

# A Layered Model of Problematic Intercultural Communication in U.S.-Owned Maquiladoras in Mexico

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*Problematic communication often occurs when people with differing cultural experiences interact. Many studies have examined cultural differences in communicative styles, but actual intercultural interaction processes have not received the attention they merit. This study uses an interpretivist approach to understanding both problematic issues and processes in one type of international organization, U.S. American-owned assembly plants in Mexico (maquiladoras). Data collected from multi-modal sources—ethnographic interviewing, non-participant observation, and maquiladora periodicals—were interpreted using an analytic-inductive method to construct a new Layered Model of Problematic Intercultural Communication. This model significantly extends previous conceptualizations of problematic communication by providing a holistic view of the ways the macro-context, individual (in)competencies, and dyadic communication behaviors interrelate and affect multi-leveled attributions of meaning in intercultural interaction. Key words: U.S. Americans, Mexicans, Problematic, Misunderstandings*

“Problematic” communication has been studied in a number of different relationships and contexts, on the basis of different conceptual and empirical definitions. Coupland, Wiemann, and Giles (1991) highlight four of the important dimensions used by scholars in conceptualizing problematic communication. First, there are a variety of types of problematic communication including, “semantic slippages” (Gass & Varonix, 1991; Ochs, 1991; Ochs & Schiefflin, 1984), interethnic/intercultural communication style differences (Hecht, Larkey, & Johnson, 1992; Kochman, 1981; Martin, Hecht, & Larkey, 1994), intercultural differences in desired goal outcomes (Tracy, 1991; Tracy & Coupland, 1990) and socio-cultural power imbalances in the communication context (Coupland, Nussbaum, & Coupland, 1991; Henley & Kramarae, 1991). Second, awareness of a misunderstanding may range from total unawareness to hyperawareness. Third, problems that are recognized may be attributed to either individual incompetencies (Ochs, 1991; Ochs & Schiefflin, 1984) or group identities (Coleman & DePaulo, 1991; Coupland, Nussbaum & Coupland, 1991; Kochman, 1981; Martin, Hecht, & Larkey, 1994). Finally, reparability of the situation depends on the type of problem and how it is perceived by the interactants. In some cases, interactants may neglect repair to avoid unpleasantness (Ragan & Hopper, 1984). In other instances, “semantic slippages” may be clarified through feedback processes (e.g., Ochs, 1991) while power imbalances may necessitate structural changes (e.g., Henley & Kramarae, 1991). In addition, problems related to intergroup differences may require increased cultural knowledge and skills (Carbaugh, 1993), adaptation (Kim, 1986, 1988), and/or accommodation

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(Gallois, Franklyn-Stokes, Giles, & Coupland, 1988; Giles, Mulac, Bradac, & Johnson, 1987) for shared understandings to emerge.

This study examined one particularly problematic communication situation, communication across cultural boundaries. The focus was on how cultural perspectives contribute to problematic communication in international organizations. These international organizations play an increasingly important role in our global economy. This paper begins by discussing the organizational context and then explains an ethnographic study which explains problematic communication in this setting.

### Intercultural Organizational Context

Although previous studies have identified issues related to problematic intercultural communication (e.g., Carbaugh, 1993; Hecht & Ribeau, 1987; Hecht, Ribeau, & Alberts, 1989; Kochman, 1981), the international business context has been relatively neglected. While Hofstede's (1980) pioneering research in this area revealed five value dimensions that cut across cultural borders, he did not examine the problematic ways in which these values are negotiated and enacted in actual intercultural communication.

Both increased U.S. international expansion and developing international trade liaisons clearly demonstrate the growth of intercultural relationships in this context. During the 1980s, U.S. investment abroad increased from \$216 billion to \$373 billion (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991). In addition, recent economic contracts among General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and Pacific Rim countries create challenges for organizations in drawing together diverse human and material resources across national and cultural boundaries. With growing international and multinational interdependencies, a concomitant responsibility is created for scholars to extend knowledge of problematic intercultural communication to enhance both working relationships and organizational effectiveness.

International organizational effectiveness has been undermined by problems relating to inadequate intercultural understandings. When U.S. American executives take international assignments, they often lack cross-cultural language and communication skills (Burns, 1987).<sup>1</sup> Inadequate cross-cultural training for international managers has resulted in financial losses to corporations, averaging about a quarter of a million dollars per expatriate failure (Edwards, 1978), as well as personal suffering through career demotions, conflict, and frustration (Hannon, 1994). In attempting simply to "export" U.S. ways of managing to other countries, a manager may be faced with intercultural misunderstandings and conflict (Casse, 1982; Harris & Moran, 1988; Thiederman, 1991).

One context in which this need is particularly critical is in the U.S. American-owned assembly plants, or "maquiladoras" in Mexico where organizational communication problems have been identified as major issues negatively impacting corporate productivity (Derr, 1993; Thyfault, 1987).<sup>2</sup> Beginning with the Border Industrialization Program in 1965, this industry presently consists of more than 3,800 plants, employing over 1 million workers (Rangel, 1998) and producing in excess of \$21.4 billion dollars in gross annual output (Vargas, 1996). With the growth of the industry has come an onslaught of criticism relating to U.S. American abuses of socio-structural power. Researchers have pointed out the ways in which U.S. Americans exploit assembly-line workers (Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Martinez, 1994)

and reinforce patriarchy through gender inequalities in work roles, status, and pay (Prieto, 1997; Tiano, 1994). Thus, issues relating to both cultural differences, as well as socio-structural inequalities between Mexicans and U.S. Americans complicate relationships in an industry in which people are interdependent with respect to achieving personal and organizational goals. The prevalence of problems in maquiladoras creates an exigency to elaborate a conceptual understanding of both problematic issues and processes as they occur in intercultural interaction.

In this study, an interpretivist perspective was used to sort out these cultural problematics and extend our conceptual understanding of these phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This approach prioritizes the actors' constructions and interpretations of their own relationships (Harris, 1968), grounds meanings in an understanding of the interaction context (Mishler, 1979), and emphasizes the fluid processes through which actors continuously negotiate symbolic understandings (Trujillo, 1983). From this perspective two research questions were formulated:

RQ1: What are the problematic communication issues that create intercultural misunderstandings in the maquiladoras?

RQ2: How can we explain the process by which problematic communication occurs?

Consistent with the procedures described by Strauss and Corbin (1990), multi-modal ethnographic descriptions were collected to provide thick description. These data were analyzed to identify the salient issues in problematic intercultural communication in this context. The emerging themes were then examined. A theoretical explanation emerged to describe how problematic communication occurs.

## Method

Many communication scholars argue that triangulation of methodologies is a primary tool in determining the reliability and validity of research findings (e.g. Hickson & Jennings, 1993; Hickson, Roebuck, & Murty, 1990; Philipsen, 1982). In this study, data were collected from multi-modal sources, including: ethnographic interviewing, non-participant observation of interaction in maquiladoras, and maquiladora industry publications. Each of these sources was selected as a way of gaining descriptive accounts of people's actual communicative behavior from two national cultural perspectives: U.S. American and Mexican. Data from each of these sources were analyzed using an analytic inductive method.

