Cultural Behaviour – a Challenge for Intercultural Encounters

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Abstract. The present paper explores some key aspects of culture that are essential in the process of understanding intercultural interaction. It draws comparisons between the way culture is perceived and manifested by different nationalities, by various ethnic, religious or organizational groups. The aim of the paper is to provide a theoretical background for those who want to explore the field of intercultural communication. The author focused on the notion of culture, more precisely on its definition and frameworks used to describe it, concluding with a brief overview of the dangers one might come across when dealing with generalization and stereotyping. The paper is addressed to a readership interested in gaining a greater conceptual understanding of intercultural interactions due to professional purposes or personal interests. The originality of the paper is rendered by the fact that it provides a keen insight into recent research in the field, by exemplifying the theoretical ideas and providing accessible analyses of the intercultural interaction processes.

Key words: culture; individual; group; interculturality; communication; phonetics; phonemics.

1. Cultural variability

Intercultural communication is very difficult to define. It is even more difficult to come to an agreement when it comes to explaining what culture is. As we are all members of several social groups at the same time, all communication that occurs may de defined as intercultural. Such a situation is the one in which "the cultural distance between the participants is significant enough to have an adverse effect on communicative success, unless it is appropriately accommodated by the participants." [1]

Along the centuries writers have shared personal views regarding the meaning of culture. While for some anthropologists culture consists of patterns and traditional ideas, of derivatives of experience, for others it represents a set of values and ideas, of policies and behavioural conventions shared by a group of people but manifested in a unique way by each individual. Culture has the power to bring the past back to life, to deal with social situations, influencing the perceiving and acting of people. "To study culture is to study ideas, experiences, feelings, as well as the external forms that such internalities take as they are made public, available to the senses and thus truly social. For culture, in the anthropological view, is the meanings which people create, as members of societies. […] On the one hand, culture resides in a set of public meaningful forms […]. On the other hand, these overt forms are only rendered meaningful, because human minds contain the instruments for their interpretation. The cultural flow thus consists of the externalizations of meaning which individuals produce through arrangements of overt forms, and the interpretations which individuals make of such displays – those of others as well as their own." [2]

The present paper is focused on the meaning of culture and on the way it is manifested through more or less explicit types of regularities. It also points out the fact that culture is associated with social groups even though the individuals of the same group do not share the same cultural characteristics. The first issue to debate when analyzing culture is to decide whether some aspects of behaviour are universal or culturally relative or whether cultural groups should be studied from within. The anthropologist Kenneth Pike

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discovered and coined the etic-emic distinction which proved to be extremely helpful in the process of sorting out the problem of culture. The two terms have been derived from the words phonetics and phonemics, as they stand as two different approaches to analysing culture. Both etics and emics refer to ideas and behaviours. But while with the first one the concepts are universal, with the latter one, they are culture-specific. While emics are studied within the system in one culture, etics are studied outside it and they are both essential when analyzing cultural differences in people and across cultural groups. Etic frameworks have been developed in different disciplines: psychology, anthropology, linguistics. Two social psychologists, Geert Hofstede and Shalom Schwartz tried to identify some key dimensions useful for comparing cultural groups. Therefore, they defined values as conceptions or guiding principles in life. Later on, after a careful survey, and based on several criteria, they distinguished five dimensions: individualism which is rendered by loose ties between individuals who focus on their personal needs, versus collectivism, which is represented by strong ties between individuals who focus on the needs of the group. Secondly, there is the High Power Distance versus the Low Power Distance. It refers to the individuals' capability of understanding the fact that power is distributed unequally. The third dimension is based on gender: masculinity versus femininity. As a forth dimension the two psychologists identified High Uncertainty Avoidance and Low Uncertainty Avoidance. They refer to the extent to which individuals belonging to a cultural group feel threatened by uncertain circumstances. The last but not the least would be the Long-term versus the Short-term orientation and it underlines the idea that people might focus on the future or on the present. The above-mentioned dimensions have proved to be useful in many empirical studies or to explain behavioural differences. However, they are irrelevant when it comes to explaining the influence of culture on individual behaviour. The individual level should not be confused with the society level because Hofstede's findings reflect tendencies relevant for the group as a whole. The other social psychologist mentioned above, Shalom Schwartz, focused on comparing cultures that provide measures at the individual level. Like his counterpart, he conducted a survey and realized that the value priorities of groups and individual members of the group are similar but not identical. At the individual level he identified ten different value constructs (security, power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, conformity, tradition), unlike the group level where he distinguished seven value constructs.

