Cross-Cultural Differences in American & Palestinian Expressions of Identity

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THE ONTOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION:
A CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF
AMERICANS & PALESTINIANS

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Abstract

This paper explores, via a cross-cultural analysis, the ontological function of interpersonal communication (Stewart, 1977/1986). The ontological function focuses on the processes of communication that enable individuals to form, negotiate and preserve self-definitions. Theoretically, the ontological function becomes a vehicle for understanding how and why all forms of human communication are unique expressions of identity. The study explores the different cultural variations of self-definitions held by Palestinians and Americans based upon the high-low context continuum (Hall, 1976) and the activity-being value orientation (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961). The study illustrates how these cultural variant self-definitions are mirrored in culturally mediated patterns of the ontological function.

In its most basic sense, the ontological function focuses on communication as a vehicle for identity formation and maintenance. John Stewart (1977, 1986), in introducing the ontological function, stresses the link between "self-definition" and communication. "Whenever humans communicate," said Stewart, "part of what's going on is that each is defining himself or herself in relation to the other person involved" (1986, p. 24). This mutual exchange of self-definitions is instrumental in Stewart's conception of communication as a transactional process.

While numerous researchers have pursued the transactional aspect, few have followed up on the ontological function. Most functional analyses concentrate on the "task or problem-solving function" or the "social function" (see Bales, 1976). Ruben (1982) briefly discusses how cross-cultural differences in the task and social function may spawn intercultural difficulties.

Despite the relative dearth of literature on the ontological function, the importance of this function should not be underestimated. From a purely theoretical perspective, all functional analyses serve to better define the role of communication in daily interactions. Exploring the ontological function in particular will help us understand the role of communication in identity formation and negotiation.

Further, in that self-definitions are unique, the ontological function becomes a vehicle for understanding how and why all forms of human communication are expressly and explicitly unique. This relates to the need to develop a vocabulary for talking about the individualistic and qualitative nature of human communication. While much has been written on intercultural communication, very few micro-level works focus on intrapersonal communication (Del Polito, 1977; Hamachek, 1971) and communicator style (Norton, 1983).

The link between self-definition and communication, inherent in the ontological function, has far reaching implications. Even in the most stable of relationships, self-definitions and communication patterns are never truly static. Participants constantly work to maintain a consistency of self-definition, even if to the detriment of the participants themselves (Watzlawick et al., 1967). While the implications for communication research are rich, most self-definition research is being conducted by psychologists and social psychologists.

Within the intercultural literature, discussions of identity and identity-related issues are becoming more frequent (Boekestijn, 1988; Servaes, 1988; Ting-Toomey, 1988; Zaharna, 1989). Both Ting-Toomey's (1988) face negotiation and Zaharna's (1989) self-shock would appear to be exemplary analyses of the ontological function in that both focuses on processes of self-definition and maintenance via communication strategies. As the interest in identity grows, a better understanding of the ontological function may well supply communication scholars with the needed conceptual tools.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of the ontological function of interpersonal communication and to illustrate its saliency within and across cultures. The analysis argues that the ontological function is both culturally universal and culturally relative. Just as dominant self-definitions vary from culture to culture (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988), so too can the dynamics of the ontological function be expected to vary from culture to culture.

The study explores this contention via a cross-cultural analysis of American and Palestinian examples of the ontological function. The analysis concentrates on initial stages of interaction when participants are trying to arrive at definitions of each other. The Palestinian culture was chosen as a representative of an Arab, Eastern culture, a "being culture" (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Okabe, 1983) and "high-context culture" (Hall, 1976) as to contrast with the American culture

which is representative of the Western culture, a "doing culture," (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Stewart, 1972) and "low-context culture" (Hall, 1976).

Because the ontological function is not as well known, the first section explores the ontological function of communication in more detail. The second section highlights salient differences in the Palestinian and American cultural self-definitions and ontological functions. The paper concludes with implications derived from the cultural differences.

