

Extra linguistic issues in Intercultural Communication human language taboos stereotype

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Abstract: This study examines Extra linguistic issues in Intercultural Communication between cultural diversity and the efficacy of their communication in a multicultural environment. To better understand the connection between cultural background and efficient business communication, we conducted a questionnaire survey in 2014 among 20 employees from a Chinese subsidiary¹ of a European top global expressed negative effects of cultural differences on communication, they also manifested positive attitudes toward intercultural interactions. Moreover, ignoring or even disrespecting the different cultural values of intercalants were regarded as basic barriers in intercultural communication, and such barriers can be avoided when a different cultural background is respected. Although cultural differences were considered to hinder the respondents' performance and often to be a source of dissatisfaction, they did not discourage them from entering into intercultural communication.

Keywords: intercultural communication, business communication, cultural diversity, stereotypes, Chinese managers, collectivism, psychological needs

Introduction

Previous studies have shown that despite progressive globalization and the blurring of borders between national markets, a phenomenon of the reinforcement of cultural differences between nations, regions and ethnic groups can be observed (Lillis & Tian 2010), which often leads to communication problems in globalised business (Ferraro 2002). Any research into the influence of culture-relevant factors on communication practices in a business context is a step towards recognizing these problems and is indispensable for designing and developing any intercultural business method that could be applied to facilitate the efficacy of communication between and among employees working in global corporations. This study

¹ A **subsidiary** company or daughter company is a company owned or controlled by another company, which is called the parent company or holding company

examines the personal opinions of Chinese employees working in a multicultural environment on the relationship between cultural diversity and the efficacy of intercultural communication in a workplace. That relationship needs to be continuously explored due to globalization and the internationalization of European companies, especially in the context of the latest attempts by Central European politicians to make European and Chinese business collaboration closer than ever before. As new businesses between East Asians and Europeans will place managers in new cultural contexts, it is worth considering the opinions of Chinese employees who have so far been exposed to communication with Europeans. After a brief presentation of the aim and the parts of theory most relevant to our study, we present specific research questions and design. In the subsequent sections, we present survey results and describe participants' attitudes towards communication interactions with co-workers from other cultures, participants' feelings about communication barriers and their impact on the satisfaction of their psychological needs, and their personal views about possible means to overcome those difficulties. The empirical part is followed by a discussion and concluding remarks on the advantages of continuing research into the influence of culture-specific factors on the efficacy of intercultural communication contacts in business contexts.²

Research Aim and Theoretical Perspectives

The main aim of this study is to determine to what extent culture—understood from the anthropological perspective as knowledge, beliefs, art, moral rules, ideas, standards, law, customs, capabilities and habits acquired by people and shared by them with other members of society (Benedict 1934; Tylor 1958; Hill 2005), and from the cognitive perspective as collective programming of the mind, cognitive patterns, ways of thinking, feelings, interaction styles which are acquired, described and communicated by means of symbols, and socially transmitted from one generation to another (Kluckhohn 1951; Geertz 1973; D'Andrade 1984; Triandis 1994; Hofstede 2001; Swaidan & Hayes 2005; Matsumoto 2006)—affects the ways company employees perceive communication practices in a multinational business environment, and to what extent intercultural interactions shape the picture of intercultural business communication as seen by the very participants of the process of communication. We will examine two basic and general relationships which have to be taken into account when planning any research into intercultural communication in a business environment. The first one concerns employees'

² Chaney, L. H., & Martin, J. S. (2011). *Intercultural Business Communication* (4th ed.).

orientation to the process of communication in the company and the cultural background of the employees. Such an opposition has been projected because measuring an individual's attitude to communication, i.e. the level of his or her understanding that the needs and feelings of others—being signaled, expressed, maintained and developed through communication practices—are important in social relationships, to a certain degree reflects the level of awareness that co-workers should care for one another's well-being and satisfaction with intercultural interactions.

