A Case Analysis of How Cultural Identity Works in Intercultural Communication

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Abstract: *The cultural identity issue has always been an interesting topic in intercultural communication. This paper describes and analyzes the business case of JH under the theoretical framework of Social Identity Theory, Cultural Iceberg Model, and Intercultural Competence Model through the approach of discourse analysis. As is demonstrated in the case of JH, intercultural challenges like cultural awareness, communication style, language barrier and decision-making difference are ineluctable. The paper presents the challenges or threats related to cultural identity in intercultural communication and it attempts to find possible ways to enhance intercultural competence as well as overcoming intercultural barriers in intercultural communication.*

Keywords: Case analysis, Cultural identity, Intercultural communication.

1. Introduction

1.1 Culture and Identity

The term culture has a high frequency of occurrences and a large range of applications in daily life, whatever the nationality one belongs to, whatever groups one is in and whatever language one uses. Then, what is culture? In the academic field, scholars have various interpretations on culture based on their own studies and understandings. According to Kroeber & Kluckhohn (1952), culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups. Moreover, S. Nanda and R. Warms (2014) point out, culture is the learned behavior and symbols that allow people to live in groups; the primary means by which humans adapt to their environment; the ways of life characteristic of a particular human society. As we can see, many scholars attempt to define culture from their own perspectives while it seems to be a broad term to cover almost all the activities of human life. Then how one behaves in a cultural context is really interesting and significant for a successful intercultural communication.

It is said that everyone has an identity, whether it is given by nature or by nurture. One might be curious about why people have different skin colors, eye colors, and hair styles. One might also be curious about why people in different regions speak various languages and wonder if these languages share any similarities for communication. Besides, one might gradually realize the fact that people around have a different personality and mode of thinking. Actually, all these factors are related to identity. Identity, then, according to John R. Baldwin et al. (2014), is defined by our “knowing” of ourselves. This knowing means taking an inventory of who we are. Woodard (1997) suggests that one way to recognize who we are is by considering how we are different from others. You know who or what we are, based on who or what we are not. Admittedly, having the awareness of knowing ourselves is important in intercultural communication, with which one might have a much clearer understanding of the position he or she stays in and the distinctions with others.

Specifically, identity has its own subtypes, that is, personal identity, social identity and cultural identity. However, one point needed to be clarified is that the coverage of the three subtypes of identity is gradually increasing in accordance with the connotation. Further, personal identity is a subtype of social identity; social identity is a subtype of cultural identity; and cultural identity is a subtype of identity. John R. Baldwin et al. (2014) propose, part of that inventory involves our concepts of ourselves as unique individuals; whether, for example, we are shy, athletic, or interested in soccer—our personal identities. And, part of the inventory involves our role identities, relational identities, and our membership in groups. It is the group-based aspects of identity that makes up our social identity. However, as for the cultural identity, Moha Ennaji has comment on this term. Moha Ennaji (2005) believes, cultural identity is the identity or feeling of belonging to a group. It is part of a person's self-conception and self-perception is related to nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, generation, locality or any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture. In this way, cultural identity is not only characteristic of the individual but also of the culturally identical group of members sharing the same cultural identity. In my view, cultural identity refers to the feeling of being included in a group or culture which seems to be more interesting than personal identity, social identity and national identity. It is these properties that make the entire person who he or she is.

1.2 Cultural Identity, Communication and Language

Cultural identity consists of racial, religious, class, gender, and familial identities and is also related to nationality, ethnicity, language and even any kind of social group that has its own distinct culture. Additionally, identity is something that is created and shaped through communication, that is, in the eyes of John R. Baldwin (2014), identities are a social construction. They are created through communication in the context of our social world, histories and relationships. Identities co-exist with communication and are conveyed via language. Giroux (Hortobágyi, 2004) tackles the radical post-modern notion that identities are shaped in discourse through language use.

1.3 Case of JH

The case for analysis is the interview of JH conducted by Aarhus University in 2016. Specifically, JH is a businessman having been working in Asia for 19 years for an international Danish company. He has a Danish wife and has lived in Shanghai for about 12 years. The company where he works is a multinational company that focuses on the fashion or design. He has 15 employees in his office, some of whom are Danish internationals and the rest are Chinese from different parts of China. Communication is penetrating his daily life in working in China. Hence, cultural issues are affecting or even defining his daily life. Language barrier is the first problem that he has to deal with. He has also confronted with other intercultural challenges, such as different communication styles, differences in decision making and feedback giving etc.