### *Interviews*

Over the course of the fieldwork, formal ethnographic interviews were conducted with twenty maquiladora employees. The interviews ranged in length from three to seven hours. Many of the employees were interviewed more than once. In addition, informal conversations on the topic were conducted with these employees, as well as other maquiladora owners, managers, and employees who were not formally interviewed. The settings for these interviews and conversations varied, with the majority occurring at the plants or in social situations.

Eighteen of the individuals participating in formal interviews were administrative and management personnel, including general managers, manufacturing managers, manufacturing engineers, production managers, human resource managers, the president of the Maquila Owners' Union, and a former president of the Maquila Workers' Union. Two line workers were also interviewed. Management was empha-

sized due to the structure and role responsibilities inherent in this industry. It is the managers who are involved in the majority of intercultural interactions that take place in maquiladoras. In a U.S. American owned plant, all Mexican management personnel are required to be bilingual, and Mexican line workers are typically monolingual. Mexican line-supervisors and mid-level managers serve as cultural and linguistic mediators in everyday plant operations in coordinating activities between U.S. American administrators and Mexican line personnel. Thus, these individuals were selected for interviewing on the basis of their intercultural experience in organizations.

Access was gained through a number of techniques. The researcher was not employed in the industry, but developed professional and social relationships with individuals in the Hermosillan community by referrals from personal contacts connected with the local university. Contacts with the university were established through living at the border for more than eighteen months and associating with people who worked in the maquiladoras or who have friends or relatives who worked there. A collaborative research project was used as an entrée into the university. Once initial relationships were established, these sources provided references and contact with others in the industry.

The formal interviews were developed based on Spradley's (1979) guidelines for ethnographic interviewing. Ethnographic interviews were conducted in the field to provide thick or rich descriptions of culture as a way of life. These interviews began with an ethics statement, also called informed consent, which informed participants of the purpose of the study ("to understand how communication and culture affect working relationships in maquiladoras"), and assured them that their participation was voluntary and anonymous. Next, background information was obtained (e.g., work experience, roles, and responsibilities). This was followed by a "grand tour" question asking each participant to describe his/her typical work day. At this point, the interview focused on actual interactions in the context. The interview proceeded with open-ended questions designed to ascertain each participant's recall of specific problematic intercultural interaction situations. Finally, the participant was asked to give advice for how others should handle these situations. The formal interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Thirty informal interviews were conducted as conversations on the topic. These conversations emerged during interactions with the participants in the formal interviews and others who were knowledgeable about the maquiladoras. The conversations were not planned, but occurred spontaneously when the researcher was living in the area. For example, an acquaintance of the researcher visited the site to explore the possibility of opening a maquiladora. While traveling around town, speaking to people at the local *Secretaria de Comercio y Fomento Industrial* (Secretariat of Commerce and Industrial Development), gathering information about regulations, banking services, office space, and hiring personnel, we discussed problematic communication in maquiladoras with a number of Mexicans who provide services for this industry. In another situation, an informal interview was conducted while the researcher was shopping at the site. The researcher met a maquiladora owner. The conversation shifted to communication problems in the plant. There was no formal structure to these informal interviews. They were embedded in portions of naturally occurring conversations. Detailed fieldnotes were recorded immediately after these informal interviews.

### *Non-Participant Observation*

In addition to the interviews, the researcher toured and recorded observations at seven plants. These assembly plants were involved in auto, kitchenware, leaded-glass, silver-plating and computer technology industries. Each plant uses components from outside of Mexico, coordinates organizational policies and procedures with U.S. American home offices, and assembles products that are primarily exported to United States consumers.

While in the plants for either interviews or tours, the researcher compiled descriptive fieldnote accounts of maquiladora physical contexts, documents, such as organizational charts, and company brochures, as well as interaction patterns among managers and workers.

### *Written Documents*

Written documents were another data source that complemented the ethnographic interviewing and non-participant observation information. The researcher selected *The Twin Plant News*, a monthly periodical widely circulated along the U.S.-Mexican border that specifically focuses on maquiladora industry issues. The researcher examined a sample of sixteen issues covering the period between January 1993 and August 1994. This comprises the approximate period over which the fieldwork was conducted. Articles were selected that dealt with intercultural communication issues. An article was considered if it discussed the ways that culture affects how organizational members communicate with each other, with members of other organizations, or with the public.

### *Inductive Analysis*

Open-coding was used for analysis and interpretation of data from all three sources and involved a systematic inductive approach (Bulmer, 1979; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Robinson, 1951) identifying problematic communication phenomena and conceptual relationships among the phenomena. Inductive analysis is a process of "discovering categories" by "grouping concepts that seem to pertain to the same phenomena" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 65). Analysis also entailed a "constant comparative process" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 62), through which emergent categories were specified and compared first to other data and then to other categories to clarify the parameters of each category, as well as the relationships of separate categories to one another. This embodied an ongoing, refining process striving for clarity in both categorical descriptions and conceptual relationships.

A problem was identified when a participant labeled it as such or the researcher observed misunderstandings or conflicts. In any one misunderstanding, there may be more than one problem or issue present. Separate problems were coded when they each represented a complete idea or semantic unit. Two senior researchers conducted audit checks to substantiate the coding of field notes into problems. These researchers read a portion of the field notes and examined how they were coded into problems. Any discrepancies in interpretation were discussed and resolved. In qualitative research, these analyses are emergent rather than finite as in quantitative content analysis. As a result, the coding changes as more information is added, and a final set of codes only emerges at the end of the analysis. At the conclusion of this stage of analysis, 37 problems were identified (see Tables 1-3).

TABLE 1  
NEGATIVE STEREOTYPED IDENTITIES (PROBLEMS 1-13)

| U.S. Americans  | Mexico               | Mexicans                        | Maquiladoras   |
|---|----------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| Arrogant<br>Exploitive<br>Imperialistic<br>Oppressive | Dangerous<br>Lawless | Corrupt<br>Lazy<br>Poor workers | Poor quality<br>Poor technologies<br>Exploitive<br>Steal U.S. jobs |

TABLE 2  
LANGUAGE INEQUALITY IN ATTUNING-IDENTITY ISSUES (PROBLEMS 14-19)

| Issues               | Mexican Bilinguals  | U.S. American Monolinguals  |
|----------------------|---|---|
| Interaction patterns | Mediators between monolinguals<br>Reflects bilingual identity | Only with other English speakers<br>Reflects independent identity |
| Power/status         | Enhances status<br>Symbolic negation<br>Spanish               | Creates dependency<br>Symbolic elevation<br>English               |

TABLE 3  
CULTURAL IDENTITY ENACTMENT PROBLEMS (PROBLEMS 20-37)

| Mexican Interdependent Identity                            | U.S. American Independent Identity                     |
|--|--|
| Personal orientation                                       | Task orientation                                       |
| Negotiate rules, laws                                      | Formal guidelines                                      |
| Familial/organ/community spheres interpenetrated           | Familial/organ/community spheres bounded               |
| Indirectness in conflict                                   | Directness in conflict                                 |
| Guides time in activities                                  | External time orientation                              |
| Historical past linked to present and future relationships | Short term future orientation emphasizes task outcomes |
| Hierarchical status  | Egalitarian status relations                           |

The problem codes were examined for underlying consistencies. Again, the method of constant comparison was utilized to link problems based on functional and semantic similarities. The problems were grouped into three issues on the basis of analysis of the conceptual linkages among the 37 inductively derived categories: negative stereotyped identities (see Table 1, Problems 1-13); language inequality in attuning-identity problems (see Table 2, Problems 14-19); and cultural identity enactment problems (see Table 3, Problems 20-37). These first two steps were used to provide an answer to the first research question: What are the problematic communication issues that create intercultural misunderstandings in the maquiladoras?