I. THE ONTOLOGICAL FUNCTION OF INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Despite its pervasiveness, the ontological function (Stewart, 1986) of communication is perhaps one of the most neglected areas of communication research. In fact, the study of communication in terms of its function is relatively underdeveloped. As Ruben observed, "Few researchers [in communication] appear to be focusing their efforts in any direct fashion toward an exploration of the *functions* of communication -- what it is for, and how it is used" (1983, p. 166).

While much of the discussion of task and social functions grew out of small group communication research (Bales, 1970; Cragan & Wright, 1986), John Stewart introduced the ontological function in the context of his book on interpersonal communication, *Bridges Not Walls* (1977/1986).

> . . . communication is more than just a way to get things done. Who we are as persons emerges in our contacts with others. I think of that as the "ontological" dimension or function of communication; it supplements the "instrumental" dimension or function . . . . (1986, p. viii)

Ontology, the study of being, is largely associated with philosophy, especially the work of Heidegger, Sartre, and Tillich. R.D. Laing (1968) helps carry the meaning and applicability of ontology from philosophy, to psychology, to interpersonal communication in explaining what he meant by "ontology" or being,

> "(a person's) sense of his own [sic] and other people's reality and identity . . . a sense of his integral selfhood and personal identity" (1968, p.415).

It is this sense of one's own reality and identity and that of others which is very much at the heart of Stewart's notion of the ontological function. In fact, the thrust of Stewart's book is contained in an often cited quotation, "Every time persons

communicate, they are continually offering definitions of themselves and responding to definitions of the other(s) which they perceive" (1986, p. 23).

Thus, in its most basic sense, the ontological function is concerned with the processes of self-definition via communication. The two basic dimensions of the ontological function are identity formation -- how we develop beliefs about who we are, and identity maintenance -- how we negotiate and preserve preferred self-identities.

The Ontological Function: Identity Maintenance

For many, the role of communication in the formation of our own self-identity may lie predominantly out-of-awareness. Many of us may not be aware of how our own self-images reflect other's images of us because, as Vallacher noted, "we internalize -- adopt as our own -- the perspectives of others" (1980, p.5). In other words, the distinction between how we view ourselves and what others think about us, or how others see us becomes blurred.

Similarly, we may be unaware of the critical role that communication plays in our efforts to maintain self-identities. This may be related to the way in which we view communication. Communication is often seen as simply transferring information. Berger & Bradac's description is representative, "communication is a more general concept involving the exchange of messages which may or may not be spoken in linguistic form" (1982, p. 52). Because of this dominant view, we tend to see and focus on communication as "information transfer," not as an act of creating and validating self-images.

Indeed, we tend to focus on the information, the "message," not realizing that the verbal and nonverbal patterns we select and employ are unique reflections of how we see ourselves and how we would like others to see us as well. Yet, much of what makes us unique unto ourselves and recognizable to others is our unique combination of communication behaviors.

The combination of our communication behaviors make our communication profile as distinctive as our physical profile. Even in a "blind" review of competitive papers, scholars who have published extensively may reveal themselves simply by the topic they chose, their writing style, their reference sources, their argument structure, etc. Thus, even in one of the most objectively neutral forums, the ontological function belies anonymity.

The pervasiveness of the ontological function may well be tied to the pervasiveness of the sense of self for all individuals. As Erich Fromm once lamented, ". . . everyone, with the possible exception of infants, some philosophers, and some psychopaths, is aware of one's self" (1947, pp. 39-40).

With this awareness of an existence of self, there appears to be an ever present need for self-confirmation. "Every relationship," say Laing, "implies a definition of self by other and other by self" (1971, p. 86). Giffin (1970) goes further by stating, "The initiation of any communicative event carries with it an implied request: 'Please validate me'" (p. 351). Erikson states the necessity of self-validation more strongly, "social confirmation of some identity, even a negative one, is often preferable to a lack of confirmation and the uncertainty and confusion that results" (1960, p. 62, italics his).

