

Intercultural Context-shifting:

**A praxis toward a multiple understanding of
interpersonal relationships
for constructive intercultural communication**

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The flow of this presentation

- An **issue** and the **purpose** of this presentation
- **Literature review**: Intercultural context-shifting(ICS) in the ICC research
- The concept of Intercultural context-shifting
- An **application** of ICS to an example of intercultural communication breakdown
- **Assumptions, limitations, and directions** for future research

The background of this presentation: An issue in intercultural interpersonal relationships

Globalization

- More exposure to culturally dissimilar others
- misunderstanding and conflicts

☞ The **minimization/oversimplification** of multifaceted and dynamic identities of self, others, and their interpersonal relationships

The foregrounding of major negative contexts

Many people tend to **automatically foreground** a limited number of **negative contexts** particular to a situation (e.g., a situation where a Korean and a Japanese are in a meeting) .

⇒e.g., historical and political contexts related to the Japanese invasion into Korea in WW II.

Through such **negative contexts**, they understand others, themselves, and their interpersonal relationships.

The purpose of this presentation: To present the conceptual tool of Intercultural Context-shifting

- As a way to unfix and decenter the **negative contexts** and their entailing interpretations, **intercultural context-shifting (ICS)** seems to be helpful.

The explanation on ICS

- ICS is an intentional cognitive frame-shifting and its subsequent emphatic practice, shifting from the initial negative contexts to alternative contexts by which people can see multiple aspects of others, themselves, and their interpersonal relationships so that they may be able to respect their differences and to find common ground with others in order to create more constructive relationships.

ICS in the intercultural communication competence (ICC) research

- In general, many ICC models include three major components: cognition, affection, and behavior (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009)
- ICS ⇒ 1. cognition: **cognitive frame-shifting**
(Bennet & Bennet, 2004, p. 156)
“One attempts to take the perspective of another culture”.
2. affection: **psychic shifts; Empathy**
(Guo & Storasta, 1998-9, p. 33)
cultural empathy
(Bennet & Bennet, 2004, p. 156)
“The attempt to organize experience through a set of constructs that are more characteristic of another culture than of one’s own.”

The concept of “context” in ICS (1)

adaptation->intergration

- ICC: “the ability to communicate effectively in cross-cultural situations and to relate appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts” (Bennet & Bennet, 2004, p. 149)

e.g., a Japanese making more eye-contact in the U.S.

→ “Contexts” in ICS are **not limited to particular cultural contexts of others** to which we strive to adjust but rather we can **freely make a shift to various contexts with our imagination.**

e.g., such shared concepts as “**global citizenship**”, “**environmental challenges**”

The concept of “context” in ICS (2)

- “Contexts” as **subjective mental models of social situations** (van Dijk, 2009)
- This “mental model” connects social structures (race, gender, age, etc) with discourse structures, i.e., the way we speak and build relationships.
- Mental models as “context models” have **socially shared aspects** and **personal differences**.

The **Three-layered framework** of ICS

To become aware of diverse contexts that go beyond one's own spectrum, intercultural context-shifting provides interactants with a **three-layered framework** for dynamic context-shifting. More concretely, as you are in a communicative situation with culturally different others and have a negative interpretation of them, **the framework guides its users to look at them in three levels of context: micro-context, mezzo-context, and macro-context.**

