

The Confluence of Intercultural Communication and Education Research: An Excavation of The Residents' *Mole Show*

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Introduction

Although the performing arts and popular culture might not always occupy the limelight in discussions on education research, few stakeholders would dispute that they do hold a compelling interest for many secondary and tertiary learners. Accordingly, there is no shortage of research illustrating the powerful connections between popular culture and motivational strategies for secondary and tertiary learners. Given this availability of education research dealing with motivation, this chapter will instead concern itself with a discussion of the voice of two marginalized cultures in a fictional stage production. This discussion will lead into a question that is one of the underlying queries of issues of voice in education research: How might voices be appropriately acknowledged and represented in education research? The other key inquiry grounding this anthology of ethics and issues of voice in education research will investigate some of the implications that conceptualizations of voice have with respect to the ethics of education research.

The Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1993) will comprise the principal theoretical construct underpinning this article. There are four main reasons supporting its inclusion here. Firstly, it will serve as an effective springboard to discuss various aspects of intercultural communication, and in turn, issues of voice in education research. Secondly, given that intercultural conflicts frequently result in one culture subjugating another,

it will also serve as a catalyst to examine the ethics of education research. Thirdly, the DMIS has been widely implemented in the field of intercultural communications, and as a result, there is a substantial body of literature focused on it.

The Mole Trilogy, As Conceived, Recorded, and Staged by The Residents

In the early nineteen eighties, San Francisco-based experimental musicians The Residents created a touring theater production in which they examined the intercultural relations of two juxtaposed, fictional cultures: the Mohelmot and the Chubs. The former, usually referred to simply as the Moles, are less technologically developed, more superstitious, and much harder working. The Moles prefer to live in darkness, and thus live underground. The Moles embody E.T. Hall's concept of a *high context* culture (Hall, 1976). In marked contrast, Chub culture is technologically advanced, outwardly ebullient, superficial, and pleasure oriented. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they live above ground. The Chubs personify Hall's concept of a *low context* culture, one that would feel right at home on the left side of Milton Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (Bennett, 1993).

At the very beginning of the narrative, a violent storm causes the inundation of the Moles' subterranean world, forcing them to abandon their underground homeland. These migrating Moles soon encounter the Chubs, who initially appear eager to welcome the Moles. Soon, however, it becomes apparent that the Chubs' welcome has more to do with securing a cheap source of labor than with genuine intercultural acceptance, or ICC sensitivity.

Intercultural friction eventually leads to armed hostility between the two cultures. This violent conflict fails to resolve the intercultural strife. One immediate result of this violence is that the Chubs prohibit the use of the Mohelmot language. In this fictional world, then, language can be viewed as a means by which the emic group, the Chubs, exercises hegemony over the etic group, the Mohelmot. However, The Residents have also written in a third cultural group into this intercultural conflict.

Towards the end of the narrative, a pop band named The Big Bubble becomes an intercultural phenomenon by singing in the legally forbidden Mohelmat language. The members of The Big Bubble comprise a bicultural, mixed ethnicity group of young people called the Cross. Superficially at least, the Cross might well appear to be the embodiment of what some scholars have referred to as a third space worldview. The idea of third spaces has been defined as “*a spatial metaphor to suggest an alternative, radical geography which mobilizes place, politics and hybrid identities*” (Pile, 2004, p. 255). A third space point of view typically develops in individuals with combined ethnicity.

What implications does a third space conceptualization of voice have with respect to the ethics of education research? On a superficial level, the spoken voice of the Cross, in tandem with the singing voice(s) of The Big Bubble, serve to reinforce the fact that there are increasing numbers of mixed race/bicultural/ethnically ambiguous learners in education systems around the increasingly globalized world. The implication here is that educational researchers need to be constantly aware of this blended voice, and should therefore welcome any potential *shades of grey* that might emerge from their data. With respect to the blended voice of the Cross, educational research should view cultural absolutes with a critical, or at least wary, eye, given that their third space voice transcends the purely *black and white*, or the monocultural. Educational research that is conducted in the English language often occurs in pluralistic, heterogeneous societies, ones with increasing numbers of bicultural and ethnically ambiguous learners.