That the self is "recognizable" to the individual, may, in fact, be a psychological imperative. Many psychologists have noted that individuals have a fundamental need for a consistent, stable sense of self. As Prescott Lecky observed, the self is the "central axiom for the individual's whole life theory" (1968, p. 297). Several scholars have dramatized the repercussions of what happens when this axis, the self, is lost. (See, for example, R.D. Laing, 1965, "divided self;" and N. Branden, 1972, "disowned self.")

Yet, however paramount the recognizable self-definitions may be to the individual, the ontological function is part of the communication process and communication is by definition not a static process of bona fide guarantees. Even in the most stable of relationships, neither identities nor communication are ever truly static as both must respond to changing social and environmental circumstances. Thus while there may be a confirmation of a self-definition, that definition might not be the preferred or intended definition.

There is a body of literature within communication that speaks to the distinction between "confirming" and "disconfirming" messages (see, for example, Haney, 1973; Smith & Williamson, 1985). Confirming messages serve to validate messages sent, or in this case, self-definitions offered. Disconfirming responses, such as denial, disagreement, omission, serve to invalidate messages sent. Thus, it is not surprising that we take our communication personally. When our "message" is misunderstood, we feel misunderstood. When our "message" is unclear, we take pains to explain ourselves. Underlying all of this is the ontological function.

The process of maintaining self-definitions can also be seen in terms of communication strategies for signaling or cuing others to our preferred self-definition. We do not explicitly state our identity, but rather cue others to our identity. In this, the literature is fairly rich.

One ready example comes from the American business culture. A whole genre of literature, namely the "dress for success" books, outlines much of the elaborate cuing system for conveying preferred identities. These books are not just guides for getting ahead in the business world. They are manuals for learning how to code and decode cultural signals of "where one is" in the business ladder of

success as well as what strategies one can use for cuing others about "who I am."

The cues are the mechanisms, the strategies by which the ontological function operates. In that all of our verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors are in fact "cues about our identity," the ontological function is ever present. As Stewart stressed, everything about us communicates different dimensions of our self-definitions:

> . . . Your clothes are part of your "this is how I define myself" message, just as mine are. Your tone of voice also reveals how you define yourself in relation to the situation and the person you're talking with. . . . Touch, distance, eye contact, and choice of words all contribute to your self-definition, too. 1986, p. 23

Thus, to communicate with another is to communicate aspects of ourselves. As Hamachek (1971) observed, we communicate who we are. It is against this intra-cultural theoretical backdrop that we now turn to a cross-cultural analysis of the ontological function as both culturally universal and culturally relative.

II. THE ONTOLOGICAL FUNCTION: A CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS

Just as different cultures have different salient elements within the dominant self-definition, so too may we expect the ontological functions to reflect these culturally-mediated self-definitions. In this section, we explore how different cultures, specifically the Palestinian and American cultures, vary in their salient cultural self-definitions and ontological functions. The medium for view these cultural differences is through the expressions of the people and the metaphors that these expressions suggest via metaphor analysis (Deetz, 1984). First, let us look first at the cultural definitions of self.

Cultural Self-definitions

Culture plays a significant role in developing our view of the world as well as our view of ourselves in that world. As Dimen-Schein observed, "humans create their own cultures and therefore themselves" (1977, p. 25). Numerous scholars have explored the cultural variations of self (Geertz, 1983, 1973; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Hallowell, 1974; Marsella et al., 1985). To concertize this theoretical link between culture and self-definition, I have chosen to analyze the Palestinian and American cultural self-definitions on the basis of the high-context - low context continuum (Hall, 1976) and the "being" - "doing value orientation (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961). There are, of course, other cross-cultural dimensions in cultural differentiations (see, Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988).