A framework of ICS

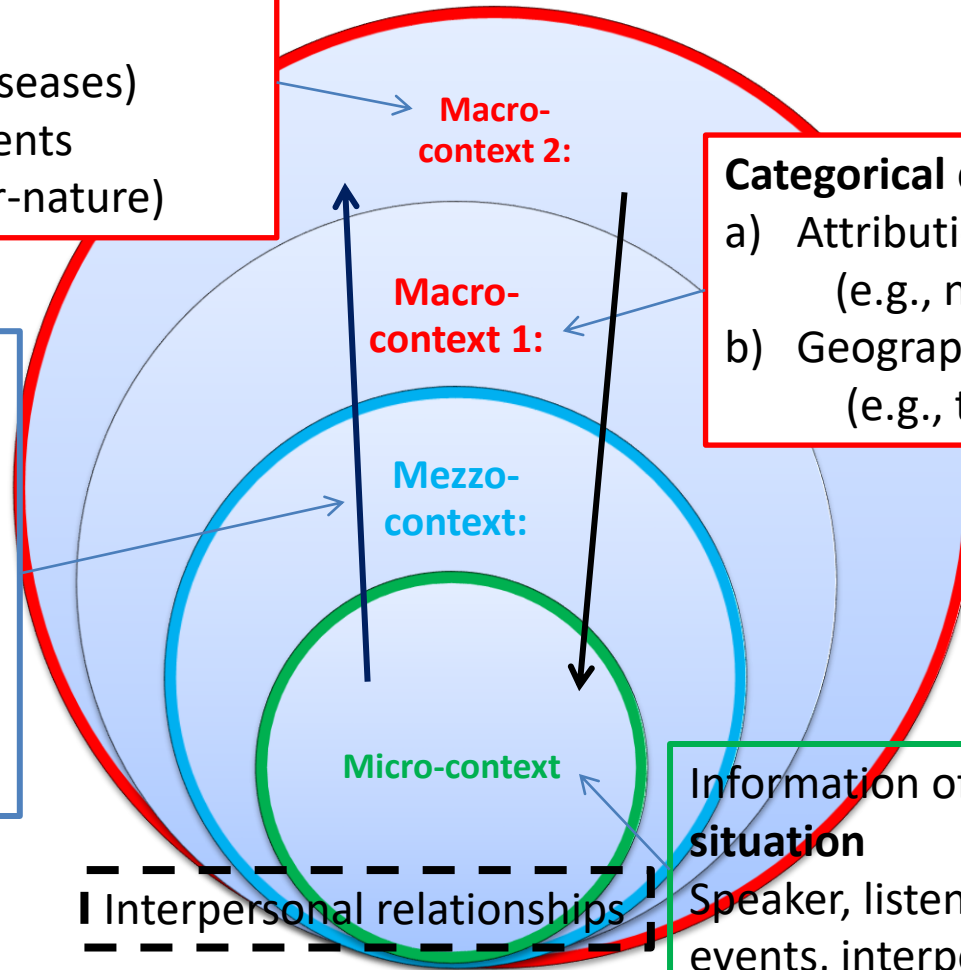
Topical descriptors:

- a) Global elements
(e.g., infectious diseases)
- b) Metaphysical elements
(e.g., ethics, super-nature)

- a) Types of **organization**:
government,
corporations,
schools
- b) **Occupational**
groups: managers,
engineers, teachers

Categorical descriptors:

- a) Attribution allocations
(e.g., nationality, race)
- b) Geographical allocations
(e.g., the globe, continent)



Information of a **communicative situation**

Speaker, listener, time, place,
events, interpersonal relationships

A dynamic formation of contexts and interpersonal relationships

- The three levels of contexts overlap with the broader contexts in the background and in a communicative situation, **communication, identities and interpersonal relationships are dynamically constructed and reconstructed** by the interactants as they bring in and foreground varied contexts of different levels by referring to them or using **verbal and non-verbal signs** that are characteristic of such contexts.

(cf. **contextualization cues**, Gumperz, 1982)

e.g., “waves of immigrants” -> a context of a dominant group of society

What can we have after the use of the ICS three-layered framework ?

If we are able to make a shift to a context which allows us to see culturally dissimilar others in a positive manner and to start building a constructive interpersonal relationship, intercultural context-shifting is successful.

