

Insights into the Differences — Similarities Dialectic in Intercultural Communication from University Students' Narratives

Elizabeth ROOT
Oregon State University, USA

Abstract: Within intercultural communication, the concept of cultural difference has often been overemphasized. One way to address this is to consider a dialectical approach to intercultural communication. This study examines the specific dialectic of differences—similarities and considers ways to effectively incorporate this dialectic in intercultural pedagogy, based on a narrative analysis of 44 university students' narratives. Three themes regarding how narrators approached the concept of cultural difference or similarity were identified. The discussion focuses on the need to provide more accessible ways to communicate aspects of difference/similarity and the need to highlight the relational element of this specific dialectic.

Keywords: Differences — similarities, intercultural dialectics, narratives, intercultural instruction

1. Introduction

One of the assignments in my intercultural communication course requires students to write a personal narrative at the beginning of the term in which they recall a time they experienced an “intercultural encounter.” This is how one student, Steve¹, ended his narrative about a trip to Cuba to participate in a baseball tournament while he was in high school. After experiencing hospitality that completely overwhelmed him, he said:

On the flight home my family and I discussed for hours the differences in cultures that we had just experienced. We couldn't stop saying how different we were treated compared to if it [the tournament] had been hosted in the States...it was definitely an eye opening experience that has made me want to travel around the world and experience different cultures and see how they treat outsiders.

After this short, memorable trip to Cuba, Steve's lasting impression was the differences in communication and behavior he experienced. While better understanding cultural difference is important, I was struck by his emphasis on difference as the lasting impression. It made me wonder if, at the end of my course, students might simply walk away more aware of cultural differences instead of finding ways to connect through difference.

The concept of cultural difference has been a cornerstone in the field of intercultural communication, even though more recently traditional intercultural communication research

¹ All names of research participants have been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants.

has been criticized for emphasizing difference too much (Martin & Nakayama, 2013; Thurlow, 2004). An overemphasis on group difference can result in “false dichotomies and rigid expectations” (Martin & Nakayama, 2013, p. 67). Differences have, at times, been presented as “obstacles to be overcome or curiosities to be inventoried” (Thurlow, 2004, p. 218). Research has often examined intercultural difference based solely on nationality or race/ethnicity. This can distract from seeing how intercultural situations can also be more subtle: “The challenge of the intercultural is usually far less obvious” (Thurlow, 2004, p. 219).

Not only has intercultural communication research focused on difference as nationality or race/ethnicity, but university students also seem to hold this distinction as the main marker of cultural difference. For example, Fortman and Giles (2012) asked 50 communication undergraduates to write five sentences with the word “culture” used in a meaningful way in each sentence. While their initial intent was to synthesize a general definition of culture from these sentences, the outcome was that “no consensual definition developed” (Fortman & Giles, 2012, p. 92). Instead, the main result was that these students associated the word “culture” with nationality or a geographic location.

Another study to assess how university students define an intercultural interaction was conducted by Halualani (2008, 2010). She also found that participants “frame the notion of culture as nationality or based on the national origin of a person” (Halualani, 2010, p. 255). Her research, conducted at a multicultural university in the United States, emphasized that while participants defined interactions in complex ways, there was also a de-personalized element to their definitions. Her participants also described interaction with people from different nationalities as open, positive, and with a sense of the exotic. Halualani (2011) has also looked at this from the view of an intercultural communication instructor, pointing out that students often perceive culture as a fixed, unchanging entity; this framing of culture is “seductive” and “lulls students into a false sense of security” (Halualani, 2011, p. 48). She states how her goal as an instructor is to work to dismantle “the widespread representation (often created by intercultural scholars, anthropologists, and cross-cultural psychologists themselves) of culture as ‘known,’ ‘fixed,’ ‘certain,’ and ‘apprehensible’” (Halualani, 2011, p. 44).

One way to address the complexities of intercultural situations, instead of oversimplifying them, and to combat portrayals of culture as fixed or certain, is to consider a dialectical approach to difference in intercultural communication (Martin & Nakayama, 1999, 2013). As Martin and Nakayama state (2013), “...rather than cultural difference, our inclination is to put that concept into dialectical tension with cultural similarity to highlight the hybrid and heterogeneous character of all cultures” (p. 59). The purpose of this research is to examine more closely the complexities of the intercultural communication dialectic of similarities—differences, based on a narrative analysis of 44 university students’ narratives.

2. Literature Review

In order to provide the theoretical context for the current study, first the theoretical foundations of a dialectical approach to cultural difference will be discussed, followed by instructional considerations with regard to presenting aspects of cultural difference/similarity.

2.1. Theoretical Assumptions of a Dialectical Approach to Cultural Difference

A dialectical approach to intercultural communication, while initially articulated by Martin and Nakayama (1999, 2013), also draws on Bakhtin (1981) and Baxter and Montgomery (1996). Cheong and Gray (2011) summarize this approach succinctly:

A dialectical intercultural perspective is a metatheoretical framework that focuses on the simultaneous presence of two relational forces of interaction in recognition of their seemingly opposite, interdependent, and complementary aspects, akin to eastern philosophies on the completion of relative polarities” (p. 266).