Edward T. Hall (1976) introduced the concept of a high and low-context continuum for cultures. According to Hall (1982), "the level of context determines everything about the nature of the communication and is the foundation on which all subsequent behavior rests" (p. 19). In high-context cultures many of the communication cues are embedded in the sociocultural context. In low-context cultures very little information is actually contained in the sociocultural context and must come from the participants or communication exchange itself. Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey (1988), who have elaborated extensively on Hall's work, highlight the distinction,

While meanings in low-context cultures are displayed overtly through direct communication forms, meanings in high-context cultures are embedded implicitly at different levels of the sociocultural context. (p.90)

They also observed that high-context cultures tend to stress collectivism, while low-context cultures tend to elevate individualism (see Ting-Toomey, 1988; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988, for analysis). Although Hall did not apply the high- and low-context labels specifically to individuals' self-definition, the labels are theoretically applicable because individuals both reflect and express their culture.

The Palestinian self-definition is very much aligned with the characteristics of high-context cultures. The Palestinian identity is embedded in the "context" -- literally and figuratively. The identity of the individual is tied to the people, specifically the family, and to the geographical region, specifically the land. As Kenneth Bailey observed, "The family estate is a significant part of the Middle Eastern's personal identity . . . The land does not belong to them, they belong to the land" (1983, p. 169). Palestinian writer and scholar Fawaz Turki described "land" as the "geography of the Palestinian soul," he explained level the identity-land link,

In short, a Palestinian's relatedness to the land has to do with his [sic] ego ideal and ego involvement, with the core concept of his place in existence and with his major assumptions about the self. Without his land, very simply a Palestinian could not establish his identity. (1983, p. 10)

This link between family-land-identity provides the underlying rational or assumption for some Palestinian self-descriptions which non-Palestinians may find puzzling. It is not at all incongruent for a Palestinian who was born in Kuwait and raised in Detroit, Michigan to say that he is "from" Ramallah -- a Palestinian town he has never visited. His identity is linked to the land even if he himself is geographically separated.

It is perhaps important to note that the link between land and identity is not a recent development or product of the Palestinian's recent history, but instead is well-rooted within Palestinian cultural idioms, poetry and traditions (Sayigh, 1979;

Sulaiman, 1984; Turki, 1983, 1972). For example, the response to the British Mandate authorities' introduction of "the concept of identity card" in the 1920s was met with the Palestinian phrase: "Ardi hiya hawiyati!" -- "My land is my identity!" (Turki, 1983, p. 10). The Palestinian idioms are rich with such land-identity interdependence. As Turki explained:

> Among Palestinians when you want to ask for the whereabouts of a certain person -- "Where is Mohammed nowadays? -- you say: "Mohammed, wein ardu filhall ayyam?" That is: "Where is Mohammed's land nowadays?" Similarly, the most awesome challenge, or abuse, you can direct at a Palestinian is: "Biddi ahrek ardak!" That is: "I shall burn down your land!" (1983, p. 10)

To Palestinians, no phrase is more familiar than ardi-aardi. Translated literally -- "My land is my womenfolk" -- the phrase is meaningless; for its significance is masked by a colloquialism that Palestinians employ when their communication is not merely one of *saying* but of *meaning.* As understood by Palestinians in its historico-cultural sense, however, the phrase reads: "My land is my nobility" -- "sharafi," i.e., my being is what I am. (Turki, 1983, p. 10)

It is for this reason that one often hears the Palestinians equate their "loss of land" to "loss of identity. For the Palestinian, resettlement efforts, enforced exile or deportation strike at the core of the identity issue. For example, efforts to "resettle" in land outside Palestine is culturally and emotionally translated by Palestinians as attempts to finalize their loss of identity. Hence, the tenacious and persistent resistance of Palestinians living in the refugee camps against resettlement: for a refugee to accept resettlement is to forfeit his or her Palestinian identity.

In contrast to the high-context Palestinian culture, the American culture is a low context culture. Identity in the low context culture is not as embedded in the social context. It is more individually-based, and comparatively speaking, more abstract. The American chagrin over the Palestinian "obsession" with the land is perhaps characteristic of the American cultural self which has an identity which is more ideologically-based (i.e., freedom, democracy, the American "way of life"), as opposed to being geographically-based. Because identity is not tied to people or land per se, the American identity is an infinitely more "portable identity." Indeed, America is one of the most mobile societies in the world. Doubts or concerns one may have about a prospective move are more likely financial or professional concerns than they are ontological ones.

