Psychocultural factors affecting intercultural communication effectiveness

Han Yinyan
Dalian Institute of Light Industry

Abstract
The paper investigates psychocultural factors which affect intercultural communication effectiveness and argues that ethnocentrism, prejudice and stereotypes often function as major barriers to intercultural communication. To promote communication effectiveness, people are supposed to employ strategies such as developing empathy, cultural adaptation, and the like.

Key words: communication effectiveness, ethnocentrism, prejudice, stereotypes

1. Introduction
In intercultural contexts, People do not always find it easy to put through the message they intend to convey to people of other cultures, even when they are very proficient in the target language. There seems to be something standing in between them that constitutes obstacles to their communication. What are those non-linguistic obstacles? How to remove them and be effective in intercultural communication? These issues have engaged the attention of many scholars. It is generally accepted that communication is a dynamic process involving many factors apart from linguistic competence. That is to say, communication effectiveness is also greatly affected by social, cultural and psychological factors. However, it seems that the prior researches on intercultural communication effectives focus more on linguistic competence than on other aspects. At least, in the case of the so-called psychocultural factors, they have received much less attention than they deserve. Therefore, this paper is intended as a tentative attempt to investigate those factors in their relationship to intercultural communication effectiveness. It proposes that psychocultural factors often function as major barriers to intercultural communication and also points out ways to facilitate communication effectiveness.

2. Basic notions
Communication, as mentioned above, is actually a very complicated process involving people’s linguistic competence, cultural backguoud, cognitive process and even biological and psychological process. Communication covers a wide range of dimensions. The present paper concentrates on the so-called psychocultural factors and explores their effects on communication effectiveness. Thus, it is necessary to investigate these two notions that provide theoretical basis on which the future discussion is developed.

2.1 Psychocultural factors
People are all socialized in their own culture. Therefore, people from divergent cultures are often characteristic of different social norms and psychological elements. In other words, culture is very inclusive. It permeates virtually every aspect of human life and determines or influences all
of man’s behaviors including man’s psychology. Thus, psychocultural factors, here, refer to those culture-related ones in the domain of psychology. Kim and Gudykunst pointed out in 1992 that the psychocultural factors influencing communication with outgroups include stereotypes of and attitudes (e.g., ethnocentrism and prejudice) toward outgroups. This paper adopts the term psychocultural factors in the sense of the above and those factors this paper is to explore in the following part mainly cover ethnocentrism, prejudice and stereotypes.

2.2 Communication effectiveness

Scholars have long been interested in the research on how to appropriately and effectively communicate with people from other cultures. Some use the term communication competence to cover all the related aspects. Others prefer communication effectiveness, instead. Actually, some researchers equated effectiveness with competence. So, it is necessary to clarify these two concepts first.

Communication competence is overlapping with communication effectiveness to some extent. Possessing communication competence is one of the prerequisites for effective communication, but it does not necessarily lead to effective communication. Communication effectiveness lays more emphasis on the outcome of communication, i.e. achieving desirable ends or goals or satisfying interactants’ needs by any means. The concept of communication competence mainly focuses on the abilities and skills within a person.

The clarification of the difference between communication competence and communication effectiveness provides the theoretical foundations for the following discussion of psychocultural factors affecting communication effectiveness.

3. Psychocultural factors and their effects on communication effectiveness

3.1 Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is derived from two Greek words ethnos, meaning nation, and kentron, meaning the center of a circle. “Ethno” is the prefix denoting cultural, ethnic, or racial groupings; “centrism” refers to the centrality of one’s own group.

3.1.1 Characteristics of ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is a kind of defensive attitudinal tendency to view the values, and norms of one’s culture as superior to other cultures, and people perceive their cultural ways of living as the most reasonable and proper ways to conduct their lives. Consequently, there is the expectation that all other groups should follow their civilized ways of thinking and behaving. Ethnocentrism is bolstered through people’s own cultural socialization process. It can consist of both implicit and
explicit attitudes toward outgroup members’ customs or behavior. Ethnocentrism can be seen as the tendency to interpret and evaluate outgroups’ behaviors using one’s own standards. This tendency is natural and unavoidable. People’s natural ethnocentric feelings that include the positive feature of looking after their own group and protecting against what might be hostile outsiders do not suit them well in today’s world (Brislin, 1993).

