

Ethnic Communication Theory

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Ethnic communication theory (ECT) was developed by communication scholar Uchenna Onuzulike to explore the communication style of second-generation Igbo young adults. The Igbo are one of the three largest ethnic groups in Nigeria; the others are the Yoruba and the Hausa. The Igbo people can be found in every state in Nigeria, although their ancestral homeland is concentrated in the southeastern region of Nigeria. The Igbo language is their language, and it has a variety of dialects. There are two major phases of Igbo migration to the United States, which include the Atlantic slave trade and the waves of immigration, which span decades. This chapter refers to the latter phase.

The second generation referred to in this study is those who were born to Igbo immigrants, mainly in the 1980s and 1990s. For context, the second generation refers to individuals born in the United States or those who migrated to the United States before five years of age (Padilla, 2006). ECT draws attention to the ways in which people, especially the second generation, maintain their ethnic identity while residing in the diaspora with two main cultures. First is the ethnic culture received from their parents, siblings, co-ethnic memberships, and various media outlets. Second is the culture of their new host nation.

The aim of ECT is to decenter communication theory, which has been dominated by Western perspectives. Theorizing communication through the perspective of the Igbo has attempted to decenter Western communication theory by centering African Igbo perspectives to the discussion. In this way, Igbo traditional communication continues to evolve.

ECT was conceptualized to give a voice and offer a platform for individuals to be able to partake in two or more cultural identities. The empirical study of the Igbo

second-generation young adults residing in the Washington, D.C., area was used as the initial application. Practically, the theory uses second-generation Igbo to articulate their ancestral style of communication. Generally, it can be applied to people in the diaspora who care about their ethnic cultural identity.

This chapter begins with consideration of ethnic communication theory, focusing on the theory's purpose, intellectual tradition, main goals, and features. Foundational assumptions and premises/propositions, key concepts, and research and practical applications are provided. Finally, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the future of the theory.

Intellectual Tradition of Ethnic Communication Theory

I stated elsewhere that “ethnic communication theory posits that second-generation individuals gain competence of their ethnic communication style through their parents, family members, and co-ethnic members. The Igbo communication style is learned within the primary socialization process of the Igbo ethnic group” (Onuzulike, 2014, p. 42). I further argue that the second-generation Igbo young adults’ articulation of their Igbo ancestral communication style empowers them to gain more insight into their “imaginary” ancestral homeland as they face challenges in their new host or homeland. They utilize “their communication styles for code switching, engaging in conversations with their co-ethnic membership, as well as interacting with family members in their ancestral home” (p. 42).

ECT emerged out of research, in part, as empowering second-generation Igbo who are experiencing cultural adjustment as well as responding to such Western theories, which do not center African perspectives. Specifically, the idea and influence of conceptualization of ECT was developed from a study that explored second-generation young Igbo adults who were residing in the Washington, D.C., area as they dealt with their ethnic and transnational identities (Onuzulike, 2014). That work demonstrated the need for a theory that would frame second-generation individuals in the diaspora. Then the empirical research about the phenomenological study of second-generation young Igbo adults on how they articulate their ethnic and transnational identities was used for the practical application.

The study revealed that participants struggled with their ethnic and transnational identities. Therefore, there was a need to build a theory from an African perspective that illuminates the competency of current second-generation individuals in the diaspora in relation to their ethnic communication styles. De-centering Western communication theory helps give a voice to second-generation Igbo or any other individuals facing ethnic or transnational struggles.

The discipline of communication is overdue in acknowledging and showcasing communication theories based in the continent of Africa. Some of the concepts that influenced ECT include the second-generation ethnic identity, transnational identity,

and emotional transnationalism. These key concepts are discussed in the ethnic communication theory section. To theorize beyond the West, Onuzulike (2021) advanced critical intercultural communication concepts of ECT and co-culturation by analyzing ethnicity and belonging among young Igbo in the United States.

