An Alternative Constructionist Approach
to Intercultural Communication
― A Discussion from the Perspective of *Ba.*―

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Introduction

Many studies of intercultural communication have accepted the assumption that understanding cultural traits of counterpart groups is imperative in prescribing effective strategies for problem solving and relationship-building in intercultural encounters. This type of approach to intercultural communication presupposes that each group of people has its shared inherent cultural orientations, which manifest themselves as specific cultural representations, and that these traits basically remain unchanged, affecting our thoughts and behavior across generations. Such a view of culture, generally referred to as *cultural essentialism*, has been widely acknowledged and accepted as a theoretical cornerstone for comparative cultural research as well as training for intercultural adaptation (Kim, 1988; Ishii, 2001a).

It is obvious that the essentialist approach has made substantial contribution to the development of the field of study, providing a broad variety of culture specific information for assessing the characteristics of the people to be encountered, and thus providing clues to developing specific strategies for conflict avoidance and constructive relationship-building in intercultural settings (e.g., Cushner, 1994; Kochman, 1981; Ramsey, 1998; Ting-Toomey, 2002). In fact, in doing so many researchers and practitioners have utilized knowledge from preceding studies that discussed differences in cultural patterns from unique perspectives. Such knowledge was earned based on findings gained through research that focused on what have been regarded as primordial cultural orientations of the subject groups.

These studies include some classical works that are frequently cited by interculturalists

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in developing their theoretical frameworks. For example, the results from a series of extensive quantitative research on collective value differences conducted by Hofstede (1997) have been organized into a matrix for evaluating value orientations of specific cultural groups according to his diagnostic categorization of what he called *cultural dimensions*. While Hofstede noted that the information he cited in theorizing these dimensions was of comparative nature (p.24), he claimed the universal applicability of his diagnostic framework and thus promoted the notion that the basic cultural traits of specific cultural groups should become tangible by examining their positioning within the applicable constellation maps for each cultural dimension. Another example is seen in E. Hall's dualistic models concerning ethnocultural traits such as high/low context (Hall, 1976) and M-time/P-time orientations in time management (Hall, 1983).

While these conceptual models function as theoretical measure to expound the mechanism of so-called culture gaps and communicative malfunctions between or among groups of people, they are commonly characterized as focusing solely on arbitrarily specified aspects of our thinking and behavior. Therefore, even though their models have been carefully designed and scrutinized for applicability to actual situations, there remains the unresolved question; how are we supposed to integrate those theoretical measures to utilize them for building collaborative relationships with others from different cultures? To present an alternative perspective in solving this problem, in this article I will analyze limitations of essentialism-based approaches in their actual application to the creation of common contexts in culturally diverse settings, and present a *ba*-based communicative model as an alternative theoretical framework for promoting co-creative relationship-building across what are conceived to be cultural boundaries.

Limitations of Essentialist Approach in Intercultural Communication Study and Practice

We all know from our experience that there is no perfect prescriptive model for effective intercultural communication, and that while the essentialist models concerning intercultural communication are useful in understanding potential impact of cultural factors on communication, they alone do not guarantee successful intercultural relationship-building. This is partly because the essentiaslistic models, owing to their notion of culture as static, innate and reifiable shared property, lack a perspective that incorporate the dynamic aspects of human communication; that is, how we negotiate and enact positions that best match the given situations, with what kind of combination of our physical and mental settings in ever

changing state of the environment, including both our inner state of being and that of others we interact with. In short, theories based on cultural essentialism are inevitably fraught with limitations in their applicability to actual interactive processes. I will analyze the sources of this drawback of essentialist approaches in reference to their ontological framework.

Cultural essentialism, as stated above, presupposes the static notion of culture, as if culture could be specified as a property of an identifiable collectivity (Grillo, 2003, p.159). This perspective corresponds to that of the positivistic paradigm in epistemology, in which culture is described as reified or essentialized as if they were "things" (Bennett, 2005, p.3). The positivistic view of reality, as is widely adopted in natural science, sees reality as objective being existing independently from our observation. According to Uchiyama (2007), the knowledge of reality in positivists' terms is characterized as seeking for universality and objectivity underpinned by experimentally verified truth (p.107), which excludes the possible effects of interventions by subjective factors such as personal attributes, intentions, and emotional state of the individuals.