While Martin and Nakayama (1999, 2013) list six dialectics of intercultural communication (cultural—individual; personal—contextual; differences—similarities; static—dynamic; present-future—history-past; privilege—disadvantage), this specific study focuses on the differences—similarities dialectic. This dialectic simply emphasizes that “difference and similarity can coexist in intercultural communication interactions” (Martin & Nakayama, 2013, p. 67). Brown (2004) describes this dialectic as focusing on “the relationship between the differences among cultural groups, but also the similarities that unite individuals across cultures” (p. 290).

To further explore the differences—similarities dialectic, this will be discussed within the articulated assumptions of a dialectical approach by Baxter and Montgomery (1996). They draw heavily on Bakhtin’s (1981) theory of dialogism, in which social life is depicted as an open dialogue as opposed to a closed monologue. This open dialogue is full of contradictions and tensions that concentrate on opposite yet connected tendencies. Baxter and Montgomery (1996), citing Bakhtin, state that “to enact dialogue, the parties need to fuse their perspectives while maintaining the uniqueness of their individual perspectives; the parties form a unity in conversation but only through two clearly differentiated voices” (p. 25). They also state that dialectics is not a traditional theory, since the concept does not have the structure of formal theories with axioms or propositional arguments. Instead, there are four conceptual assumptions that form a “metatheoretical perspective” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 6).

The first assumption of dialectics is based on the centrality of contradictions, defined as “the dynamic interplay between unified oppositions” which are “actively incompatible and mutually negate the other” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 6). With the specific dialectic of cultural differences—similarities, this distinction is clear. The concepts of similarity and difference both presuppose the existence of the other and also negate the other. The second assumption focuses on dialectical change. Within the tension of contradictions there is an ongoing, dynamic process. For example, Orbe (2008), in research that highlights how dialectics provide a framework for examining how first-generation college students engage in complex identity negotiations, cites Baxter (2004) to emphasize how these “forces, or dialectical tensions, are inherently neither good nor bad and exist on a continuum where there is no balancing point, no center, no equilibrium—only flux” (p. 84). Within the differences—similarities dialectic, there is always the possibility of change; once either similarity or difference is identified, there is the possibility to identify further similarity or difference, which means that the tension of this

dialectic is continually prompting a change in perspective.

The third assumption of dialectics is praxis; this captures how people have choices regarding how they communicate, while at the same time their choices and actions can become “reified in a variety of normative and institutionalized practices that establish the boundaries of subsequent communicative moves” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 13). This assumption is enacted within the differences—similarities dialectic through the manner in which communication occurs in an intercultural situation. Once someone assumes similarity or difference, their resulting communicative actions are influenced by their perceptions. If similarity is assumed, then the possibility for connection with another can occur, unless that assumption overlooks difference in a problematic manner. If difference is assumed, then the result could be distancing from or stereotyping another.

The last assumption of dialectics is the concept of totality, which emphasizes the interdependence of contradictions: “phenomena can only be understood in relation to other phenomena” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 14). The location of contradictions is at the level of interpersonal relationships, not located in the individual. The location of similarity or difference is also understood within the context of relationships; someone can only be similar/different to someone else, not on their own. There is an implication of comparison in this dialectic that makes a relational element an inherent aspect of the dialectic. While Baxter and Montgomery (1996) clearly explain there is an interdependence of contradictions, meaning that systems usually enact several dialectics at once, in this research I focus solely on similarities—differences for the purpose of teasing out the complexities of this issue in intercultural interactions.

2.2. Instructional Considerations in the Presentation of Cultural Difference

One reason to emphasize this specific dialectic is because I was also educated to focus on difference as a foundational element of intercultural communication. As an instructor of intercultural communication, I have frequently emphasized ways in which students are distinct or different from others as a means of teaching intercultural concepts. While this approach is not “wrong,” more recently I have begun to explore ways in which this approach might be problematic at certain levels. However, to first set a foundation, I will briefly mention two theories that were influential in my own development as an intercultural instructor.

One influential definition of intercultural communication comes from Collier and Thomas’ (1988) interpretive theory of cultural identity. This theory was developed to focus on the actual experiences of participants in intercultural situations and to describe the interactive negotiation process of cultural identity. In this theory, intercultural communication is specified as “contact between persons who identify themselves as distinct from one another in cultural terms” (Collier & Thomas, 1988, p. 100). Therefore, an intercultural situation occurs when people consciously avow or ascribe a distinctly different identity; these differences vary in such dimensions as scope, salience, and intensity. Scope is the “breadth and generalizability of the identity” (Collier & Thomas, 1988, p. 113). Salience refers to the importance or relevance of an identity in a particular context. Intensity refers to the strength or conviction with which the identity is felt or communicated. This definition of intercultural communication provided

the basis for the narrative assignment in my intercultural communication class. I was initially curious to discover how students defined themselves as culturally distinct from others and I wanted to use this information to help structure course content specifically to the perspectives of my students.

