Behavioural Stereotypes in Intercultural Communication

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Abstract. This paper intends to point out the importance of cross-cultural communication within the constraining framework of the cultural stereotypes and cultural differences, which can be, in the long run, softened or dissipated by placing them into the proper context and using them adequately.

Keywords: behavioural stereotypes, cross-cultural communication, cultural differences, context, communicative competence

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973: 89) defines culture as a "historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols … by means of which men can communicate, perpetuate and develop their own knowledge about and attitudes towards life." In other words, culture in general is concerned with beliefs and values on the basis of which people interpret experiences and behave, individually and in groups. Broadly and simply put, "culture" refers to a group or community with which you share common experiences that shape the way you understand the world. However, for the business environment, the concepts of cultural stereotypes and cultural differences rather than that of culture are much more active in approaching the most appropriate behaviour and conduct business people should be able to handle. Therefore, the complexity of the situational context involved gives credit to a shocking assertion with respect to the behavioural code business people have to acquire to cope with the international

dimension of their activity: "*Culture is more often a source of conflict than of synergy. Cultural differences are a nuisance at best and often a disaster.*"[1] **(**Hofstede & Hofstede 2005: 37)

This paper intends to point out the importance of cross-cultural communication within the constraining framework of cultural stereotypes and cultural differences, which can be, in the long run, softened or dissipated by placing them into the proper context and using them adequately. Do cultural stereotypes function when a business person relates to a partner of another culture? Are there cultural taboos one needs to be aware of? These are only two questions business students should be aware of when they learn to communicate cross-culturally and when they aim to develop intercultural communicative competence.

Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) see culture as the "software of the mind"; that is, while human beings all have the same "hardware", the human brain, our "software" or "programming" is rather different. It is the same experience when you interact with someone from a different culture – their words, assumptions, gestures, values, and other aspects of their culture will not make sense when transferred to your frame of reference. This assertion is clearly illustrated in their book *Cultures and Organizations* (2005: 6) by the following figure.
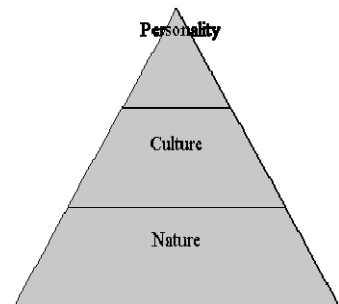
Roughly interpreted, all human beings are completely the same, completely different, and partly the same and partly different. This can be diagrammed as seen above. We are all the same as our "human nature" is regarded – we are all part of the same species, we all have the same "hardware". We are all completely different as our personalities are regarded. And we are "partly the same and partly different" on the territory of culture. As far as culture is concerned, a special notice should be taken into account here: the same person can belong to several different cultures depending on their birthplace, nationality, ethnicity, family status, gender, age, language, education, physical condition, sexual orientation, religion, profession, place of work and its corporate culture. However, culture is the "lens" through which you view the world. It is central to what you see, how you make sense of what you see, and how you express yourself. Cultures – both national and organizational – differ along many dimensions. Among them, four are the most important: Directness (get to the point *versus* imply the messages); Hierarchy (follow orders *versus* engage in debate); Consensus (dissent is accepted *versus* unanimity is needed); and Individualism (individual winners *versus* team effectiveness).

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[1] Author's emphasis.

As we will try to demonstrate, the four dimensions may appear with slightly different connotations or descriptions in various interpretations in the toolbox of cultural stereotypes. According to the Webster Dictionary, a stereotype is "an idea or statement about all of the members of a group or all the instances of a situation". The American Heritage Dictionary defines it as the "conventional, formulaic, and oversimplified conception, opinion, or image" or "One that is regarded as embodying or conforming to a set image or type." According to a further definition, "a stereotype is a simplified mental picture of an individual or group of people who share a certain characteristic (or *stereotypical*) qualities. The term is often used in a negative sense, and stereotypes are seen by many as undesirable beliefs which can be altered through education and/or familiarization". http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Stereotype

When referring to behavioural stereotypes in business, I will rather try not to assign a negative connotation to the term "stereotype", but to associate it with Hofstede's *model of cultural dimensions*, which has already become an internationally recognized standard business people should be aware of. National cultures and organizational cultures should be studied interactively, as Geert Hofstede did when he came up with the four cultural dimensions, but more than that, in my opinion, some behavioural patterns should be identified as stereotypes for a better understanding of each and every culture and for a comprehensive image of how values in the workplace are influenced by culture.