Differences between cultural self-definitions can also be illustrated via depictions of America as a "doing" culture and the Palestinian a "being" culture. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) propose two value orientations that distinguish cultures. One orientation focuses on "activity" and is viewed as characteristic of Western cultures. The other orientation focuses on "being and becoming" and

characterizes Eastern cultures. Stewart (1972) calls the activity orientation "doing," to reflect the image of doing as the dominant activity for Americans.

This American focus on "doing," by definition, places emphasis on behavior and the products of an individual's behavior. Behavior is not simply what one does, but what one is. This association between self and action, as Stewart states, "leads to the belief that the self is what the self does" (1979, p. 39). This emphasis on "doing" is compatible with other dominant traits of the American culture which stress the importance of achievement, on visible accomplishments and on measurement (Stewart 1972, p.36).

In contrast to the American "doing" culture, there are the "being" cultures such as the Chinese, Japanese or Arab cultures. Okabe (1983) contrasts the American "doing culture" to the Japanese "being culture." He observed that achievement and development are not as important in a traditional vertical society such as Japan which places emphasis on the individual's birth, family background, age and rank. For an individual of the "being" culture, "`what he [sic] is` carries greater significance than 'what he does'" (Okabe, 1983, p.24).

Cultural Variations of the Ontological Function

Part of learning about the new sociocultural environment is sharing "who am I" profiles, exchanging self-definitions. Yet, just as each culture has different conceptions of self, so too do their ontological functions differ. However fluent the cross-cultural participants may be in each others' language, the process by which one learns about the other, or exchanges self-definitions, can be both confusing and alienating.

This difference between "being" and "doing" notions of the self are evident in the nature of greetings, a basic ontological function. Notice the emphasis on "doing" in the typical American greeting, ""How do you do?" or, "How are you doing?" and the response, "I'm doing fine." An up-dated version of an activity greeting is, "What's happening?" "What's new?" In contrast, the Arabic greeting stresses a state of being: "Kief halik?" which literally means "How is your condition?" The choice of responses are: "mabsuta" (happy), "aal" (great), "ya'aani" (so-so). etc. -- all statements of being, how one is at the moment.

This difference in being and doing is further revealed in the questions one asks to learn about another person. Again, the assumption in the doing culture is that the self is what the self does. Thus, it is not surprising that the first question, following, "Hi, my name is . . . " is, "What do you do?" The answer to What do you do?, is as revealing as the question. Instead of responding with an activity that one does, one makes the automatic assumption that what one is what one does: "I'm a painter" -- (not, I paint), or "I'm a communication professor" -- (not, I

teach communication at a university). This is similar to the greeting: "How do you do?" "Fine." Action defines being.

While "what do you do?" is one of the first questions asked in the "doing" culture of America, it is one of the last questions you would ask a Palestinian, if at all. The question is simply not relevant to who the person is. If you wants to know where one works, you ask them, "Where do you work?" The question is phrased differently to emphasize that one is not asking who the person is.

The following example is unique in that it highlights a cross-cultural mishap of the ontological function between a bi-cultural Palestinian American, visiting with a mono-cultural Palestinian. The Palestinian American was showing the Palestinian from Ramallah around Washington. Just to make small talk she asked him, "So, what do you do?"

His English was good, he was fluent -- but the look on his face after I asked him, "What do you do?" was, What kind of a question is that? I didn't know why I asked the question either. It was really strange for both of us, but the best part about it -- he picked up on it that it was a way to make talk and he immediately shot back -- 'What do you do?' We both cracked up laughing, it was just so strange. I guess I forgot who I was talking to.

In the Palestinian "being" culture the first question after hello is "Which family are you from?" or, "What town are you from?" "What is your family name?" After that, the follow-up questions may be "Are you related to so-and-so? I knew so-and-so from Beirut. or, Is your grandfather so-and-so? I am sure my father must know your grandfather."

