Normativity in intercultural communication – what now?

Challenging the idea that ethical consideration and normative reflection are relatively recent in interculturality research, Dominic Busch begins with the assumption that 'research on interculturality has always built on normative orientations'. To me, as an ethicist, this is neither provocative nor innovative. Yet, from this starting point, Busch is able not only to challenge established interpretations and widespread dichotomic discourses but also to tease out blurred distinctions and complex realities. The finding that there is another way of describing the field, distinct from the dominant positivism vs. poststructuralism debate, is constructive. It offers a new way of categorising different epochs and positions in the field, and, accordingly, reminds us of how such categorisations are rarely absolute and often pragmatic: they simplify complexity, provide analytical tools etc. In other words, Busch's analysis takes us behind the established labels and under the discursive surface of interculturality research, providing a nuanced alternative to superficial simplicity.

Busch's study addresses 'normative orientations in research on interculturality' which he calls a 'discourse of normativity'. Discourses are indeterminate and notoriously difficult to delimit, and this also applies to this discourse of normativity. While it is fair to give it this label, it also becomes clear from Busch's article and other contributions in the field, that there are several discourses on normativity, ethics and the role of rights and values, in this field (Casmir 1997; Arnett and Roberts 2008; Cheney, May and Munshi 2011). Busch distinguishes between positivist and poststructuralist approaches, while others prefer universalist and particularist, modern and postmodern etc. Busch is also not alone in suggesting an alternative. For example, Richard Evanoff has suggested a constructivist approach to intercultural ethics as an alternative to modern and postmodern approaches (Evanoff 2006). However, with good use of grounded theory Busch can identify four epochs with different discursive profiles: pragmatism, modesty, new hope and new explorations. In this way, Busch can claim not only the constant presence of normative orientations, but he also introduces an important issue: the different kinds of normativity.

Busch focuses on the normative perspective or ethical compass scholars might be using – intentionally or not, explicitly or implicitly – when researching intercultural communication and developing the discipline. Consciously adopting this kind of 'orientation' allows us to discover, or to be reminded of, the normative dimensions of such endeavours. I will argue that such dimensions are abundant in interculturality research. Ethics is therefore not limited to a perspective on intercultural communication, but rather normativity is an

integrated part of it and, as Busch correctly points out, is closely related to assumptions regarding ontology, epistemology etc..

Busch adopts a historical perspective and is primarily concerned with changing normative orientations since the 1960s. The last epoch he identifies brings the article close to the present day, but contemporary challenges are not his focus. What does a conscious and critical awareness of normativity in interculturality research mean today? With the aim of exploring the issue of normativity further, I will, in the following, elaborate on, and critically examine, how this relates to the four sub-topics: 1) the research process, 2) research ethics, 3) global issues, and 4) critical discourse analysis.

Research process

Research in the fields of intercultural communication, intercultural competence and cross-cultural communication – the search items Busch more specifically examines – is typically interdisciplinary, drawing on methods, theory and insights from several different academic disciplines (although most often disciplines within the humanities or the social sciences). Accordingly, the research design can take many forms and look very different depending on the specific aspects of the individual research project, but also on the approach chosen when studying the research topic or question at hand.

How do you think? How do you work, argue and write? These are key questions that relate closely to both the research process and to research design. While the *research process* can be complicated, calling for a change of plans in terms of how the research questions are phrased, the methods used and arguments made, the *research design* is about how different parts of a research project relate to each other. The process encompasses everything from beginning to end, including preparation, the establishing of the material, analysis and presentation. Research design refers instead to the structure of the argument and how the various parts are connected. These parts are many and include the unit of analysis, the research question, the choice of method in terms of collecting data and forms for analysis, the theory in analysis and discussion etc. In this way, the research design lies at the intersection of philosophical worldviews, strategies of inquiry and research methods (Creswell 2009). It can also be seen as the framework for answering a given research question in terms of the purpose of the study, sampling strategies, methods and theory (Robson 2002).

It is worth noting that there are normative dimensions in all of these different parts of the research process and the various elements of the research design in intercultural communication research projects. Already the topic reflects some kind of interest in one

social phenomenon rather than another, and an assumption that this in some way or another is interesting, relevant or important to something or someone. Similarly, the choice of data, material and sampling strategy reflects a conscious (or not) interest and focus that excludes other perspectives and insights, in the same way that the choice of theoretical perspective or outlook frames the outcome of the study. Further, the sharing of the research findings with the research community, the public and relevant user communities, is yet another arena where normative considerations are at play. In other words, normativity is unavoidable in all stages of the research process and in all kinds of research.