Everyone is ethnocentric to some degree. It is possible to have a low degree of ethnocentrism, but it is impossible to be non-ethnocentric. The degree of ethnocentric tendency in an individual can range all the way from the basic need for valued social identity to the identity defensive need for power or dominance. Additionally, people can be ethnocentric about different aspects of their culture (e.g. language, food, architecture). Under conditions of a perceived outgroup threat of competition for scarce resources, members of various identity groups can oscillate between high ethnocentrism and low ethnocentrism depending on the changing circumstances.

3.1.2 Effects of ethnocentrism on communication effectiveness

Ethnocentrism does have positive effects and is often “a source of cultural and personal identity”. On the other hand, ethnocentrism “takes on a negative condition and becomes destructive when it is used to shut others out, provide the bases for derogatory evaluation, and rebuff changes” (Samovar, et al., 1998).

In fact, many scholars believe that because people learn ethnocentrism so early in life, and primarily on the unconscious level, it might well be the major barrier to intercultural communication.

The negative impact of ethnocentrism on intercultural communication is clearly highlighted by Stewart and Bennett (1991):

First, ethnocentric beliefs about one’s own culture shape a social sense of identity which is narrow and defensive.

Second, ethnocentrism normally involves the perception of members of other cultures in terms of stereotypes.

Third, the dynamic of ethnocentrism is such that comparative judgments are made between one’s own culture and other cultures under the assumption that one’s own is normal and natural.

As a consequence, ethnocentric judgments usually involve invidious comparisons that ennoble one’s culture while degrading those of others.
A high level of ethnocentrism is also dysfunctional with respect to successful communication with outgroups. Specifically, a high level of ethnocentrism leads to misperception of members of outgroups; this misperception causes people to make inaccurate attributions about outgroups’ behavior. In other words, a high level of ethnocentrism leads people to interpret outgroup’s behavior using their own cultural frame of reference, thereby possibly distorting the meaning of the outgroups’ behavior. Obviously, it is impossible to fulfill effective communication without understanding outgroups’ behavior.

What is more significant, ethnocentrism often serves as the starting point for most prejudicial beliefs (Samovar, 1998).

3.2 Prejudice

The term prejudice stems from the Latin word *praejudicium*, which means a precedent, or “a judgment based on previous decisions and experiences”. Prejudice involves making a prejudgment based on membership in a social category. While prejudice can be positive or negative, there is a tendency for most people to think of it as negative.

Plotnik (1986), a psychologist, defined prejudice as “an unfair, biased, or intolerant attitude towards another group of people”. When applied to intercultural communication, prejudice places the object of the prejudice at some disadvantage that is not directly related to the actual conduct of the person, but rather is part of the misjudgment of the person holding the prejudiced views.

3.2.1 Characteristics of prejudice

Prejudice has functions and uses for people, such as expressing values (“we are better than others”) or defending self-images (“the others have more money because they cheat”). Prejudices also take various forms, ranging from hostile rejection to very subtle tokenism.

People tend to think of prejudice in terms of a dichotomy: either prejudiced or not prejudiced. It is more accurate, however, to think of the strength of one’s prejudice as varying along a continuum from low to high. This suggests that people all are prejudiced to some degree. As with ethnocentrism, this is natural and unavoidable. It is the result of people’s being socialized as members of their ingroups. Even people with low levels of prejudice prefer to interact with those who are similar to them because such interactions are more comfortable and less stressful than interactions with outgroups.

An individual learns prejudice against outgroup members via the family socialization process,
education, the peer group, the mass media, and other such influences. Individuals can hold prejudices against others based on their skin color, foreign accent or local dialect, cultural or religious practices, and the like.

### 3.2.2 Effects of prejudice on communication effectiveness

The word *prejudice* means “prejudging” something or someone based on biased cognitive and affective preconceptions. Such judgment is often biased and inaccurate to some degree and accordingly has negative effects on communication.

Usually prejudice is seen as varying along a continuum ranging from very positive to very negative. People tend to be positively prejudiced toward their ingroup and negatively prejudiced toward outgroups.