Another influential model that has shaped my approach to intercultural instruction is Bennett's (1993) Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), which is also based on the concept of differentiation. As Bennett (1993) specifies, "...the concept of fundamental difference in cultural worldview is the most problematic and threatening idea that many of us ever encounter. Learners (and teachers) employ a wide range of strategies to avoid confronting the implications of such difference" (p. 2). DMIS lists six different stages of a person's development toward intercultural sensitivity. It is a descriptive model in the sense that it describes what people do and how they organize their experience of difference. The first three levels of the model are referred to as ethnocentric stages, specifying the inability to see an alternative reality that is different from an individual's own sense of reality. The last three levels, the ethnorelative stages, signify a difference in perception and include an acceptance of cultural relativity. Bennett (1993) specified that moving from the ethnocentric stages to an ethnorelative stage is not an easy process.

As an instructor of intercultural communication, I have always worried that emphasizing similarities can result in reified ethnocentrism. Based on Bennett's DMIS, if many students enter an intercultural class in one of the ethnocentric levels of cultural sensitivity, my concern is that they would perceive aspects of similarity in ethnocentric ways: *If someone is similar to me, then they must perceive the world in a similar manner, and this supports notions that my perception is the "most natural."* In fact, the highest level of the ethnocentric stages in DMIS is titled "Minimization," in which individuals minimize cultural differences and focus on how people are, underneath it all, "just people." To combat this, I typically design course content to begin with cultural differences.

With regard to cultural difference, it is necessary to consider how "difference" is marked and then to consider what happens after an identity or cultural feature is marked as "different" (Sorrells, 2002). Sorrells cites Hall (1997) by stating that difference carries meaning. For example, when difference is marked, it "defines boundaries and creates classification systems that allow for the establishment of binary dichotomies..." (p. 23). When qualities are designated to a group, stereotypes are set; the complexities of groups or individuals are simplified and, unfortunately, often presented in a derogatory manner. These habits of marking difference in such a manner could be seen as actually trying to "fix" difference (Sorrells, 2002, citing Hall, 1997), to make difference less intimidating and to set these qualities or characteristics as permanent. Therefore, to fight against stereotyping and simplistic representations of groups or individuals, it is crucial to analyze ways in which difference is defined and marked.

Within the context of the differences—similarities dialectic, however, it is also necessary to consider how "similarity" is marked. The concept of what is "similar" also carries meaning. For example, the DMIS, while based on the concept of differentiation, also provides insight into how cultural similarities are conceived. In the ethnocentric stages, reliance on perceived similarity is presented as problematic. However, once one can perceive cultural differences, then there is the possibility to perceive and accept cultural relativity, to be able to see how

there are similarities within differences and also differences within similarities. Therefore, while my own foundational concepts of intercultural instruction were initially focused on aspects of cultural difference, it is possible to explore those foundations again to see where the implications of cultural similarity also exist. For this specific study, although the initial purpose was to explore how a select student population shared personal experiences about a time when they realized they were interacting with someone who was “different” than them, this data also provides a way to explore how, within their narratives, students have included details and insights into cultural similarities.

3. A Narrative Approach as Method to Explore Cultural Differences—Similarities

In order to explore how students might share personal experiences of difference/ similarity, narrative inquiry was utilized. This is one particular type of qualitative research which revolves around “an interest in life experiences as narrated by those who live them” (Chase, 2011, p. 421). Narratives can be seen as

a distinct form of discourse: as meaning making through the shaping or ordering of experience, a way of understanding one’s own or others’ actions, of organizing events and objects into a meaningful whole, of connecting and seeing the consequences of actions and events over time. (Chase, 2011, p. 421)

In this sense, research can focus on how people narrate their personal experiences and how they construct their identities and realities. Chase (2011) describes this approach to narrative as an interest in “how narrators make sense of personal experience in relation to cultural discourse” (p. 422).

My own approach to narrative has also been influenced by Bruner’s (2002) description of narratives. In many ways, the world is a set of stories; people choose to navigate their way through these stories and therefore create and recreate their lives. Bruner (1988) considers that “‘world making’ is the principal function of the mind” (p. 575). According to Bruner (2002), a story results when there is a difference between what is expected and what actually happens: “The story concerns efforts to cope or come to terms with the breach and its consequences” (Bruner, 2002, p. 17). It is through these efforts that “A narrative models not only a world but the minds seeking to give it its meaning” (Bruner, 2002, p. 27).

To engage in narrative inquiry, personal narratives were collected from students enrolled in an upper-level division intercultural communication course at a large state university in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. The writing assignment was included in the syllabus, with instructions to reflect on a previous experience that students would classify as an “intercultural encounter” and to write this experience as a narrative (See Appendix 1 for the story prompt as presented as a class assignment). The purpose of the vague story prompt was not to lead the participants in a specific direction, but instead, to see what reflection and personal experiences they would identify as an “intercultural encounter.” This prompt was not meant to mimic an in-depth interview study, so the function of the prompt was to simply generate a narrative.

After the assignment had been graded and returned, students were then told about the study and given the option to volunteer to participate. This study analyzes 44 narratives that were collected over a year and a half. During this time, the intercultural communication course was taught three different terms with a total of 81 students enrolled. Out of 81 students, 44 volunteered to submit their narrative assignment for analysis. Therefore, this study analyzes all narratives that were submitted by student participants within this time period. IRB protocol was followed to ensure the ethical collection of student work. Since this study was designed as qualitative research, the 44 narratives analyzed were not considered as representative of the entire student population. Instead, the narratives were seen as a window into 44 student perspectives regarding cultural differences and similarities; even though the results cannot automatically be considered to reflect a larger student population, this specific collection of narratives still provides insight into the cultural differences—similarities dialectic.