As evidenced in The Cross, educational research stands to benefit from a third space point of view, which recognizes and acknowledges cultural diversity and ambiguity. In transcending the primacy, or even hegemony, of any single culture, third space mindsets encourage and promote the acceptance and inclusion of diverse voices. This acceptance of diverse voices can serve as an ethical model for educational researchers, who need to

constantly be cognizant of the myriad value and belief systems in the increasingly interconnected twenty-first century; especially those that are minority ones, or hitherto oppressed ones. Examples of such *non-ethnic* oppressed voices include religious minorities, linguistic minorities, sexual orientation minorities, female emancipation communities, vegetarians and vegans, as well as the voices of the economically oppressed.

With respect to the ethics of education research, two obvious questions arise from the fact that The Big Bubble give voice to their pop songs in a prohibited language. The first of these two questions interrogates the extent to which the Chub language is used by the subjugating culture, the Chubs, to assert and maintain hegemony over the subjugated culture, the Moles; while the second question aims to identify the extent to which the third space Cross youth been given the voice of intercultural saviors. As for the first question, it is clear that the Chubs use their language as a means to maintain hegemony over the Moles. Seen in this light, ethical education research would do well to consciously avoid such hegemonic practices. And, although most educational researchers would consciously claim to abhor such hegemonic practices, controlling their subconscious biases and elitist tendencies might prove more difficult. For instance, researchers from a wide variety of academic disciplines, not only education, have traditionally felt superior to people with lower levels of educational attainment. Similarly, well-meaning researchers associated with elite universities might subconsciously harbor biases against their fellow humans from less prestigious institutions. Ethical education research must strive to avoid all hegemonic practices, just like fictitious pop band The Big Bubble.

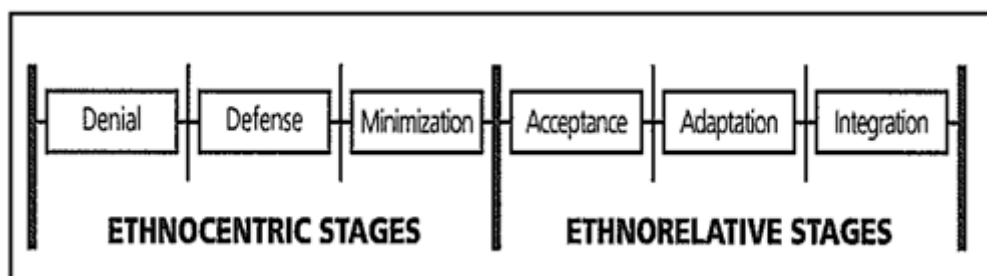
As for the second of the above questions, the third space Cross, as epitomized by The Big Bubble, have been superficially given the voice of intercultural mediators. The situation, however, is somewhat more complicated. The following is a direct quotation from the 1985 liner notes to The Big Bubble studio album, composed and recorded by The Residents:

“... the singer (“Ramsey”) is jailed, and begins to see himself as the new Messiah of traditional “Zinkenites.” The Zinkenite wished to form a new Mohelmot nation. Truth be known, the singer (“Ramsey”) is merely a naïve puppet of an aggressive Cross named Kula Bocca.... The story abruptly ends, but there is plenty of basis for a dynamic conclusion, if The Residents ever get around to it.” (Uncle Willie, 1993, p.98)

Although the Cross appear to be well-positioned to act as intercultural mediators, they are by no means the embodiment of all that is moral or socially just. After all, Ramsey, the lead singer of The Big Bubble, believes he is some sort of Messiah, whereas he is really just the manipulated pawn of a megalomaniac Cross named Kula Bocca. Translating this into education research terms, voices must be appropriately acknowledged and represented, especially oppressed voices. Moreover, the practice of championing the underdog, a natural proclivity for more than a few proponents of social justice, must be tempered with a dogmatic adherence to objective fact.

Milton Bennett’s Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)

Figure 1: The developmental model of intercultural sensitivity



The DMIS is a six-stage hierarchical framework. Its first three stages are called the ethnocentric stages, while its latter three stages are known as the ethnorelative stages (Bennett, 1993). Now, the first stage of ethnocentrism, which is called the denial stage, comprises the belief that there are no real differences among different cultures (Bennett, 1993). Individuals in this stage perceive their own culture to be the only legitimate one. Awareness of different cultures cannot truly happen, because proximity to differences is avoided physically, or mentally (Bennett, 1993). The Chubs are at least partially situated in this denial stage, given

that they have given voice to both isolation and separation in their interactions with the Moles. Similarly, the argument could also be made that the Moles are located in this initial stage of the DMIS as well, given that they would still be literally isolated from other cultures were it not for the tempest that flooded their underground domain. With respect to the ethics of education research, this initial stage of the DMIS serves as a reminder that educational researchers need to keep in mind that some survey samples will contain respondents whose voices are less than appealing, perhaps even morally repugnant, but that these voices must be honored in the same way as less potentially offensive voices. Of course, this is predicated on the fact that such morally repugnant voices are not spreading, or attempting to spread, hate. After all, spreading hate is illegal in several jurisdictions.