Finally, the three thematic areas and the problem codes were examined to create a model of problematic communication and answer the second research question: How can we explain the process by which problematic communication occurs?

## Results

The problems and issues that emerged from the analyses in answer to question one appear in Tables 1-3. These 3 issues and 37 problems describe the key elements of problematic intercultural interaction in the maquiladora context. In the interest of

space, however, these are presented in the tables, not described individually. Instead, the model is discussed as a means of organizing and explaining these problems and issues.

### *A Layered Perspective of Interpretation*

The analysis revealed repetitive cultural patterns articulating U.S. Americans' and Mexicans' perceptions of problems and issues and explicating the processes of intercultural interaction. The issues and problems provide a descriptive framework for talking about problematic communication in various situations, but they do not adequately explain the processes by which problems emerge through interaction and interpretation processes. The conceptual and theoretical relationships among categories, indicated that numerous layers or levels of analysis were needed to explain these processes. The first issue, Negative Stereotyped Identities (Table 1) explicates how cultural communities perceive outgroup members' identities, as well as the organizational identity of the maquiladora industry. Both historical and mass-mediated negative images of outgroups affect the collective construction of negative stereotyped identities imposed on individual cultural group members and communicated through dyadic interaction. Thus, this issue exists on at least three levels: the communal, the individual and the dyadic. Similarly, Language Inequalities Issues (Table 2) permeated multiple levels or layers. Problematic issues related to inequalities in linguistic accommodation in dyadic interaction often appeared at the communal level of cultural identity. Many U.S. Americans express monolingual identities in contrast to Mexican managerial communication, which reflects a bilingual identity. This is also related to the communal level in terms of socio-structural differences in intergroup power relationships in maquilas. However, these inequalities are also part of individuals' monolingual or bilingual language competencies and either inhibit or facilitate dyadic interaction through language divergence or accommodation. Finally, Cultural Identities (Table 3) exist on a number of levels, including the communal, dyadic, and individual (Hecht, 1993). Two types of communal identities are manifested in this setting: national cultural and organizational identity. While national cultural identity is, in part, inherited from previous generations, it is also reconstructed and creatively enacted by cultural group members in organizational interaction. National cultural norms and rules for enacting personhood interpenetrate how individuals express their organizational roles (e.g., as accounting, engineering, production, and manufacturing managers) in dyadic experiences, with U.S. Americans' communication emphasizing independent identity and Mexicans' communication reflecting more interdependent identity. While differences in national cultural realities contribute to problematic communication within the organization, in some situations, in which Mexicans and U.S. Americans perceive a shared threat from outsiders, shared organizational affiliation emerged as a superordinate communal identity.

To complicate matters further, the problems related to each of these three issues, Negative Stereotypes, Language Inequalities, and Cultural Identities, emerged from multi-leveled attributions of meaning in intercultural interaction. Accounts suggested that symbolic communication phenomena at the dyadic level contributed to problematic communication when they resulted in either linguistic or cultural asynchronies. However, reports revealed the need to consider misunderstandings not only at the content level of meaning (e.g., in terms of "semantic slippages") but

also at metacommunicative levels (e.g., in terms of in-group/out-group perceptions and intergroup power relationships).

As a result of these findings, a "layered perspective" emerged as a descriptive framework for understanding how problematic communication phenomena is interpenetrated and interrelated to historical, mass-mediated, and cultural constructions of identity (Baldwin & Hecht, 1995; Hecht, 1993). This layered perspective offers an in-depth understanding of the mutual influence and interaction of communal, individual and dyadic levels of cultural experiences. At the communal level, both cultural group and intercultural group histories and power relationships form the basis for individual cultural group member's knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes about one's own in-group, as well as out-group members. These, in turn, influence how cultural norms and behaviors are enacted in interaction situations and often result in problematic communication in the interpretation and evaluation of meanings in intercultural contact.

### *A Layered Model of Problematic Communication*

From the conceptual links between and among these interpenetrated levels of issues, a layered model emerged that provides a conceptual description of the processes through which problematic communication occurs. This model explains the need to understand: 1) the macro-context (i.e., cultural group and intergroup histories, intergroup inequalities) that infiltrates maquiladora communicative behaviors; 2) the individuals' (in)competencies (i.e., knowledge, skills) as well as individual motivations, stereotypes, and goals that underlie the emergence of problematic communication; 3) the dyadic communicative behaviors reflecting the negotiation of identity (i.e., organizational and cultural) through interaction processes and 4) the interpretations or attributions (i.e., perceptual, metaperceptual, and metarelational) of symbolic meaning in intercultural interaction. This layered perspective encompasses complex conceptual relationships between problematic intercultural communication phenomena and processes in this organizational context. The theoretical model is explained below by using exemplars from the research that best illustrate the relationships between and among the phenomena. At the conclusion of this paper, the visual representation appears in Figure 1.

**Macro-context.** Participants' accounts revealed that aspects of historical, political, and economic international relations between the United States and Mexico permeate communicative behavior in maquiladora organizations. Historically and collectively constructed international relationships often result in negatively stereotyped identities, which influence dyadic interaction and also interpretation of intercultural communication. In addition, macrocontextual issues relate to intergroup power and inequality issues. These are apparent in terms of socio-structural inequalities in which U.S. Americans maintain the highest level positions in maquiladora industries, as well as in socio-structural conditions in which Mexican labor rates give maquilas the competitive advantage over U.S. domestic plants in bidding for new product contracts. While an extensive elaboration of these relationships is beyond the scope of this study, several issues emerged from the data which elucidate how actors perceive and evaluate each other in this intercultural context.

**Twin Plant News'** coverage of problematic issues in intercultural maquiladora relations, stated that it was important to know, "Mexicans believe that Americans communicate superiority by assuming that Mexicans accept the Manifest Destiny