This notion of independent and impervious reality is built on an ontological paradigm that draws a clear boundary, as is often referred to as *Cartesian cut,* between the observer and the observed, and it assumes that a natural phenomenon can be explained as a sequence of independent events that are mutually related by causality. While, as Shimizu (1978) pointed out, the atomistic and reductionistic thinking of positivism has made tremendous contribution to the development of modern natural science such as Newtonian physics and molecule biology, it has serious drawbacks of not being able to describe phenomena that are affected by subjective factors. As Uchiyama (2007) noted, the incompatibility between positivistic understanding of reality and actual knowing experience leads to an impasse when we try to deal with issues involving human communication (e.g., organization management, education, medical care), since what we face in actual communication is a series of unpredictable dynamic processes of interactions whose constituents are basically not observable as objective entities. Since a positivistic approach solely counts objectively recognizable, more specifically *measurable*, entities as constituents of reality and excludes intangible subjective factors, it only captures partial phases of reality (Uchiyama, 2007, p.111).

Another limitation of the positivistic approach in communication study derives from its atomistic view of reality Since it is built on the assumption that things or events can be subdivided into independent constituents whose attributes are predefined, it is incapable of explaining the mechanism of complex communicative processes that emerge from dynamic interactions among the constituent individuals, who behave in contingent manners according to their relations with one another. Shimizu (1999) maintained that this dynamism is a basic

attribute of collective behavior of organic elements such as cells and individual humans, in that the state of the whole system (e.g., organs, groups of people) is determined according to constantly changing state of environment and the inner states of constituent elements. In studying intercultural events, especially those involving intercultural collaboration, the same dilemma emerges for positivists; that is, while they need to identify causal relationships among the specified factors (for instance, relationships between collective value orientations and people's behavior), they are only capable of exercising abductive inference about the presence of such relationships. In other words, what they can observe is the final product of interactions (e.g., a group's decision, an innovative idea, a favorable atmosphere), but not *the process* that has yielded it. Thus, the positivistic approach to intercultural communication may provide information that can be a "useful concomitant of intercultural competence," but it "does not itself constitute competence"(Bennett, 2005, p.5).

The Shift toward Constructionist Views of Culture in Intercultural Communication Studies

As mentioned above, as a major theoretical framework for discussing intercultural issues essentialism-based models of intercultural interface have been widely adopted, and they have made a substantial contribution toward enhancing people's acknowledgment of the need for acquiring adequate cultural information in both scholarly and practical venues of concern. By nature these approaches presuppose the sheer existence of *cultural gaps* to overcome through mutual efforts to understand counterpart groups. On the other hand, there has been criticism of those essentialism-based approaches from various fields of study surrounding intercultural communication (e.g., Clifford, 1992; Grillo, 2003; Kono, 2013; Mabuchi, 2002; Modood, 1998; Oda, 1999).

One of the major objections to the essentialistic view of culture has been raised by post-modern social constructionists, preceded by scholars in sociology such as P. Berger and T. Luckmann (1966) and Spector and Kitsuse (1977), whose common argument is that reality is of social construction and does not exist a priori as a set of innate attributes of individuals or groups of individuals. Ueno (2001) argued that through introducing a new paradigm the constructionists' view of culture has brought about a crustal deformation in fields related to cultural studies. In fact, its denial of culture as an objective entity has uprooted the theoretical foundation of cultural anthropology and has even driven the field of study into a state of dissolution (p. 284). Also, the constructionists' view of culture as a constructed reality has inevitably called cultural relativism, which is built on cultural essentialism, into

question (Oda, 1999).

In recent years, there has been a movement toward redefining constructionism from indigenous people's perspectives to increase its variations in perspective . For instance, Oda (1999) argued that the dichotomized framework of cultural essentialism versus constructionism itself entails residual influences of colonial identity politics that reflects the Eurocentric view of cultural identity, and he pointed out that in reality local people interchangeably exercise plural identities as a strategy in the daily life context, which he described as situational bricolage consisting of cultural fragments (p.158).