A brief demographic overview of the participants is that 15 participants are male, 29 are female, with a range in ages from 20 – 40 years old. 35 respondents identified as white North Americans (one participant was a white Canadian studying in the United States; this was the only international student that was enrolled in the course during that time period). Nine respondents identified as people of color: one Ethiopian American, one African American, one Native American, one Hmong American, one Chinese American, one Persian American, two biracial students (Korean/white), and one participant who simply identified as multiracial. How students identified racially/ethnically comes into play in the ways in which they defined what an intercultural encounter was, which is why this demographic information is included.

Table 1. Gender of Research Participants

Female Participants	29
Male Participants	15

Table 2. Race/Ethnicity of Research Participants

Race/Ethnicity of Participants	Number
White U.S. American	34
White Canadian	1
Ethiopian American	1
African American	1
Native American	1
Hmong American	1
Chinese American	1
Persian American	1
Biracial (Korean/White U.S. American)	2
Multiracial	1

4. Complexities of the Differences—Similarities Dialectic in Specific Narratives

In analyzing the data, the first step was to consider specific ways in which students identified themselves as being culturally different. The majority of narratives designated cultural difference based on different nationality. Race/ethnicity was the secondary designator of cultural distinctness. These results are similar, then, to Halualani's (2010) and Fortman and Giles' (2012) research that university students tend to consider culture mainly as based on nationality, national origin, or geographical location. The other ways in which difference was designated in the data were represented very little, but there were narratives that designated cultural difference based on politics, gender, religion, social class, and ability/disability identity.

The next step was to identify ways in which narrators depicted aspects of cultural differences or similarities. While the initial assignment prompted students to remember a situation when they were aware of cultural difference, the capacity of narrative inquiry also allows for exploration of how, within those narratives, there were assumptions or statements of similarity also present in the narration. Each story was initially analyzed individually; every narrative was closely read to distinguish the narrator's approach to an intercultural encounter. Stories were designated by the narrator's approach to cultural similarity or difference. After each narrative was analyzed individually, the data set was conceived as a whole and similar individual analyses were combined to generate larger themes. From this analysis, three general themes emerged. Some narrators initially assumed similarity with others, only to discover that differences also existed. Some focused solely on difference at the beginning of their contact with someone, but over time discovered subtle aspects of similarity. Finally, some narrators focused their entire narrative on aspects of cultural difference.

I have chosen to present these research results by sharing the summaries of five narratives as exemplars to highlight the results. These chosen stories are not to be seen as necessarily representing the entire or complete data set for each specific theme; however, there are elements in each of these stories that do represent the important points for each theme. For the sake of space, I have condensed each of these five participants' narratives while still staying as true to the original text as I possibly could. Any quotation within the story summary is the exact words of the narrator. Therefore, the presented summary is as close to the original as I could master; my interpretation is not included until the analysis section that follows the presentation of the narratives.

4.1. Theme 1 as Similarities → Differences

In this set of narratives, the narrators either clearly establish or imply that their initial approach to the person or situation was to assume similarity between themselves and the other(s). This assumption of similarity is quite complex; since the assignment asked students to identify an experience that they would classify as an "intercultural encounter," at some level there would have to be an awareness of something about the situation or the individual that was worthy of this designation. However, initial perceptions of cultural markings were not emphasized in these narratives. Instead, the narrators simply assumed that whomever they were interacting with would be more similar to them than different. There are two narratives that will demonstrate

this theme. The narratives will be presented first, followed by a description of highlights from the analysis.

4.1.1. Narrative 1.

Charlie, the narrator, is a white male who begins his narrative describing his first day at a new job. One particular co-worker, Rashid, stood out to him because he was the first one to introduce himself and help Charlie adjust. Rashid was also the first one to strike up a conversation every day when Charlie showed up for work. There was one particular moment Charlie remembers distinctly when he needed a ride to work; when he finally got the courage to ask Rashid, Charlie became convinced that Rashid was a “true friend” based on Rashid’s immediate, positive response to his request. It was at this point in the narrative that Charlie states: “Rashid was from Dubai. To be honest, I was young and culture didn’t necessarily determine who my circle of friends were.”

The rest of the narrative, however, explains how there were differences between Charlie and Rashid. Meeting Rashid’s family, for example, was an experience where Charlie first felt nervous, but eventually relaxed, appreciated all the food offered to him, and ended up feeling at home. Other examples of differences focused on Charlie’s growing awareness that Rashid experienced different reactions and reception from others, including customers and one new co-worker. One specific moment involved racial remarks directed at Rashid’s family by a customer; Charlie felt obliged to stand up for his friend, even if this meant angering a loyal customer at work. As Charlie put it, “It would have been easy to give Rashid a hard time about his culture but never once was that the issue with our core group of friends. Rashid was embraced as one of us because truly, he is.” At the end of the narrative, Charlie states that “it’s the small things” that influence how he and Rashid are treated differently. Charlie’s final words are:

It’s not right that because Rashid comes from a different part of the world that we treat him like so. If any of these unenthusiastic people knew Rashid like I had grown to know him, they wouldn’t see any difference, but instead they take the ‘stereotype road’ and make assumptions. He’s been a loyal friend over the last five years and I appreciate what he has done for me.