Main Goals and Features of Ethnic Communication Theory

Assumptions of Ethnic Communication Theory

The initial theorization of ECT through the analysis of the second-generation Igbo young adults produced five underlying themes: (1) figurative language: proverbs, metaphors, and idioms; (2) oratory and storytelling; (3) respect for elders; (4) directness in communication; and (5) ambassadorship and diplomacy (Onuzulike 2014, 2018). Even though these themes are core and specific to the Igbo, they may not apply to all Igbo. This is because cultures are not static; rather, cultures evolve and people adapt to the circumstances that serve their interest. Other influences, such as those found in host countries and media, may determine whether each person adheres to and applies the themes. Along the same lines, five assumptions were formulated in conceptualization of ECT (Onuzulike, 2018):

ASSUMPTION 1

Assumption 1 states: “*Figurative language: proverbs, metaphors, and idioms* involve developing a holistic view of meaning and critical thinking, belief, values, and behavior” (Onuzulike, 2018, p. 45). The first assumption infers communication styles of second-generation Igbo young adults in the United States make them think critically about every situation. Igbo people are known for using figurative words. One popular Igbo proverb says, “*ilu bu mmanụ ndị Igbo ji eri okwu.*” Literally, it means the (cooking) oil that the Igbo use to eat words. The Igbo bury wisdom and knowledge in their figurative language and conversations. Also, the essence of using figurative language is beyond just the incident or issue at stake. The Igbo use figurative language not just about the current conversation but beyond, so individuals can apply it in other areas of their life. This phenomenon is not limited to the Igbo people; it also applies to other African nations.

ASSUMPTION 2

Assumption 2 indicates: “*Oratory and storytelling* entail assertiveness and competence in communication. The second assumption asserts that communication styles of the second-generation Igbo young adults enable them to excel in speech” (Onuzulike, 2018, p. 46). It is not unusual for a traditional Igbo person to use a story to answer a question. Also, a story may be used to formulate the background to enable the individual to answer the question. In terms of oratory, the Igbo are known to have a command of public speaking and an appeal to emotions. In the traditional Igbo society, when the

community is gathered in the public square, people take turns speaking concerning the subject matter. This type of performance is ingrained in their culture.

ASSUMPTION 3

Assumption 3 states: "*Respect for elders* encompasses facework management: saving face, giving face, and face honoring, as well as acknowledging wisdom" (Onuzulike, 2018, p. 47). Ting-Toomey (2005) referred to facework as "the specific verbal and nonverbal behaviors that we engage in to maintain or restore face loss and to uphold and honor face again" (p. 73). In Igbo culture, facework management skills can be used to validate elders during conflicts as they maintain their "social self-esteem and social worth" (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001, p. 186). Essentially, facework management skills in the Igbo context involves respecting and honoring your elders both at home and particularly in the public. Moemeka (1997, p. 181) observed that in traditional African societies, "the elderly are seen as the true repositories of wisdom and knowledge and, therefore, as assets of great value to the community."

ASSUMPTION 4

Assumption 4 claims: "*Directness in communication* involves a dialectic process. The fourth assumption suggests the Igbo communication style of second-generation Igbo (SGI) may take forms or approaches of assertiveness, straightforwardness and confrontational and dialectical patterns" (Onuzulike, 2018, p. 48). Although the Igbo traditionally apply figurative speech in their communication, they also employ direct communication, which, among Igbo, is situational and can be explicit or implicit. It is situational and explicit when the speaker communicates his or her message or instructions without any ambiguity and in a clear and forceful manner to make the receiver somewhat uncomfortable. Igbo people can also engage in direct communication in ways that are not so direct, but subtle and implicit. In this case, the receiver may have to read in between the lines, listen attentively, and make certain inferences to get the full message, as when the message is direct, but the speaker's intention may be hidden. Someone can tell a person something serious in a very polite and courteous manner; in this case, the speaker will be direct and not explicit, as with some use of proverbs. Thus, it is common for age grades (age mates) to be direct in their communication among themselves. But it is traditionally frowned upon to be (too) direct with elders.

