

Status Related Social Categorization: High Context and Low Context Cultural Perspective

Elena Pruvli¹ and Ruth Alas¹

¹ Estonian Business School

Abstract. That social categorization affects culturally diverse environments is well investigated, but most of examinations were done from a low-context communication perspective. The aim of this study is to explore the impact of Estonian and Italian actors' communication patterns (low and high context respectively) on status-related categorization towards a third culture English. To find out the relationship between the context level of communication and social categorization peculiarities a correlation investigation was chosen as a method. It was conducted in three stages in a contrived experimental setting with the focus on non-task-related information. The results revealed that the Italian actors were mainly concentrated on the lifestyle-related details of the video-example environment, referring them to high status. On the contrary the Estonian group paid more attention to the verbal message of the English video-personalities, and referred them to lower social class. Main results suggest that when status-relevant "underlying attributes" are not willingly revealed, the members of high-context culture are basing their social categorization on environmental context even if this context is culturally different from their own, so less considering willingly shared personal information. Other important finding is that in the same situation for social categorization low-context culture representatives are following mainly the issues that are verbally deliberately disclosed.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication, High Context, Low Context, Social Categorization

1. Introduction

In a business environment status indicates if the person expects more honourable approach and is giving individual more credibility in interactions. The counterparts with equal status level experience fewer obstacles in communication (Clair, Beatty, and MacLean 2005). Its influences on actors' business potential, on creation and maintaining the stable connections with co-workers and partners in culturally heterogeneous environments are the central point of diversity research. Diversity is based on social categorization (Mannix and Neale 2005, p. 33). The social structure of Estonian and Italian societies is very different, thus understanding the status differences is very important in the development of one's potential and relational capabilities in business. The class society of Italy by the Italian Institute of Statistics definition (Sassoon 1997) since mid-80s was considered to comprise 6 categories. The upper class of bourgeoisie makes up 10% of working Italians. It consists of business owners, independent professionals and top managers. Apart of imbalances in wealth distribution the social status differences in Italy are expressed in alcohol consumption traits (Cooper 1993) and table manners (French 1994). According to Karjahärm (2009) Estonian society stems from native peasantry. The social structure of the local population was quite homogeneous. The last two decades of re-independence created the social stratification mainly determined by personal income and relationship to the means of production. The majority of entrepreneurs and intellectuals of Estonian origin have roots in the rural cultural environment. This paper is an attempt to assess the influence of Estonian and Italian communicative patterns on social categorization process related to the third culture. The correlation comparative research is focused on social categorization process, its reasoning and outcomes in high context and low context cultures. It is experimentally examining Italian and Estonian groups of students, who are close by age, educational and professional experiences.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social Categorization and Status

A number of diversity and related social categorizing studies were performed in the US in multicultural (Watson, Kumar and Michaelsen 1993), multiethnic (Watson, Johnson and Zgourides 2002), or multi-racial teams (Bacharach, Bamberger and Vashdi 2005), when visible differences were at the focus of attention.

Mannix and Neale (2005, pp. 35-36) define “less visible differences, also known as underlying attributes”, which include apart of education, skills, abilities and functional background, differences in social and network ties such as work-related, friendship and community ties as well as in-group membership. Theorizing by Phillips, Rothbard, and Dumas (2009) demonstrates the peculiarities of the choice to willingly divulge or withhold status-relevant personal information in heterogeneous environments. They (Phillips, Rothbard and Dumas 2009, p. 722) “have highlighted how the disclosure of personal information can be problematized in situations where there are status asymmetries between individuals.”

A significance of social categorization in European diverse environments was proved by Dutch-initiated research. It is established a strong connection between the process of socioeconomic information arranging and qualities of the relationships in multi-cultural settings. Van Knippenberg, De Dreu and Homan (2004) explored the interdependence of social categorization process and information elaboration in diverse groups. More recently Spisak et al. (2012) unpacked the intergroup relations using masculine and feminine factors, De Kwaadsteniet et al. (2012) highlighted a connection of social information about the actors with coordination in actions. Greer et al. (2012) demonstrated a correlation between the leader categorization tendencies and the financial outcomes of the multi-ethnic teams. Categorizing individuals by socioeconomic background in studies introduced above was explored from the low-context cultural perspective, when the actors had the choice “to disclose or not to disclose” (Phillips, Rothbard and Dumas 2009) most of the status-relevant underlying attributes.