Charlie, while still claiming cultural similarities, or at least not seeing Rashid as being “any different,” is nevertheless aware that he, at times, is treated very differently than Rashid in public situations.

4.1.2. Narrative 2.

Mina, a Persian-American female, shares her experience when her grandmother, aunt, and two cousins come to visit from Iran. Mina was eagerly anticipating connecting with her eldest cousin, who was going to live with Mina’s family for her senior year in high school as she prepared to apply to a university in the United States. Mina was “looking forward to helping her

get comfortable living in the United States and filling her in on what college is like.” However, even from the beginning of the visit, Mina notices it was more difficult than she expected to feel a warm, comfortable connection with her cousin. Mina had difficulty understanding her cousin’s insistence on only applying to an Ivy League school. Not only did she not understand this extreme focus on attending a prestigious university, but she was also surprised by her cousin’s lack of comprehension regarding Mina’s busy life in a sorority and working part-time when she was also a full-time student. At the end of her narrative, Mina explains:

Although I’m Iranian and lived there for a great part of my childhood, I felt that I was talking to someone who was very different from me. I have taken on a lot of the American culture and mixed that with my Persian culture and created my own culture. These differences made it harder to connect with my cousin and altered the way I looked at things. My realization of this difference made it harder for me to connect on a deeper level with her because we did not see things in the same way.

While she initially assumed she and her cousin would have so many similarities and connections, Mina’s awareness of how she was different from her cousin also provided her personal insight into her own identity as a Persian American.

4.1.3. Analysis.

In both of these stories, the two narrators initially assume, for a number of reasons, that they would share more in common with another than not. For Charlie, he clearly states how he was not aware that he factored in aspects of culture when he met people; he has the privilege and position to assume that others must be similar or have similar experiences to him. For Mina, she simply considers that her cousin, sharing the same family and culture of origin, will share similar values and life goals. Mina begins her narrative with more of an awareness of her personal cultural identities than does Charlie, simply because she is aware of her identity as both Persian and American. As both of these narrators discover differences, their reaction to these differences can be presented in contrast. For Charlie, it appears this is his first awareness that some people personally experience discrimination. This aspect of difference is located externally, centered on other people who are rude and who stereotype. Charlie highlights being a witness to others’ rude treatment of Rashid, judging him based on “where he comes from.” The narrator here does not indicate that Rashid looks, speaks, or acts differently; instead, he simply categorizes this difference as Rashid’s origin. Charlie, as a white male, has not experienced or seen this type of discrimination before, and since it occurs against someone he considers a “true friend,” he is appalled by people’s judgment. In contrast, when Mina becomes aware of how different her cousin is from her, she locates this difference more internally, considering how she has changed because of her life in the United States. Both Charlie’s and Mina’s narratives indicate a growing awareness of living on the edge between culture; Charlie only sees this from a distance, happening occasionally to Rashid, while Mina sees her own identity as a negotiation between her Persian identity and her U.S. American identity.

4.2. Theme 2 as Differences → Similarities

In this set of narratives, the narrators either clearly establish or imply that their initial approach to the person or situation was to assume difference between themselves and the other(s). This assumption of difference is quite strong, and it is not until either a specific moment when aspects of similarity are directly communicated, or there is reflection time to consider similarity, that this insight occurs to the narrator. Even when aspects of connection or similarity are discovered, there still is a stronger emphasis on difference. In other words, the feeling of difference appears to be stronger than the insight into similarity. There are two narratives that will demonstrate this theme. The narratives will be presented first, followed by a description of highlights from the analysis.

4.2.1. Narrative 3.

Matt, a white male, grew up in a predominantly white town. During his second year as a resident assistant at university, there were two black basketball players on his dormitory floor that continually challenged his authority. On move-in day, these two young men began to play loud music that Matt describes as being “incredibly vulgar.” This put Matt in a difficult position to ask them to turn down the volume; he was even approached by several fathers who were concerned with the presence of the two black men on the same floor as their daughters. Matt describes how his attempt to deal with the situation did not go as he had planned: “I went upstairs to have a conversation with them about it, but to no avail. They were very quick-witted and I, already feeling the pressure of interacting with people very different from me and trying not to be racist, completely folded.”

The situation continued to be challenging for Matt, including loud music persisting at all hours of the day and night, and some instances of these two residents breaking occasional dorm policies. Matt felt “timid and did not know what to say or do.” The situation escalated over a few months until finally, with the help of Matt’s coworker who acted as a mediator, the three men were able to have a productive conversation: “The guys said that they felt I was being racist by acting so differently around them. They said they knew I was trying, but that’s exactly what they did not want me to do.” The result of that conversation was more civil treatment toward each other and Matt felt like these two students began to show him more respect in his role as the resident assistant. The end of Matt’s narratives explains how one of those basketball players stayed in the dorm for an extended period of time over winter break and the two of them actually formed “a sort of odd friendship that lasted throughout the year. I still go and hang out with the basketball player and I talk trash with him about his play after various games.” In Matt’s situation, his initial assumption of difference was the direct cause of conflict; when he began to tentatively seek out more similarities, a type of friendship began to form.