Does this mean that interculturality research should be regarded as a normative undertaking? Yes and no. The abovementioned normative dimensions are unavoidable. However, normativity can be at play in different ways. Although researchers are often faced with (difficult) choices during a research process, the purpose of a research project or, indeed, the overarching aims of a given academic discipline, can vary in their emphasis. One common distinction is between exploratory, descriptive and explanatory research (Neuman 2007). All of these are easily recognisable in intercommunication research where various projects explore (new) communication processes in (new) specific or seek to describe or explain specific processes or practices.

This distinction between exploratory, descriptive and explanatory research is recognisable in most fields of research, and I have argued that all three of them have critical normative dimensions. However, some research projects have also, in a normative sense, much more ambitious aims. They identify a problem and aim to solve it. Some scholars want to change the world (or at least some parts or aspects of it), and in some forms of action research they engage actively in bringing about such change. Some of them explicitly see themselves as scholarly activists. Indeed, in some cases, a normative ambition is an explicit and integral part of the discipline itself. Examples include social work, pedagogics, law and theology. In other cases, the normative dimension is an explicit part of subdisciplines where the overarching aim is otherwise descriptive: normative ethics, normative philosophy, normative political science etc.

In the case of critical discourse studies, this normative aim is quite explicit and programmatically stated both by the editor (Shi-xu 2016) and in the presentation of the aims of this journal: 'to enhance cultural diversity, equality and prosperity in social life as well as in scholarship'.[1] In intercultural communication this is more complex, but Busch documents

[1] https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?show=aimsScope&journalCode=rmmd20, accessed 15.11.2020.

how ‘normative orientations’ are not new. Both his article and my comments above point towards the unavoidable integral normative dimensions of the field, but also large parts of intercultural communication research come across as purpose driven in a normative sense. An important element in the historical roots of the field was the understanding of intercultural communication as a means to convince the Other, settle a favourable business deal and/or to contribute to reconciliation, peace and understanding. The academic discipline of intercultural communication would provide tools for practitioners to achieve such goals. This particular understanding might not be typical or representative of the discipline today, but the normative and constructive ambition continues to be shared by many.

Research ethics

So far I have addressed the issue of normativity in relation to the character of intercultural communication as a research field in general and to the research process in particular. If we ask ‘What is good intercultural communication research?’ another aspect of normativity comes to the fore. Good research lives up to established, scientific criteria such as transparency, trustworthiness, accountability, originality etc. With a coherent research design and sound argumentation, findings and conclusions can be trusted. But good research needs not only to be true or original in the sense that it offers new insights or knowledge. In addition to being produced in accordance with established research standards and coming across as interesting and convincing, it must also live up to established standards of research ethics and integrity.

One common, but unfortunate, approach to research ethics, is to limit it to getting approval from a review board, having the necessary formalities in place and abiding by the laws and regulations that apply. This approach is reductionist as it limits the question of ethics to legal issues and makes ethics a matter of ticking off boxes, meeting regulations and covering one’s back. A more ambitious approach would see research ethics as a set of rules, norms and values that the individual researcher and the research community is committed to and that needs to be continually interpreted and negotiated when faced with the particular challenges of ongoing research projects. In contrast to the reductionist approach that would, for example, seek consent from research participants, the more ambitious approach would engage in the quest for ensuring properly and suitably *informed* consent. This approach would be critically aware of how ethical dilemmas appear in interculturality research, in particular when things go wrong and the research process takes unpredicted turns. This is a move away from the principle of ‘Do no harm!’ to a search for a positive outcome, actively seeking good

quality research every step along the way towards the final research report. In its maximalist form, the approach to research ethics is an ethics of self-critical public academic discourse that seeks not only to understand or explain the world, but to change it for the better. In other words, it is a move from rules and regulations towards seeing normativity in research as an issue of social responsibility.

Accordingly, in the ambitious, and arguably preferable approach, research ethics is not primarily about abstract principles and rules, but constant critical and normative discernment. This is not to say that ethical theory or generic rules are irrelevant, but they need to be applied in a given context with critical sensitivity. It is in line with this way of thinking that, for example, the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees issue *guidelines* for research ethics. Their *Guidelines for research ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Law and Theology* (NESH, 2016) focus on a wide spectrum of issues under five different sub-headings: A) Research, society and ethics, B) Respect for individuals, C) Respect for groups and institutions, 4) The research community, E) Commissioned research, and F) Dissemination of research. Of particular relevance to the field of intercultural communication are the sections on Human dignity (section 5), Responsibility for avoiding harm (section 12), Respect for vulnerable groups (section 22), Research on other cultures (section 23) and Limits on cultural recognition (section 24). Such guidelines do not provide ready-given answers to ethical dilemmas, but highlight key concerns, values and norms that should be taken into consideration.