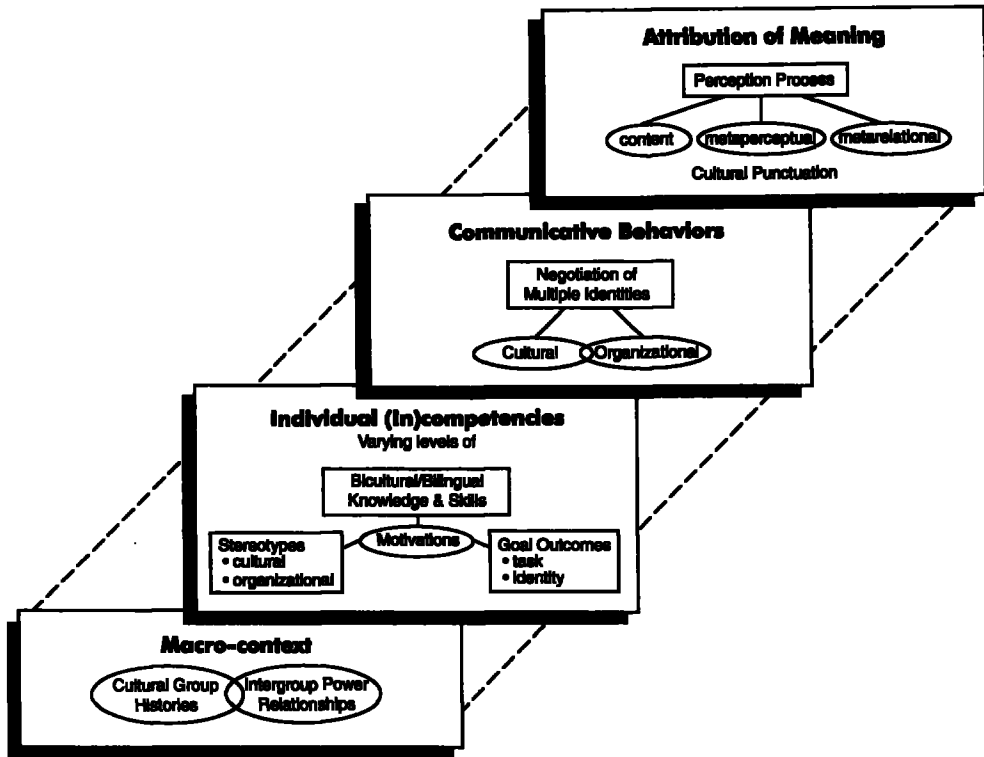


FIGURE 1

A LAYERED MODEL OF PROBLEMATIC COMMUNICATION.

philosophy of the U.S." (Derderian, *Twin Plant News*, 1993). This philosophy encompasses the U.S. government confiscation of Mexican territories in the 19th century (Martinez, 1991), as well as the historical U.S. American involvement and investment in Mexico (Pastor & Castañeda, 1989). In fact, Mexican critics of the maquila industry fear a replication of the U.S. economic dominance in Mexico at the beginning of the 20th century that fed the fires of the Mexican Revolution (Hellman, 1994; Reynolds, 1970). The inequality which has been prevalent in international relationships is mirrored in maquiladora organizational structures with U.S. Americans occupying higher status positions. This inequality is verifiable by participants' accounts, e.g., "Americans are always at the top" (Fieldnotes, February, 1994) as well as organizational charts (e.g., Fieldnotes, March, 1994) and corporation publications showing American home office personnel have the ultimate authority in developing and administering maquiladora policies and procedures (e.g., Fieldnotes, February, 1994). Thus, the plant operations themselves may be negatively evaluated by Mexicans who perceive that they are dependent on U.S. Americans within a system which perpetuates socio-structural and national cultural inequalities. Moreover, many Mexicans believe the asymmetry of U.S.-Mexican relationships in maquilas must be contextualized within a historical understanding of international relationships in which U.S. dominance has resulted in negative outcomes for Mexicans.

In consideration of the macro-economic context, U.S. American plants in Mexico

are also viewed negatively by many U.S. Americans because mass-mediated stereotypes of NAFTA perpetuate an image that "Mexicans are stealing U.S. jobs" (Lindsley, 1993). The fears that emerge from these stereotypes result in problematic international communication between U.S. home offices and plants in Mexico. One Mexican manager explained,

Some Americans think that they are losing jobs to Mexico and so they try to keep the production work in the United States. Sometimes managers in the United States think this way and then they lie about the efficiency or effectiveness of the plant in Hermosillo (Mexico) (Fieldnotes, April, 1994).

Thus, the macro-context includes differing cultural constructions of historical, political, and economic international relationships between U.S. Americans and Mexicans. Both U.S. Americans' and Mexicans' negative images of the maquila industry itself permeate everyday work relationships and are critical elements of the macro-context which contribute to a problematized intercultural partnership among employees in this organizational context.

It is within this macro-context that the problematic elements of intercultural interaction emerge. With the macro-context moving from foreground to background, the themes of issues configure themselves into a model of communication processes consisting of these elements: individual competencies, cultural and organizational identities, and interpretation of symbolic communication behaviors.

*Individual (in)competencies.* Individual cultural knowledge, skills, motivations, stereotypes, and goals constitute conditions that influence the emergence of problematic communication. In theories relating to both interpersonal (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984) and intercultural (e.g., Gudykunst, 1988, 1993) communication competency, scholars have identified the importance of knowledge, skills, and motivations as they relate to abilities to achieve valued outcomes. In addition, while negative stereotypes emerge from communal constructions of historical and mass-mediated images of outgroup members, previous research has shown that when they are a part of an individual's incompetencies, they adversely impact accommodation behaviors in intergroup contact situations (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993; Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Finally, studies have shown that behaviors are rarely driven by a single overarching goal, consequently understanding problematic communication means recognition that actors have multiple, sometimes competing goals (Dillard, Segrin, & Hardin, 1989; Eisenburg & Phillips, 1991; O'Keefe, 1988; Tracy & Eisenberg, 1989). While knowledge, skills, motivations, stereotypes, and goals have been identified as important factors in competency theories, they have not received the attention they merit in problematic communication literature. This emically derived model points out the multiple and complex interrelationships among these phenomena as they relate to problematic processes.

In respect to knowledge and skills, U.S. Americans and Mexicans interacting in maquiladoras may or may not know appropriate cultural behaviors. In some situations, people do not know what is culturally appropriate and enact behaviors which violate normative expectancies. For example, U.S. American managers give Mexican employees written feedback forms when employees quit their jobs. Employees follow Mexican cultural norms for face-saving and write on these forms "Oh, yes, I was very happy, I would work here again" (Fieldnotes, April, 1994). Because U.S. Americans do not understand that Mexican cultural norms prescribe face-

saving communication in contexts which could violate self, other or relational face, their attempts to gain direct written negative feedback perpetuates a lack of understanding.<sup>3</sup> Ignorance of Mexican norms makes U.S. Americans ineffective in obtaining the information necessary for assessing organizational policies and procedures.

On the other hand, in respect to motivations, actors may have knowledge of what is culturally appropriate, but may not appropriately attune their linguistic or cultural behaviors. This also results in problematic communication. In intercultural interaction in maquilas, the schism between cognition (knowledge) and action (skills) is evidenced when people report knowing what is appropriate, but do not attune their behaviors accordingly. For example, a problematic issue in maquiladoras revolves around the inequality in language attuning behaviors: Mexican managers are required to be bilingually competent but U.S. Americans are typically English monolinguals (see Table 2).