Also, drastic changes in the view of relationships between communication and culture have been brought by scholars from symbolic interactionism such as Mead, G.H., Goffman, E., Blumer, H., who commonly maintained that the meanings of events, and therefore their recognition, are created through social interactions by exercising shared symbolic systems. According to these theories, interactions through exchanging and sharing various types of symbols generate "cultural meanings" such as collective norms, common beliefs, and expected roles of individuals (Ishii, 2001b, p.100).

These movements toward redefinition of culture and cultural identity as social constructions have posed a fundamental problem for interculturalists. Specifically, researchers and practitioners who deal with intercultural encounters have inevitably come to face the question; if there is no essential components of culture, how do we define a certain setting as *intercultural* and how should we commit ourselves to achieve the goal of promoting effective *intercultural* communication when no cultural boundary is specified? In their effort to find solutions to this aporia, attempts have been made to present alternative concepts of cultural identity and intercultural encounters by several researchers of the field. They include approaches that defined culture as a processual phenomenon constructed dialectically out of seemingly contradicting elements (Martin, Nakayama, & Flores, 2002), and approaches that construed cultural identity as a subjective process in which individuals take their unique positions in specific social settings, and investigated how contextual factors affect the process of cultural minorities' negotiations of their positioning (Asai, 2006).

These studies have suggested that constructionistic approaches that refer to a fluid notion of cultural identity and contextual definitions of culture are significant in that they have introduced a relation- and context-oriented view of culture and cultural identity into the field of intercultural communication. However, generally, those discussions that endorse the constructionists' perspective still do not seem to have successfully presented theoretical frameworks for explaining characteristics and mechanism of the principle that facilitate the individuals' self-positioning processes within a group that generate collaborative relationships

in heterocultural environment.

Bennett (2005) discussed the efficacy of what he referred to as constructivistic paradigm in intercultural communication, which he presented as an alternative to positivistic and relativistic approaches. As one of its practical implications he presented "self-reflexive definition of culture," which promotes one's recognition of the nature of his/her act of *definition* as well as that of others, and eventually leads to enhancement of "intercultural empathy" as the process of "imaginative participation in an alien experience" (p.12). Defining culture as our description of patterns of behavior generated through human interaction within some boundary condition (p.10), Bennett described the mechanism of co-creation of collective contexts through individuals' engagement in this self-reflexive definition of culture as the following:

> Following this definition of culture, people do not "have" a worldview –rather, they are constantly in the process of interacting with the world in ways that both express the pattern of the history of their interactions and that contribute to those patterns. So, if one wishes to participate in Japanese culture as an Italian, she must stop organizing the world in an Italian way and start organizing it in a Japanese way. (This is the theoretical ideal, never achieved, of course.) Where does she "go" conceptually to achieve this shift? To inter-culture space, which is constituted of culture-general constructs (constructed etic categories) that allow cultural contrasts to be made. From this meta-level space, she can "enter" the organizing pattern of a culturally-different other by first shifting to the contrasting etic constructs and then to the appropriate emic constructs. (pp.10-11)

Bennett's concept of connecting to different patterns of perception and experience through self-reflection with the mediation of *inter-culture space* is worth consideration in that it presented possible specific, even if highly theoretical, procedure of attuning oneself to cultural heterogeneity that may lead to co-creation of common cultural contexts. On the other hand, it does not provide sufficient information about specific phenomena that his theoretical framework for generation of common cultural contexts has been induced from, and, more importantly, about the mechanism in which the "inter-culture space" functions as a connecting vehicle as well as about the principle that governs its generation. Thus, Bennett's overall discussion on the procedure of bridging different patterns of individuals' experience is focused not so much on its genetic principle and its functions in intercultural relationship-building as the nature and style of individuals' engagement in the developing process of intercultural

empathy.

Potentiality of *Ba*-based Relationship-Building in Culturally Diverse Settings

Non-Atomistic Notions of Being

In this section I will present a *ba*-based model of autonomous relationship-building as an alternative constructionistic framework for discussing specific principle and mechanism of relationship-building in culturally diverse settings.