Cultural Values

As for the role of cultural values in intercultural business communication, recent studies have signaled a relationship between Hofstede's dimensions (esp. power distance, collectivism vs. individualism, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation and masculinity vs. femininity) and modes of decision-making, communication models, management styles and the values which guide managers when building business relationships (Abramson et al. 1993; Tang & Ward 2003; Kobayashi & Viswat 2011; Neuliep 2011). Some research findings show that the selection of a style of communication may be affected by the values which guide employees. For instance, Koreans prefer an indirect style of communication because of such Confucian values as harmony, consensus or egalitarianism (Merkin 2005), and also because they are sensitive to face (saving face), preferring compromise to resolve conflicts (Park 1993; Lim & Choi 1996). Most comparative research into the influence of axiological systems (e.g. in Confucian, Buddhist or Protestant philosophies) on business communication practices has traditionally consisted in comparing Asians with Americans and exploring the values which guide them in business communication (harmony, cooperation, win-win principle, long-term relationships, respectful manners, etiquette, perseverance, attitude to changes, flexibility to the rules, loyalty, etc.), treating these two groups as model representatives of high-context and low-context cultures (see e.g. Ting-Toomey et al. 1991; Gernet 1995: 471; Yook & Ahn 1999; Aune et al. 2001; Li & Moreira 2009). However, unique research into the presence of Confucian and Protestant values in the work ethics of Asian and non-Asian countries (Phuong-Mai 2005; Domurat et al. 2012) shows that Confucian values do not have to be limited to Asian cultures, and—surprisingly—certain non-Asian countries (e.g. the Polish one) are characterized by a high level of collectivism and even higher level of “Confucian Work Ethics” than, e.g., Koreans.

Stereotypes

Such employees' features as parochialism, ethnocentrism, cultural imperialism and stereotyping have been found fully pejorative in the context of multicultural management, as well as attempts to manage employees from different cultural backgrounds in the same manner have turned out to be a challenge to global businesses (Chaney & Martin 2011; Okoro 2013). As stereotypical perceptions of interactants lie in the field of our interest, it is worth specifying that stereotypes are "widely-accepted, culturally shared beliefs describing personal traits and characteristics of groups of individuals" (Ramasubramanian 2011). According to W. Lipmann (1922), stereotypes are simplified and often distorted "pictures in our heads" which refer to phenomena and people, and which help people overcome an overwhelming amount of information, complexity of the surrounding world (cf. McGarty et al. 2002: 2-3), and enable them to "make sense of their worldly encounters" (Hager 2010: 127). Even if a stereotypical perception may be false, stereotype answers the question of what something should be like if we want to believe—basing on our cultural experiences—that that thing is what it is (Habrajska 1998: 117). Some linguists believe that stereotypization is an epiphenomenon³ of thinking that is oversimplified, schematic, and often wrong (Shaumjan 2006: 179), and that it falsifies the picture of people and objects it refers to. However, performing the nominal function, stereotype helps people categorize the elements of the surrounding reality and understand their experiences. Similarly to symbol or myth, stereotype is of ambivalent character and conveys both positive and negative meanings and references, relying on such factors as age, gender, race, religion, profession and nationality (Permyakova 2015), which are modeled by history tradition, politics, and essentially by the mass media (Michajłowa 2007: 176).

Cultural Differences in a Work Environment

Communication problems deriving from intercultural interactions were evidenced in our questionnaire survey (results are shown in Table 1). First of all, it must be emphasized that all the participants recognized the concept of culture as important for them and their co-workers. The participants' responses clearly show that they have encountered negative aspects of cultural diversity impeding their professional communication and that they are aware of communication problems arising from intercultural contacts, which is seen in the answers to Statement 3 (M

³ An **epiphenomenon** (plural - epiphenomena) is a secondary phenomenon that occurs alongside or in parallel to a primary phenomenon. In medicine, an **epiphenomenon** is a secondary symptom seemingly unrelated to the original disease or disorder.