Prejudice misleads people to the tendency of ignoring the information inconsistent with their attitude in communication. Prejudice serves the function of assisting them in organizing the world around them. Prejudice allows people to behave in accordance with the categories they have constructed, rather than on the basis of the actual incoming stimuli. In his book *The Social Animal*, Aronson (1972) provided an excellent example of how highly prejudiced people interpret incoming stimuli so that they are consistent with their attitude:

Prejudiced people see the world in ways that are consistent with their prejudice. If Mr. Bigot sees a well dressed, white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant sitting on a park bench sunning himself at three o’clock on a Wednesday afternoon, he thinks nothing of it. If he sees a well-dressed Blackman doing the same thing, he is liable to leap to the conclusion that the person is unemployed — and he becomes infuriated, because he assumes that his hard-earned taxes are paying that shiftless good-for-nothing enough in welfare subsidies to keep him in good clothes. If Mr. Bigot passes Mr. Anglo’s house and notices that a trash can is overturned and some garbage is strewn about, he is apt to conclude that a stray dog has been searching for food. If he passes Mr. Garcia’s house and notices the same thing, he is inclined to become annoyed, and to assert that “those people live like pigs.” Not only does prejudice influence his conclusions, his erroneous conclusions justify and intensify his negative feelings.

From the above it is obvious that people’s prejudiced attitude, consciously or unconsciously, leads to misinterpretations or misunderstandings, and as a result, negatively affects intercultural communication and makes effective communication impossible.
It can be noticed that a close relationship between negative stereotypes and prejudice exists because people have feelings (or prejudices) about various traits and beliefs (the content of the stereotypes) they believe others possess.

3.3 Stereotypes

Stereotyping is a complex form of categorization that mentally organizes people’s experiences and guides their behavior toward a particular group of people. Lippman, in 1957, indicated that stereotypes are a means of organizing people’s images into fixed and simple categories that they use to stand for the entire collection of people.

Stereotyping is an exaggerated set of expectations and beliefs about the attributes of a group membership category. A stereotype is an overgeneralization about an identity group without any attempt to perceive individual variations within the identity category.

3.3.1 Characteristics of stereotypes

Like ethnocentrism and prejudice, stereotyping is a natural result of the communication process. People cannot help stereotyping when they communicate on automatic pilot.

Because stereotypes are categories about people, they have all the features of categories, especially the organization of specific bits of information and subsequent reaction to the category as a whole. If people hold a well-formed stereotype about some ethnic or cultural group, then they may use that stereotype when they interact with any individual belonging to that group.

Categories in general and stereotypes in particular are shortcuts to thinking. People have to make so many decisions about their behavior during a given day that they need guidance, hints, helpful rules, and so forth. Stereotypes serve this purpose.

3.3.2 Effects of stereotypes on communication effectiveness

Stereotypes, in and of themselves, do not lead to miscommunication or communication breakdowns. If, however, inaccurate stereotypes are held rigidly, they lead to inaccurate predictors of others’ behavior and to misunderstandings. In addition to inaccurate stereotypes, simple stereotypes of other groups can lead to misunderstandings. In order to promote effectiveness in communicating with outgroups, people need to increase the complexity of their stereotypes (e.g. include a large number of traits in the stereotype and differentiate subgroups within the group being stereotyped) and question their unconscious assumption that most members of a group fit a single stereotype (Stephan & Rosenfield, 1982).
Given that people cannot respond to the specific traits, needs, and goals of every individual when they meet, they have to group people together and then respond according to their knowledge of that group or category. By doing so, they run the risk of stereotyping the individual and putting him or her at a disadvantage. People’s stereotypes lead them to depersonalize outgroups. When this occurs, little emphasis is placed on an individual outgroup’s characteristics since the stereotypes associated with the outgroups are guiding communication behaviors. People use their stereotypes of outgroups to explain communication difficulties and, therefore, confirm their negative feelings associated with outgroups. Participants in intergroup breakdowns are likely to seek advice and consolation from members of the ingroup and, therefore, they will ultimately attribute the cause of the breakdown to the outgroups.

To sum up, ethnocentrism, prejudices and stereotypes, as the components of intergroup perception, are closely related to each other. Ethnocentrism is usually the source of prejudices and prejudices are overlapping with negative stereotypes to a great extent. These three psychocultural factors are all the consequences of one’s cultural socialization and often function as major barriers to intercultural communication.