So far, in various fields of study, there have been approaches from non-atomistic ontological perspectives that ascribe being of things and events to the function of a subsumptive principle that provides grounds for their being. Many of these approaches tried to explain the existence of matters or physical phenomena from a perspective that posed *place* or *field* as their substratum. In philosophy, for instance, Aristotelian notion of *topos,* Plato's notion of *chora,* and Kitaro Nishida's notion of *basho* commonly signify a substratum for matters or events to take form. In physics, the discovery of the magnetic field and the quantum field has redefined the Newtonian notion of vacant space into a notion of dynamic regions where magnetic force or quantum mechanics functions (Nakamura, 1989).

In social science, the notion of *field* has been introduced by several scholars to explain the function of disciplines or principles that interrelate the individuals and their behavior to create some wholeness as social reality. For instance, Lewin (1951) defined field as the totality of coexisting facts that are conceived of as mutually interdependent, and argued that human behavior is closely connected to a function of the field that concurs it.

These studies, although their purposes and definitions of corresponding notions differs from one another, had a significant impact in promoting the notion that the being of things and events should be explained not simply as the sum of constituent elements or factors but as the functions of forces or principles that subsume them.

Concept of Ba in Theoretical Contexts

As an approximate notion to *field*, the word *ba* (場) has been used in practical contexts in Japan, meaning places where events occur, or specific occasions or phases of events (Niimura, 1998). Academically, *ba* has been studied from culture specific perspectives by various Japanese scholars in social science. For example, Nakane (1967) construed *ba* as the state in which groups of people are formed according to certain social frames such as ascriptive groups and local communities, and maintained that in the Japanese society identification with *ba* is more important than identification with groups formed according to

common attributes of individuals. In organizational studies *ba* has been discussed as a principle that provides contextual information for relationship-building. For example, as Tsuyuki (2003) noted, *ba* connotes the presence of a shared context that affects the relationships among individuals involved in an event. Nishiguchi and Beaudet (2000) defined *ba* as a platform for relationship-building that is commonly recognized by the interacting individuals, where information of dynamic interactions are shared and recreates the relationality and meanings of events on a real-time basis (p.97). Thus, *ba* in theoretical contexts can be properly understood not simply as a certain set of concurring events or a metaphorical space in one's mindscape, but as a fundamental principle of relationship-building according to which mutually influential interactions among individuals occur.

Ba as a Principle for Autonomous Relationship-Building and Co-Creation of Common Contexts

Ba as the principle for generating self-organizing relationships among individuals and co-creation of common contexts has been most extensively discussed by scholars from *bioholonics*, which studies "the genetic and relational functions of organic systems focusing on the multiple phases of their complexity and self-organizing internal orders" (Shimizu, 1978, p.275). Shimizu (1978, 1996, 1999) studied the behavior of constituent elements in organic systems and patterns of their self-representations, and discussed the principle and mechanism that govern these patterns. By *self-representation* he meant the process in which individual organic elements (e.g., cells, individual humans) define their own roles based on their relations with the environment and other individuals, and act according to these definitions to express themselves (Shimizu, 1996, p.35), and he called such elements *kankei-shi* (関係子), translated as *holon* (Shimizu, 1984, p.49).

According to Shimizu (1999), for a group of *holons* to achieve coherence among their behavior, they need some vehicle that synthesizes behavior of individual *holons*. He called this substrative vehicle *basho* (場所), which literally means place. He argued that a *basho* provides what he called "subsumptive constraint," which refers to the constraint on the individuals' behavior that enables them to determine appropriate self-representations out of an indefinite range of choice so that they cohere the state of *basho*. Shimizu compared *basho* to a theater where an improvisational drama is played out. There the individual actors (i.e., *holons*) need to specify acting that may best suit the flow of the drama so that their acting becomes coherent with the whole play as well as other actors' acting. What enables the individual actors to make appropriate choice of action is their precise perception of the state of the *basho* (i.e., the theater) that is transmitted to the individuals as an image of the place. This perception of the *basho* provides clues as to what are relevant actions in a particular

context. In this sense, a *basho* functions as an agent that provides the individuals with constraining conditions for directing their actions and enables them to co-create a shared tentative scenario (p. 109). Shimizu concluded that the shared image of *basho* that is reflected on individuals' consciousness is *ba* (p. 129).