Global issues

This reflective approach to normativity links intercultural communication not only to the practice of communication across national or cultural boundaries, but also to the social, economic and political realities of the world we live in. This raises the issue of how such realities have, or should have, consequences for the conception of intercultural communication and its normative dimensions. Drawing on Bourdieu, Busch argues that scholars' embeddedness in social relationships 'considerably controls and determines their research questions, attitudes and normative questions'. He states this as a descriptive fact, but it can also be seen as a normative challenge. How can, and should, responsible scholars view intercultural communication in the context of the global issues that haunt humanity today, and how should the same scholars respond to such issues today?

Given the focus on asymmetrical power relationships in intercultural communication, there are already plenty of resources in the field to address current challenges related to social

and economic inequality, absolute and relative poverty. Equally familiar is the fact that many countries are faced with immigration and that issues of integration, border control and populist identity politics invite new and reinforced understandings and categorisations of people on the move: refugees, asylum seekers, undocumented migrants, illegal immigrants etc. Are we prepared for this? How can interculturality research contribute constructively to the common good in this situation? Which methodological and epistemological issues follow from such normative challenges?

Closely related to the issue of migration and identity politics are the global flows of ideas. Intercultural communication is in important ways a reflection of life in the 'global village', but the complexities of globalisation are profound and its consequences brutal for some. Modern slavery and global, online Islamophobia are ethical issues of today. The latter points to how modern technology poses not only new opportunities but also profound threats to human life and coexistence as we know it. When machine and man are linked closely together, how should we understand man, woman, culture and communication – and what are the normative implications?

Similar questions arise when considering the climate crisis and all its consequences. What would intercultural communication look like in the Anthropocene? Or phrased in an explicitly normative fashion: How can we go on doing intercultural communication research in the traditional way, when what we need is a radical change? How should we understand the relationship between man and nature? How can we move from the traditional anthropocentric understanding of intercultural communication towards a biocentric communication for the Anthropocene?

Critical Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is only one of several approaches to intercultural communication research, but is key in cultural discourse studies and can play an interesting and powerful role in terms of addressing such issues of normativity. Critical discourse analysis, in particular, is unabashedly normative in its effort to identify asymmetry and processes of marginalisation and hegemonisation in intercultural communication or in short, highlighting the complex issue of power (Van Dijk 1993:253). Power can be understood in different ways: as decision-making, agenda-setting and preference-shaping power (Lukes 2005). The latter is of particular relevance to understanding how discourse analysis can have a constructive, normative function in intercultural research. It is productive power that creates needs, ideas and expectations, including ideas about right and wrong, good and bad, relevant and irrelevant,

important and unimportant Foucault, 1980. Both postcolonial theory and discourse analysis help us to see these aspects of power, not only that they exist but also how they work as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in and through the language and discourses that actors use and are shaped by.

Given that there are different ways of thinking and talking about normativity, critical discourse analysis provides a tool to examine how the issue of normativity is discursively constructed within the discipline. The established distinction between virtue ethics, deontological ethics and consequential ethics, provides interpretative repertoires and potential nodal points in this discussion. Still, discourse analysis would be able to look for alternative ways of configuring this in practice. Alternative structures could, for instance, rely on the already mentioned differentiation between law and ethics, principles and utility, the knowledge and competence of the established scholar vs. popular, indigenous knowledge or insights and understandings from the Global South.

Finally, critical discourse analysis challenges established patterns of categorisation and provides tools to see connections across presumed independent sectors. This is an already in-built element of intercultural communication in that it seeks to look at processes of communication across or between more or less clearly defined cultures. Discourse analysis can identify ways of talking that produce notions of such cultures, discourses that challenge such categorisations and, not least, implicit or tacit resistance to established stereotypes, categorisations and power structures. Discourse analysis can also challenge the occasionally overly emphasised gap between academic research on the one hand and the public and politics on the other. The approach can reveal how this too is a construction that, intentionally or not, functions to regulate notions of knowledge, facts and the validity of interpretations.

With his article on the changing discourse of intercultural ethics Busch has provided an important meta-perspective on changing normative orientations in intercultural communication up to the present day. It remains the challenge of responsible actors in the field to acknowledge not only the normative dimensions but also the normative challenges in the field today, for a better tomorrow.

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