ASSUMPTION 5

Assumption 5 states: "*Ambassadorship and diplomacy* comprise flexibility, adaptability, and mutual face giving. The fifth assumption posits that the Igbo communication style enables them to flourish in foreign lands" (Onuzulike, 2018, p. 48). For example, the Igbos' ambassadorial and diplomatic skills can be displayed through adaptability and cordiality, and they are well traveled. An Igbo "proverb that says, 'e be onye bi ka o na-awachi,' or where one lives, the person thrives. It means that wherever an individual lives, that is the place the person calls home and thrives. 'Ojemba enwe ilo/iro' means

a traveler has no enemy” (Onuzulike, 2014, p. 97). The literal translation of “*Oje mba enwe ilo*” is that the sojourner or traveler does not have enmity. Contextually, it means that he or she lives an honorable lifestyle, follows the conventions of the host culture, and respects the people and the host culture. This concept is a propositional one about the Igbo migrants’ enculturation. The concept implies that the Igbo coexist with the host culture as their entrepreneurship and economic growth thrive in the diaspora.

Key Concepts in Ethnic Communication Theory

The key concepts in ethnic communication theory are ethnic identity, transnational identity, emotional transnationalism, the second generation, and communication style:

ETHNIC IDENTITY

The concept of ethnic identity is central to this theory. Ethnic identity or group membership links generations together with shared ancestry, history, origins, and ethnic characteristics and cultures; this includes traditions, customs, values, behaviors, belief systems, language, dance, and music. It is a group’s membership in a social system that is bonded with common ancestral heritage. Ting-Toomey (2005, pp. 8–9) reminds us that “before we understand the significance of an individual’s ethnicity, the salience of the individual’s ethnic identity has to be understood.”

TRANSNATIONAL IDENTITY

Transnational identity involves “having two geographical experiences by the virtue of traveling and experiencing two communities or countries. It is an identity involving both a host nation and a nation of origin—usually the ancestral home” (Onuzulike, 2014, p. 16). Second-generation young Igbo utilize social media to negotiate and articulate their ethnic and transnational identities in the United States. Vertovec (2001, p. 575) attests that “transnational connections affect migrants as never before with regard to practices of constructing, maintaining and negotiating collective identities. This has a significant bearing on the culture and identity of the so-called second generation, or children born to immigrants.”

EMOTIONAL TRANSNATIONALISM

Emotional transnationalism can be experienced when second-generation individuals are embodied and situated “between different generational and locational points of reference, both the real and the imagined—their parents’, sometimes also their grandparents’ and other relatives’, and their own” (Wolf, 2002, p. 258). These individuals’ appreciation of their ancestral cultural experiences is explained or embodied through their parents. One does not need to travel to the ancestral lands to experience emotional transnationalism; it can be triggered or experienced through social media. Yearning for the ancestral culture triggers imagined emotional transnationalism. The study on SGI

young adults indicated that engaging “social media serves as segue in connecting and emotionally experiencing the ancestral or ‘imagined’ homeland” (Onuzulike, 2014, p. 177).

THE SECOND GENERATION

The second-generation Igbo (SGI) young adults were used as a case study in the application of ECT. Second generation is characterized as those individuals born in the United States or who moved to the United States at a very early age or before they turned six years old (Padilla, 2006). The notions of second generation and first generation can be applied to other countries, groups, and similar situations, such as first- or second-generation students. Second generations across the globe operate within transnational social fields linked by familial, cultural, social, economic, religious, and political networks. Among second-generation individuals, transnational practices vary across country of origin. Some may prefer to visit their homeland, while others may prefer to send remittances.

