

# Cultural Differences, Stereotypes and Communication Needs in Intercultural Communication in a Global Multicultural Environment

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**ABSTRACT:** This study examines the personal opinions of Chinese employees working in a multicultural environment about the relationship between cultural diversity and their effectiveness in communicating in a multicultural environment. To better understand the link between cultural background and effective business communication, in 2020 we conducted a questionnaire survey of 20 employees of the Chinese subsidiary of a leading European manufacturing company. The analysis showed that even if the respondents expressed the negative impact of cultural differences on communication, they also showed a positive attitude towards intercultural interactions. Moreover, ignoring or even disrespect for the different cultural values of the interacting persons was considered a major barrier in intercultural communication, and such barriers can be avoided if the other cultural background is respected. Although it was believed that cultural differences hindered the work of respondents and were often a source of dissatisfaction, they did not prevent them from engaging in intercultural communication.

**KEYWORD:** intercultural communication, business communication, cultural diversity, stereotypes, managers, collectivism, psychological needs.

## Introduction

Previous studies have shown that, despite progressive globalization and the blurring of boundaries between national markets, one can observe the phenomenon of increasing cultural differences between nations, regions and ethnic groups (Lillis & Tian 2010), which often leads to communication problems in globalized business countries (Ferraro 2002). Any study of the influence of cultural factors on communication practices in a business context is a step towards realizing these issues and is indispensable for the design and development of any intercultural business method that can be applied to improve the effectiveness of communication between working employees and between them in global corporations.

## Discussion

This study examines the personal opinion of Chinese employees working in a multicultural environment about the relationship between cultural diversity and the effectiveness of intercultural communication in the workplace. These relationships need to be constantly explored in connection with the globalization and internationalization of European companies, especially in the context of the latest attempts by Central European politicians to make European and Chinese business cooperation closer than ever before.

Since new businesses between East Asians and Europeans will place managers in a new cultural context, it is worth considering the views of Chinese employees who have had the opportunity to interact with Europeans so far.

After a brief summary of the purpose and parts of the theory most relevant to our study, we present the specific research questions and design. In the following sections, we present the results of the survey and describe participants' attitudes toward communicative interactions with colleagues from other cultures, participants' feelings about communication barriers and their impact on the satisfaction of their psychological needs, and their personal views on possible means of problem solving to overcome these difficulties. The empirical part is followed by a discussion and concluding remarks on the benefits of continuing research into the influence of cultural factors on the effectiveness of intercultural communication contacts in a business context.

The main purpose of this study is to determine to what extent culture - understood from an anthropological point of view as knowledge, beliefs, art, moral rules, ideas, standards, laws, customs, abilities and habits acquired by people and transmitted by them to other members of society (Benedict 1934; Tylor 1958; Hill 2005), and also from a cognitive point of view as collective mind programming, cognitive patterns, ways of thinking, feeling, styles of interaction that are acquired, described and transmitted through 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 how employees perceive communication methods in a multinational business environment, and that the degree of intercultural interaction forms a picture of intercultural business communication in the eyes of the process participants communications.

We will consider two main and general relationships that need to be considered when planning any study of intercultural communication in a business environment. The first concerns the orientation of employees to the process of communication in the company and the cultural background of employees. Such opposition was projected because the measurement of a person's attitude to communication, that is, the level of his or her understanding that the needs and feelings of others, which are signaled, expressed, maintained and developed through communicative practices, are important in social relations to a certain extent reflects the level of awareness that colleagues should take care of each other's well-being and we are satisfied with the intercultural interaction.

The second attitude considers cultural barriers and communication barriers in intercultural business communication, determined by stereotypes in relation to other cultures, as well as the attitude towards cultural differences of interaction participants from the same corporation. We mean the reconstruction of the connection between the experience of professional communication of employees with representatives of other cultures and their individual perception of intercultural business communication.

The work of Markus et al. (1997), Hofstede (2001), Kitayama & Cohen (2007) or Nisbett (2007) show that the field of social cognition has been the subject of debate for several decades on the influence of cultural, linguistic and social factors on cognition styles and structures that determine people's preferences for communication styles (Gut & Wilczewski, 2015). Recent studies of the influence of socially and culturally specific factors on business communication show that among the categories that influence communication practices in a multinational environment are (1) the behavior of individuals in relation to the community, (2) the construction of independent and (3) sensitivity to philosophy, traditions and values.

The cultural aspects of individualism and collectivism explain the behavior of individuals towards themselves within the group and towards other members of the group. Because collectivism has been found to be dominant among Eastern cultures (Hofstede 2001; Robertson et al. 2001), in contrast to Western cultures

characterized by strong individualism, our study participants are expected to exhibit collectivist behavior, meaning they will by definition consider the welfare of their colleagues and this account will be even stronger than their own (but only in the framework of intragroup relations; Triandis 1988). Relying on the fact that “collaboration in groups is high, but unlikely when the other person belongs to a strange group” (Triandis et al. 1988: 325) and that the core values for collectivist people are benevolence, conformity, and tradition (Ralston et al. 2012: 482; Schwartz 1994), we predict that the interviewed employees will demonstrate a strong community orientation, they will recognize culture as a major factor influencing the process of building relationships in their multicultural workplace, they will strongly express a willingness to respect their culture when interacting with colleagues from other cultures.