4.2.2. Narrative 4.

Hope, a white female, focused her narrative on an experience she had as a conversation partner with an international student from China. Hope volunteered for this experience with

the prompting of an assignment in an anthropology course. Her initial assumptions were that “this was going to be a major burden on my time and there would be no possible way that I could even communicate with her.” However, early on in her narrative, Hope explains how the experience went differently than her initial expectations:

To my surprise, I was able to learn a lot about another culture. Not only that, but at times I would forget it was an intercultural experience because there were a variety of things which came up that were relevant to me and my own personal cultures.

Hope was initially very “agitated” that her partner asked questions about so many topics. She would try very hard not to show her frustration and to answer all the questions, but underneath, this experience annoyed her. After the assignment ended, however, Hope can now identify how these “were things that I took for granted...I am never asked to explain why I do what I do, or how I say what I just said. I am not asked due to the fact that the people in which [sic.] I am surrounded by are part of a lot of the same cultures as myself.” Hope also was aware that the framework of this conversation program, assigned through a course, caused a specific bias:

Having them tell us that we would need to act as a teacher or mentor made me feel as if I was superior to her. I, being superior to her, made me feel as if my culture was correct and hers was wrong...Regardless of what seems to be a lot of negative and uncomfortable feelings I had throughout my experience; it really was still very rewarding and educational. I think that this was one of the first times I was so involved for a lengthy period of time; I was challenged. Most intercultural experiences which I have had were brief and I am not given the chance to build a relationship with the person. Having an intercultural experience taught me a lot about other cultures as well as myself.

The end of Hope’s narrative specifies that, while it was not an easy experience, she was able to learn and have those moments when she was able to connect to this international student in a way that made her forget this was an “intercultural” experience.

4.2.3. Analysis

These two narratives illustrate how initial assumptions of difference are not always a productive way to proceed in an intercultural interaction. Matt marked two specific dorm residents as being completely different than him based on racial designation; every interaction he had with them was influenced by his continuing perception of difference. In fact, Matt’s specific attempts to “not be racist” were actually directly perceived as racist. Hope began her relationship with her conversation partner, not only focusing on cultural difference, but framing this difference in a negative manner, even doubting if she would be able to communicate with her partner at all. Both of their initial and subsequent interactions were difficult and filled with tension, as the emphasis on cultural difference in their assumptions persisted. In both narratives, the discovery of similarities is presented as a subtle discovery, in the sense that the concept of

difference remains the stronger sentiment, even at the end of the narratives. These discoveries of similarities, or ways to connect, only happened over time, and in the case of Matt, with direct intervention. Hope was also aware that her interaction in this situation, prompted by a course assignment, was designed in a manner to focus on cultural differences. Hope did not question this bias, the way in which she was designated to be the cultural/language “expert,” until after the term was over and she gained a deeper perspective on why certain aspects of her experience had been challenging for her. Therefore, time plays a crucial role in the discovery of subtle similarities that exist within a main assumption of difference.

4.3. Theme 3 as Focusing Only on Differences

In this set of narratives, the narrator assumes difference from the beginning of the experience or interaction, and that assumption continues throughout the experience. The end result is that only cultural difference is perceived, with little to no emphasis on discovering or experiencing similarities. The majority of these narratives are travel narratives, when the narrator was on vacation or a short-term mission or service trip. Since the narrator travels outside of the United States in these travel narratives, the sole marker of cultural difference is based on nationality and geography. For the sake of space, just one narrative will demonstrate this theme, followed by a description of the highlights from the analysis.

4.3.1. Narrative 5.

Natalie, a white female, traveled to France with her mother and sister to visit an old friend of her mother’s, Marie. Natalie begins her story by admitting that she felt nervous to meet Marie and had many stereotypes of French people in mind. Marie turned out to be more “proper and sophisticated” than what Natalie had assumed: “She was probably the most diverse person I had ever met.” From Natalie’s point of view, Marie got annoyed with her and her sister many times during the two-week trip, often shaking her head and saying “Oh, you American teenagers!” Natalie found the food very different, and thought it was strange that in France people do not share entrees with other people when they are dining out. She also had a difficult time adjusting to the shower facility at Marie’s, which was a handheld showerhead with no shower curtain: “Marie was very confused as to how we made such a big mess. She also gave us what looked like half-sized towels to dry off.” The end of Natalie’s narrative emphasizes how distinct Marie was from her, including Marie having a different outlook on life and eating different foods at different times of the day: “I was expecting things to be a little different and challenging but did not know it would be as hard as it was.” Natalie’s entire narrative is a collection of ways in which her experience in France was different from what she had expected.