The belief that U.S. Americans should speak Spanish is articulated in numerous industry articles in the *Twin Plant News* (e.g., Webber, 1993, 1994), as well as in U.S. Americans' own self-reports. However, the prevalence of U.S. American monolingualism was observed in interaction situations in which Mexican bilingual managers immediately codeswitched to English when interacting with U.S. Americans. Observations also revealed that reciprocated U.S. American linguistic accommodation was a rare occurrence (e.g., Fieldnotes, February, March, April, 1994)—so much so that one manager of the local Secretaria de Comercio y Fomento Industrial (Secretariat of Commerce and Industrial Development) who works with U.S. Americans to facilitate plant set-up was startled when I spoke Spanish to her and later commented that it was her impression that "Americans don't speak Spanish" (Fieldnotes, May, 1994). In an interview, one U.S. American manager described his lack of Spanish language skills as "The number one thing that has really hurt me" (Fieldnotes, April, 1994). According to this same U.S. manager's accounts, others' accounts, and my observations he has lived and worked in Mexico "for seven years but does not speak a word of Spanish" (Fieldnotes, February, 1994). Hence, while some U.S. Americans "know" they should speak Spanish, in many instances, their behaviors do not reflect this knowledge. The degrees of resonance between knowledge and skills may be understood in terms of motivations that affect the desires both to develop cultural and/or linguistic knowledge and to enact behaviors reflecting that knowledge. Through further discussion, it is clear that these motivations are influenced not only by macrocontextual issues (e.g., intergroup asymmetry) but also interaction goals and negative stereotypes.

Analysis of actors' accounts from this data shows that problematic communication often emerges in situations in which interactants have differing goals. Although Mexicans and U.S. Americans must work interdependently to achieve shared organizational goals, culturally-based values are described as prioritizing relatively different goals for interactive behaviors. Problematic communication also emerges on the basis of imposed identities in the form of negative stereotypes in everyday intercultural interaction. Furthermore, the desire to maintain one's own identity as separate and distinct from negatively stereotyped others and the need to enhance a positive identity in response to perceived threats may be valued outcomes in many situations. Finally, different identities (organizational, cultural) may be linked to different goals or an identity's enactment may be modified for different goals. The

ways that differing goals problematize interaction are evident in an examination of behaviors communicating negative stereotypes as well as cultural and organizational identities in maquiladora contexts.

When actors do not attune their behaviors to be isomorphic with cultural group others, underlying avoidance drives may reflect a desire to maintain cultural distinctiveness. Negative stereotypes based on historical and mass-mediated images are particularly salient in relation to motivational drives and behavioral attunement in maquiladora interactions. Since U.S. organizations have typically transferred managers to foreign assignments on the basis of their technical rather than cultural expertise, these managers have been susceptible to these communally constructed stereotypes. Accounts show that stereotypes often result in behaviors by which U.S. Americans seek to maintain the vitality of their own culture and simultaneously, avoid the types of interaction that could lead to learning Mexican cultural behaviors, and demonstrate accommodation. For example, U.S. Americans who believe negative stereotypes that Mexico is corrupt and lawless describe themselves as fearing Mexicans (Fieldnotes, February, 1994). When one U.S. American director was initially transferred to Mexico, he got the Mexican army to serve as an escort for his helicopter and had the Mexican police guard his house (Fieldnotes, February, 1994). In this situation and others in which Americans avoid interacting with Mexicans, avoidance behavior influences Mexicans' generalized negative perceptions of U.S. Americans as oppressive, exploitive and arrogant. Thus, when U.S. Americans act based on their stereotypes of Mexicans, this reinforces Mexicans' stereotypes of U.S. Americans. Since Mexicans report trust as an essential building block of positive working relationships (Fieldnotes, April, 1994), Mexicans who hold negative stereotypes of U.S. Americans experience distrust in intercultural interaction. Mexicans' perceptions that Americans' ignorance and fear of Mexicans undermines trust is exemplified by the account of the former President of the Maquila Worker's Union:

When the . . . corporation had meetings I would be the only Mexican in attendance, the only Mexican. Americans don't know Mexicans, so they don't trust Mexicans. They are afraid to ask Mexicans for help, to learn Mexican ways. They don't want to learn anything new (Fieldnotes, February, 1994).

Negative stereotypes inhibit trust, as well as the development of cultural knowledge for improving relationships. In addition, negative stereotypes of cultural group "others" implicitly juxtapose one's own cultural group identity in a superior and more positive light. Consequently, negative stereotypes of cultural others may result in failure to attune behaviors to match those of cultural others, with concurrent desires to enact those behaviors reflecting maintenance of one's own cultural identity as distinct from "others."

In this context, both Mexicans and U.S. Americans report negative stereotyped beliefs of the other's cultural group; however, these stereotypes may result in different kinds of behaviors for members of each group because they are working within a socio-structural system (macro-context) that reflects cultural power inequalities. In maquiladoras, many U.S. Americans enact behaviors communicating superiority to Mexicans; criticizing Mexico and its system (Webber, *Twin Plant News*, 1994; Fieldnotes, February, 1994), not learning Spanish, and not respecting Mexican customs and values (Derderian, *Twin Plant News*, 1993). These U.S. American behaviors communicating "superiority" are underpinned with higher power status positions within maquiladora organizational structures. For U.S. Americans, then,

stereotypes may support what Katz (1960) refers to as a "utilitarian" function. Utilitarian drives maintain negative stereotypes of lower-power cultural groups because they ostensibly "reward" higher-power cultural groups through interactive processes in which perceived and actual power inequities support and reinforce one another. When U.S. Americans communicate negative stereotypes through interactive processes, their "reward" is to maintain self-perceived superiority and maintain the structural inequalities. For example, within a context of inequity in linguistic attuning behaviors, English is symbolically elevated and Spanish symbolically devalued in status. All managers' meetings, reports and international communication is conducted in English, as typified in one Mexican's managers' account: "The language from South to North and from North to South is always in English" (Fieldnotes, February 15, 1994). Within this system, prejudices in the form of negative stereotypes perpetuate an undesirable lower-status position for Mexicans. This structural inequality (macrocontext) is often central in Mexicans' negative evaluation of their intercultural work relationships; "As a Mexican you can only go so far in management, none of the maquilas are run by Mexicans" (Fieldnotes, February, 1994). Consequently, U.S. Americans' negative stereotypes of Mexicans benefit U.S. Americans and limit Mexicans.

*Dyadic communicative behaviors.* As mentioned previously, multiple and competing goals often complicate communication by the way they are linked to behaviors supporting negotiation of cultural identities in intercultural interaction. While U.S. American independent identity is revealed in an emphasis on task or instrumental goals, Mexican interdependent identity is communicated through an emphasis on a personal orientation, prioritizing relational concerns (see Table 3). The model supports previous suppositions that while identity may not be the focus of every interaction, identity is salient in many interactions and frequently guides the enactment of cultural communication as well as the consideration of goals of the interaction process itself (Hecht, 1993). In addition, in this organizational context, it is apparent that identities are multifaceted in relation to differing groups and roles. In many cases, cultural identity is manifested as a superordinate identity affecting how one enacts organizational behaviors (e.g., one's role as a manager, accountant, engineer) and problematizing intercultural interaction. In other contexts, shared organizational identity becomes the focus in problematic interaction.

As mentioned previously, problematic communication often occurs in specific contexts in which intercultural actors' culturally-based values prioritize relatively different goals for interactive behaviors. Cultural differences in management of identity permeate everyday organizational behaviors (see Table 3). For example, while Mexicans report preferences for social negotiation of written laws and time issues, indirectness in conflict, and establishing personal relationships before doing business, U.S. Americans report preferences for following written guidelines and time schedules, directness in conflict, and efficiency in placing tasks before relationships.