Because of the Palestinian dispersion there is now a new twist to the social construction line of questioning. Many of the places in which Palestinian are living are completely alien to other Palestinians. However, efforts to find out about the place is again via the same pattern of social construction, this time to correctly identify the city, or town. For example, one may say that she is at Southern Illinois University -- the immediate follow-up is, "Do you know so-and-so? Is so-and-so #2 still there? So-and-so #3 used to go there," etc. Whereas an American inquiry might begin with, "What's the place like? Do you like it?" the Palestinian begins with, "Who is there also? Do you (or I) know anyone there?"

Thus, the Palestinian sense of self is not "I am what I do," but "I am by my relationship with others in my social environment." In the doing culture one can attain self-distinction by achievement through doing. In the being culture distinction is made through being from a "good family," via one's relationship through others, hence the importance for Palestinians of one's "social reputation." While Americans view the social reputation as obsessive, Palestinian find the American emphasis on achievement and success obsessive.

Another basic distinguishing aspect is the ontological function are introductions. Comparatively speaking, the American culture is more direct. For example, at a social or cultural event, if you don't know someone and you want to know them, you can simply introduce yourself or "strike up" a conversation. If you want to know about the other person, you ask. For Americans, the question "where are you from" is not seen as terribly personal. In fact, it is often asked in idle conversation or to check a perception of region variations or accents. However, to ask Americans questions about their job or what they do carries more personal weight. This again, is because most Americans "identify," with what they do.

In contrast, few Palestinian "identify" with their work. Consequently, to ask someone where they work, or anything connected with their work, including sometimes your salary, is not very personal. However, Palestinians do "identify" with where they are from, so the question, "where are you from" carries the personal weight equivalent to the "what do you do" for Americans. Additionally, because particular families settled in various towns and villages, often to know the family name is to know where the person is from.

Also in the Palestinian culture, it is rare that you would simply introduce yourself to "stranger" at a "public" function. Unless you were Western educated, you would likely wait to be introduced and or ask to be introduced if you were interested in knowing someone. The introduction would provide you with the opportunity to pursue a conversation. Inevitably the conversation begins by trying "to place" the other person. Judging from the family name, one can tell which region or city the person is from. The process of locating the person begin by which region he or she is from, which branch of the family, which family members.

Even during introductions, conversations can be much more intimate than American ones. Not only are family relations discussed, but one watches for cues in order not to ask "naive" questions that might prove embarrassing to the other person. This is perhaps related to Ting-Toomey's (1988) concept of facework.

In the cross-cultural setting, the cues may be there, but the guidelines for picking out which cues are significant or relevant to identity may be missing. Thus the participants may employ his or her own cultural variations of the ontological function. The intention for both is the same: both parties are seeking to find out about the other person. The effect, however, is quite the opposite. The questions may seem irrelevant at best, insulting at worst. "Irrelevant" represents the cultural variations between what is and is not significant for discerning another's identity.

Again, one example of what is irrelevant to the American, but vital to the Palestinian, is the need to ask about one's family. In order for a Palestinian to understand another's identity he or she needs to mentally construct a social structure within which to house the other's identity. The Palestinian treats the American doing person as a being person. The Palestinian assumption is that all

people are interdependent, or in some way connected within a social structure. Thus the Palestinian focuses on finding out about the stranger's family -- as much as there is to know or everything the other person will share. For some Americans this questioning may seem too personal, to others it may seem "nice," to others simply irrelevant.

Often times the earnestness of the questioning is misunderstood. To quote a guidebook for Americans wanting to cultivate friendships with foreign students: "Students can be lonely, especially when they first arrive in this country, and they may enjoy talking about their family and friends" (NAFSA, 1988). To a Palestinian, to ask about another's family is not simply "enjoyable," it is vital -- the person cannot be "known" or have an identity until there is a social structure within which to house that identity. Sometimes Americans pick up on this and provide a social network of friends and substitute this as the primary social structure and the family and "hometown" as the secondary, past-tense social structure.

