The TOPOI-model: a challenging model for intercultural communication
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The most important tool we use in training the intercultural competence of students is: the TOPOI-model.

The TOPOI-model is developed by Edwin Hoffman and is based on the work of the Interaction Academy of Antwerpen, which works with the axioms for communication developed by Watzlawick. There are in this model 5 areas to trace misunderstandings in communication.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T</th>
<th>Tongue</th>
<th>people influence with and without words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>Order</td>
<td>relativity of truth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>Person</td>
<td>communication has a relational level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>Organization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Intentions and influence</td>
<td>all behavior is communication</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The statements of Watzlawick can be recognized.
The O is added because the intercultural communication we discuss takes place in a professional institute, a professional organization.
In this sequence, the areas form the word TOPOI. Topoi means in Greek ‘places’ (topography).
It is important to realize that Tongue, Order, Person, Organization, and Intentions cannot be separated in practice. They are closely linked together. The areas are only separated for clarity's sake. In real communication you have to deal with all these places at the same time.

The TOPOI-model is an instrument to analyses the communication. It also is a model for interventions. The TOPOI-model is based on some assumptions:

1. communication is universal
2. the focus is on the interaction not the culture
3. communication is a circular process
4. (intercultural) communication asks for an open, reflective attitude
5. be pessimistic about communication, be optimistic about people
comments:
1. Everywhere in the world people communicate. People give meaning to their environment and to their experience and they discuss about it, they negotiate about the truth. Besides differences we have a lot in common. A Dutch female student can have more in common with a German female student, than with a Dutch middle-aged man.

2. This model does not focus on culture. The issue is the communication. In this way it is a rather new approach, in Holland anyway. A lot of training/courses in intercultural communication focus on cultural differences. Of course it can be supportive to know something about the way people interact when I go to a foreign country. If one focuses too much on culture however, it may become an obstacle in communication. People are not the carriers of a culture. Each person is an unique personality and it is this personality you meet, not his culture. People are individuals and not the representants of a culture. It is not so important to know the other culture, really knowing is an impossibility anyhow. The most important tool for intercultural communication is becoming aware and in the next step knowing ones own assumptions, especially those one does not recognize as an assumption but see as the reality. Therefore, this model focuses on communication.

3. Communication is not a linear process between a sender and a receiver. Communication is a circular process. Both persons are influencing each other at the same time. And to make it more complex: both are also involved in all kinds of influencing processes with a broader context. The social systems in which the partners participate.

Looking to communication as a circular process, makes clear that each partner can try to change the communication pattern.

If we see communication as a circular process we can ask ourself:
- what am I doing, that the other acts like this?
- what is the other doing that I act like this?
- what is the influence of my broader context: the others.

4. Communication with someone with a different cultural background asks for an open and reflective attitude. One must be ready and willing to listen and to look at different views, habits, values and standards. One must realize that his or hers view of life, is just only one view, that there are other possibilities in life, or as the Dutch say: there are more ways leading to Rome. A reflective attitude means that one is aware of his own frame of reference: about one’s view on life, about one’s values and standards which influences one’s thinking, feeling and acting. Finally a reflective attitude means that during a conversation one is able to take the position of the observer, looking from a distance what is happening. Looking from a distance to one's own role and possibilities.

5. Pessimistic: In fact I prefer: “realistic”

In all communication misunderstandings may occur, even with ones best friend. Accepting this possibility as a normal issue, keeps the communication open. The point is not to blame oneself or the other, but accept that misunderstanding can occur and can be solved.

Optimistic:
An optimistic view on mankind is important in professional work with people.

The different area's of the TOPOI-model

TONGUE
Each culture has its own code. These codes can be verbal and non-verbal. Misunderstandings may occur by misinterpreting or not knowing the codes. For example, the Dutch way of communicating is rather direct: ‘yes’ means ‘yes’ and ‘no’ means ‘no’.

Despite all codes, language itself can cause a lot of misunderstanding. In fact it is the only tool we have to express our feeling and thoughts. Everyone knows how difficult this is even in one's own language. Words have different meanings to different people. People are not always aware of that.

It's becoming even more difficult in another language. My English may not be very well, but my French is rather awful. If a need something to buy in France, I'm glad to point out in the shop what I need, or I am glad to know the word and ask simple: pain. Don’t expect me to talk according to the social etiquette. I simple don’t now all the polite sentences you are expected to say. In Holland a lot of people think of migrants as impolite, or even worse, as rude. There 'rudness' however is caused by not mastering the Dutch language. Sometimes people overreact by simplifying their own use of language, like talking to a little child.

ORDER
‘Order’ is how people look at reality. It's the pair of glasses they wear when they look at the world. Sometimes the focus of your glasses is rather fixed, like perhaps you experienced by doing this practice the first time.

Everyone has his own way of structuring reality. Nobody can grasp the total reality. People structure reality in a different way, because they have a different frame of reference, recognize different loyalties or take a different position (of power).

Therefore we can never see more than some aspects of reality. We can only take a subjective, limited and relative view with regard to reality.

What is true for me is not necessary true for someone else. In other words:

- My truth is not the truth
- The truth does not exist
- Truth is a relative concept
- We can look at reality in different ways

Order is the way you define the problem.

PERSON
This area consist of two parts:
- the personal perspectives
- the social perspectives.

The personal perspectives are well known. It is the relational level in the communication.

The social perspectives are the influences of all the messages we get on a subject. The ‘dialogue’ in the culture. As an example: everyone receives ‘messages’ on ‘otherness’.

Everybody knows at least some jokes of people with another cultural background. The jokes are mostly ethnocentric. The ‘we’ in the joke are the good guys and the ‘they’ in the joke are usually the bad or the stupid guys. In every language there are sayings on 'otherness' like:

On n'aime que ce qu'on connait.
Unbekannt, unbeliebt. Unbekannt, ungenannt.
Unknown, unloved.
Onbekend maakt onbemind
which seems a rather international saying!

And of course we receive a lot of social perspectives through the media.

ORGANIZATION
Misunderstandings in intercultural communication can also be caused by organizational matters.
If the client or customer doesn't know what to expect from f.e. a social worker or does not know the rules in the organization, this can lead to a lot of misunderstandings in the communication.

INTENTIONS AND INFLUENCE
Intentions refers to what ones aims are in the communication

Influence is the effect one has on your partner in the conversation.

It is important to realize that the effect of ones communication may differ from ones intentions. It is always the other who determines the effect of my communication.

Recognition by the other of your good intention is a fundamental need for people. As a professional worker it is important to see the intentions of the other.

Some specific points this model lay emphasis on
- judgements and prejudices are unavoidable
- have an eye for your own ‘cultural glasses’
- watch the effect, do not hang on to your (good) intentions
- be prepared for misunderstandings
- sometimes the shortest way is the roundabout way
- look for the common interest
• play an active role
• be alert to ‘blind making’ prejudices
• my truth is not the truth
• be septic about communication, but optimistic about people
• it gives space
• it is normal that there are misunderstandings in the communication
• one doesn’t have to avoid the discrimination issue
• it analyses the mistakes and shows ways to solve them
• it makes people more selfconfident of their own communication skills

Literature:
Interculturele gespreksvoering, E.Hoffman & W.Arts, Van Loghum, Houten, 1994
We give a lot of trainings for lecturers and trainers to work with this model and to make this model a part of the curriculum for social workers in The Netherlands and in different other European countries. If you want more information, please contact us.

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