Becoming more aware of cultural stereotypes and cultural differences, as well as exploring cultural similarities can help us communicate with others more effectively. When someone encounters a confusing situation, that person should analyze how culture may be shaping his or her own reactions, and try to see the world from the other's point of view. One should be aware, first and foremost, of some fundamental patterns or stereotypes of cultural differences, such as different communication styles due to specific culture-influenced beliefs, different attitudes towards conflict due to a distinct set of values, different approaches to completing tasks due to particular perceptions, different decision-making styles due to inherent culturally-shaped expectations, different attitudes towards disclosure due to specific attitudes, or different approaches to knowing due to culture-influenced assumptions.

The above-mentioned differences produce, at an inferior level, behavioural stereotypes commonly encountered in business environment. The most common areas in which certain patterns of behaviour may occur are *non-verbal business communication, the dress code in business, intercultural business communication, communication barriers in business communication, culture shock, cross-cultural negotiations,* and *cross-cultural marketing*.

Non-verbal business communication styles are generally associated with business meetings. In some cases, it is common sense that may help us (i.e. leaning

on the back of the chair is perceived as rude in Europe and America; leg crossing is perceived as threatening or accusatory in Muslim society). In other cases we rely on the assumption that messages conveyed by laughter, smiling, and crying or expressing emotions of enjoyment, anger, fear, sadness, disgust, and surprise are universal and if there is a culture where their connotation differs, it is only the smallest exception of them all. When it comes to nonverbal language, even though one can never understand and apply it fully, universal common sense has been turned into politeness by millennia of experience and goodwill.

The dress code in business submits to some general rules commonly accepted within the international business environment but it can also be inferred from a culture's beliefs and customs. Therefore, another rule one has to take into consideration is a common sense one, asserted by Ashley Rothschild *The Rothschild Image*: "You have to honor the country and the culture." The conservative dress has generally become a business stereotype; almost all the business etiquette guides contain the well-known piece of advice: "Men should wear dark conservative attires… Business suits are most suitable… Women's dress should be conservative too…" What in fact is really important is that one should seriously take into consideration and respect the dress codes of the countries that they go to.

Intercultural business communication represents a major source of producing behavioural stereotypes that may contribute to the success or failure of a business enterprise. However, business can be considered a fundamental type of cross-cultural communication; a history of international business practices can be framed in terms of the evolving structures of rules that governed how people ought to communicate to make decisions, trades, and partnerships. The major differences among business organizations follow cultural patterns that are found among all discourse communities, and some principles of cross-cultural communication can help an outsider to predict an organization's expectations. Germans, for example, highly rank directness in communication, similarly Americans are in favour of debating issues directly and openly. As with many Latin countries, communication tends to be predominantly oral rather than through the written word. Asians and Chinese are perceived as being rigid (this is only because they find it extremely difficult to say 'no'). The Arabic conversation can be very hyperbolic with much use of flowery language and flattery.

Communication barriers in cross-cultural business communication are generally considered factors such as language, modern technology, stereotyping and prejudice, anxiety, assuming similarity instead of difference, ethnocentrism; all these may lead to intercultural miscommunication by providing a narrow image of the "other" culture. Such barriers that may be perceptual, emotional, cultural or interpersonal need to be avoided, first and foremost by becoming aware of possible preconceptions (prejudice and stereotypes) to function along with the intercultural

dialogue. Perceptions are determined by the person's life experience and the history of the culture – and they differ from culture to culture. Furthermore, the role society prescribes for persons varies greatly by culture; cultures commonly impose roles by gender or social class. Another outstanding barrier in communicating cross-culturally is ethnocentrism, already mentioned above. Judging other cultures by the standards of our own culture, and associating this with a feeling of superiority of one's own culture should be counterbalanced by not stereotyping other cultures and by increasing mutual cultural awareness.

Culture shock represents another area of cross-cultural communication, in which behavioural patterns are worth discussing, especially for the business environment; how culture shock is experienced and how it can be faced while being included into a particular culture is another discussion closely connected to the idea of multiculturalism. At present, any modern nation is a complex society with corresponding variations in culture. It is made up of different ethnic groups, it is stratified into classes, it is differentiated into regions, and it is separated into rural and urban settlements, each having its distinctive cultural characteristics. These facts indicate that it is not a simple matter to acquaint oneself with the culture of a nation, let alone the culture of another nation.