Anthropologists like Edward T. Hall, Florence Kluckhohn or Fred Strodtbeck have found several frameworks for comparing cultural groups. The first of them dwelt upon dimensions of behavioural difference rather than upon fundamental values. One of these dimensions is the monochromic time (M-time) versus the polychromic time (P-time). While the first one is characterized by doing one thing at a time, by preset schedules and promptness, the other one is emphasized by doing several things at a time. Another dimension identified by Hall refers to low-context communication, based on explicit verbal messages that convey meaning, and high-context communication. This latter one uses patterns of communication based on the context, on non-verbal channels. With regard to the third dimension, the use of free space, Hall set forth four ideas: the intimate distance (or the distance for love making), the personal distance (for conversations), the social distance (for formal business) and the public distance (for public lectures). "Americans overseas are psychologically stressed in many ways when confronted by P-time systems such as those in Latin America and the Middle East. In the markets and stores of Mediterranean countries, one is surrounded by other customers vying for the attention of a clerk. There is no order as to who is served next, and to the northern European or American, confusion and clamor abound […]. In contrast, within the Western world, man finds little in life that is exempt from the iron hand of M-time. In fact, his social and business life, even his sex life, are apt to be completely time-dominated. Time is so thoroughly woven into the fabric of existence that we are hardly aware of the degree to which it determines and co-ordinates everything we do, including the modeling of relations with others in many subtle ways." [3] Hall's studies have been analyzed by many other scientists. For example, as emphasized by Spencer-Oatey and Franklin in the book entitled *Intercultural interaction. A multidisciplinary approach to intercultural communication*, Arab students have a tendency of standing closer to one another, of talking loudly and of maintaining a higher eye contact than other nationalities.

Continuing to explore cultural orientation throughout the world, other two anthropologists, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck set forth five areas of life which might prove problematic for any type of society. The first

one refers to the relationship to the environment and the second one, to the relationships among people. The other problems that have been identified are the mode of human activity, the belief about basic human nature and the orientation to time. Finding solutions for all these issues, depends on cultural orientations that different societies have developed. Using these dimensions as a starting point, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner identified other dimensions of culture that are fundamental for investigating people's behavioural choices. They conducted a survey and applied these dimensions in more than 40 countries. The feedback they received varied from one nation to another, as their study was addressed to international business and management. The first dimension is universalism/particularism. In an attempt to explain it they claimed that "What is good and right can be defined and always applies." [4] In what concerns the nations focused on particularism, much greater attention is given to unique circumstances. The second question posed by the two anthropologists is whether people regard themselves primarily as individuals or as members of a larger group. In the neutral/emotional dimension, the problem identified refers to the nature of people's interactions: should emotions be expressed clearly or should people be detached and neutral? The fourth dimension is based on specific-oriented cultures while the fifth one refers to achievements and ascription. The author explains that the meaning of achievement is based on what one has recently accomplished. On the other hand, ascription is defined as a status attributed to the individual by birth and educational background. The attitudes to time, or the sixth dimension, underline the idea that in some societies past is not that important; the things that really matter are the ones that involve plans for the future. And the last attitude is the one towards the environment: some consider the world as being more powerful than the individuals, while nature is something to be feared.

In order to better understand all the seven dimensions listed above, the authors have exemplified with a problematic scenario. "A defect is discovered in one of the installations. It was caused by negligence of one of the members of a team. Responsibility for this mistake can be carried in various ways.

A: The person causing the defect by negligence is the one responsible.
B: Because he or she happens to work in a team the responsibility should be carried by the group.
Which one of these two ways of taking responsibility do you think is usually the case in your society, A or B?" [5]

The authors applied this problematic scenario in several countries in order to obtain the percentage of respondents opting for individual responsibility and in order to check how people belonging to different cultures and nationalities react, when faced with a dilemma. Successful intercultural communication can be achieved only by finding and employing creative solutions to conflictual situations caused by different views on values and preferences.

2. Cultural mappings of social groups

Considering that cultural group has the same meaning with ethnic group anthropologists have noticed that individuals in a society are organized in many different ways and according to various criteria. The social category they belong to may be determined by their occupation, race, economic and political interest, geographical region. As culture derives from the experience people achieve as part of such sociological grounds, each of the groups listed above might be a "potential container for culture". [6]

Taking into account certain patterns of regularity people and nations may be categorized as belonging to an ethnic group or another. In the process of defining intercultural interaction, these cultural groups have a major importance as they are analyzed not only in terms of nationality but also from the perspective of religion, profession or community.