2.2. Communication Patterns

The classical Hall’s dyadic dimensions (1959, 1969) of high and low context cultures conceptualized the main difference in communication patterns which various among the cultures. High-context cultures operate relying on previous shared experiences, relational structures and other components of the context, which are usually more important in a message than words. Low-context communication occurs in a linear and verbally explicit, direct manner, when the main sense of the message is clearly spelled by words. The concept provided a theoretical basis for communication research by Copeland and Griggs (1985, p. 107), who ranked 15 cultures by context from the highest to the lowest, which are German –Swiss and German cultures. Italian culture is at the 7th position, English at 10th. These results were confirmed by Graham (1988) in his study of 12 cultures, and Onkvisit and Shaw (1993). According to Pruvli and Alas (2012) Estonian business culture is having lower context of communication than German. Comparatively to Estonians Italian communication is high-context, and so is to lesser degree English communication.

Shown the critical role of considering status issues in creating the sustainable business relationship and given the view on Estonian-Italian differences in communication patterns and social system backgrounds, the authors have explored two research questions:

Q.1: whether the context level (low and high) of Estonian and Italian cultures is having an influence on social categorization process of Estonian and Italian actors?

Q.2: how this influence is expressed by Estonian and Italian actors in a setting when social categorization is performed toward the culture other than their own?

To answer these questions the relationship between the context level of culture and patterns of social categorization was investigated by conducting experimental correlation study

3. Research Design and Results

Research was conducted in 2009 among 14 Estonian and 18 Italian students; their mean age was 28 and 26 respectively. All had a command of English at least at the 6, 5 points of IELTS level. In Estonian group 68% are female and 32% male, all had Estonian as the mother tongue, 50% had longer living/studying experiences overseas (in Germany, Latvia, Finland, Poland and Ecuador). In Italian group 57 % are female and 43% male, all had Italian as the mother tongue, 62% were raised in South of Italy, 48% in Central and Northern Italy. 33% declared to have longer stayed in a foreign environment (Greece, France, Finland and USA).

A correlation investigation for Estonian and Italian students was implemented simultaneously. A contrived experiment was chosen for a setting, and the effects of context level on social categorization were studied with a high degree of control from the authors. Following the approach of status-relevant personal information disclosure exploration by Phillips, Rothbard, and Dumas, (2009, p. 711) the current experimental study has a “focus primary on non-task-related information that might affect perceptions of status distance and relationships at work.”

An experimental intervention was occurred in three stages. The purpose of the first stage was to check if the audience had any information about the British heroes of the video shown at the second stage. The personality of Charles Saatchi, founder of “Saatchi and Saatchi” agency was discussed to figure out if participants were aware about the private life of Saatchi: who is his spouse and what she’s doing; any kinship with the UK politicians etc. The aim of the second stage was to get an overview of the each participant status-related categorisation process. English culture has a diverse social structure, has higher context communication than Estonians but lower than Italians and participants revealed little experience with it. The students were asked to watch the video and make some written comments individually about the social status of the video presenter and the members of her family. The notes should include the signals about the heroes’ social position “related to higher status”, “related to lower status” and “confusing”, and should be summarised by the social category resolution. The video from British cooking series Nigella Express 101, part 1, titled “Everyday Easy” shows presenter Nigella Lawson outside the supermarket. She is describing the everyday life: work, children coming hungry from school and waiting for their mom at home. As her father was coming over for dinner the meal should please everyone, be feeding but simple and the ingredients should be available. She enters the food department, and explains that she’s going to roast a chicken with potatoes. Nigella Lawson stresses that for this dish you can use a cheap vegetable oil. Video shows her coming home and preparing the supper. Then her father is coming, and telling her that he was frying himself eggs for breakfast. They altogether set the table, put wine and glasses for adults and start eating.