COMMUNICATION STYLE

Communication style is “the way one verbally, nonverbally, and paraverbally interacts to signal how literal meaning should be taken, interpreted, filtered, or understood” (Norton, 1983, p. 11). Besides the above definition, communication style can be learned and solidified through social media. For example, an Igbo born in the diaspora can watch Nollywood films about the Igbo, then emulate and internalize Igbo characteristics and behaviors.

Claims of Ethnic Communication Theory

Ethnic communication theory offers six empirically testable propositions to explain and predict how ethnic communication styles play out within the context of “ethnic identity competence in relationship to the second-generation and their parents, family members, and co-ethnic members” (Onuzulike, 2014, p. 49). The following propositions are formulated based on the phenomenological research of second-generation Igbo (Onuzulike, 2014, 2018).

PROPOSITION 1

Proposition 1 states: *The more the second-generation individuals communicate with their parents, family members, and coethnics, particularly in relation to their ethnic culture, the more the children become competent in their ethnic communication styles.* Proposition 1 is concerned with how second-generation people comprehend and practice their ethnic speech styles from those who are already proficient or at least familiar with their ethnic patterns of communication. Research has demonstrated that children learn their ethnic identity firsthand from their parents. This shows that parents are the prime source for their children in learning and gaining competence in their ethnic identity.

PROPOSITION 2

Proposition 2 proclaims: *The more the second-generation individuals visit their ancestral homeland, the more they become competent in the Igbo communication style.* Proposition 2 suggests that visiting the ancestral homeland of Igboland or sending children to attend part of their schooling in their ancestral homeland enhances Igbo communication style competency. The study of the SGI indicates that those who visited the ancestral homeland or who had been sent there to partly attend school (e.g., high school) had a higher probability of increasing competency in the Igbo communication style (Onuzulike, 2014).

PROPOSITION 3

Proposition 3 indicates: *The more second-generation individuals attend to and participate in their ethnic functions, the more they become competent in their ethnic communication styles and cultural traits and the deeper their appreciation of the culture.* Proposition 3 deals with the question of attending and partaking in ethnic cultural functions in the diaspora. This proposition is consistent with the young SGI partaking in ethnic cultural functions in the Igbo community in the United States, for example, during their youth. Some of the participants indicated that they attended some Igbo functions to keep them informed and connected to Igbo culture and identity. Likewise, coethnics through social networks and other coethnic young Igbo organizations, associations, and social groups play a major role in how they form their ethnic and transnational selves. Some of the young Igbo organizations such as the Nwannedinamba Youth Branch, Umu Igbo Unite, and the Umu Igbo Alliance create the platform for the SGI to sustain their ethnic identity. These organizations and associations serve as a place of cultural reproduction, socialization, and competency.

PROPOSITION 4

Proposition 4 asserts: *The more second-generation individuals consume transnational media and ethnic media, the more they appreciate and improve their ethnic communication styles.* Proposition 4 addresses how transnational media and ethnic media such as Nollywood films and Igbo music proliferate second-generation individuals' proficiency of Igbo communication style.

PROPOSITION 5

Proposition 5 attests: *The more second-generation individuals access ethnic culture online and through social media, the more they gain additional knowledge and competence about their culture.* Proposition 5 is concerned with how the second-generation individuals utilize social media and the Internet to assert their ethnic identity in relation to the ethnic communication style. Empirical study of SGI indicated that they recognized the dominant force of social media, and they make use of social media to widen their knowledge in relation to Igbo history, language, culture, identity, and more.

PROPOSITION 6

Proposition 6 indicates: *The more second-generation individuals read ethnic-related literature and engage in ethnic artwork or aesthetics, the more they increase their knowledge about their ethnic culture and communication styles.* Proposition 6 answers the question about how literature and art impact ethnic communication styles of second-generation individuals. The answer is that second-generation individuals use literature and artwork to enact, articulate, and learn their ethnic culture and communication styles. The empirical evidence comes from study of SGI in the Washington, D.C., area.

