

Holding Local, Not Global, Intercultural Dialogues

Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz
Director, Center for Intercultural Dialogue

Intercultural dialogue (ICD) is most often studied on an international and political stage. But a more personal and local form of ICD occurs when people interact with cultural others in their daily lives.

One of my research projects investigated intercultural weddings. The results should be useful to others interested in similar interpersonal ICDs, and the concepts of ambiguity and intertextuality (the ability to reference something from another time and place), which turned out to be relevant in this case, should prove useful across contexts.

I take *culture* to be a system of meanings, and *communication* to be the creation and sharing of meanings. *Intercultural communication*, my field of study, investigates how people of different cultural backgrounds (nationality, ethnicity, religion) interact. Because cultural meanings are learned, those participating in intercultural communication lack shared past experiences, leading to misunderstandings. ICD is often assumed to make gaps and mismatches in meaning explicit and resolve them.

Weddings usually involve identity displays, so intercultural weddings pose the problem of how to display two different cultural identities simultaneously. Cultural identity is never so visible as when contrasted with the identity of others, which is just what happens in an intercultural wedding. Intercultural couples are motivated participants: they have the most to gain by solving their own difficulties, and the most to lose if they cannot. Many couples find ways to avoid the problem, such as holding two weddings. Those holding a single wedding may integrate multiple *symbols* (something present standing for something absent) into the ceremony. All words are symbols, as are nearly all foods, clothing, objects, etc. Symbols introduce *intertextuality* as well as *ambiguity* (as they may stand for several things, thus conveying multiple meanings simultaneously).

Summarizing an example will make this concrete. A groom who identifies as African American and Quaker married a bride who identifies as white and Jewish. They used a *huppah* (wedding canopy) made of fabric from Kenya, purchased on a trip exploring his African roots. His friends and family saw fabric they recognized and accepted it as representing his African American identity. Her friends and family saw the *huppah*, an object familiar from prior Jewish weddings, and assumed it represented her Jewish identity. In both cases, intertextuality meant that participants used knowledge of the past to make sense of the present. Given their different pasts, the same symbol conveyed different meanings to different participants.

This example shows how one couple creatively used intertextuality and ambiguity through the incorporation of a complex symbol in their wedding ceremony. All interaction makes use of symbols to convey meaning quickly. All interaction is also intertextual: people make sense of new information by relating it to old information. In this case study, ambiguity resulted from intertextuality: everyone was satisfied that they understood a symbol's meaning based on past experiences, without considering whether the message they understood was the same as that understood by others.

The question of how people can do different things, refer to different pasts, and convey different meanings at one time is relevant to many contexts. The answer, in at least some of those contexts, may also be to make use of symbols permitting intertextuality and ambiguity. Through symbols, knowledge of the past is brought into the present; at the same time, both/and becomes a real possibility.

For those who are used to thinking of ICD as occurring between political entities such as nations, focusing on ICD at the family level changes what should be studied, and what information should be included as relevant. Understanding the relevance of the past to making sense of the present cuts across all levels and contexts. For those who are stuck in an either/or situation, examples of both/and resolutions may prompt consideration of additional ways to resolve misunderstandings and conflicts. People are complicated; solutions to problems often need to be complex. Symbols are one of the ways to manage complexity.

Reference:

Leeds-Hurwitz, W. (2002). *Wedding as text: Communicating cultural identities through ritual*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.