When it comes to *cross-cultural negotiations*, theories take largely into account the human behaviour and the way it is perceived during negotiation. When considering negotiation at an international level, several underlying factors are extremely important for a cross-cultural perspective of negotiation. I have in mind factors such as the purpose of negotiation, the role of distance, complexity (team size and the role of each member), duration, cultural differences (language, behaviour standards, religious beliefs and values, social practice, sensitivity to time, etc.), and differences in law systems. With reference to the importance of these factors, for example – according to each country's cultural pattern – negotiation teams are organised differently, or time allotted to negotiation process, for instance, is also determined by how time is perceived by various cultures. How to avoid stereotyping in negotiations? By assimilating knowledge about the other culture, discovering and evaluating the cultural differences, and being tolerant towards the other culture. Only by taking cross-cultural negotiation training, can negotiators give themselves an advantage over competitors. Considering this perspective, business students should become aware of the fact that two negotiators with the same potential client, having identical proposals and packages will have different results in negotiating if they approach the other culture's values, beliefs, etiquette and business behavioural patterns on a surface level or exhibiting a deeper insight of those values. Doing or saying the wrong thing at the wrong time makes all the difference in negotiation process. Cultural patterns such as eye contact, personal space and touch, time, meeting and greeting norms, gift-giving etiquette

are only several factors that pass beyond stereotyping and help students tailor their behaviour in a proper way to maximise their negotiating potential.

Last, but not least a few words on *cross-cultural marketing*, which is a strategic process of marketing among consumers whose culture differs from that of the marketer's own culture; it demands marketers to be aware of and sensitive to cultural differences.

Having identified such stereotypes and cultural differences, a question arises: How are these differences exploited for the benefit of the business students? First of all by making them aware that while some of our assumptions are universal, in that most people in the world have them, others are culturally specific. It is these culturally specific assumptions that can often cause miscommunication. When an interaction is not working, the following questions can help explore the underlying assumption generally induced by stereotypical judgment:

- What is the basis for this assumption/stereotype – is it personal experience or someone else's opinion?
- Does this assumption/stereotype check out against what can be objectively observed?
- If the assumption(s)/stereotypes were set aside, how would it help the interaction?

First of all, special treatment must be addressed to the specifics of national business culture because having an insight into the cultural dynamics of a country or region can be very helpful to understand why people act the way they do, and the appropriate way you should act while in that country. There are three areas of interest which account for the impact of business stereotypes, no matter the culture differences:

- appearance, which highlights business etiquette do's and don'ts involving dress, clothing, body language, and gestures;
- behaviour, which highlights business etiquette do's and don'ts involving dining, gift-giving, meetings, customs, protocol, negotiation, and general behavioural guidelines;
- communication, which highlights business etiquette do's and don'ts involving greetings, introductions, and conversational guidelines.

These three areas address the business instances most commonly practiced within the organisational environment, i.e. business meetings, negotiations, presentations, and interviews.

Starting from the above-mentioned business landmarks, stereotypes – seen not as undesirable beliefs which can be altered through education and/or familiarisation but as something that *is regarded as embodying or conforming to a set image or type* – play the role of functional indicators of different cultural categories that require different patterns of treatment. Consequently, from this perspective, Geert Hofstede's dimensions analysis can assist the business person or traveller both in a better understanding of the cultural stereotypes and intercultural differences within regions and between countries, and in choosing the most appropriate code for business communication. The rules that govern this code are influenced and assisted, in my opinion, by patterns of behaviour that make the difference between organisations, business people, or business environments.

Irrespective of the country analysed, by using the above-mentioned dimensions the conclusion one can draw is that the differences are significantly relevant and the only possible solution is to turn to some basic assumptions, generally encountered and accepted, not far from what, for instance, the business etiquette exhibits.

Understanding culture in general and specific individual cultures in particular can make the difference between success and failure in the global market and economy. Therefore, associating this idea with accurate identification of cultural differences and behavioural stereotypes, to which we apply an appropriate use of politeness rules and business etiquette prescriptions, can provide the adequate conditions for the success and effectiveness of business communication.

For students pursuing careers in international business, this means learning to manage cultural stereotypes and cultural differences on three levels: *self*, *interpersonal*, and *organisational*. According to Martin and Vaughn (2007: 31-36), "Cultural competence refers to an ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures." It comprises four components: the first two components address the first level (*self*), and they are the awareness of one's own cultural worldview and the attitude towards cultural stereotypes and cultural differences. The other two components refer to the *interpersonal* and *organisational* levels. They are the knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews, as well as cross-cultural skills. Within this framework, developing cultural competence represents the "ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures" (ibid). Hence, international business managers rate the ability to work with people of other cultures as the most important quality of success, particularly in overseas assignments (Bhawuk and Brislin 1992).

We would like to highlight that the answer for developing cross-cultural competence in the academic field (and more specifically in the case of business students) is to enhance the students' performance in multicultural settings and to teach them *to be interculturally competent.* Teaching intercultural communication requires a target for a more specialised and applied teaching/learning methodological

approach since cross-cultural skills in general and communication intercultural skills in particular are a major criterion for success in the global business environment.

When working in the global commercial environment, knowledge of the impact of cultural stereotypes and cultural differences is one of the keys to international business success. Improving levels of cultural awareness helps business students build international competencies and enables them to become more globally sensitive.

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