Defence is the second stage of the DMIS (Bennett, 1993). In this stage, a person's own culture is experienced as the only legitimate culture. For individuals in this stage, cultural differences are not simply viewed with mistrust, but these differences are actually considered a threat to one's own identity and self-concept (Bennett, 1993). Given that the Chubs do feel superior to the Moles, whom they subjugate and exploit, the argument could well be made that, post-exodus and post-tempest, there are at least some Chubs in this defence stage. However, it would be decidedly difficult, if not impossible, to argue that there were any Chubs in the third stage of the DMIS, the minimization stage.

Minimization is the final ethnocentric stage of the DMIS (Bennett, 1993). Minimization is characterized by attempts to over-generalize similarities between the emic group (the "*ingroup*") and the etic group (the "*outgroup*") (Bennett, 1993). That is, cultural differences are downplayed, or considered unimportant. For people in this third stage, differences are not viewed as threatening. Minimization also comprises the belief that there are universal truths which impact upon all mortals. However, the caveat here is that these values may well originate in one's own *ingroup* culture (Bennett, 1993). The Chubs are clearly not positioned in

this minimization stage, as they are keenly aware of their cultural differences with the Moles, and they even feel superior to their formerly subterranean neighbors. As for the Moles, they more than likely do feel threatened by the Chubs, given that the latter have officially banned the Mohelot language. After all, simple logic dictates that having one's first language outlawed can normally be considered a threatening act, in that it is an attempt to squelch one's primary voice.

The fourth stage of the DMIS, which is the very first stage of the three **ethnorelative** stages, is called acceptance (Bennett, 1993). It is profoundly different from the three preceding stages in that it acknowledges that cultural differences do exist, that they are important, and that they should be respected (Bennett, 1993). To paraphrase, individuals at this stage of the paradigm understand that to respect cultural differences requires an ability to buy into an *outgroup* voice. Thus, in terms of the ethics of education research, the acceptance stage is the one in which the natural comfort zone of the typically open-minded, probably liberal, educational researcher is beginning to be accommodated. Consequently, educational researchers have to acknowledge this comfort zone, and be vigilant in terms of maintaining objectivity. Ethically speaking, educational researchers need to treat respondents in the three ethnorelative stages with exactly the same objectivity as more xenophobic respondents in the three ethnocentric stages. Similarly, education researchers need to continually and consistently challenge any pre-existing assumptions that they might have concerning the participants in their research.

With respect to the Moles, the Chubs, and the Cross, it would be tempting to position the Cross in the acceptance stage, or one of the two other ethnorelative stages, although this would not be accurate for all Cross individuals. After all, one cannot ignore the possibility that there could be Cross individuals who identify with Chub culture more than Mohelot culture, and *vice versa*. Such behavior would clearly be less ethnorelative and more ethnocentric. An

example of this will be discussed later on in this chapter.

The fact that The Big Bubble's lead vocalist Ramsey was literally and figuratively giving voice to young people of mixed ethnicity is worth commenting upon. It is noteworthy that The Residents chose to comprise their fictional pop music band with people of mixed ethnicity, namely the Cross. What were The Residents' motives for doing this? While this query has never been directly addressed, one might speculate that the Cross were conceived by The Residents to effect some kind of resolution to the intercultural conflict between the Chubs and the Moles. Such a scenario would firmly place The Residents on the ethnorelative, right side of the DMIS.

The theatrical production of The Mole Show ended abruptly, without any sort of intercultural resolution. The curtain came down soon after the official narrator, magician Penn Jillette, broke the proscenium and pretended to have a mental breakdown. Thus, The Residents intended for audiences to leave their theaters feeling confused and bewildered. One logical inference from this abrupt ending is that The Residents did not actually believe that intercultural conflicts could be permanently resolved. Such an inference would posit that the normal outcome of intercultural strife is confusion and bewilderment, otherwise The Residents would have provided for their audiences to exit the theater with a far more positive mindset. Clearly, this reading of The Mole Show positions The Residents on the left, ethnocentric half of the DMIS.