In the following section, I will describe the specific mechanism of autonomous relationship-building and co-creation of common contexts through the functions of *ba*.

Mechanism of Ba-Based Relationship-Building and Generation of Common Context

Based on his discovery that an aggregate of muscle molecules autonomously generate orderly movement as a system under certain conditions, Shimizu (1978) posited that elements in an organic system have the ability to co-create the self-representation of the system they belong to through their collaborative movement. Shimizu applied his findings from bioholonics to develop his theory of *ba* in human communities, and maintained that individual humans are also innately oriented toward generating self-representations that are coherent with the others' in the community to co-create collective representations, just as a group of cells co-create and maintain the functions of the organ they belong to.

According to Shimizu (1999), what makes this autonomous collaborative movement of constituent elements possible is the function of *ba*. Specifically, as noted in the previous section, *ba* functions as a principle that organizes the behavior of individual elements in mutually coherent ways by putting some constraints on their behavior, so that the organic sysem can adjust its inner states to constantly changing state of environment. This adjustment process requires the constituent elements to narrow the range of their behavior out of infinite possible options in ways that they generates appropriate self-representations of the system as a whole. For instance, in the process of morphosis, the function of each cell is determined according to its present position as it relates to the positioning of other cells so that the group of cells form an organ as a collective self-representation (Shimizu, 1999, p.127). Thus, the system, exercising the function of *ba*, puts constraints on the behavior of the individual elements, who sense the constraints and make appropriate choices of actions so that they collaboratively create the system's self-representation that suit its changing need. Only organic systems have the ability to generate by themselves this self-constraining function to maintain the orderly state of the system (p.127).

Shimizu (1996) argued that to us humans this constraint is perceived as impression of the *basho*, typically as the atmosphere, to provide clues for our choice of actions that suit the particular contexts of the situation and cohere with the others' actions. This infers that the information of *ba* is not communicated in semiotic forms such as verbal codes. Rather, it is

communicated in implicit, non-semiotic forms through our corporeality, specifically sensory, affective, and intuitive aspects of perception (p.69). This reflects the fact that the individuals are subsumed in the function of *ba*, and therefore cannot observe it as objectified phenomena from outside. Instead, we perceive it as the inner state of ourselves as reflection of the state of *basho* (p.69). Thus, in perceiving the functions of *ba* as meaningful constraints on our behavior, we need to focus on the real-time state of our inner corporeal state (pp.69-70).

Then, how can we confirm the appropriateness of our understanding of the state of the *basho* and how do we generate a coherence among the individuals' behavior to co-create a collective self-representation? As above-mentioned, the individuals sharing a *basho* are regarded as engaging in co-creation of a common context as actors in an improvisational drama, in which individual actors represent themselves so that their acting suits the expectations of audience and the theater as *basho*. In the drama individual actors sense and play their appropriate roles so that their acting becomes coherent with the others' acting and eventually generate the collective representations that match the *basho*. What guides individual actors in aligning their acting with the others' acting and the drama's context is the constraining function of *ba*, which provides the actors with specific ideas about the meanings of the drama and thus about their specific options of acting. In other words, the tentatively shared scenario that individuals apprehend from the context of the ongoing drama is equivalent to *ba* as such constraint (Shimizu, 1996 p. 66). Thus, individuals commit themselves to participating in an improvisational drama unfolding in specific settings (*basho*) and act according to the tacitly shared scenarios (p. 59). Shimizu (1995) summarized the process in which individuals' self-representations become consistent with representations of *basho* through the function of *ba* as the following:

> Although the *ba* may not be so clear at first, it must be clear enough to produce fuzzy but meaningful self-representations of the actors. The self-representations of the actors will change the internal state of the *basho*, which results in a change in *ba*. The corresponding change in the actors' internal constraints [*ba*] will lead the actors to produce more detailed representations. Such a change will be repeated between the actors and the *basho* in a cyclic way until the representations of both sides fit well. (p. 75)

Shimizu (1996, 2000) called this cyclic process for matching individuals' behavior with the state of the *basho* "holonic loop," and noted that it presupposes the duplex structure of life. According to Shimizu (1996), individual organic elements have two different dimensions

of being, which are "ego-centric self" and "basho-centric self". While the ego-centric self represents a localized being that can act as an independent agent of decision-making and action-taking, the *basho*-centric self represents a ubiquitous shared being that is inseparable from *basho*. It is because of the function of this *basho*-centric self that the individuals can sense the real-time state of *basho* and make appropriate decisions about what actions to take (pp.56-57).