Three functions of ICS

- 1) Cultivating **self-cultural awareness**
- 2) Nurturing the ability to **find common ground /commonalities** with others in order to gain more balanced view
- 3) Helping us **recognize differences** between others and their multicultural relations

An application of ICS to an example of intercultural relationship breakdown

- A Chinese student and a Japanese student studying in Canada
- They have been friends for 2 months.
- A bombardment of news items of territorial disputes and criticism of Japanese perception of history was on the Internet.
- There was a series of counter-demonstrations against Japan by Chinese student groups on campus.
- They began acting somewhat unfriendly to each other, then their friendship ended.

Analysis

Despite a myriad of alternative contexts, the government-driven and media-driven political **macro-contexts** and the **mezzo context** of the Chinese students' counter-demonstrations at the university were **automatically foregrounded in their minds as frames of reference** to understand themselves and their relationships. At the same time, a mirco-context in which they had been friends was pushed in the background.

The use of the ICS framework

Macro-context 1 (categorical descriptors):

b) geographical allocations -> “East Asians”

Macro-context 2 (topical descriptors):

a) global elements -> “global citizenship”, “environmental challenges”

Mezzo-context: international students (occupational groups) at the same university (types of organization)

Micro-context: Their relationship they had been friends.

⇒ More balanced view of their relationships

⇒ the maintenance or even a further development of their interpersonal relationship

A possible criticism 1: Minimization

- Regarding ICS's function of helping people find commonalities, Bennet & Bennet (2004) may say that this line of finding common ground seems to **minimize differences by placing commonalities in the front**. At the Minimization stage of DMIS (Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, Bennet & Bennet, 2004), people **foreground and acknowledge superficial cultural differences in etiquette and customs**, but deep inside they assume that **human beings are all the same**, so **cultural differences are minimized** in their minds.
- This is the final phase of the **ethnocentric** stage of the DMIS model.

A response to the criticism:

As a tendency, many people can easily fall into the ethnocentric cognitive pattern that separate ourselves from culturally dissimilar others, so we must **strategically** find ways to de-center our ethnocentric views, look at intercultural relationships in an alternative context, and find common ground for building a constructive relationship.

Differences are acknowledged and commonalities are **strategically used to balance a view** on others.

A possible criticism 2: the issue of **authenticity**

- When we make a shift from one context to another, people understand that new context through their **subjective perceptual filters**.
- It is impossible to understand the new cultural context in the exactly same way as a member of that different cultural group.
- Context-shifting is based on self-created “other cultural contexts”
- The issue of authenticity becomes problematic as we context-shift.

A response to criticism 2:

- In intercultural communication, it is impractical to assume that both parties involved in interpersonal relationships can share **exactly the same meanings of phenomena and the contexts behind them.** We do not need to have the same meaning as others, **but isomorphic meanings** similar to those of others, so that the interactants can have common ground on which to build relationships.

Limitations and future directions

Limitations:

The framework and its descriptors and elements are not comprehensive.

Also, the diagram of it for ICS is incomplete with only a few concrete examples shown in it.

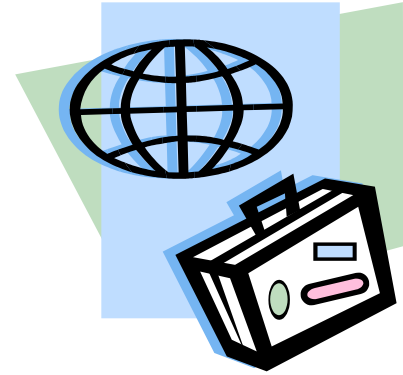
Future directions:

ICS should be applied to an extensive range of examples, so as to identify its effectiveness and limitations. This leads to a meaningful revisions of this concept.

The main references:

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- Chen, G. M., & Starosta, W. J. (1998-9). A review of the concept of intercultural awareness. *Human communication*, 2, 27-54.
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- van Dijk, T. A. (2009). *Society and discourse: How social contexts influence text and talk*. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, Sao Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City: Cambridge

The end



Thank you very much.

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