However, given that The Residents are both business professionals as well as artists, such a *cliff hanger*, confusion-inducing ending may have been a pragmatic means to set the stage for a sequel, assuming that The Mole Show became a financial success. Regrettably, the touring production of The Mole Show, which was The Residents first ever attempt at intercontinental touring, was a financial disaster, and a sequel never emerged. In fact, the Mole Show tour ended in such financial dire straits that two of the four original members of the band

permanently departed. Since that time The Residents have functioned with a core unit of just two members. Perhaps this acrimonious ending to The Mole Show explains why no sequel has ever emerged. Or, perhaps there have simply been too many other exciting ideas emanating from the fertile minds of The Residents. In the three decades since 1982, The Residents have adhered to a rigorous work ethic, and their artistic output has been prodigious. Lastly, although The Residents have on occasion retroactively re-visited some of their earlier projects, as of this writing they have never re-visited The Mole Show. Therefore, their true motives for not offering the Cross, and by extension The Big Bubble, a mediating voice that could potentially bridge the cultural divide plaguing the Chubs and the Moles are currently unknown.

Returning now to the DMIS, adaptation is the second ethnorelative stage (Bennett, 1993). It is also the fifth of the six stages. Adaptation is characterized by an attempt to use an individual's knowledge about cultural differences to improve relationships with people who are culturally different (Bennett, 1993). In this stage, individuals do not simply adopt a different set of cultural beliefs and behaviors to the exclusion of their own beliefs, values, and behaviors (Bennett, 1993). Instead, such individuals strive to integrate both the *ingroup* as well as the *outgroup* cultural beliefs and behaviors. Adaptation is frequently based on a kind of empathy, in which people are able to experience events differently from others in their own, ingroup culture (Bennett, 1993). Adaptation can also entail an internalization of two cultural reference points, which is known as pluralism (Bennett, 1993). In pluralism, individuals experience events in an original way, one based on the mixing of two cultural patterns. Such individuals may use skills or behaviors from either cultural framework, depending on which one would be most helpful in any given situation (Bennett, 1993). In the fictional world of the Chubs and the Moles, the Cross would probably be positioned either in this fifth stage, or in the final stage of the DMIS, which is called integration.

Integration is the third ethnorelative stage of the DMIS (Bennett, 1993). It is also the

sixth stage, and it is characterized by the mixing of various aspects of an individual's identity into a new whole, while still remaining culturally marginal, or fluid (Bennett, 1993). Consequently, people in the integration stage have the ability to communicate effectively with many cultural groups (Bennett, 1993). In other words, individuals in the integration stage can easily alter their behavior to adapt to various cultural landscapes (Bennett, 1993). Such adaptive behavior means that it can sometimes prove difficult to empirically measure this final stage of the DMIS.

Given their combined ethnicity, one would logically expect some of the Cross individuals to be situated in either this integration stage, or in the adaptation stage. However, while their identity is indeed an enviable, ethnorelative mixture of more than one culture, it is by no means true that they operate solely on a higher plane of morality. Not only are their voices apparently being manipulated by the nefarious Kula Bocca, himself a Cross, but Ramsey, the main voice in *The Big Bubble*, appears to be guilty of hubris. To reiterate, Ramsey has started to believe that his voice is that of the new Messiah of the traditional Zinkenites. The Zinkenites wanted to form a new Mohelmot nation. Clearly, the more interculturally sensitive or proficient stages of the DMIS do not necessarily equate with a stronger moral fabric.

Moreover, the fact that Ramsey, a member of the Cross, has started to perceive himself as being the spiritual leader of the Zinkenites constitutes proof that not all of the Cross can be placed in the integration or adaptation stages of the DMIS. While the precise ethnic composition of the Zinkenites remains a mystery, the isolationist, ethnocentric nature of desiring a new Mohelmot nation cannot be denied. As such, Ramsey and the other Zinkenites, regardless of their ethnicity, would be most comfortable in one of the first three (e.g. ethnocentric) stages of the DMIS.

The conceptualizations of voice discussed above give rise to one more discussion relating to the ethics of education research. This discussion concerns the nomenclature which

The Residents have used to identify the two main ethnic groups in this fictional world: the Chubs and the Mohelmot. To the average native English speaker, voicing the monosyllabic proper noun “Chub” is easier than voicing the polysyllabic proper noun “Mohelmot.” Moreover, The Residents have abbreviated the latter proper noun to “Mole,” which conjures up images of something subterranean that likes to live in dirt. Alternatively, “Mole” also conjures up nefarious images of a covert spy, or enemy alien, living amongst us. In other words, the act of giving voice to these two cultural groups results in two divergent connotations, one easy and the other not so easy. Ethically-minded education researchers need to bare in mind such culturally-connected distinctions when making assumptions about their research participants.