= 4.45, SD = .76). Moreover, 80% of the Chinese employees agreed or partly agreed that people with different cultural backgrounds communicate with difficulties, which may indicate that they themselves have experienced such communication problems at work (M = 4.05, SD = 1.05). Importantly, the employees seem not to relate those difficulties to people, but rather to their cultural backgrounds because their culture favors different means of communication (Statement 5; M = 4.00, SD = .86). That is why they value cultural adaptability as a way to overcome those differences (Statement 7; M = 4.75, SD = .44), which also suggests that the employees reflect positive attitudes toward intercultural contacts; this is not surprising because according to the concept of Positive Organization Scholarship in general (see, e.g., Kalinowska-Andrian 2006, Rozkwitalska 2011), and management psychology (Stevens et al. 2008), intercultural interactions between people who represent different experiences, models of perception and thinking, and their approaches to solving problems, positively expand the array of possibilities of solving problems and may result in increased job satisfaction due to diversity, personal and professional development, a chance to gain new knowledge and experiences as well as adventure (Stahl et al. 2010, Rozkwitalska 2011) which those interactions offer to company workers who work in an international environment. Another important cultural factor affecting intercultural communication at a workplace is stereotypes, with which 70% of the respondents agreed or partly agreed (Statement 8; M = 4.10, SD = 1.21). That factor solely pertains to the employees' feelings about how they are perceived by their interactants as well as how they are perceived by them (that matter is discussed in more detail in section Stereotypes in Intercultural Communication Contacts).

Stereotypes in Intercultural Communication Contacts

It is worth noting that the participants expressed a positive attitude to working with people from different cultures (M = 4.25, SD = 1.02), which was confirmed by their responses concerning a respect for the cultural values of their co-workers (M = 4.80, SD = .41) and the significance of the concept of respect regarding their view of cultural values in general (see: "I feel well when my co-workers respect my cultural values", M = 4.80, SD = .52). 75% of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their co-workers' self-construal is better than their factual perception, i.e. than the way they are perceived by other employees (M = 3.90, SD = .85). However, what is interesting is the fact that such perceptions are weaker as it comes to construing the self interdependently—what is typical of East Asians as representatives of collectivistic culture. In that case, only 30% of the Chinese responded that their co-workers viewed themselves as better workers than them (M = 2.90, SD = 1.25). Even if a majority of employees indicated that some workers

did not want to communicate to others ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.19$) and that gossiping was common in their workplace ($M = 3.70$, $SD = .98$), a comparable number of them responded that this fact did not derive from cultural differences ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.16$) nor from disrespecting one's beliefs or cultural values ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 1.37$), and that it did not influence their willingness to communicate with employees from different cultures ($M = 1.65$, $SD = 1.14$). Such results indicate that even if some of the employees mentioned the gossiping problem or they did feel that their co-workers did not want to communicate with them because of their cultural backgrounds, there seems to be no direct correspondence between stereotypical perception of people from other cultures and communication at a workplace. Nevertheless, a cultural background of the gossiping issue needs to be further investigated to support or disprove that conclusion, and to explore the extent to which it is an "us" vs. "them" issue.

Conclusion

We believe that special attention should be paid to culture-specific factors when characterizing the efficacy of communication, because numerous investigations indicate that they are key and positive factors that enhance the negotiation and decision-making processes, stimulate the performance of multicultural teams members, and increase their satisfaction and decrease work absence (see, e.g., Clampitt & Downs 1993; Daily et al. 1996; Daily & Steiner 1998; Schachaf 2008; Wilczewski 2015). The relation between culture/cultural diversity and the efficacy of their communication in a multicultural environment needs to be continuously explored due to globalization processes and internationalization of European companies, especially in the context of the recent frequent political attempts to get Chinese and European business collaboration closer than ever before (e.g. by consolidating sea and land links between China and Europe, see the Chinese concept of "New Silk Road"). This is why it is worth diverting researchers' attention from intercultural communication practices between East Asians, Americans and Western Europeans onto Central Europeans, as new international businesses will possibly place many of Central European employees in new cultural contexts.

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