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***“Old Habits Die Hard...? Stereotypes as Barriers to a
Successful Intercultural Communication”***



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Abstract

The following paper brings into focus the phenomenon of intercultural communication – the issue that plays a significant role in today’s globalized world. The worldwide globalization can be considered as a reason responsible for various connection development among particular countries. The above-mentioned connections do not only concentrate on discovering the aspects of other cultures as a tourist and learning about language, traditions, habits, landscape and certain facets of everyday life. There can be also observed a more important meaning of intercultural communication – the international business relations that enable economic development and economic security of various countries all over the world. The lack of extensive knowledge of some traits or behaviors characteristic for certain cultures may lead to many intercultural misunderstandings. This article aims to clearly identify stereotypes as a chosen barrier to successful intercultural communication. It also shows the case study method as one of the most suitable teaching methods when it comes to solving different cultural matters.

Key words: intercultural communication, stereotypes, stereotype modification possibility, prejudice.

1. Introduction

The subject of intercultural communication in today’s globalized world can be regarded as one of the most significant issues concerning successful cooperation among countries. The afore-mentioned theme is being constantly analyzed from many different perspectives. This subject has already been investigated by a wide range of researchers, e.g. Göller (2000), Baumer (2002), Bredella (2002), Mikułowski Pomorski (2003), Thomas (2003), Myczko (2005), Scollon/Wong-Scollon (2005), Bolten (2007), Busch (2007) or Golka (2008).

The author of this paper decides to base on the research that was conducted while working on her dissertation from 2007 to 2011 at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. The subject of the examination concerns an analysis of different approaches to intercultural communication. It also offers an investigation into barriers to successful intercultural communication. Worth mentioning is the fact that the obstacle presented in this article cannot be treated as the only existing one. Of course, there can be beheld a huge variety of many other issues that lead to unsuccessful intercultural communication or do not enable intercultural communication among cultures. After five years of dealing with intercultural communication the author decides to describe in this article the stereotype phenomenon as one of the most significant barriers.

2. The Definition of Culture and Intercultural Communication

The theme of intercultural communication cannot be analyzed without explaining what is understood as culture. Worthy of mention is the fact that there are hundreds of culture descriptions – „there is no general culture definition” (Bolten 2007: 39). By consulting the relevant literature the article examines the most important ones for this investigation.

Goodenough (1964) claims that „we should note that culture is not a material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people, behavior, or emotions”. (Goodenough 1964: 36). Goodenough regards culture as an organization of the above-quoted aspects which are thoughts and feelings of a person, interhuman relations or the way of interpreting reality by certain people: “A society’s culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and to do so in any role that they

accept for any one of themselves” (ibid.). Hall (1976) carries out an exploration of the high-context and low-context communication (Hall 1976: 91): “A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite: i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the implicit code” (ibid.). Heringer (2004), Markowsky and Thomas (1995) consider culture as away of orientation in an unknown reality. Similarly to culture definition there can be also observed a variety of intercultural communication explanations. Moreover, these definitions are usually connected with a certain context. This paper bases on the chosen descriptions given by such scientists as Lüsebrink (2005), Bolten (2007) or Thomas (2007).

After focusing on the term of culture putting an emphasis on interculture occurs to be worth mentioning. According to Bolten (2007) interculture refers to an international collaboration on various levels between different countries (Bolten 2007: 22): „Intercultures are created when the members of different worlds A and B cooperate with one another” (ibid.).

On the other hand communication can be – strongly simplified – contemplated as *message*, *announcement*, *exchange* or *connection* (Beck 2007: 13). Lüsebrink (2005) comprehends intercultural communication as „the communicative dimension of relations” (Lüsebrink 2005: 7).

Researchers who deal with social psychology also carry out an analysis of intercultural communication (e.g. Thomas). This approach should be viewed as a significant one because it provides a detailed explanation of intercultural communication from the perspective of human behavior. In Thomas’ opinion there should be a strong connection between intercultural acting and intercultural communication – the scientist recons acting as „a specific form of behavior” (Thomas 2007: 56).

An interesting way of perceiving culture present G. Hofstede, G.J. Hofstede and Minkov (2010) – the scientists regard culture as a kind of „mental programming” (G. Hofstede/G.J. Hofstede/Minkov 2010: 4) that consists of particular patterns of behavior and emotional attitude towards various matters (ibid.). The above-mentioned characteristic concerns a group of people treated as members of a certain culture (ibid.). The researchers explain what they mean by using the term „software of the mind” (ibid., 5) while concentrating on culture definition: “This does not mean, of course, that people are programmed the way computers are. A person’s behavior is only partially predetermined by his or her mental programs: he or she has a basic ability to deviate from them and to react in ways that are new, creative, destructive, or unexpected. The software of the mind (...) only indicates that reactions are likely and understandable, given one’s past” (ibid.). Moreover, according to G. Hofstede, G.J. Hofstede and Minkov the „mental programming” starts in the childhood – a period of time which is responsible for collecting a database of future reactions within the scope of a culture that one belongs to (ibid.).