4.3.2. Analysis

This narrative, typical of the others in the data set, is focused on the differences the narrators have experienced during a short-term travel experience. Steve’s story of his trip to Cuba, highlighted in the introduction, also fits into this theme. In some ways, this is an expected

result from an assignment that asks people to recall significant memories. If everything had gone the way they expected in their travels, they would not have interesting stories to share. Referring back to Bruner's (2002) concept of story, people recall situations and tell stories more about the unexpected than the expected. However, what is notable in these travel stories is that most narrators seem to expect difference from the very beginning. Natalie discusses her nervousness and awareness of French stereotypes, which fueled her expectations about Marie. This perception caused a bias for her to note differences more strongly than any similarities she experienced. Even when these narrators are in the minority, immersed in another national culture, they still tend to note the difference as external, meaning that everyone else is somehow different from them, not the other way around. Since these travel experiences are short-term, there does not seem to be enough time for the narrators to process the differences at a depth that allows them to see beyond the differences to aspects of cultural similarity.

These five narratives and resulting analysis demonstrate how this data set depicts different approaches to intercultural situations. Some narrators assumed more similarities within intercultural relationships, until specific differences were observed. For other narrators, specific situations were approached by assuming differences between people; as certain relationships progressed, these narrators discovered similarities in a way that allowed them to connect with others. Finally, some narrators simply reported memories of differences throughout the entire story. No narratives in this specific data set focused only on cultural similarities. Possible reasons for this will be addressed in the discussion section.

5. Discussion

To gain insight into the complexities of the differences—similarities dialectic, it is important to first note that there is not convenient language to express the tensions that exist in this dialectical relationship. Language and concepts in Western discourse tend to only express or emphasize dichotomy instead of dialectics. This influences how people perceive the dialectic tensions and how they express these tensions. For example, it was more common for narrators to focus on one side of the contradiction at a time, not necessarily because they did not see or experience complexities, but because there are no easy terms to describe the concept of “differences in similarity” or “similarity in differences.” These stories indicate that the narrators tended to enter a situation assuming one over the other (a dichotomous approach) whether they were consciously aware of this or not. Their initial assumptions, based on only one side of the dialectic relationship, strongly influenced the interaction, and, in some cases, became the main impression after the interaction was over.

In the narratives where assumptions were challenged, such as finding more similarities within difference, this is when the most insightful intercultural learning occurred. In other words, crucial cultural learning and knowledge increased in those specific moments when the contradictory aspects of the dialectics collided in someone's experience. With the case of Mina, the cultural learning that occurred provided insight into the narrator's own cultural identity. At other times, it was cultural learning that provided insight into the other person depicted in the narrative, such as when Charlie learned how his friend Rashid had to face discrimination on a regular basis, or when Hope began to realize how overwhelming it would

be to experience immersion in a foreign culture. Therefore, perhaps the most crucial insight into the differences—similarities dialectic is that important intercultural insights develop when someone more consciously experiences that energetic tension between the two contradictions.

Another relevant point is the element of time that is expressed through the narratives. None of the narrators who really wrestled with the dialectical tension of differences—similarities told a story about a one-time interaction. Time is necessary to experience the actual energetic tension of contradictions inherent in this dialectic. Not only was there always an element of time passing, but there was also the element of prolonged contact with another, whether it be through a conversational partnership for a term, a living experience in a dormitory, or a friendship that has lasted for many years. This emphasizes the relational aspect of dialectics; the energetic tensions of dialectics are located within a relationship, not within an individual. The travel narratives in this data set do not include the contradictory elements of the dialectic because of this lack of relationship; even if there are short stories about people connecting to someone during a trip, this is not a prolonged relationship with repeated contact over a length of time. If an interaction is short, it is possible to overlook dialectical tension and simply remain focused on one aspect of the dialectic, even if the other aspect is also present.

There are obviously many more ways that dialectical tensions can be explored in intercultural situations. Just based on the one dialectical tension of differences—similarities, this study hints at expanding the category to include more possibilities. Within the differences—similarities tension, there could also be a dialectic to explore the internal—external location of the differences/similarities. Baxter and Montgomery (1996), for example, differentiate between dialectics that are internal (between or within a dyadic relationship) as compared to issues that are external (between the dyad and the greater community). Within the similarities—difference dialectic, there seems to be tensions that exist whether the similarities/differences are perceived as being more external or internal. As Thurlow (2004) describes,

seldom at the point of intercultural encounter are people able to resist the tendency to judge ‘they are strange,’ ‘it’s they who are wrong.’ Why cannot people instead pause and reflect ‘I feel strange,’ ‘what is it about me which makes this person seem strange?’
(p. 222)

There is a tension involved in perceiving where, exactly, the similarities/differences exist, and while, of course, the dialectical approach describes the location of the tension within the relationship, there is still the struggle, from the perception of the narrator, to consider the location of the similarities/differences. In this current study, many of the narrators who could claim dominant identities (either as born in the USA or as white narrators), emphasized that the difference was external; they could claim their identity as the norm and therefore could depict the other(s) as the ones enacting difference or similarity. This was, of course, not overtly stated since it was an element of identity that was taken for granted. Many narrators who focused on identities that were not dominant (in this data set, mostly narrators who identify as people of color), tended to consider more internal locations for similarity/difference, in that they felt they were the ones who were marked (mostly as different) from the majority of others. This also can connect to the privilege—disadvantage dialectic of intercultural communication. Privilege—

disadvantage can be seen in how narrators both assume and also react to cultural similarities/differences. While there is a privilege in perspective of being able to claim a dominant identity and take aspects of identity for granted, this privilege can be an obstacle in seeing how cultural differences—similarities exist within a relationship, not within a cultural “other.”