The goal of the third stage is to examine the individual reasoning behind the participants’ decision about Lawson family social status, and to specify it on a group level. The students were asked to discuss their responses in their groups, and to orally present a summarised statement about the group decision process. Comparative mode is used in intercultural communication research (Carbaugh 2007), the results were collected from both groups to be comparatively analysed.

The researchers made sure, that the audience was not aware of Nigella Lawson’s’ background. Born to the former Chancellor of the Exchequer and the heiress of J. Lyons Empire Nigella Lawson is worth £15 million, half of it coming from culinary book sales. Students were not connecting Saatchi, who earned his millions through his advertising agency “Saatchi and Saatchi” with the content of the video, which showed his spouse, father-in-law and step-children. At the time of the experiment Nigella Lawson and her husband lived in a £25 million residence in Eaton Square in London's exclusive Belgravia district. The family dinner on the video was shot in a specially created kitchen-like studio, but the relations and habits of the family were real. During the experiment the participants and researchers agreed that the video scene will be examined as the real-life situation.

Table 1 is introducing the status-related signals’ classification made by Italian and Estonian respondents after watching the video.

The Italian group concluded that details of environment are convincing them, that Ms. Lawson belongs to the upper class. Despite her talk about long working days, the way how she and her father behaved and the wine-drinking habits showed that these people are of particular lifestyle. Her father was casually elegant, had firm posture and looked as the high status person. Estonian group resumed, that Nigella is a “hard-working” single mother, whose older retired father needs care and can’t be of much help. 25% of the group presumed, that the presenter is on alimony and has to carefully count her food expenses. 100% named her and Mr. Lawson’s’ talk as one of the main sources of information. That the elderly gentleman is making himself a simple breakfast gave the Estonian students the reason to sum up, that these people belong to lower social category.

4. Discussion

The overall goal of the examination was to study the relationship between the context level of culture and patterns of social categorization of Estonian and Italian actors. The difference in social categorization results of the researched groups is rooted in social structures' differences between Italian and Estonian societies. The class system traditions in Italy are influencing social relationships (Argyle et al. 1986) and business connections development (Capasso A., Dagnino G. B. and Lanza A., 2005), making the status issues important in the development of relational capabilities.

The research showed that the context level of Estonian and Italian cultures is having an impact on social categorization process on individual and group levels. During the experimental intervention the status-relevant information was not willingly disclosed. However the high-context participants relied more on details of the environment, relationships between the people, behavioural particularities, looks of individuals and consumption patterns to derive the message about the heroes' social position. The information was obtained from the context, rather than from verbal communication. In contrary the members of the low-context culture were attentive to the words of the experimental plot actors and gained main information from willingly given facts. The study found the evidence, that when social "underlying attributes" are not deliberately disclosed in intercultural environment, the representatives of high-context culture are arranging the social categorization process relying on elements of the context dispute they are strange and foreign to them. In the similar setting the low-context culture representatives are mainly relying on verbally disclosed-on-purpose issues. The findings contribute to the intercultural communications and diversity studies by highlighting that sharing or omitting the status-relevant information by choice depends on the communication patterns of the actors involved into diverse environment. They can help managers in considering these issues while developing the relational capabilities and sustainable business connections.