A parallel example of ambiguous American questioning is offered by a Palestinian, fluent in English, who went for an interview with an American firm. A common question used in American interviews is, "how do you see yourself in 5 years from now?" The underlying assumption is that there is a "future orientation" of the self (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961). For Americans who have this future orientation, the difficulty in answering the question is knowing what they want to do. For the Palestinian, the difficulty is more fundamental: there really is no future-tense, at least not in the man-made sense. God creates the future tense, not individuals. While Palestinians have been developing a more present orientation because of their recent history, the dominant orientation is the past, one's father, one's grandfather, the family tradition, the village tradition, the Palestinian tradition. As the Palestinian woman who shared this example with me stated, "I understood what the interviewer was saying when he asked the question, but I had no idea what he meant." As a footnote, many would attribute this future tense limitation to Moslems. However, the Palestinian woman who shared this example is Christian.

SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to illustrate the primacy of the ontological function in interpersonal communication. The ontological function, introduced by Stewart (1986), focuses on the processes of self-definition, i.e. identity formation and maintenance, via the communication process. The analysis has illustrated that, although different cultures may mediate characteristically different self-definitions, the ontological function of developing and maintaining these self-definitions are still present across cultures. The Palestinian culture as representative of a "high-context, being culture," and American culture as

representative of a "low-context, doing culture" were used in a cross-cultural analysis of the ontological function.

Areas for future research include not only different cross-cultural functional analyses, but also intercultural analyses of the ontological functional. In that self-definitions are unique, the ontological function becomes a vehicle for understanding how and why all forms of human communication are expressly and explicitly unique.

Of particular importance is the process by which individuals seek to consciously or unconsciously preserve this uniqueness despite differing communication contexts. Cross-cultural analysis of the ontological function is basically virgin territory. Much of the documentation is available, what has been missing is a communication-based conceptual framework for analyzing individual-based phenomenon, such as self-definitions. In many ways, Ting-Toomey's (1988) negotiation of face can be seen as both a pioneering study as well as a model for future ones. In that there are different dimensions of self-definitions, there is a need to understand the how these dimensions are reflected in the ontological function.

The ontological function also has implication for intercultural adaptation research. Taken over the longer run, frustrations associated with the ontological function can begin to take their toll. The sojourner may begin to feel that he or she cannot communicate their "real" self, and the self that others are picking up on is either insignificant or unrepresentative of who they are. This inability to hold on to preferred, recognizable self-identities in alien socio-cultural contexts was introduced as self-shock (Zaharna, 1989). Self-shock stems from disturbances to the ontological function which make identity negotiation virtually impossible. Because of the differing self-definitions, it is plausible to suggest that intercultural disturbances of the ontological function will effect someone from a "being" culture in a profoundly different way than someone from a "doing" culture. Already we see the bases for this in the different approaches Americans companies take versus those that Foreign Student Advisors take in assisting the sojourner. The more we understand about how the intercultural setting affects individuals, as opposed to groups of people and statistics, the more able we will be to fine tune adaptation strategies and programs to benefit sojourners.

The value of all these research ventures is that we continually develop needed conceptual tools as well as a communication-based vocabulary for talking about micro-level and individual-level analyses.

Notes

1. Examples used in the analysis are based on the author's intercultural communication fieldwork in the West Bank and Gaza, August 1983 to August 1984.

2. I should stress that I am speaking about cultural generalities documented within the literature -- there are exceptions to every rule. My oversimplification of categorizes is for the purpose of theoretical illustration. I should also stress with regard to both the Palestinian and American cultures, both cultures have been heavily influenced by other cultural groups. In speaking of American culture I am referring to those cultural characteristics dominated by the white, Anglo, Christian -- and am conspicuously ignoring bicultural nature of many Asian-Americans, African-Americans, and Hispanic Americans. Similarly, because of the dispersion of the Palestinians, when I speak of the Palestinian Arab culture I am referring to the cultural ideals within the Palestinian cultural tradition -- and am conspicuously ignoring the historical and geographical changes, including the fact that over 65% percent of the Palestinians are now living in other cultures.

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