



Defining culture and interculturality in the workplace

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Defining culture and interculturality in the workplace: how cultures interact within organisations

In this presentation I am going to focus on the link between cultures and communication in the workplace: how do we use our different cultures to communicate, and how do these cultures evolve through the process of communication? Based on this reflection, I will then propose definitions for the terms multicultural, intercultural, cross-cultural and transcultural, applied to communication.

The contentious point that I want to raise concerns how we delimit the field of intercultural communication. Generally, conventionally, and, I would argue, more or less arbitrarily, many authors, in English and in French, limit their studies in intercultural communication to the level of national cultures. They recognise that there are also differences within national cultures, but do not generally focus on their impact on the “intercultural” communication they are studying. While there are good reasons to single out the national level of culture as different from other cultures (sometimes called “sub-cultures”), I would like to argue that artificially delimiting the field in this way is scientifically reductive, and in some cases may prevent our better understanding of the interpersonal processes at play in interactions within the multicultural workplace, for example.

My reflection is based largely on my PhD study in which I examined the interpersonal, intercultural interactions within a European student association, named AEGEE, to which I will refer to illustrate what I am saying.

The vision that I am going to present rests on two premises. Firstly, that intercultural communication is possible and does happen! When we read a lot of cross-cultural work focusing on national cultural differences, we get the general impression that there are so many differences that it is a miracle people manage to understand one another at all. My approach is slightly different (it is intercultural rather than cross-cultural, as I will explain later). Based on the

observation that people always seem to manage to communicate (with more or less mutual understanding), what interests me is how they cope with cultural and identity differences in seeking to establish common grounds for understanding.

The second presupposition is that there is no fundamental, qualitative difference between national culture and other cultures. Culture is an idealised construct associated with group belonging. It corresponds to the shared knowledge (meanings, values, representations and so on) attributed to members of a particular group, developed and modified through interactions with other group members. The culture of a particular group, be it a national group, a company, or a coach party, is learnt through socialisation within that group. However, since we all have different cognitive make-ups, different value sets and so on, it is improbable that any 2 people share an identical representation of a particular culture (certain traits yes, others no), and this is why I suggest that a culture is an artificial or idealised construct.

It is traditional in cross-cultural, and much intercultural communication work, to isolate culture on a national level, but there appears to be relatively little scientific justification for this. When you observe interactions, people from different national groups within a company, for example, are able to use shared references linked to company culture as a source of predictability and of common grounds for understanding.

My hypothesis is that the only difference between national and other levels of culture is in the nature of socialisation. For a vast majority of people, primary socialisation takes place in an environment (home, school, media) marked by national culture (but also class culture and others). This socialisation strongly marks the cognitive make-up of the individual: it can be considered “absolute”, in the sense that the individual has no pre-existing culture: it is “*tabula rasa*” socialisation.

Secondary socialisation, on the other hand, is relative in nature. The individual is already socialised in their primary socialisation cultures, and secondary socialisation cultures are learnt *relative* to this. *ie.* the individual learns such cultures as deviations from the pre-established norms : values, representations, meanings of the primary socialisation cultures.

The consequences of this reasoning are as follows: primary socialisation cultures (national cultures) have a much more profound impact on the (largely unconscious) cognitive structuring of the individual, whereas secondary socialisation is largely conscious, and consists in adapting certain interiorised norms to the norms observed within the groups of secondary socialisation. In this way, even between individuals socialised in a common culture of secondary socialisation, there is still scope for considerable intercultural misunderstanding since their secondary socialisation does not extend to many unconscious cultural presuppositions linked to primary socialisation.

The advantage, from a scientific point of view, in restoring the link between national and other types of culture, is that it then becomes possible to reflect on how different cultures affect our communication in a given interaction. Instead of being the products of a sole national culture, our different groups and identities are all called to account in explaining the way we behave. These different cultures do not determine behaviour, they prefigure it, meaning, they constitute a source of possible meanings to which individuals can refer to make sense of one another's behaviour. The way people actually behave in a given situation is evidently linked to a very large number of factors, but generally guided by the necessity to appear predictable and coherent to others (principle of intersubjectivity). This predictability consists in behaving in a manner compatible with one's different identities (person identities, role identities but also social identities – ie identities associated with the membership of social groups).

The relationship between cultures and communication is thus one of *prefiguration* – cultures make available certain behavioural traits, representations and so on, that individuals may or may not integrate into their actual behaviour, based on the *configuration* of the situation (the different identities of the participants and their definition of the encounter), and on the *figures* which emerge from the encounter itself (the way different elements are actually defined, negotiated, performed, by the participants, during the interaction). In Dijon, we call this model, based on the three levels of cultural

prefiguration, contextual *configuration*, and emerging *figures* in particular encounters, the “semiopragmatics” model of communication. Semio because we are dealing with how meaning is constructed, and pragmatics because it is a questions of forms emerging in a particular context.

The fact that national identities and cultures can here, and at different moments, be more or less relevant than company culture, departmental cultures, or ethnic cultures, depending on the situation and the course of events, allows us to usefully apply this model to communication within organisations in a multicultural context.

It also allows us to think about the way these different cultures may evolve through interactions in the workplace, due to the fact that they are commonly activated simultaneously. A couple of examples which I observed in my student association will, I hope, illustrate this more clearly.