3. Pictures in Our Heads (Walter Lippmann) as Barriers to a Successful Intercultural Communication

As already mentioned the author of this article aims to provide a description of stereotypes as possible barriers to successful intercultural communication. The following part of the paper

carries out an exploration of stereotypes that can be recognized as obstacles interrupting international relations among certain cultures.

3.1 The Definition of Stereotypes

*„If stereotypes are a part of the general culture,
it would be a bit strange
if they were not generally believed”
David J. Schneider*

By considering the relevant literature one can come to a conclusion that: “Any form of stereotyping is potentially an obstruction to successful intercultural communication, because it will blind us to real differences that exist between the participants in a discourse” (Scollon/Wong-Scollon 2005: 171). The first publication that stressed the theme of stereotypes was „Public Opinion” by Walter Lippmann published in 1922. The above-mentioned book can be contemplated as a revolutionary work because its author formulated a definition of stereotypes as the first scientist – according to Lippmann they should be pinpointed as „pictures in our heads” (Lippmann 1922/ 2008: 37). Lippmann’s observation can be explained in the following way: “For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture” (Lippmann 1922/ 2008: 83).

An extensive body of literature exists on the analysis of stereotypes and their definition. Bartmiński supports Lippmann’s idea and recons stereotypes as „elements of a linguistic worldview” (Bartmiński 1998: 65-66). Scollon und Wong-Scollon (2005) maintain that stereotypes should be described in the under mentioned way: “Stereotyping is simply another word for overgeneralization. The difference, however, is that stereotyping carries with it an ideological position. Characteristics of the group are not only over generalised to apply to each member of the group, but they are also taken to have some exaggerated negative or positive value” (Scollon/Wong-Scollon 2005: 168).

The author of this paper regards the above-presented stereotype definitions as the most significant ones for this article. More extended, a further detailed stereotype description analysis is beyond the scope of this investigation. The next subchapter presents two different ways of perceiving stereotypes: the positive and the negative one.

3.2 Positive and Negative Stereotypes

Juang and Matsumoto’s (2007) standpoint refers to stereotypes as a kind of orientation in a foreign reality – the scientists point out that background knowledge (or imagination) of a particular culture may demonstrate the most appropriate ways of savoir vivre (Juang/Matsumoto 2007: 103). The researchers consider stereotypes from two different perspectives – they divide them into positive and negative ones (ibid.): “Stereotypes can be either positive or negative. For example, a common positive stereotype is that Asians are hard-working, the *model minority*. Another positive stereotype is that Germans are industrious and scientifically minded. Stereotypes can be generally true or completely false” (ibid.). It is arguable that stereotype research mainly focuses on negative aspects (Yzerbyt/Demoulin 2010: 1058): „Even members of groups who typically enjoy advantaged social status may at times be confronted with a negative stereotype on particular dimension” (ebd.). According to Scollon und Wong-Scollon (2005) negative stereotypes can be viewed as

a barrier to successful intercultural communication and as a source of intercultural misunderstandings (Scollon/Wong-Scollon 2005: 171f). They prevent foreigners from regarding a particular country in a positive way (ibid.): “If we forget the deeper reasons why these rhetorical strategies are used, we can easily move into negatively stereotyping members of other groups who are working from different basic assumptions about the most respectful way to treat strangers. The result is an overall negative impression of members of the other group” (ibid., 172). Moreover, negative stereotyping also influences the international business environment – that is why some countries are not preferred to deal with their inhabitants as prospective business partners.

3.3 Stereotype Modification Possibility

This article refers to stereotypes as a kind of barrier to intercultural communication that does not enable successful international relations within the framework of private contacts and business cooperation. Taking into consideration the fact that there is a huge variety of different stereotypes concerning particular nations, the author of this paper would like to concentrate on stereotype modification possibility.