Intercultural challenges or threats really occur in JH's case of intercultural communication. We are curious about why these problems could occur and how one's cultural identity works in the process of intercultural communication.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Cultural Iceberg

In order to better understand the nature of culture, it's necessary to introduce the Cultural Iceberg Model by Edward T. Hall (1976). He proposes, if the culture of a society was the iceberg, then there are some aspects visible, above the water, but there is large portion hidden beneath the

surface. The external, or conscious, part of culture is what we can see and is the tip of the iceberg and includes behaviors and some beliefs; the internal, or subconscious, part of culture is below the surface of a society and includes some beliefs and the values and thought patterns that underlie behavior. Hall suggests that the only way to learn the internal culture of others is to actively participate in their culture. Only by doing so can we uncover the values and beliefs that underlie the behavior of the society.

2.2 Social Identity Theory

Further, Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) propose the Social Identity Theory and suggest that: 1) How we see ourselves is closed tied to how we see the groups to which we belong; 2) When we interact with others, we see them in some combination of personal terms and expectations and their membership in groups; 3) When we place people in groups, we tend to compare those groups against our own, usually in a way that makes our groups look better to us.

2.3 Intercultural Competence Model

According to D.K. Deardorff (2006), intercultural competence is defined as the ability to interact effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations, based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes. Deardorff synthesizes a pyramid model of intercultural competence based on the findings of 23 intercultural experts, in which the lower levels are viewed as enhancing the higher levels (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Deardorff pyramid model of intercultural competence.

The pyramid model above represents motivational, cognitive, and skills elements and incorporates context within these components. Thus, the ability to understand one's own cultural norms and expectations and to recognize cultural differences, openness to new experiences and diversity, and non-judgmental stance are expected to provide a foundation for entering a more globalized world.

In the process of engaging that globalized world, an understanding of world history will help prepare one for identifying and understanding cultural differences, participating effectively in and across these cultures through, and evaluating his or her own performance in these contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Question

How are cultural identity issues functioning and affecting the intercultural communication in multinational corporations in analysis of the case of JH?

3.2 Case Study

As is the case, communication style, language, perceptions of hierarchy and norms for decision-making are the main challenges or barriers for international team (Brett et al., 2006). In process of JH's doing business in Shanghai, he has been faced with a large number of somehow ineluctable intercultural contexts, and realized the cultural differences. Apart from that, he has also been confronted with some intercultural challenges, the details of which will be presented in the data analysis part with the discourse analysis approach. As is mentioned in the interview with JH, understanding and interpretation of different languages in intercultural communication is really a headache for him because Chinese, English and Danish are languages with different structures and the mode of thinking behind the languages are more complex. Additionally, cultural awareness and communication style in a particular intercultural communication also matter, for example, saying "no" does not mean refusal in China but an invitation for further negotiation. Moreover, decision-making costs a lot of time before the decision is finally made.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Data Selected

The data selected for analysis is the interview with JH in 2016 in which JH introduced several challenges or barriers affecting intercultural communication. Discourses of JH for analysis are four excerpts as follows.

4.1.1 Cultural awareness

I think one of the biggest challenges in communication that I have experienced in Asia, is actually the communication between the Asian office and the Danish or European office. And I feel that for me, a very big part of my job has always been to sort of decode from one end to the other. So, in one way I'm the Danish representative in our office here, that try to help our Asian colleagues to understand "what does this

mean?" Or what does the communication from Europe mean, or what do the European people expect when they ask this question, or when they give this instruction? And then of course the other way around, I also try to explain to our European or Danish colleagues, what it is that the Asian people mean, or what they're looking for.

4.1.2 Communication style

I think Chinese people are used to getting very clear instructions. When you give instructions here, you don't leave anything to imagination. Whereas I think typically in Denmark you give an instruction, which could be 70% of what you want, and then the rest is up to the person executing the task.

4.1.3 Language barrier

It can be very small things, you know, it can be – like we discussed before – that when Chinese people write an email in English, they think in Chinese, and Chinese is a very differently constructed language, so very often when you read their emails, it's very clear for us that are having the experience, that it's a Chinese person who has written this, because it's very often not very nuanced, it's very – almost like commando language, right? Whereas a person who is thinking maybe in their daily life in Danish, but then writing in English, can also – that can also impact their communication. My direction to both sides is to – if something can be misunderstood – read your email very carefully, and if something can be misunderstood, then explain, explain, explain. As much explanation, as elaborate as you can be in your explanations, that can really help a lot of misunderstandings. It can also mean that the people in China may understand what is written, but may have a different idea of what is expected in the other end. And the more you explain in writing, the better.

4.1.4 Decision-making difference

If I should say one word which is important when you are here, it's really "patience". China is a funny mix of things moving very fast, and things moving very slowly. I think when the decision is taken, things move very fast. But the part from you meet people the first time until the decision is taken, or until the deal is made, can be very long seen with Western eyes... So I guess the learning is that you shouldn't take a "no" for a no here. A "no" is very often just an invitation to discuss further, or negotiate further, or make it clear what advantages and disadvantages are at both sides of the table. I'm very often surprised, that we start with a demand from our side, and then the other party says "no", but then six hours later we actually get our demand through, and everybody seems to be happy with that result. So, patience is just something you have to come with. So, if you don't like to sit at a dinner for five hours, and talk about chicken feet and drink local wine, then maybe you should reconsider to come here. Maybe you need to go somewhere else, because that's part of the game.