4. Ways to facilitate communication effectiveness

Communication scholar Y.Y. Kim (1988) pointed out that individuals who hope to carry out effective intercultural interaction must be equipped with a set of abilities to understand and deal with dynamics of cultural differences. To facilitate communication effectiveness, one is supposed to employ some strategies.

4.1 Develop Empathy

Empathy literally means “feeling into” another’s feelings with one’s own, vicariously, and attempting to achieve some I-thou congruence. Empathy is multi-faceted, involving cognitive (thinking), affective (feeling), and communication components:

Cognitively, the empathic person takes the perspective of another person, and in so doing strives to see the world from the other’s point of view. Affectively, the empathic person experiences the emotions of another; he or she feels the other’s experiences. Communicatively, the empathic individual signals understanding and concern through verbal and nonverbal cues (Bell, 1981).

The cognitive, affective, and communication components are highly interrelated and must be
present for outgroups to perceive that the participants are being empathic.

Empathy involves (1) carefully listening to interlocutors, (2) understanding interlocutors’ feelings, (3) being interested in what interlocutors say, (4) being sensitive to interlocutors’ needs, and (5) understanding interlocutors’ points of view. While these indicators of empathy include verbal components, people tend to rely on nonverbal behavior more than verbal behavior when they interpret interlocutors’ behaviors as empathic (Bell, 1981).

Empathy has been long recognized as a central element for intercultural communication effectiveness. It refers to a process of projecting oneself into another person’s point of view in which he thinks the same thoughts and feels the same emotions as another (Adler, 1987). Empathy allows people to sense what is inside another’s mind or to step into another person’s shoes.

However, in intercultural communication, people often engage in defensive behavior that keeps other people from wanting to reveal information about themselves — information people need if they are going to engage in empathetic behavior. Empathy cannot take place when one of the individuals becomes defensive over the other person’s lack of interest. Other factors such as constant self-focus, stereotyped notions concerning gender, race and culture, an attitude of superiority and dogmatism can all be potential stumbling blocks to empathy.

For intercultural communication to be successful, people must all learn to go beyond personal boundaries and try to learn about the experiences of those who are not part of their daily lives. People must realize that they have to develop empathy and that can be cultivated only if they become sensitive to the values and customs of the culture with which they are interacting (ibid).

4.2. Intercultural Adaptation

To achieve intercultural adaptation, people must observe the following prerequisites:

(1) Intercultural Awareness

Intercultural awareness more or less refers to the cognitive aspect of intercultural communication competence and it helps people realize commonalities of, and particularly differences in cultural patterns. Also, it helps people adjust psychologically to other cultures and arrive at cognitive and affective “readiness” stage in intercultural communication.

(2) Open-mindedness and Behavioral Flexibility

Open-mindedness, here, means one is willing to accept change and is not closed to new ideas. When one communicates with outgroups, he should not interpret their behaviors on the basis of his
own frame of reference, which may lead to ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and even prejudice. Meanwhile, one needs to employ some strategies to compensate the gap in communication; that is to say, one needs to be flexible and adapt his communication style to each culture and situation that confronts him (Samovar, 1998).

(3) Knowledge About and Direct Contact With the Target Culture

The knowledge of the outgroup’s culture and of how it is different from and similar to one’s own has a direct effect on his interpretation and predictions of their behavior. Knowledge here means communicator’s awareness or understanding of what needs to be done in order to communicate appropriately and effectively. Generally, the greater one’s cultural and linguistic knowledge, the less the misunderstandings will be.

Intercultural adaptation, to a great extent, can bridge the psychocultural gap in communication between interlocutors from different cultures and help them promote communication effectiveness.

5. Conclusion

As indicated previously, people, consciously or unconsciously, have the tendency of ethnocentrism, prejudice and stereotypes, which often function as major psychocultural barriers to their intercultural communication.

To promote communication effectiveness, people are supposed to empathize in dealing with the negative impacts of their attitudinal tendency (e.g. ethnocentrism, prejudice and stereotypes). Moreover, people should be culturally sensitive; i.e. they should have intercultural awareness, which can help them perceive what happens in the process of communication even if it is not explicitly spoken or acted out.

References