3.3.1 The Connection Between Stereotype and Prejudice

First of all, various studies revealed results regarding the reason of stereotype strong position in people’s minds (e.g. Hansen 2000:322 or Schneider 1996: 440) - prejudice is treated as one of these significant aspects (Schneider 1996: 440): „There is no doubt that our prejudices, however derived, can sometimes drive our stereotypes and make them resistant to change“ (ibid.). Prejudice is defined as: “An antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization. It may be felt or expressed. It may be directed toward a group as a whole, or toward an individual because he is a member of this group” (Allport 1954: 9). Filner and Myers (1994) treat prejudice as an inevitableness and highlight the fact that it should be contemplated as a deep-rooted part of human nature (Filner/Myers 1994: 19). The scientists illustrate prejudice as „a reflection of cultural and psychological context (and) intrinsically human and therefore unavoidable“ (ibid.). Brown (1995) reflects Filner and Myers’ (1994) opinion (Brown 1995: 7): “Prejudice which besets so many societies in the world today and which so urgently requires our understanding is the negative variety: the vary, fearful, suspicious, derogatory, hostile or ultimately murderous treatment of one group of people by another” (ibid.). Schneider (2005) focuses on the aspect that prejudice as an integrated part of a particular inhabitant group everyday life (Schneider 2005: 27). Mainly this facet makes stereotypes irresistible for modification: “Prejudging is as normal and almost as much a part of our basic (and, I dare say, primitive) mental toolbox as is categorization. Every day in countless ways, I must decide whether to approach or avoid certain people, situations and things” (ibid.).

The connection between stereotype and prejudice leads to the following question: is there any possibility to modify the ways of perceiving other cultures? The next subchapter focuses on this aspect.

3.3.2 Stereotype Modification Analysis

In spite of certain stereotype and prejudice existing as a part of „pictures in our heads” (Lippmann 1922/ 2008: 37) some scientists do not exclude stereotype modification possibility: “Despite the obvious continued existence of stereotypes and prejudice, many

cultural stereotypes have changed (and some quite dramatically) over the last half century or more (...). Of course, cultures can change without individuals' changing, as defenders of the old die and are replaced by the generations of the newly enlightened – but real change *has* taken place” (Schneider 2005: 379). Stangor (2000) associates stereotype modification with individual relations between inhabitants of different cultures and traditions (Stangor 2000: 419): “We consider the process of stereotype change produced through contact with individual group members an example of the general cognitive process by which attributes of category members modify category attributes” (ibid.).

While considering stereotype modification possibility one should also take Fiske and Operario's (2004) statement into account – within the scope of international relations a tourist or a businessman must take into consideration the variety of information about a foreign country and try to verify the read or heard „truths” (Fiske/Operario 2004: 134) „stereotype change can occur by revising categorical beliefs through motivated attention to information (ibid.). Schneider (2005) maintains instances of stereotype modification possibility (Schneider 2005: 380): “For example, attitudes toward people with mental illness improved at least from the early 1950s through the early 1970s (...). Attitudes toward homosexuals have become more favorable over the past 15 years or so (...). The gender stereotypes have probably lessened over time, although not dramatically (...). The most intensively studied area has been racial attitudes, and here there is considerable evidence of real change from the 1950s until at least the late 1980s” (ibid.). In the context of modifying stereotypes Schneider (1996) also mentions a particular difficulty when it comes to changing deep-rooted standpoints (Schneider 1996: 439): “Consider, first, the issue of whether some stereotypes are invulnerable to experimental change. Some stereotypes seem to be, but unless we want to define stereotypes narrowly in terms of this feature we also need to recognize that many are not” (ibid.). Schneider (1996) provides an explanation of the above-mentioned difficulty concerning stereotype change. According to Schneider's (1996) statement there are four main reasons why stereotypes do not undergo any rapid modification (ibid.).

Firstly, some stereotypes cannot be modified in a fast way because they are strongly connected with some traditional images (ibid.). As an example Schneider (1996) maintains the traditional approach to female and male sex (ibid.): “Unyielding stereotypes are accurate at least in terms of mean tendencies. I doubt that spending even thousands of (boring) hours watching female bodybuilders would change my stereotype that men are stronger than women (ibid.).

Secondly, Stangor (1996) claims that it is particularly complicated to modify viewpoints concerning reality of chosen countries (ibid.). Moreover, certain human reactions in various situations are beheld as emotional, stereotype and prototypical attitudes (ibid.). The scientist also contemplates another reason which is individual conviction that ordinarily remains constant (ibid.).