To provide a metaphorical image of the relations between the ego-centric self and the *basho*-centric self, Shimizu (2000) presented his *egg model*.
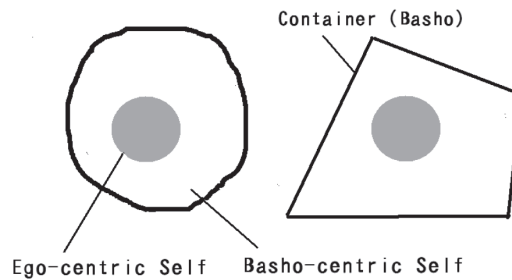

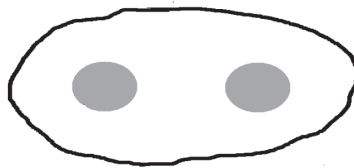**Figure 1.** The Egg Model of the Ego-Centric and the ***Basho***-Centric Self

Figure 2. The Egg Model of Shared ***Basho***-Centric Self

Note. Figure 1 and *Figure 2* have been produced by the author based on Figure 1-2 in Shimizu (2000, p.150).

As shown in Figure 1, the two dimensions of self can be represented by the yolk and the albumen, which respectively correspond to the ego-centric self and the *basho*-centric self. While the yolk retains its independence, it senses changes in the albumen's state as the albumen spreads in the shape and size of the container (*basho*). The albumen, as in Figure 2, fuses with other albumen without separating from the yolk and creates a synthesized whole. According to Shimizu, this shared space occupied by the albumen corresponds to the function of *ba* (p. 148).

According to Shimizu (2000), the *basho*-centric self (the albumen) is characterized by its inseparability from that of others and its subsuming nature, and the characteristics of the

basho (the container) are directly reflected on its state. The ego-centric self (the yolk) also perceives the characteristics of the *basho* through perceiving the state of the *basho*-centric self (p. 149). Furthermore, representations of an ego-centric self are communicated to other ego-centric selves through the shared *basho*-centric self, just as the movement of one yolk is passed on to the other yolk through the combined albumen. This signifies the state that self-representations of the ego-centric self are communicated implicitly through the function of *ba*. Thus, the shared *ba* generates a common context that synthesizes the individuals' self-representations and is revised as the individuals act according to their perception of changing state of the *basho* (p. 149).

Shimizu's concept of the duality of self presupposes that the ego-centric self and the *basho*-centric self are mutually exclusive in principle but in function they are interdependent. Through the cyclic process of mutual adjustment between the two sides' representations coherence between the functions of these two dimensions of self is established, just like between a key and a keyhole. Shimizu (1996) explained this process as "mutual induction" of the ego-centric self and the *basho*-centric self, and concluded that this process of mutual induction is made possible by the function of *ba*.

Implications for Application of *Ba*-Based Relationship-Building to Intercultural Contexts

Practical and Methodological Advantages of the Ba-based Approach

So far, I have presented the Smizu's bioholonical concept of *ba* as a principle of relationship-building and co-creation of collective contexts, and summarized the specific mechanism of these processes, on the assumption that it might be applicable to intercultural settings and therefore provide an alternative constructionistic model in intercultural communication studies. In this section I will discuss the applicability of this *ba*-based model in intercultural communication as well as its limitations.

Theoretically, the *ba*-based model has several advantages in its application to culturally diverse settings. First of all, since, as Shimizu discussed, *ba* functions as a connecting principle for humans in general, its functions are not confined to some specific cultural groups and thus can transcend cultural boundaries. Although in Japan *ba* in ordinary context has certain sociocultural connotations, the concept of *ba* as discussed from the bioholonical perspective is free of these cultural assumptions. In fact Shimizu (2000) suggested the potentiality of the functions of *ba* in creating harmonic relationships among different cultural groups (p. 169).