5. References

- [1] M. Argyle, M. Henderson, M. Bond, Y. Lizuka, and A. Contarello. Cross-cultural variations in relationship rules. *International Journal of Psychology*. 1986, **21**: 287-315.
- [2] S. Bacharach, P. Bamberger and D. Vashdi. Diversity and homophily at work: Supportive relations among white and African-American peers. *Academy of Management Journal*. 2005, **48**: 619–644.
- [3] D. Carbaugh. Cultural discourse analysis: Communication practices and intercultural encounters. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*. 2007, **0** (3): 167-182.
- [4] J. Clair, J. Beatty, and T. MacLean. Out of sight but not out of mind: Managing invisible social identities in the workplace. *Academy of Management Review*. 2005, **30**: 78–95.
- [5] L. Copeland and L. Griggs. *Going International*. New York, NY: Random House, 1985.
- [6] A. Cooper. Italian drinking patterns: Model for theories and policies. *Moderation Reader*. 1993, **7** (2): 33-35.
- [7] E. De Kwaadsteniet, A. Homan, E. Van Dijk, and I. Van Beest. Social information as a cue for tacit coordination. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*. 2012, **15**: 257-271.
- [8] J. French. Social situation and emotional state in eating and drinking. *British Food Journal*. 1994, **96** (1): 23-28.
- [9] J. Graham. Deference given the buyer: variations across twelve cultures. In F. Contractor and P. Lorange (eds.). *Co-operative Strategies in International Business*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books. 1988, pp.473-85.
- [10] L. Greer, A. Homan, A. De Hoogh, and D. Den Hartog. Tainted visions: The effect of visionary leader behaviors and leader categorization tendencies on the financial performance of ethnically diverse teams. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. 2012, **97**: 203-213.
- [11] E. Hall. *The silent language*. New York: Anchor Books, 1959.
- [12] E. Hall. *The hidden dimension*. New York: Anchor Books, 1969.
- [13] T. Karjahärm. Models of the Estonian national movement in modern historiography. *Acta Historica Tallinnensia*. 2009, **14**: 146-171.
- [14] E. Mannix and M. Neale. What differences make a difference? The promise and reality of diverse teams in organizations. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*. 2005, **6**: 31–55.

- [15] S. Onkvisit and J. Shaw. *International Marketing*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993.
- [16] K. Phillips, N. Rothbard and T. Dumas. To disclose or not to disclose? Status distance and self-disclosure in diverse environments. *Academy of Management Review*. 2009, **34** (4): 710–732.
- [17] E. Pruvli and R. Alas. Multiply cultural mindsets of international company: Inter-departmental communication and organisational formalisation. *Forthcoming in conf. proceedings: 28th EGOS Colloquium 2012, Helsinki Aalto University & Hanken School of Economics, Helsinki, Finland 5.07–7.07.2012*. Available from http://www.egosnet.org/jart/prj3/egos/resources/dbcon_def/uploads/45xw6_EGOS_Helsinki_track41_Pruvli_Alas.pdf (assesses 28.05.2012).
- [18] D. Sassoon. *Contemporary Italy: Economy, Society, and Politics since 1945*. London and New York: Longman, 1997.
- [19] B. Spisak, A. Homan, A. Grabo, and M. Van Vugt. Facing the situation: Testing a biosocial contingency model of leadership in intergroup relations using masculine and feminine faces. *Leadership Quarterly*. 2012, **23**: 273-280.
- [20] D. van Knippenberg, C. De Dreu, C and A. Homan. Work group diversity and group performance: An integrative model and research agenda. *Journal of Applied Psychology*. 2004, **89**:1008-1022.
- [21] W. Watson, K. Kumar and L. Michaelsen. Cultural diversity's impact on interaction process and performance: Comparing homogeneous and diverse task groups. *Academy of Management Journal*. 1993, **36**: 590–602.
- [22] W. Watson, E. Johnson and G. Zgourides. The influence of ethnic diversity on leadership, group process, and performance: An examination of learning teams. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*. 2002, **26**: 1–16.

Table 1. Experiment participants' status-related categorization process on a group level.

	Signals related to higher status	Signals related to lower status	Confusing signals
Italian students	Not changing the clothes/putting apron while cooking Setting of the table: rules, use of cutlery, tableware and accessories	Buying food at supermarket instead of delicatessen or market	Cooking a very simple dish with basic ingredients Picking up the cheap oil, but being aware and stressing the differences in oil types
Estonian students	The way how wine is served and consumed Fathers' behaviour and looks	Presenter is a working mother with two kids, who's working long days She has lack of money, looking for cheaper, affordable products even for the family gathering Simple casual outfit	Beautiful home and spacious kitchen, but probably provided just for the cooking show