

# Report

## Creating Anxiety: Setting the Stage for Intercultural Communication

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One of Georg Simmel's great contributions to communication studies and to sociology was the idea that interaction between strangers in modern cities could bring about two opposite yet complementary responses. Simmel observed that members of one group tend to react with opposition when they enter into contact with members of another group, leading on the one hand to the "negation of the other party" (1903, p. 503), while concurrently the members of the in-group pull more tightly together. This dual process of attraction and exclusion, for Simmel, is nothing less than the "life-process" (1903, p. 491) of social groups. The idea would find its echoes in the founding members of the Chicago School. Dewey (1922), who had studied with Simmel, described how contact between different cultural groups can lead to both exclusion and cohesion: "the belief about superiority or being 'as good as other people', the intention to hold one's own are naturally *our* feeling and idea of *our* treatment and position" (p. 59). Lasswell (1927) similarly looked to propaganda as an instrument to "weld thousands and even millions of human beings into one amalgamated mass of hate and will and hope" (p. 227).

While noting the inherent risk of conflict in situations of intercultural contact, all three scholars saw in communication the seeds of a solution that could forge a great and cohesive society. Simmel (1922) pointed to "the power of intellectual and educational interests" (p. 135), while Dewey's faith in a great society rested on enhancing education such that "intelligent direction may modulate the harshness of conflict, and turn the elements of disintegration into a constructive synthesis" (pp. 121-122).

Lasswell's (1927) position on this was more nuanced. On the one hand, he praised President Woodrow Wilson's propaganda achievements in World War I, noting how "one hundred million people, sprung from many alien and antagonistic stocks, was [*sic*] welded into a fighting whole, to make the world safe for democracy" (p. 225). On the other hand, he later brought to this topic an important measure of caution about mass media propaganda campaigns, reminding us how the symbols created can at once be "eliciting fresh acts of identification from some,

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and provoking decisive acts of rejection from others” (Lasswell, 1935, p. 33). Lasswell argued that media representations of one cultural group could arouse “insecurity reactions” (p. 155) among members of a second cultural group, and he suggested that group leaders could thus profit from generating insecurity.

The challenge of intercultural communication and the role of anxiety in the process were also taken up by Edward T. Hall and other members of the Palo Alto School. See, for example, Goffman (1963) and Birdwhistell (1970). Describing the complex and largely unwritten rules that govern intercultural encounters, Hall concludes: “Anxiety, however, follows quickly when this tacit etiquette is breached” (1959, p. 74).

Most recently, Gudykunst (2005) built on the work of Simmel and Hall,<sup>1</sup> among many others, to elaborate a theory of Anxiety and Uncertainty Management (AUM). “When anxiety and uncertainty are above our maximum thresholds,” he writes, “we are unable to communicate effectively (e.g., because we are focused on the anxiety or we cannot predict strangers’ behaviour)” (p. 70). Echoing the progressivism of the Chicago School, Gudykunst calls for mindfulness as a means to manage anxiety and uncertainty, and suggests a role for the mass media in helping to reduce uncertainty about the behaviour of members of other groups (Gudykunst, 1988).

My research seeks to build on the work of Simmel, Dewey, and Gudykunst while retaining the guardedness of Lasswell and the understanding that words and images in the mass media can serve either to reduce the anxiety that accompanies intercultural communication or to heighten it. Communication can educate, foster intelligent direction, and promote mindfulness, or it can heighten “perceived cultural dissimilarities” (Gudykunst, 1988, p. 134) between members of different cultural groups, thus fostering anxiety and uncertainty. The questions this dual potential presents us, then, are 1) which approach is evident in the messages created by a cultural group, and 2) what impact does this have, if any, on the intercultural interaction that follows?

Methodologically, I will borrow Katz’s model<sup>2</sup> for intercultural communication and explore how the mass media messages *of* one cultural group, *about* another group, and *for* the first group affect the cultural identity of the members of the first group and their perceptions of members of the other group. I will also borrow from Lasswell and content analysis to identify the extent to which messages carried by the mass media channels of a cultural group (for example, diasporic media, professional journals, or special interest websites) include representations of other cultural groups and what the nature of those representations is. Finally, I will draw from Liebes and Katz’s (1990) focus group methodology to explore the extent to which these messages about different cultural groups are actually engaged by their intended audience, and the manner in which audience members interpret and collectively make sense of the messages.

As more and more cultural communities become active producers of mass media messages, the opportunity to portray other cultural groups and shape perceptions of those groups is increasing. The need to better understand the impact of these texts on the vital intercultural exchanges that follow is similarly increasing.

## Notes

1. See Rogers (1999) for an intellectual history of intercultural communication research that considers the influence of both Simmel and Hall.
2. Katz's scheme was presented by Larry Gross as part of his contribution to Liebes and Curran's *Media, Ritual and Identity* (1998).

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