The transcultural function of *ba* can also be underpinned by its self-organizing nature. As discussed above, *ba* is characterized by a guiding principle for self-organization of coherent relationships among individual constituents. In this sense, the dynamics governing the *ba*-based relationship-building is not that of a hierarchical organization but rather of a community comprised of individuals who are participating in its activities on an equal and spontaneous basis, as is typically observed in a soccer game. Thus, the *ba*-based relationship-building may present an alternative model of intercultural association that is not affected by the existing theoretical frameworks based on the notion of power structures among cultural groups, which, as Oda (1999) pointed out, have continued to affect multicultural policies even in the postcolonial era.

The second advantage of applying the *ba*-based model in intercultural communication is related to the implicit nature of the information of *ba*. Since, as discussed above, the information of *ba* is communicated through implicit processes that cannot be reified as observable phenomena, the primary channels for communicating such information need to be of corporeal nature instead of intellectual. This means that transmission of information among the individuals can be done directly on non-semiotic basis. As Tsuyuki (2003) discussed, this type of information can take the form of *tacit knowledge* and be conveyed intercorporeally. Therefore, a substantial portion of communication occurring in a *ba*-based relationship-building does not have restrictions imposed by semiotic, that is verbal, channels of communication. This is a great advantage for people who are to commit to collaboration in culturally diverse environment, in that the *ba*-based relationship-building model accommodates approaches that do not depend solely on verbal communication.

One possible practice of intercultural relationship-building from the *ba*-based perspective is to allow the individuals share certain amount of time participating in casual activities where their sensory channels of communication become open to shared implicit information. Actually, positive effects of this kind of corporality-based approaches in relationship-building and enhancement of organizational creativity have been reported from related studies (e.g., Itami, 2005; Nonaka & Konno 1999; Tsuyuki, 2003; Kono, 2012). For instance, Nonaka & Konno (1999) referred to cases of workplace interior designing that led to innovative knowledge creation through enhanced face-to-face communication (pp.175-177). Considering that the corporeal aspects of communication have a transcultural nature, these approaches can have similar effects in culturally diverse settings.

The third potential advantage of the *ba*-based relationship-building in culturally diverse contexts concerns its affinity for the diversity among the constituent individuals. As illustrated in the description of the egg model, co-creation based on the *ba*-principle

presupposes preservation of the individuality of each constituent (shown as yolk). Contrary to the stereotyped understanding that *ba* has an assimilating effect, the bioholonical concept of ba is characterized by the constituents' absolute diversity as a necessary condition for co-creative collaboration (Shimizu, 2000, pp.81-82).

Furthermore, the diversity among the constituents increases the resilience of the system against environmental changes in that it provides wider range of options for adjustment (Ashby, 1956), which is particularly true of organic systems (Shimizu, 2000). Also, as mentioned above, for an organization the internal diversity leads to the increase in its creativity. For instance, diversity in workers' vocational background has been acknowledged as an important condition of organizational innovations (Togawa, 2010). Thus, in organizational context *ba* can be construed as a guiding principle for emergence and innovations, and because of its affinity to internal diversity of organizations the *ba*-based relationship-building has substantial potentiality for creative collaborations in culturally diverse settings.

As for advantages in academic contexts, the concept of *ba* and autonomous relationship-building based on the *ba*-principle might provide a new perspective in pursuing constructionist approaches in intercultural communication studies. Specifically, the notion of self-organization of relationships and emergence of systemic order through the interactions among the individuals can propose a new view of intercultural connection-building that is focused on its generative aspect, and thus not affected by the traditional dialectical approaches. The *ba*-based perspective also provides a new conceptual frame for mutual understanding. The constructionist notion of culture as social creation is applicable to the *ba* perspective in that culture as the common context is supposed to be created through interactions among the constituent individuals in communities. As stated above, this process does not deny the individuals' retention of their original unique patterns of thoughts and behavior. In such a context, crosscultural understanding is a matter not so much of accumulating culture specific information about others' backgrounds as of knowing the process of relationship-building, the information of whose phases is captured only through participating in the event (Miyake, 2000). Hence, from the *ba* perspective, cultural understanding means knowing the dynamic phases of intercultural interactions through participating in actual relationship-building processes, and, as Kono (2014) suggested, this perspective accommodates action-oriented styles of research.