Such authors as Klin (1991) or Panasiuk (1998) also regard stereotype modification as difficult but not impossible (Klin 1991: 143 or Panasiuk 1998: 84-98). The arguments they put forward are comparable to these of Schneider (1996). According to Andersen and Taylor (2008) the stereotype modification problem stems from the fact that a certain group of stereotypes has never been considered in scientific works as modifiable (Andersen/Taylor 2008: 275): “Racial and ethnic inequality is peculiarly resistant to change. In society, the inequality produces racial stereotypes, and these stereotypes become the lens through which

members of the dominant group perceive members of the minority group” (ibid.). Devine, Monteith and Zuwerink (2000) draw attention to the connection between stereotype and prejudice – if stereotypes are regarded as modifiable, the same aspect may concern prejudice and motivate members of certain cultures to change their viewpoints about the inhabitants of other countries (Devine/Monteith/Zuwerink 2000: 305).

The above-quoted researchers examined prejudice modification possibility and came to a conclusion that there are certain steps to be followed while attempting to change one’s position – these are: “Establishing nonprejudiced standards based on one’s personal beliefs for how one ought to respond; internalizing those standards by linking them to the self-concept, defining them as important, and feeling committed to them; learning how to inhibit stereotypic responses so as to respond consistently with one’s personal standards” (ibid.). Devine, Monteith and Zuwerink’s (2000) prejudice reduction concept pertains prejudice reduction possibility of each group member – even of the most prejudiced ones (ibid., 307): “Given the relatively overt and controllable nature of prejudiced behavior, coupled with existing social norms prohibiting their expression, there is reason to believe that high prejudiced people may at least have established nonprejudiced standards for behaviors” (ibid.). The authors carry out an exploration of the above-mentioned opinion in the following way: “Whether these standards are based on their own standpoint or that of others (e.g., society) is an open question, the answer to which could have important implications. If high prejudiced subjects have established nonprejudiced standards based on the own standpoint for their behaviors, tactics for encouraging them to generalize such beliefs to other types of responses [...] might be devised” (ibid.).

The above-presented analysis shows various difficulties concerning stereotype modification. To sum up, the most significant barrier to successful intercultural communication seem to be the deep-rooted attitudes towards other cultures.

4. Case studies concerning stereotypes and communication

After focusing on theory describing intercultural and stereotypical issues the autor of this article would like to suggest a certain way of working on above-mentioned aspects in the classroom. An investigation into the existing teaching methods shows that the case study method can be regarded as one of the most suitable teaching methods while dealing with difficult cross-cultural matters. The aim of a case study is to motivate the course participants to find the best solution or a diversity of solutions to a particular problem. Students usually work in groups and discuss different possibilities. They may learn how not to perceive other nations in a stereotypic way, how to respect other cultures in everyday life or in the business area. Finally, they also exercise certain skills: „It is possible to train managerial communication skills, such as holding a meeting, negotiating a contract, or giving a presentation. Case studies force students into real-life situations that require them to get involved in managerial communication” (Odrakiewicz/Zator-Peljan 2012: 130). The proper case study preparation and the ability to use other sources/research plays a very important role while working on a chosen case: „The most important consideration case study preparation and teaching is thorough case review and appropriate Internet-based support provided to each group commensurate with their level. The use of e-learning resources support business, intercultural management communication and managerial skills acquisition in addition to language skills“ (Odrakiewicz/Zator-Peljan 2012: 130).

The author of this investigation would like to present here a few case studies that can be used during an intercultural training or a Business English course combined with cross-cultural issues. The below-quoted case studies are written by Shanti Consulting, a company that deals with improving one's performance by using the cultural intelligence (<http://www.shanticonsulting.com/multicultural-communication-case-studies/>):

a) **Monsooned**

A case study on project deadlines, the Indian 'yes' and high-context versus low-context communication.

Rebecca works with United Technologies, a Chicago based company. She is talking on the phone to Abhinav, the manager of one of United Technologies vendors for customer service outsourcing.

Rebecca: We really need to get all of the customer service representatives trained on our new process in the next two weeks. Can you get this done?

Abhinav: That timeline is pretty aggressive. Do you think it's possible?

Rebecca: I think it will require some creativity and hard work, but I think we can get it done with two or three days to spare

Abhinav: Ok.

Rebecca: Now that our business is settled, how is everything else?

Abhinav: All's well, although the heavy monsoons this year are causing a lot of delays getting around the city.

Two weeks later...

Abhinav: We've pulled all of our resources and I'm happy to say that 60% of the customer service representatives are now trained in the new process. The remaining 40% will complete the training in the next two weeks.

Rebecca: Only 60%? I thought we agreed that they all would be trained by now!

Abhinav: Yes . The monsoon is now over so the rest of the training should go quickly.

Rebecca: This training is critical to our results. Please get it done as soon as possible.

Abhinav: I am certain that it will be done in the next two weeks.

Reflection...