The first one concerns how new cultural traits may be adopted, based on innovations which happen during interactions. It stems basically from a typing error. The association I followed meets up every six months for a 4-day congress of 800 or so people, which culminates in the ceremony whereby new local groups sign up to join the association. They sign a document called the “*convention d’adhesion*” (for historic reasons, they use the French name, although the *lingua franca* of the association is English). At one such congress, a typing error slipped into the programme, and instead of reading “*signing* the convention d’adhésion”, the programme said “*singing*” (the “n” and the “g” were back to front). When the moment came, a group of students stood up, and started singing to the tune of “*Sur le Pont d’Avignon*”:

“*Convention d’adhésion, on la signe, on la signe,
Convention d’adhésion, on la signe tous ensemble*”.

The song was picked up by the rest of the 800 or so people, and then repeated for all the different signatures. It was then subsequently sung at the next congress, and the one after, and has become a part of the association’s culture, to

the point that the words are now projected onto a big screen at every congress, since relatively few of the participants now speak French.

The second example is linked to the way cultural traits may be transferred between groups through interaction. It concerns Dutch culture and association culture. There are many Dutch students in the association (the figures are something like 20% of around 15000 members). Apparently, this success is linked to the strength of student associations in the Netherlands, where they form an important part of student social life. Dutch students are proud to belong to their group, and are competitive towards rival groups. Their competitiveness takes various forms, including a game, whereby the groups try to steal from one another any emblematic objects on public display, such as flags, mascots and so on. They triumphantly keep the objects for a while, before returning them to their owners.

The Dutch local groups in AEGEE had started a variant of this game, whereby they would try to steal each other's flags during congresses. The game soon spread to other, non-Dutch groups, and has become a tradition within the association today, to the point that most members are unaware of its Dutch origins.

In other words, participating in this game, which was initially a trait linked to Dutch student culture, became a trait common to all association members. Because Dutch student culture and associative culture were continuously activated simultaneously, while playing the game, as possible sources of reference, the trait came to be transferred between the two.

Examples like this can thus help us to better understand how organisational cultures and the other cultures, activated alongside them within an organisation, *ie.* taken as sources of reference in interpersonal encounters, may gradually come to affect one another, certain traits “rubbing off”, as it were. In this sense, a very **wide** range of encounters can be seen as “intercultural”, or at least “multicultural” since they involve the cultures of different groups.

How then, might we define these terms in order to be able to relate different levels of culture to one another, that is to say without artificially reducing intercultural communication to communication between **national** cultures alone?

If we are to accept, for its heuristic potential and theoretical coherency, this wider definition of culture, based on the social group, then it stands to reason that all interpersonal communication is to some degree multicultural, insofar as it involves individuals who belong to several social groups. In this sense, advances in intercultural communication, notably concerning the way that individuals manage their different identities and cultures, can interest interpersonal communication studies in general, and indeed such parallels have already been drawn, as illustrated by the work done in CAT, on “intergenerational” communication.

It thus appears unnecessary to worry too much about what makes communication “intercultural” rather than “ordinary”, to take a distinction sometimes used. Rather, it seems more reasonable to talk about multicultural, intercultural, cross-cultural or transcultural **aspects** or **dimensions** of communication, which become more or less foregrounded at certain moments, and which can be taken as an object of study by researchers who are thus inclined. I would argue that the practise of artificially limiting intercultural study to the study of contact between national cultures is unnecessary, and at worst misleading, but that the more profound influence of national cultures on communicative behaviour can and should be underlined, for the reasons linked to socialisation that I have already suggested.

From a terminological point of view, it remains then for us to distinguish the four terms based on their prefixes: multi-, inter-, cross- and trans-.

I would propose that the use of “multicultural” should be clearly distinguished from the political notion of “multiculturalism”, and that, for our purposes, multi- should be taken to refer simply to plurality. “Multicultural” communication,

which I would not distinguish from “pluricultural”, refers merely to the fact that several cultures can be involved in an interaction. As I have suggested, this is necessarily the case if we consider individuals to be complex social beings belonging to several social groups. The adjective “Multicultural” applied to communication, appears, then, to be pleonastic in many cases.

Whereas “multicultural” supposes the coexistence of several cultures, the adjective “intercultural” suggests **interactions** between different cultures. It thus refers to the way that different cultures contribute simultaneously to shape communicational behaviour and common references negotiated by participants in an encounter, but also to the impact that such interactions may have on the cultures of the groups concerned. This second sense is related to the process called, in French, “*l’interculturalisation*” (Demorgon) – the process whereby cultures which come into contact mutually influence one another’s evolution.

Whereas intercultural communication necessarily concerns situations of contact, “cross-cultural” communication can be defined as the study of **differences** between cultures, in the tradition of Hall, Hofstede, Trompenaars and many others. Cultures, or certain aspects of them, are studied systemically, more or less in isolation, and then compared to one another. Such studies can teach us about behaviour within cultural groups, but, as Hofstede warns, should not be applied strictly to communication **between** groups: they completely ignore the symbolic dimension of intercultural contact, *ie.* the way that individuals take into account one another’s identity as a member of another group, and make allowances for this, both in the way they behave, and in how they analyse one another’s behaviour.

Finally, transcultural aspects of communication, I would suggest, can be defined as aspects of communication which are valid across social groups, or which do not take into account cultural differences.

These definitions are, I stress, personal ones, based on my own conceptualisation of the links between culture and communication. I believe that one of the objectives of this panel is to discuss how we each understand this terminology, and so I hope that my contribution will have been able to start the ball rolling.