Limitations of the Ba-Based Approaches in Practice and Research

Although *ba* as a relationship-building principle may present a hopeful constructionist alternative in intercultural communication practice and research, it also has some limitations. Firstly, while introducing the notion of *ba* as a culturally transcendent principle of relationship-building may appear to resolve intercultural conjuncture situations that essentialist approaches cannot handle, it is not almighty. This can be easily understood if we think of the failed cases of multicultural policies or international marriages, which in terms of physical settings should provide suitable structures for the *ba*-based interactions. What these cases suggest is that even though the *ba*-based relationship-building is supposed to function autonomously, it alone does not guarantee a universal prescription for effective intercultural relationship-building. Especially, it has been pointed out that for a *ba*-based interaction to yield meaningful collective orders and innovative ideas, there need to be clear visions about the goals shared among the individuals (Nonaka & Konno, 2000; Shimizu, 1996). Also, the *ba*-based interactions presuppose an organizational environment that facilitates individuals' spontaneous participation in discussions or activities on an equal basis (Itami, 2005; Nonaka & Konno, 2000). Thus, the *ba*-based relationship-building prerequisites a shared organizational goal and the presence of individuals who are motivated for a common goal. Settings that meet these conditions may not be easy to secure, especially in intercultural contexts.

As mentioned in the previous section, the function of *ba* is perceivable only through capturing its tacit information through participation in ongoing events. This poses one methodological problem concerning the researchers' perspective. Although effects of *ba* can be observed from outside through reviewing changes in the system's state (Nishiguchi, 2000), real-time description of the function of *ba* is possible only through participating in the event and perceiving the changing state of *basho* as one's inner state (Miyake, 2000; Shimizu, 2000). This requires researchers' active involvement in the events that they are going to investigate, and they need to be described from a first-person perspective, which is hardly acceptable in the traditional positivistic frameworks of social science (Uchiyama, 2007). However, there have been a number of attempts toward establishing methodological accounts that accommodate such first-person descriptions as significant data. For instance, Uchiyama (2007) emphasized the relevance of applying Soft Systems Methodology, a form of action research methodology founded by P. Checkland, to social science. According to Uchiyama, the aim of action research is to make meaningful changes in situations at issue through collaborative participation of individuals including the researchers (p.334). In Soft Systems Methodology individual participants are encouraged to share their own view of the

problem in intense discussions until they reach some common understanding of the situation and possible solutions. Uchiyama stresses the significance of sharing subjective opinions (*omoi*) as reflections of mental reality, which he calls *actuality*. He maintains that in dealing with issues that involve human subjective factors the priority should be given to such subjective aspects of data as the outcome of the individuals' interactions with the situation through their actions.

Even though these attempts to give relevant scholarly accounts to subjectivity are encouraging, still much needs to be done to establish an integrated methodological framework for doing research on relationship-building based on the *ba*-principle.

Conclusion

In this theoretical discussion I have tried to delineate the paradigmatic shift from essentialism toward constructionism in intercultural communication studies, and discussed the necessity for a new framework for explaining generative aspects of intercultural interactions. Then I introduced the concept of autonomous relationship-building based on the *ba*-principle to present an alternative constructionist model of intercultural understanding. Although, as discussed above, the notion of *ba*-based autonomous relationship-building provides a hopeful alternative perspective to interculturalists in that it has potentiality for transcultural applicability because of its culturally transcendental characteristics, it alone does not guarantee successful relationship-building. Also, it is obvious that conscious effort to collect background information of our counterparts, whether it is construed as cultural or not, is both necessary and effective, especially at the early stages of encounters.

Despite the limitations of the *ba*-based approach to intercultural communication, hopeful signs of its effective applications to intercultural contexts have been shown (e.g., Kono, 2012; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). It is expected that more interdisciplinary exploration be done concerning the functions of *ba* and its applicability to culturally diverse settings to broaden the range of theoretical and practical options in intercultural relationship-building.

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