Research and Practical Applications of Ethnic Communication Theory

Ethnic communication theory suggests that second-generation individuals accumulate competence in their ethnic communication style through the parents, family members, and coethnic members. In addition, they can increase their ethnic competency through social and transnational media. One of the practical applications of the ECT includes communication between second-generation young Igbo adults with their parents in the diaspora. One example is the research of the second-generation Igbo young adults in the Washington, D.C., area. Onuzulike (2014) used a qualitative approach of thematic analysis of in-depth interviews and open-ended questions. The analysis involved 12 participants (M = 6 and F = 6) who were aged between 19 and 34. There was a focus group of some participants (M = 3 and F = 2) that provided supplemental information so the researcher could further probe and explore recurring patterns found in the interview sessions. An observational method was used as well. During the focus group, it was observed how participants interacted among themselves and how they code-switched sometimes. Their verbal and nonverbal communication exuded Igbo communication traits. For example, some of them snapped their fingers when they were talking about Nollywood movies.

Practical applications of ECT evoke the notion of multicultural leaning due to challenges manifest in many areas, including ethnicity, race, language, religion, and other forms of identity markers. Research on SGI indicates that some of them faced identity and cultural challenges while going through primary and secondary schooling in the United States. Some of them indicate that they experienced mockery and bullying in school. Some were concerned about it, some said it is kids just being kids and picking on each other, and some said that it is typical for students to undergo that experience. Furthermore, the research on SGI shows that learning about African culture was very pertinent to them despite the mockery they faced about Africa and the way their parents dressed or talked with an accent. One can feel insecure or ashamed of his or her culture based on derogatory remarks and negative treatment. One of the participants, Agbonma, indicated that she rejected her Africanness and Igboness when she was younger because of the way the media depicted Africa. She said that she has learned that things have improved by talking to her young niece, who is in elementary school, which

is facilitated by increasing ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity in schools, colleges, and universities in the United States. For the SGI, the results show that learning about African culture is very pertinent to them.

Igbo is the heritage language of the SGI. It is not uncommon for the parents and other family members to speak Igbo to them in the household. Therefore, children who are exposed to multiple languages may code-switch and mix up languages during their conversations. Some of the SGI blend English and Igbo, which is referred to as “Engligbo.” This phenomenon was experienced by some of the participants who learned Igbo in the United States.

In terms of reconnecting ethnic identity via social media, all participants acknowledged the dominant force of social media, and they utilize social media to learn and to connect to Igbo history, culture, identity, and more. Obiageli stated that she uses Facebook mainly to keep abreast of Igbo cultural events. She says that she goes to the site to promote and support Igbo events and the Igbo people as much as she can. Agbonma said that even though she has used social media to articulate Igbo culture, she has no intention to do so in the near future.

All participants expressed their love for Nollywood and cited it as a primary source for connection to the ancestral homeland. For transnational Nollywood flows to occur, the SGI need to watch Nollywood movies.

Continuing the Conversation

ECT has advantages, including that it provides a platform for individuals besides the second generation to partake in their ethnic cultural heritage. That is, the theory can be used to relate to someone from another ethnic group besides the second generation. People from different generations and ethnic backgrounds are welcome to apply the theory in terms of relating to others. Even though this theory was conceptualized based on the experiences of second generation, it can be applied to any individuals of different generations who are attached to their ancestral origin.

Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed ethnic communication theory, which emerged from research on second-generation Igbo young adults who resided in the Washington, D.C., area. Ethnic communication theory predicts that second-generation folks increase the competence of their ethnic communication style via their parents, family members, and coethnic members. They also use media to gain entrance to and to reconstruct their ethnic, cultural, and transnational identities. This theory, which can be applied to multigenerational groups, has contributed to generating a platform to decenter communication theories, which are dominated by Western perspectives.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT AND REFLECTION