Problematic communication is especially apparent in intercultural situations in which there is possible threat to one's identity. In potentially face-threatening situations, Mexican "face-saving" communication foregrounds the importance of identity goals over instrumental goals. Mexicans describe this as culturally normative in conflict situations. For example, one Mexican manager described a potential conflict with U.S. Americans in the home office in the U.S. who believe "they are

losing jobs to Mexico. Sometimes, then, they lie about the efficiency or effectiveness of the plant in Mexico" (Fieldnotes, April, 1994). The appropriate Mexican cultural norms in a potential conflict situation call for the use of indirect communication behaviors, that protect the other's face by "pretending" there is an error rather than an intentional deceit (Fieldnotes, April, 1994).

In other accounts, it is evident that problematic communication often occurs in situations in which Mexicans perceive indirect communication supporting face-saving norms are appropriate and U.S. Americans perform direct task-oriented behaviors which Mexicans perceive as threatening to identity. This conflict in cultural norms is typified by one Mexican manager's account:

The biggest difference between Americans and Mexicans is in the way Americans express disagreement at management meetings . . . the Americans will tell another manager, 'I didn't like what you did . . .' Mexicans interpret this as a personal insult. They have a difficult time understanding that Americans can insult each other in this way and then go off and play golf together . . . Mexicans would be polite, perhaps tell the person in private, or make a suggestion, rather than confronting" (Fieldnotes, May, 1994).

Thus, Mexican interdependent identities are manifested through indirectness in face-threatening communication and prioritizing relational identities as valued outcomes, while U.S. American independent identities are reflected in direct communication emphasizing task outcomes. In intercultural interaction, communication is problematized as actors symbolically enact culturally different ways of construing personhood in relationship to others in everyday *maquiladora* interaction. However, both Mexican and U.S. American managers emphasize the importance of image management in interactions where there is a perceived threat to shared *maquiladora* identity.

While negative stereotypes of both Mexicans and U.S. Americans problematize national cultural identities, common organizational identity is often highlighted in problematic communication with home office personnel and U.S. clients. Both Mexican and U.S. Americans reported negative stereotypes of *maquiladoras*; *maquiladoras* are exploitive, assemble poor quality products, use substandard technologies, and steal American jobs (see Table 1).

Both U.S. Americans and Mexican revealed strategies that they use in order to combat these negative stereotypes and maintain the viability of their organizational roles. In responding to negative imposed identities of *maquilas*, national identities are sometimes backgrounded and identities of U.S. Americans and Mexicans as *maquila* managers are foregrounded in image-management discourse. For example, one U.S. American director was attempting to get a new product order from a client in the United States and he explained, "They had to come to Mexico to the plant to do their own test of the product quality because they don't believe we have the quality and technology in Mexico to put together the product they want." He elaborated that he doesn't feel frustrated when a client outside his company believes this, but when it's within his own company, he becomes frustrated and argues with them, "Hey, we're all working for the same person—right? The same person signs my paycheck as signs yours and just because we're in Mexico doesn't mean the quality of our products is inferior" (Fieldnotes, April, 1994). Thus, *maquiladora* organizational identity becomes most salient in communicative contexts where actors are bound by a common goal of responding to perceived challenges from *maquiladora* outsiders.

The image-management strategies offered by maquila managers are both ambiguous and contradictory. For example, one U.S. American director told me that "people in the U.S. talk about losing jobs to Mexico; what they don't understand is that there is work being done in Mexico that was never done in the United States" (Fieldnotes, April, 1994). In an interview with a Mexican manufacturing manager at this same plant he indicated to me that conflict often occurred because of competitive bidding with home office plants and that the Mexican plants could always outbid U.S. plants for the same product orders (Fieldnotes, February, 1994). Thus, it appears that maquiladora managers' goals are to reach mutual agreement about the positive evaluation of maquiladoras rather than a shared understanding of actual organizational behaviors. In this situation, valued outcomes are driven by motivations to sustain positive identity and this influences the nature of communicative processes.

A theoretical analysis of the relationship between the social construction of identity and problematic communication highlights the effect of negative stereotypes on motivational drives to maintain cultural identities and support or change socio-cultural power inequities. The negotiation of cultural identities in everyday interaction also problematizes everyday interaction when there are cultural differences in goal outcomes. The shifting boundaries of multiple identities are apparent in negotiating imposed negative organizational identities which are perceived as threatening to the achievement of organizational goals. Negative stereotypes affect motivations and result in reluctance to attune one's behavior to resonate with cultural others. In addition, both Mexican and U.S. American maquiladora managers may experience contradictory tensions in intercultural interactions that are influenced by multiple and competing goal outcomes. Conflicting cultural norms and rules for outcomes (e.g., instrumental or identity goals) set up communicative situations ripe for misunderstandings. Sometimes the emphasis on enacting identity, whether cultural or organizational, can problematize interaction. While actors from both cultures must work together interdependently to achieve instrumental outcomes related to shared organizational goals, pervasive issues dealing with the enactment of identity often supersede considerations for task related outcomes and communication becomes problematized.

*Levels of attribution of meaning.* Not only does problematic communication occur because of multiple goal outcomes of interlocutors, but multiple levels of attribution of meaning also complicate intercultural interaction processes. Analysis of participant accounts in this study revealed that misunderstandings occur at three levels of attribution: content, metaperceptual, and metarelational. On the basis of early conceptualizations of Bateson (1951), interpersonal communication scholars have highlighted the importance of considering both the content and metacommunicative interpretations of relational communication. This is evident in the axiom: "Every communication has a content and a relationship aspect such that the latter classifies the former and is therefore a 'metacommunication'" (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967, p. 54). However, the data show the need to further delineate attributions of meaning of intercultural metacommunication as "metaperceptions" or perceptions of messages about the cultural other's perceptions of one's own cultural group, and "metarelational" or perceptions of intergroup power relations that focus on the meta-meanings of messages regarding the symmetrical or hierarchical nature of cultural group relationships. Each of these levels of meaning—content,

metaperceptual, and metarelational—may lead to misunderstandings. Thus, this model synthesizes these constructs to create a new and vital understanding of multi-layered misunderstandings which occur in intercultural communication. In addition, differences in cultural time orientations interpenetrate the meanings attributed within this multi-leveled framework, thereby confounding misunderstandings, a phenomenon I call “cultural punctuation.” Below, each of these is explained with exemplars from the data to illustrate how they impact attribution of meaning in problematic interactions. Before exploring these complex processes, it is important to clarify the nature of the perception process itself.

Perception embodies a process by which actors select, accentuate, and interpret sensory data from the communication context (Bruner & Postman, 1948). Actors categorize selected data in order to facilitate interpretation. A category may be defined as “an accessible cluster of associated ideas which as a whole has the property of guiding daily adjustments” (Allport, 1979, p. 171). While categorizing facilitates everyday discourse, these same processes can reinforce pre-existing stereotypes when actors utilize simplified decision rules to manage the complexity of information processes. Allport (1979) describes this human tendency as “the principle of least effort” which overrides considerations of the complexity and diversity of human interactive experience and which may incline actors to “hold to coarse and early-formed generalizations as long as they can possibly be made to serve our purposes” (p. 176).

This “principle of least effort” in categorizing sensory data sometimes effects attributions of meaning in everyday intercultural interaction in maquiladoras. This is evident when actors pay selective attention to that data in their sensory environment which reinforces pre-existing stereotypes while ignoring other data which challenges stereotypes. When stereotypes serve as boundaries for selection and interpretation of sensory data, this process reinforces resistance to change.