The cultural values of a religious group for example, can be defined according to the individuals' beliefs and orientation to life, according to their communicative abilities, to their policies, rituals – in one word, to their entire behaviour. Their cultural manifestations can fundamentally influence personal but also national contexts. Anthropologists have pointed out the importance religion has in people's lives as members of different social groups, and in one of his studies, Hill exemplified: "Teased and rejected at school for embracing a Western religion, he wondered how it was possible to be Christian and Japanese at the same time, when the two cultures had such different values. He described his religion as a suit of Western clothes that did not fit his Japanese body, and which he wished to exchange for a kimono. It seemed that Christianity

was despised in Japan and he longed to visit the West. […] After the Second World War, Endo traveled to France to study, hoping to find some answers in the heartland of Catholicism; but here he simply suffered further rejection in a climate of anti-Japanese hostility. […] Unable to find answers in Asia or Europe, and suffering from tuberculosis, Endo slipped into a dark depression. Before returning home, however, he visited the Holy Land in order to research the life of Jesus, and he discovered something he had never realized before. Jesus, too, has been rejected by those around him. […] On his return to Japan, Endo resolved to re-tailor his ill-fitting clothes, to make them Japanese and find a Christian message that would make sense in Japanese terms. He did so in a series of novels that explored themes of rejection and salvation, focusing in particular on the choices facing those trying to reconcile Japanese culture with Christian faith. […] And Endo must have struck a chord. By the time of his death in 1966, he was regarded as one of Japan's greatest novelists of modern times." [7]

The situation above is just one example of struggle to find one's identity based on religious aspects and beliefs. It is very important for the human individual to experience this feeling of allegiance, of belonging to a cultural group, of being a small part of the whole. When being rejected this privilege, one has to find one's own way in life in order to find salvation.

Discussing the relationship between organizations and culture, one may notice that companies have certain sets of rules and values and procedures, but however, they somehow correspond to the features of the national culture they belong to. When two companies merge, for example, it is inevitable for the people involved not to experience a clash of culture, be it national or organizational. Such clashes will subsequently lead to conflicts caused by the individuals' rejection or difficulty in adapting to the new standardized procedures and codes of conduct. The different practices and conventions may have a considerable impact on the psychological welfare of the people having to adapt to a new situation or cultural environment, triggering the so-called *culture shock*. Individuals experience feelings like deprivation, helplessness, confusion or alienation.

The same discomfort can be felt when working in multi-cultural companies, when having to interact with other nationalities in their home culture, or with various professional groups. These professional groups are not limited to the frameworks of a company or industry. Such a group is meant to guide its members with the purpose of behaving as the profession requires. Due to an increased demand for inter-professional working the so-called *shadowing scheme* has become more and more popular. People belonging to one area of social life should spend time in the presence of individuals having a completely different profession, with the sole purpose of making the two environments interact and share information that might prove to be useful for both. In a research report carried out by Moore and Dainty, the engineering sector was correlated with the commercial one. "There was evidence that professional divisions between team members had led to discontinuities and ineffective responses to unexpected variations that had occurred during the construction phase. […] Professional priorities within the workgroup were based around traditional project-based responsibilities. The design team had a clear emphasis on design quality, whereas the commercial team on delivering the project to programme. This division emphasized the lack of a single focus for the project team, and led to an emphasis on reactive problem solving as opposed to proactive problem avoidance, and on "best-fit" approaches rather than innovative solutions." [8]

There is this need for people belonging to different professions to interact and share their knowledge. For instance, doctors should work together with social workers and nurses while teachers should cooperate with the IT staff due to the development of e-learning materials or even with engineers coming from the industrial area of social life.

Spencer-Oatey and Peter Franklin identified another type of social group known as community of practice, which is defined according to three criteria: the mutual engagement of members, the members' common negotiation of the enterprise and their shared repertoire. Studies conducted by two anthropologists, Holmes and Stubbe, on two teams, showed that small talk and humour varied from one team to another: if in one team humour had a positive pragmatic effect, in the other one the subversive humour was emphasized. Some people may regard small talk in the workplace as being too intimate and interfering with their personal lives. It might even cause difficulties in integrating into the given social group. But for others, on the

contrary, it is a step forward to socializing and eliminating barriers. Therefore, differences in practice may represent a source of discomfort and consequently should be taken into consideration by interculturalists. Every individual is a member of a cultural group be it a professional, organizational or religious one and which vary in size and complexity. The boundary between them is very thin and this brings forward the risk of generalizing. For example if meeting a Frenchman who likes a certain kind of food one may think that all French people like that food. Or if a shop assistant behaves in a polite manner in the United Kingdom, it is possible to over-generalize and to draw the conclusion that all the British shop assistants are very polite.

Another risk we take into account is that of inappropriate stereotyping – that is, identifying people or nations by a specific label which can refer to religious belief, occupation, customs, food. Further on, stereotyping also may refer to a set of additional characteristics attributed to the group as a whole – for example, French people are good cooks, or the Swiss are very precise, the Germans are punctual. But, unfortunately, this may lead to discrimination. The third risk refers to avoiding excessive essentialism and reductionism. The first one occurs when people assume that a cultural group has some specific characteristics and all its members share the same defining features.

To sum up, anthropologists consider that the boundaries between such categories are rather blurred and their members do not share the same characteristics: some are more representative than others. The prototype of a cultural group may be regarded as an abstract representation. When discussing about intercultural communication one cannot help but notice that there is a need to help people interact more efficiently with one another, even if they belong to different ethnic or social groups. Members of any kind of group have a tendency of projecting their group identity very clearly.

3. References

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