1. In what ways did the chapter increase your understanding of second-generation young Igbo or other ethnic groups?
 2. What research projects might be a good fit for ethnic communication theory?
 3. How might the ideas in the chapter relate to you, your upbringing, and your ethnic or cultural identity?
 4. How might any assumptions in the chapter relate to you?
 5. How might this chapter impact you in terms of maintaining and dealing with transnational ties, struggles, or identities?
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STORIED REFLECTION

A Practitioner's Journey With Theory: Using Theories for Skill Building on the Frontlines of Organizations

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8:01 AM. It was an early autumn day in 2013. The city of gardens was in *mostly* full bloom. On a hot and uncharacteristically sticky morning, about 30 senior sales and marketing leaders gather for a two-day workshop. They are excited to engage in learning and take back some communication tools to enhance the work life of self, peers, subordinates, supervisors, and clients. We kick-start the day by writing down our operational goals. The training focused on learning communication skills for high stakes moments. The training is attentive to helping participants enhance their repertoire of dialogic skills. The goal of the present module is to help participants stay focused on the goals they ultimately desire. The objective of this module was to help participants align their work outcomes with their heartfelt values. The ultimate purpose is to help participants, 'restart their brain' by asking the following questions:

1. "What do I really want—
 - for myself?"
 - for others?"
 - for my relationships?"
 - for the organization?"
2. "Is my behavior going to get me what I want?"

1:11 PM. Thirty high-performing, talented leaders enter the room after enjoying a scrumptious lunch. We begin reviewing the content and discussing operational challenges, when voices pipe up:

Participant 1: "I am struggling; I don't know if I can get this deal."

Participant 2: "I will do *what* it takes, if *that* helps me secure a deal."

Facilitator: "What concerns you? Which stakeholders have been impacted?"

Participant 3: "My situation is complex. I cannot be too authentic. These communication skills may not be helpful in *my situation!*"

Facilitator: "Let's go back to the core questions. What do we really desire? Why are we learning these skills today?"

The back-and-forth interaction piqued the interest of the entire class. Progress halted around this single concern: the various difficulties in their work situations made it difficult for participants to connect with the value of the new communication skills they were learning. It became important to help participants restart or shift their mindsets about communication skills by asking themselves: What do I really want?

This training workshop was inspired by communication theories developed over many decades with care and concern by social science scholars. I can envision these experts at their desks, talking to students as they wove their wisdom into concepts, assumptions, and propositions accompanying their theory. I hope these scholars know that their work made its way into a training classroom where it became a lantern in the dark by illuminating a way forward for business leaders.

Some examples of how theory came in handy during that transformative training session are as follows: First, framing tools (metaphors, stories) allowed the *facilitator* to shift the focus and provide inspiration and hope to the participants. It was evident that anxiety and stress from stiff competition were plaguing the minds of individuals. Second, influence appeals (e.g., stating the company value of integrity and transparency that required all members to be ethical and sincere in every transaction) alongside advice-seeking (e.g., how would you encourage your subordinates to accomplish the operational goal alongside maintaining the highest moral ground?) provided easy communicative nuggets that helped the group push past the critical challenge.

In a stroke of luck, six years after this incident, I had the opportunity to use advice-seeking theories in my dissertation. This story is focused on exploring the utility and efficacy of theory. Does learning theory transform the post-college work lives of our students? Is it necessary? How does teaching theory make a dent in the lives of our students? My takeaway from time as a consultant seeking practical answers and as a graduate student exploring theories is, "Yes! We need theories." I envision our theories as a toolkit that we can dive into while navigating the complex challenges and problems facing our organizations, teams, families, and

personal lives. Theories have played an important role in my work life, and my current story is a testimony to the value of teaching theory to undergraduate students. It illustrates how theories can open the minds of our students to creative possibilities in artistic and inspired ways while engaging in problem solving and decision making at work.

I have hope that theories will enable, equip, and empower our students to create inroads across other organizations and other areas of their life. The communication discipline can be a trailblazer in bridging the gap between theory and practice. After all, a great practitioner can be a fine theorist. These are not separate.