Maquiladora managers’ understanding of this process in their everyday life experiences is evidenced in their descriptive accounts of interactions with U.S. Americans who visit Hermosillo, Mexico. Their visits are often stimulated by Hermosillan managers’ motivations to overcome U.S. American negative stereotypes of Mexicans which serve as barriers for new product orders (Fieldnotes, February, 1995). Maquiladora managers describe themselves as knowing that if any U.S. Americans experience unpleasantness in Hermosillo (e.g., get sick from food, experience slow service at the hotel), this will reinforce their pre-existing negative beliefs of all Mexicans, regardless of the amount of other sensory stimuli which contradicts the stereotypes (Fieldnotes, April, 1994). Their emic descriptions of intercultural interaction in these situations reinforce the concept scholars refer to as “refencing” (Allport, 1979, p. 23). Refencing occurs when actors notice sensory stimuli which challenge pre-existing categories, but instead of changing categories, the stimuli are noted as “exceptions” reflecting the rigidity of their beliefs. Thus, an understanding of perceptual processes allows us to see how rigidity of beliefs may serve to reinforce early-formed and rigid generalizations. How these processes effect interpretation at various levels of meaning will now be explained.

Cultural inequivalencies in intercultural interaction may be interpreted at the content level of meaning in intercultural communication. In intercultural interaction, cultural differences in ways of communicating symbolic meanings and evaluations of symbolic behaviors create misunderstandings at the content level of under-



standing. Thus, at this level there may be inequivalencies in shared understanding emerging from "semantic" slippage in translating or cultural differences in interpreting appropriate cultural rules and norms in a given context. Content level misunderstandings often occur in translation processes. One Mexican production engineer explained that

When I first started working at (company name), I had to call on all the defects or problems with cars after receiving customer complaints. So I had to call all these dealers in the U.S. and although my English is good, I didn't know all the technical terms, so I wouldn't know what they were talking about . . . when I first started, I just called all the glass in the car 'glass' but there are many different kinds of glass, not just one (Fieldnotes, March, 1994).

Thus, translation processes may result in problematic communication when there is a lack of shared vocabulary among participants, especially in discussing technical terms. In this case, awareness of the misunderstandings lead to management of problematics when interlocutors developed shared understandings for ways of categorizing parts of the automobile.

At the "metaperceptual" level of interpretation, participants in communication interaction may also attribute meaning to cultural others' perceptions of their cultural group. In *maquiladora* interaction, this metalevel of interpretation is often triggered by violations of cultural expectancies which potentially exacerbate misunderstandings. Simply stated, interpersonal communication scholars define metaperception as "This is the way I see you seeing me" (Watzlawick, et al., 1967; p. 90). In intercultural interaction, this would be translated as "This is our cultural interpretation of the way we see your culture as interpreting our culture." Misunderstandings at this level are reflected in lack of shared understanding of how participants' perceive each other as perceiving their own cultural group.

Problematic communication leads to metaperceptual interpretations that negatively affect understanding. Metaperceptions of cultural others predominately reflect and reinforce negative cultural stereotypes. For example, when U.S. Americans do not attune their behaviors to resonate with Mexican cultural behaviors (e.g., communicate a personal orientation or use indirect conflict styles), this results in violations of cultural expectancies. In interpreting this behavior at the metaperceptual level, Mexican actors' accounts show that some Mexicans perceive that these norm violations are an indication of how U.S. Americans perceive Mexicans (e.g., Americans do not want to learn Mexican ways because they do not respect Mexicans). This metaperceptual interpretation of meaning in interaction, in turn, reinforces negative stereotypes of U.S. Americans. While in some situations, Mexicans' metaperceptions of U.S. Americans' perceptions of Mexicans may be true, in other cases, they may not be. There are a multitude of possibilities why a U.S. American may have violated a specific cultural expectancy (e.g., simply do not know what's appropriate, but do respect Mexicans; know Mexican ways, but perceive their own cultural communication as more effective). However, when cultural actors are not aware of ways metaperceptual misunderstandings arise, metaperceptions contribute significantly to problematic communication.

At the next meta-level, actors interpret intercultural power relations through communicative behaviors that reflect and reinforce either intergroup symmetry or hierarchy. This is the "metarelational" level of meaning. In interpersonal relationships, communication is often problematized when metarelational misunderstandings occur in interactants' interpretation of symmetry or hierarchy in relational

messages (e.g., Tannen, 1990; Watzlawick, et al., 1967). As in other types of communicative interactions, the metarelational misunderstandings linked to attributions of symmetry or hierarchy are ascribed to cultural group identities. For example, one Mexican maquila manager informed me that U.S. Americans "are afraid when they come down here, they don't know Mexican business and they think they must pay the graft" (Fieldnotes, May, 1994). According to numerous Mexican accounts, some U.S. Americans do not really understand the Mexican system, think it is corrupt, don't ask for advice from Mexicans, and too often attempt to use bribes in business transactions. On the other hand, other U.S. Americans are described as thinking the Mexican system is "corrupt" and "want to change the system . . . by refusing to pay tips to make the system go faster" (Fieldnotes, February, 1994). Thus, according to Mexican accounts, U.S. Americans who do not learn Mexican cultural norms for socially negotiating rules often mistakenly assume that paying bribes is either totally appropriate or inappropriate regardless of the type of relationship and context. The metacommunicative aspect of these kinds of behaviors is important in that U.S. American stereotyped beliefs that the entire Mexican system is "corrupt and lawless" leads to norm violations. In addition, Mexicans perceive U.S. Americans who label the Mexican system as "corrupt" as communicating superiority (Fieldnotes, May, 1994). Problematic communication at this level of meaning may reflect and reinforce actual socio-cultural power asymmetries. Analysis of participants' accounts shows that Mexicans commonly interpret problematic communication at this level of meaning. While this interpretation relates to their perceptions of present day socio-cultural structural inequities (macro-context) that are enacted in everyday communication, meanings are also infiltrated by perceptions of historical intercultural relationships (macro-context).

The importance of historically-embedded meanings in infiltrating present day intercultural relationships may be understood by exploring the impact of cultural orientations toward time as they relate to the punctuation of communication. "Punctuation" occurs when actors arbitrarily designate any particular act within a stream of ongoing communication as either a "stimulus/beginning/cause" or a "response/end/effect" (Watzlawick, et al., 1967). Howell (1979) has theorized that actors' punctuation of interaction as "episodic" problematizes intercultural interaction. This new model extends this thinking by seeing it as integrally bound to cultural time orientations.

Analysis of actors' accounts reveals that U.S. Americans tend to punctuate the meaning of present moment communicative behaviors in terms of how they relate to desired future outcomes. In contrast, Mexican time orientations often involve interpreting present moment interactions in terms of meanings infiltrated by historical past intercultural relationships. An examination of two accounts, one from a U.S. American director and one from a Mexican manager, illuminates these punctuation processes. In each case, both have identified the issue of U.S. American monolingualism as problematic, but cultural punctuations are different. The U.S. American director reported:

I wish I had known how to speak Spanish. It would have helped me a lot. . . . At work I have fifty-four bilingual managers, so when I want to know something, there's no problem with my lack of Spanish. When I want to know something about a particular worker, I have someone translate. . . . However, although I can get along, sometimes I would like to do things myself, directly (Fieldnotes, April, 1994).