4.2 Discourse Analysis

Fairclough (1995) proposes, a discourse is a way of

signifying a particular domain of social practice from a particular perspective. Distinguished from text, discourse can thus be understood as a complex bundle of simultaneous and sequential interrelated linguistic acts (Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, 2001). In this paper, we mainly adopt the discourse analysis approach to analyze the interview data of JH. When we are conducting discourse analysis in this paper, the four aspects should be taken into consideration, that is, topic, concept, role and strategy. Accordingly, the data for discourse analysis are the four excerpts of interview with JH mentioned above.

First, we have to admit that it's quite difficult to understand people with diverse cultural backgrounds in accordance with the Cultural Iceberg Model. Different nations have their own cultural connotations and it's significant to cultivate one's cultural awareness and to pay attention to one's cultural identity. As for JH's communication between the Asian office and the Danish or European office, JH is playing the role of decoding and encoding the cultures to each side, in which his cultural identity plays a big part. For JH, cultural identity is the identity or feeling of belonging to the Danish or Western group when giving instruction of Danish office to the Asian office, and vice versa. It is part of his self-conception and self-perception is related to his nationality.

Second, communication style is a barrier for JH to tackle with. Communication style is a general term used by most sociolinguists to refer to either personal identities or interpersonal relationships among participants (Ron Scollon et al., 1994). Different communication styles might result in a loss of status in corporation. In the second excerpt of the interview, JH mentioned in the interview that the Chinese prefer instructions to be clearly written while the Dane like to flexibly execute the task after getting the 70 percent they want. To some extent, the Chinese tend to have all of the instructions or tasks clear-cut so as to avoid the misunderstandings and uncertain troubles. Leaving any imagination behind means time-consuming and can be regarded as an irresponsible behavior when assigning a task. This cultural difference might be confusing for JH considering him as a Dane. While for the Dane like JH, they prefer to perform the task flexibly to some degree as they have the awareness or habit to behave like that. This difference of behavior or way of communication when performing a task is due to the different cultural identities of the two groups. As we can see, culture is learned and one's cultural identity is related to the gradual learning and acculturation accompanying with one's growing up in the context of culture.

Third, language barrier might cause difficulties in comprehension and misunderstandings between people with different cultural backgrounds. Writing an email to a foreigner is a case in point, the Chinese express their opinions in English while using Chinese mode of thinking. While in the meantime, the Dane also write the email in English while thinking over in Danish. Hence, in the process of communication via email requires layers of shifting roles or perspectives to the opposite side and constant explanations are necessary for a successful intercultural communication, as is shown in JH's interview. English as a foreign language

or a second language for the people whose mother language is Chinese or Danish is considered as a kind of language barrier in intercultural communication, since they have different expectations from the other side and their social identities are different, either. Hence, in some extent, a high proficiency of certain languages and cultural understanding are fundamental to overcome the barrier and to reach a fluent and clear communication.

Fourth, the process of making a decision is relatively slow in China and requires patience, as can be inferred in the discourse of JH. JH complains that in China things in total move very fast while move very slow before the decision is taken. Indeed, a large number of procedures and steps need to be done before taking a decision in Chinese business context. One has to negotiate with the other side again and again in order to reach a final agreement. Perhaps it is related to the invitation-refusal-invitation-and-acceptation custom which is long-lasting and deep-rooted in Chinese culture. For instance, in JH's words, a "no" is very often just an invitation to discuss further, or negotiate further, or make it clear what advantages and disadvantages are at both sides of the table. Thus, before taking a decision or reaching an agreement, a basic cultural knowledge and patience count a lot for those who desire to adapt to the Chinese culture. Accordingly, certain intercultural knowledge, intercultural communication skills and effective behaving are deemed indispensable in intercultural communication.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

Human beings are living in social groups rather than being solitary and each of us has an identity to play in the cultural context. Admittedly, in the case of JH, cultural identity issues are disturbingly affecting the process of intercultural communication. Put it in another way, cultural identity has played an essential but confusing part in intercultural communication in which challenges like intercultural awareness, language barrier, communication style and decision-making difference are frequent and ineluctable. In this context, proper intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes are essential for those who are in a multinational corporation where intercultural teams are common and intercultural communication contexts are numerous, so as to successfully overcome intercultural barriers.

Further, intercultural competence could be boosted through ways like intercultural learning and practicing individually or in form of groups as well as intercultural training organized by institutions. Moreover, one should have cultural self-awareness, culture-specific information and better understanding and knowledge of the target culture, and then try to learn some intercultural communication skills like listening, observing, interpreting and analyzing to overcome the intercultural challenges, and also cultivate his or her own positive attitudes towards the target culture, like respect, openness and curiosity.

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