Lastly, and arguably, when given voice the proper noun “Mohelmot” sounds similar to another English proper noun: “Mohammed.” Is it possible that The Residents either consciously or unconsciously designed their clash of cultures with two world religions in mind- a fictionalized, twentieth century version of the Crusades? Although any attempt at answering this question would be largely speculative, the intercultural implications of it are noteworthy. Firstly, the hypothetically Islamic culture is exploited by the non-Islamic culture. Secondly, the hypothetically Islamic culture is less technologically advanced. Thirdly, there exists a third ethnic group, one combining the hypothetically Islamic ancestry with non-Islamic ancestry, and some individuals in this third ethnic group would like to revert back to traditional hypothetically Islamic values. To be sure, all three of these hypothetical questions are rife with real world ethical implications. This discussion provides an additional example of how education researchers should pay heed to the ethical implications of something as seemingly benign as nomenclature.

Conclusion

Experimental musicians The Residents have created an imaginary world predominantly occupied by two juxtaposed cultures: the Mohelmot and the Chubs. This faux world has

provided a constructive, albeit unlikely, launch pad to examine the means by which voices are acknowledged and represented in education research. More specifically, this created world has served to reveal how voices in education research must be appropriately acknowledged and represented, especially non-mainstream or otherwise marginalized voices. The practice of championing the underdog, a natural proclivity for more than a few education researchers interested in social justice, should be tempered with a dogmatic adherence to objective fact.

The world of the Chubs and the Mohelot has enabled education researchers to clearly recognize the need to be cognizant of blended voices, such as those of the Cross. Consequently, education researchers should wholeheartedly welcome any *shades of grey* that might emerge from their data. The third space voices of the Cross serve to inform educational researchers that cultural absolutes should be scrutinized with a critical, or at least a wary, eye, given that these voices can transcend ethnocentric, or other kinds of binary, worldviews. For English language educational research is increasingly conducted in pluralistic, heterogeneous societies, ones with rising numbers of bicultural and ethnically ambiguous learners.

The subsequent question that underscored this article interrogated the implications that conceptualizations of voice have with respect to the ethics of education research. Analyzing the world of the Chubs and the Mohelot revealed how ethical education research should strive to avoid hegemonic practices. Even though most educational researchers would consciously claim to abhor such practices, controlling their subconscious biases and elitist tendencies could prove more challenging. Either consciously or unconsciously, it has been seen how researchers from a variety of academic disciplines, not only education, have not been immune from feeling superior to people with lower levels of educational attainment. Additionally, education researchers associated with elite universities could subconsciously, unbeknownst even to their conscious selves, harbor biases against fellow academics from less prestigious institutions. As with the Cross-comprised pop band The Big Bubble, ethical education research must strive to

avoid all hegemonic practices. Regrettably, this is easier said than done, as was evidenced in the person of Ramsey, lead singer in The Big Bubble. That is, those who would view themselves as a Messiah, or any other kind of divine personage, are probably guilty of buying into the ultimate form of hegemony.

Hubris aside, and at least in theory, the ethnically ambiguous Cross have been seen to embody a third space voice. Although there are exceptions, as evidenced above, the Cross and other third spacers can be exempt from emic-etic binaries such as the one at the heart of this chapter. They can, and do, selectively belong to more than one culture. They therefore have more than one cultural voice. In this way, their voices can be seen as being transcendental.

Accordingly, and notwithstanding the fact that The Residents created the Cross with just as many inherent flaws as any other grouping of human voices, these third spacers can be viewed in a hopeful light. After all, their very existence is predicated on the joining, however temporary, of different cultural voices. In addition, it must be acknowledged that The Big Bubble were popular with both Chubs and Moles, a further indication that the potentially third space Cross can be viewed in a hopeful light.

Finally, with respect to third spacers, this article would argue that, as useful as it is, the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity would benefit from more clearly and explicitly articulating how its sixth stage, integration, can accommodate people of mixed ethnicity. That is, a third space worldview is part and parcel of the integration stage of the DMIS. The problem, as witnessed in the case of Kula Bocca, Ramsey, and the Zinkenites, is that not everyone with mixed ethnicity necessarily develops a third space voice!

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