This manager interprets problems relating to monolingualism in terms of how it would help him to do things for himself (communicating independent identity) in achieving future task outcomes. On the other hand, a Mexican interpretation of U.S. American *maquila* managers' monolingualism is exemplified by this Mexican administrator's account:

Let me tell you a story that my father told me. My father was from the Yucatan, part Mayan (he smiles proudly). My father told me a story about when Americans had banana plantations in the Yucatan. One day one of the American plantation owners had his house catch on fire. It was burning very quickly, and so he ran to the Indians and he started shouting at them "Fire . . . Fire . . . Fire!!!" Well, the Indians just stood there looking at him because they didn't know what he was saying. So the American got really mad and yelled "You stupid Indians, I've been here for fifteen years and you still haven't learned a word of English. (Fieldnotes, February, 1994)

This account contrasts how Mexicans and U.S. Americans interpret the same problematic issue (U.S. American monolingualism). The Mexican administrator interprets problematic communication with U.S. Americans in terms of historical experience (communicating interdependent identity with ancestors) with a clearly negative evaluation of perceived socio-structural power inequalities (metarelational interpretation). The U.S. American who wishes he could do things for himself alludes to his discomfort in depending on Mexican bilinguals, but the evaluation of the experience is localized in present-day experience without consideration for how this reflects asymmetries in past historical relationships or current structural inequalities. Thus, relatively different cultural time orientations influence the punctuation of experiences and evaluation of the metarelational component of problematic communication.

It is essential that theoretical constructions of "problematic" communication embody considerations for these multiple levels of attribution. Each level of meaning significantly affects interactants' ability to arrive at shared intercultural understandings. In some interaction situations, it is possible that actors will share perceptual interpretations of the content of the message, but will disagree on or ignore the metaperceptual or metarelational message. When actors prioritize the perceptual level of interpretation of the "content" meaning of the message, it is likely they fail to recognize the serious and extensive ramifications of metacommunicative misunderstandings. Cultural punctuation influences interpretations of metacommunicative aspects of meaning from differing time orientations, often negatively impacting U.S. American and Mexican relationships, attenuating cultural group differences and exacerbating cultural tensions.

### Contributions and Future Directions

Each of these elements; macro-context, individual (in)competencies, dyadic communication behaviors, and multi-leveled attributions of meaning have been incorporated into a new model called "A Layered Model of Problematic Communication" (see Figure 1). Hence, this model supports and extends scholarship which calls for the consideration of layered perspectives in understanding intercultural relationships (Baldwin & Hecht, 1995). Although this emically constructed model articulates theoretical constructs and their relationships relevant to problematic issues and processes within *maquiladora* organizations, the model may have transferability in understanding problematic communication in other intercultural contexts. While previous research has identified some of the components of this model in conceptu-

alizing problematic communication, this theoretical model both integrates and extends previous scholarship and clearly reveals the need for understanding these components from a holistic perspective. First, it highlights the importance of considering the macro-context as it permeates problematic interpretations of experience in intercultural relationships. It explains how historical and socio-cultural structural inequities create and perpetuate negative stereotyped cultural identities. Second, it shows how these, in turn, influence the dynamic interplay of issues relating to individual's cultural knowledge, skills, motivations and dyadic intercultural communication. Multiple motivations in communicating stereotypes point to the importance of considering the impact of the "utilitarian" function of prejudice (Katz, 1960) in supporting the maintenance of separate and unequal cultural identities. However, while there may be rewards for higher-power groups in maintaining privileged status, the extent to which this problematizes intercultural interaction suggests a negative impact in achieving organizational goals. Future research might focus on how negative stereotypes affect multiple goal outcomes in other types of organizational contexts in which intercultural actors work together interdependently.

Third, this model also reveals how problematic issues revolve around different ways of enacting cultural and organizational identity in this intercultural organizational context. While previous research has identified both status and ethnolinguistic vitality issues as relating to intergroup linguistic accommodation (Gallois, et al., 1988), this study extends our understanding of how problematic communication processes reflect multiple levels of identity in intercultural work relationships. Analysis of participants' accounts substantiate that culture influences relatively desired outcomes relating to identity and task goals, resulting in problematic intercultural interaction. In organizational relationships, Mexicans' interdependent identities prioritize relational considerations across multiple types of situations. In contrast, U.S. Americans typically violate Mexican norms with communicative behaviors revealing a more independent sense of self. Although relatively different cultural ways of communicating personhood contribute to both violations of cultural expectancies and misunderstandings, in international contexts the locus of identity shifts between cultural and organizational. In international communication situations which involve threat to shared maquiladora identities both U.S. American and Mexican maquila managers emphasize image-management communication as a way of enhancing shared organizational identity. The shifting nature of "cultural" and "organizational" identities in response to perceived threats extends our understanding of how boundary management theory (Petronio, 1990, 1991) may be used to explain face-negotiation in international communication contexts. Both U.S. American and Mexican managers in maquiladoras respond to U.S. home office personnel's negative stereotypes to protect their shared organizational identity and promote shared organizational goals. In addition, these types of face-management communication emphasize that what counts as "problematic" is contextually, relationally and culturally bound. In both cases, ambiguous and indirect communication may be seen as appropriate when group members perceive aspects of their identities as threatened. Future scholarship may be directed at understanding the complex interplay of multiple levels of identities in problematic communication in multi-ethnic U.S. organizations as well as in international organizations.

Fourth, this layered model integrates theoretical aspects of Watzlawick's et al. (1967) interpersonal communication theory to articulate misunderstandings which

occur with multi-leveled attributions of meaning in intercultural contexts. The concept of "cultural punctuation" is introduced as a way of explaining how attributions of meaning are interpenetrated by cultural time orientations. In addition, the model shows how meaning is affected by metaperceptions of intergroup stereotypes. Finally, the complexities of intercultural misunderstandings are revealed through the way this model synthesizes the interplay of differences in cultural punctuation with multi-layered interpretations of experiences at content, metaperceptual, and metarelational levels.

Thus, this new layered model reveals theoretical relationships between problematic issues and processes which encompass both the macro (context) and micro (individual competencies, communicative behaviors and attribution of meaning) levels of intercultural interaction. These are explained as interpenetrating problematic communication processes through which both imposed and enacted identities are mediated to achieve diverse goal outcomes. Differences in cultural interpretations of communicative outcomes reflect back on the importance of the macro-context in permeating meaning in intercultural relationships in both face-to-face and international communication. Hence, this model clearly delineates the need to consider these interpenetrated layers of analysis (communal, individual, and dyadic) in problematic intercultural communication.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The term "U.S. American" is used to designate Americans from the United States. While the terms "Canadian" and "Mexican" are available to name Americans from Canada and Mexico, respectively, no comparable terms exist for Americans from the United States.

<sup>2</sup>Other foreign investors in this industry include Japan and Germany, although the vast majority of plants are held by U.S. American corporations (Barry, 1992).

<sup>3</sup>For a more elaborated discussion of cultural conflict norms see Lindsley & Braithwaite (1996).

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