- Did Abhinav agree to the initial timeline requested by Rebecca?
- What might Rebecca be thinking about Abhinav?
- What might Abhinav be thinking about Rebecca?
- How will this incident affect their future interactions

b) **Jim's Mistake**

A case study on virtual teams, hierarchy, and direct versus indirect communication styles.

Based in Cleveland, Ohio, Jim is has been managing a software development team in Pune for the past two years. He has been working closely with Aruna, the Indian team leader, to develop a new networking program. While Jim has over 25 years of experience in software development, Aruna knows the program inside and out.

While reviewing his work from the previous week, Jim discovers that he made a mistake in the programming code. He notices that Aruna corrected his error, but wonders why Aruna did not bring it to his attention so that he could avoid delays and keep from making the same mistake in the future.

Reflection...

- a. Should Aruna have informed Jim of his mistake? Why or why not?
- b. If Jim wants to be notified of his mistakes in the future, how should he proceed?

c) Sandeep is out of the office

A case study on miscommunication in multicultural teams.

Sandeep has just joined the Bangalore office of a New York based MNC. As part of his training he will be spending 3 months in the US, but has already been assigned to a team with members in New York, Tokyo and Bangalore. Sarah, the New York based project manager, has scheduled a teleconference meeting for Tuesday. Sandeep will be traveling to Delhi to get his US visa over the meeting time. Here's their conversation...

Sarah: Can we do the teleconference tomorrow, 7 pm for you, or should we wait until you get back?

Sandeep: Better if we can wait, but I can do it if you like – if it's necessary.

Sarah: Do you want to postpone it? Tell me, yes or no?

Reflection...

- a. What cultural and/or personality traits are influencing the communication?
- b. What is Sarah likely to be thinking/feeling?
- c. What is Sandeep likely to be thinking/feeling?

d) Promotion

A case study on cultural conflict and the values of status and community.

Mayank has been working as an Information Officer at a foreign consulate in New Delhi for several years. His boss, Hendrick, wants to reward Mayank for his hard work and offers him a promotion and pay raise to become an Information Clerk. Mayank politely declines the offer, leaving Hendrick confused.

Reflection...

- a. Why would Mayank refuse the promotion?
- b. How should Hendrick proceed?

e) And Also Meet with Others

A case study on cross-cultural partnerships, intercultural communication and high-context versus low-context communication.

Mark is an American living in Delhi and is meeting with Ajay, who is a government official that frequently deals with the public. Mark is interested in forming a partnership with Suresh, a local businessman with whom Ajay has worked in the past. Mark wants to know if Ajay thinks partnering with Suresh is a good idea.

Mark: Do you happen to know Suresh?

Ajay: Of course, I have worked closely with him on a number of projects over the past 10 years. I know him very well.

Mark: I was thinking about meeting him and seeing if there might be a possibility for collaboration. What do you think?

Ajay: Yes, you should meet with him, and you should also meet with others.

Mark: Thanks. Who else should I meet with?

Ajay: You know there are some girls who fall in love with a boy who is very popular, well dressed, and good looking. After they get married, they realize that they made a mistake because the boy has no substance. Other girls will look for a guy with good character – checking out his family situation and talking with his friends about him. When she gets married, she is much happier than the girl who married the popular guy.

Reflection:

- a. Should Mark meet with Suresh? Why or why not?
- b. Why does Mark ask about other people to meet with?
- c. Why does Ajay talk about a hypothetical marriage?

5. Conclusions

As already mentioned, intercultural communication is considered as a significant aspect while creating positive international relations among different countries in today's globalized world. Expanded it means that the intercultural communication phenomenon influences not only various spheres of everyday life, but also global business environment. The main focus the presented paper investigates is putting a lot of emphasis on examining stereotype as one of barriers to successful intercultural communication. The author decided to explore stereotypes within the framework of this article after conducting research from 2007 to 2011 at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland.

What this all amounts to is that stereotype modification could exclude certain barriers affecting human behavior on international level and enable successful collaboration between particular countries. According to some researchers stereotypes can be regarded as possible to modify. On the other hand it is contemplated as quite difficult. The above-quoted scientists

study the variety of aspects serving as examples of a difficult stereotype modification process e.g. it is hard to modify standpoints concerning reality of chosen cultures, traditional approach to female and male sex or individual belief that remains constant. Moreover, human behavior is beheld in various situations as emotional, stereotype and prototypical. Worth of mention is also the fact that some groups of stereotypes have never been considered in scientific works as modifiable. To sum up, it can be stated that as long as stereotypes are a part of „pictures in our heads” (Lippmann 1922/2008: 37) they will be considered as a barrier to successful intercultural communication.

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