Since Asian cultures are described as collectivist and Western cultures as individualistic, we hypothesize that Chinese employees will express a tendency to construct themselves in reference to the social context, somehow constructing a form of interdependence between themselves and members of their group, which in turn is associated with the definition of the concept of “I” in a relative manner by referring to others. Accordingly, we predict that survey participants will focus on their colleagues more often than on themselves, or that self-focus will be relative, i.e. they will express their psychological needs in reference to the needs of their colleagues.

## **Results**

With regard to cross-cultural contacts, we therefore assume that even if some team members belong to different cultures and their cultural values may be considered as alien to Chinese culture, Chinese employees will still show them a positive attitude and emphasize the need to respect cultural values - since collectivist cultures are more focused on promoting the goals of others and maintaining harmony, in contrast to individualistic cultures that are focused on personal goals and individual autonomy (Markus & Kitayama 1991: 241-2).

Regarding the role of cultural values in cross-cultural business communication, recent research has revealed the relationship between Hofstede’s dimensions (especially power distance, collectivism vs. individualism, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, and masculinity vs. femininity) and modes of decision making, communication patterns, management styles, and values. which guide managers in building business relationships (Abramson et al. 1993; Tang & Ward 2003; Kobayashi & Viswat 2011; Neuliep 2011). Some studies show that the choice of communication style can be influenced by the values that guide employees. For example, Koreans prefer an indirect communication style due to Confucian values such as harmony, consensus, or egalitarianism (Merkin 2005) and because they are sensitive to face (saving face), preferring compromise to resolve conflicts (Park 1993; Lim & Чой 1996). Most comparative studies of the influence of axiological systems (for example, in Confucian, Buddhist or Protestant philosophy) on business communication practices have traditionally been comparing Asians with Americans and studying the values that guide them in business communication (harmony, cooperation, win-win principle, long-term relationships, respectful manners, etiquette, perseverance, attitude towards change, flexibility regarding rules, loyalty, etc.), considering these two groups as exemplary representatives of high-context and low-context cultures (see, for example, Ting-Toomey et al. 1991; Gernet 1995: 471; Yuk and An 1999; Aune et al. 2001; Lee and Moreira 2009). However, a unique study of the presence of Confucian and Protestant values in the work ethic of Asian and non-Asian countries (Phuong-Mai 2005; Domurat et al. 2012) shows that Confucian values should not be limited to Asian cultures, and - surprisingly - some non-Asian) are characterized by a high level of collectivism and even a higher level of “Confucian work ethic” than, for example, Koreans.

These results show that communication practices are determined not only by cultural categories (belonging to a certain type of culture), but also by axiological preferences (for example, work for the common good, a specific view of material issues) and external contexts (for example, the economic relationship between the

economic development of a country and the values of collectivism and individualism). Accordingly, we believe that categorizing employees according to their cultural background and predicting their attitudes towards other cultures, colleagues with a different cultural past, as well as behavior towards the community as a whole lead to reductionism, which leads to a distorted view of the process of intercultural business communication - especially if we take into account the role of corporate culture in determining communication interactions in the company. Thus, we agree with Chao (2000) that individual beliefs, opinions, preferences and attitudes towards the process of communication involving other cultures should be examined from the point of view of the individual, that is, theorized and then measured at the individual level, but at the same time discussed the external cultural background of employers, the imposition of certain cultural categories on them, as well as group-level consequences such as collective values (Nguyen et al. 2010: 181). In our study, focusing on the personal experience, opinions, preferences and attitudes of employees towards the process of intercultural communication, we assume that Chinese employees will view communication with people from other cultures as a positive and meaningful process due to the high level of knowledge. A collectivism that constructs the self interdependently and therefore views it as a means of maintaining intra-group relationships that work for the good of the group.

Employee traits such as narrow-mindedness, ethnocentrism, cultural imperialism, and stereotypes have been found to be completely pejorative in the context of multicultural management and trying to manage employees from different cultures in the same way has proven to be a challenge for global business. (Cheney and Martin 2011; Okoro 2013). Since the stereotyping of the interacting is in our area of interest, it is worth pointing out that stereotypes are “widely accepted, culturally shared beliefs that describe the personal traits and characteristics of groups of people” (Ramasubramanian 2011). According to W. Lipmann (1922), stereotypes are simplified and often distorted “pictures in our head” that relate to phenomena and people and help people overcome a huge amount of information, the complexity of the world around them. (see. McGarty et al. 2002: 2-3), and enable them to “reflect on their worldly encounters” (Hager 2010: 127). Even though stereotyping can be false, stereotyping answers the question of how something must be if we are to believe - based on our cultural experience - that it is what it is (Habrajska 1998: 117). Some linguists believe that stereotyping is an epiphenomenon of overly simplistic, schematic and often erroneous thinking (Shaumjan 2006: 179) that distorts the idea of people and objects to which it refers. However, performing a nominal function, the stereotype helps people classify the elements of the surrounding reality and understand their experiences. Like a symbol or a myth, a stereotype is ambivalent and conveys both positive and negative meanings and references based on factors such as age, gender, race, religion, profession and nationality (Permyakova, 2015), which are modeled by historical tradition, politics and mostly by the media (Michajłowa 2007: 176).