Finally, as mentioned earlier, no narratives in this data set focused solely on cultural similarities. One possible reason is because the assignment prompt specifically requested students to consider an experience with someone who was “different” from them. In this way, the prompt could have biased the participants to only consider cultural differences in their narratives; this is a limitation of this particular study design. However, as seen from the results, while all the narratives included perceptions of cultural difference, many narratives also included perceptions of cultural similarity. Even though the assignment prompt did not directly focus narrators to consider aspects of similarity, the fact that cultural similarities were included in the narratives indicates that participants still considered aspects of differences as compared to similarities. Because differences—similarities exist in a dialectical relationship, asking someone to consider differences implies that one must also consider similarities, and vice versa. Therefore, while the narratives did not often delve into deep philosophical considerations of the dialectical connection between differences—similarities, even just asking students to consider differences brought up aspects of similarities. Therefore, the bias of the story prompt can actually provide strength to the descriptions of cultural similarities that were discussed in the narratives. However, future research does need to further explore ways in which cultural similarities are perceived by individuals involved in intercultural interactions.

6. Pedagogical Considerations

To return to my initial narrative, and my concern regarding if students might walk away from an intercultural communication course simply being more aware of cultural differences instead of finding ways to connect through difference, this research could provide several considerations. Even though these results cannot be considered representative of any student population because of the qualitative research design of the study, I still believe it is worthwhile to share the possible pedagogical implications that came to mind as I conducted the analysis. First, the variety of student narratives, even in this small data set, illustrates how it is possible to use students’ own intercultural experiences as a way to explore differences—similarities within a classroom context. Each class contains students with many intercultural experiences and different assumptions of cultural difference/similarity. These experiences can be overtly discussed and analyzed to point out the complexities of intercultural interactions.

Second, this research highlights a need to make the dialectical tension of cultural differences—similarities more accessible. If an intercultural course needs to begin with highlighting cultural difference, as a way to address the potential ethnocentric developmental levels of students, based on Bennett’s (1993) DMIS, the curriculum obviously does not need to end there. One specific way to make this dialectic more accessible is to provide specific language for students to communicate about this tension, even making the somewhat awkward terms such as “similarities in difference” and “difference in similarities” comfortable and common. Providing specific ways to overcome dichotomous approaches to culture can construct ways for

students to explore the deeper complexities of culture.

Third, along with providing more specific language and ways to communicate dialectical tensions, it is important to consider students' comfort level in articulating certain elements of difference/similarity. These narratives suggest that students might feel there are perhaps more "socially acceptable" ways to communicate aspects of identifying differences—similarities. For example, within the narratives, there is some avoidance of describing cultural others based on physical markers of difference. There are times when race/ethnicity is mentioned, but there are many other times when this is not identified at all. Overall, the narrators seem to be more familiar or comfortable mentioning national or geographic origin when specifically labeling cultural difference. Most white narrators never mention their own race/ethnicity, or even their nationality, since these are identities that they have been socialized to take for granted. If there is mention of specific race/ethnicity, the narrators of color almost always identify their own identity along with how they identify the other(s) in their story.

The comfort level of students should be considered when planning classroom discussions on differences—similarities. If, for example, white students have grown up in a context where they feel they have been taught "not to see color," then they will more likely attempt to enter situations with people of color only assuming similarity. Not "seeing color" could also lead to not seeing difference, or at least to not acknowledging difference in descriptions of cultural situations, for fear of being marked as "racist," as is seen in Matt's story. This context of students strongly adhering to an ideology of "not seeing color" will also greatly impact classroom discussion on differences—similarities, especially if, in a specific situation, race/ethnicity is a crucial difference or similarity to note.

Finally, this research suggests the importance of emphasizing the relational element of the differences—similarities dialectic in intercultural learning. The most poignant examples of experiencing the differences—similarities dialectic occurred within some type of relationship, not in one-time, brief interaction. Therefore, while intercultural relationships obviously cannot be forced upon students, it is possible within a classroom setting to facilitate interaction and student relationships during the course of a term. It is also possible to highlight how the tension of dialectics exists in the "inbetweenness" of relationships, to encourage students to not see difference or similarity as only located externally. A combination of these pedagogical considerations could hopefully encourage more meaningful exploration into the simple, yet complex dialectic of differences—similarities.

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Author Note

Elizabeth Root is an assistant professor of intercultural communication at Oregon State University. Her research focuses on issues of university internationalization, cultural identity, and intercultural communication pedagogy.

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Appendix 1: Prompt for the Narrative Assignment

These are the directions that appeared in the course syllabus to describe the narrative assignment for students: “At the beginning of the term, you are required to reflect on a previous experience that you would classify as an “intercultural encounter” and to write this experience as a narrative. I would encourage you to consider what might have been one of the first experiences in which you realized that you were interacting with someone who was ‘different’ than you. Consider how this realization affected the situation. Include as many details as possible about how you felt, what you thought, and what you said and did in such a situation. This assignment needs to be written as a story, not as an essay, and so be as creative as you would like in order to capture your experience in a story form.”