Studying the role of a social stereotype (which is a “standardized opinion about certain social groups or representatives of these groups”, Kotorowa 2014: 187) in intercultural communication makes it possible to understand the cultural foundations of the cognitive process of categorization and, therefore, allows us, in particular, to understand popular ideas about people from other cultures - this allows us to reconstruct what how people perceive themselves and others. This task seems indispensable in the context of intercultural courses for students and trainings for staff working in a multicultural environment, as it contributes to their “a common knowledge base about the target culture, and also contributes to deeper reflection on someone else’s culture, students’ own culture and the process of forming judgments in general” (Weber 1990: 137).

In our article, we tried to study the orientation of employees towards the process of intercultural communication in a global company, as well as such cultural foundations of communication barriers as stereotypes, self-esteem and other interpretations. An analysis of the results of a questionnaire survey conducted among 20 Chinese white-collar workers from the Chinese branch of a European global corporation allowed us to answer three research questions.



In the case of the first question about participants' experiences and opinions about the impact of cultural diversity on the process of communication in the workplace, we found that respondents experienced negative effects of cultural diversity in their workplace, which resulted in difficulties communicating with managers and colleagues from different cultures as during working hours, and after work, which in some cases even leads to a decrease in their productivity, and often to a decrease in their satisfaction. No matter how negative the effects were, the participants showed a positive attitude towards intercultural interaction and pointed to cultural adaptability as a means of overcoming these effects.

With regard to the participants' opinions on the impact of employee stereotypes on professional communication and satisfaction of their psychological needs, the results clearly show that in Chinese culture, where the collectivist way of decision-making, as well as the perception of "I", the participants of the survey show the following beliefs: "I" the main source of barriers in intercultural communication is ignoring or even disrespect for the cultural diversity of those interacting, as well as the stereotypical perception of employees with a different cultural background (opinions such as "My colleagues think that they work better than they actually are" prevail), and that communication problems in intercultural interaction can be avoided if the other cultural background is respected.

Thus, the results confirmed the collectivist way of interdependent self-construction that is typical of the Chinese, namely, even if the respondents believed that their work colleagues built their images better than they actually did (in fact, better than in reality) through the eyes of the respondents), their own self-contemplation looked rather collectivist, that is, they did not perceive themselves as better than their colleagues. It is important to note that there is no direct correlation between the stereotyped perception of colleagues with different cultural backgrounds and communication barriers in the workplace.

Answers to the last question about participants' opinions about the sources of communication problems and ways to overcome them in the future showed that Chinese respondents considered cultural differences as a factor preventing them from fulfilling their professional duties, but not strong enough to deter them from work. The majority of the respondents considered the lack of respect for cultural values to be the greatest source of dissatisfaction and a decrease in their well-being and positive attitude towards colleagues. The results showed that survey participants looked forward to cultural trainings, as well as formal and informal meetings, where they could (themselves and others) get to know other cultures better (which corresponds to cultural adaptation as a way to overcome the negative consequences of intercultural problems) in order to their cultures were respected more.

## **Conclusion**

We believe that when characterizing the effectiveness of communication, special attention should be paid to cultural factors, since numerous studies show that they are key and positive factors that improve negotiation and decision-making processes, stimulate the performance of members of multicultural teams and increase their satisfaction and reduce absence from work (see., example, Clampitt & Downs 1993; Daily et al. 1996; Daily & Steiner 1998; Schachaf 2008; Wilczewski 2015).

The relationship between culture, cultural diversity and the effectiveness of their communication in a multicultural environment requires constant study due to the processes of globalization and internationalization of European companies, especially in the context of recent frequent political attempts to bring Chinese and European business cooperation closer than ever before (for example, by strengthening maritime and land ties between China and Europe, the Chinese concept of the "New Silk Road"). This is why it is worth shifting the attention of researchers from intercultural communication practices between East Asians, Americans, and Western Europeans to Central Europeans, since new international ventures may place many Central European employees in new cultural contexts. Awareness of cultural differences among

colleagues prepares employees to better understand their behavior and overcome barriers to communication, as well as understanding culturally relevant business models in an international context. This is important not only for effective communication in workgroups or cooperation between employees and employers, but also for cooperation with international subsidiaries of the company, for negotiations with stakeholders and other companies, as well as for increasing communication potential in global corporations.

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