

Effectiveness of Communication between American and Chinese Employees in Multinational Organizations in China

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This study investigates how American and Chinese employees perceive the effectiveness of communication between them and what kinds of communication barriers they have encountered. I conducted interviews with 42 employees from 28 multinational organizations operating in North China. Participants were recruited using snowball and network sampling techniques. A constant comparative method was used to analyze the data. Findings show that about one-third of the participants were satisfied with their intercultural communication at work, and others considered their intercultural communication somewhat effective or not effective. Participants' explanations indicate that they used different criteria to evaluate communication effectiveness. Such criteria include having good work relationships, getting the job done, and getting their points across. Regardless of their degrees of satisfaction, all participants reported some barriers to intercultural communication. Major barriers include language barriers, face concern, different thinking patterns, different communication styles, lack of shared knowledge, and inefficient organizational structures. Drawing on Hofstede's theoretical framework, this study provides a detailed account of how national culture affects communication between American and Chinese employees in the workplace. Research findings not only bring insights into the field of intercultural organizational communication, but also help practitioners better understand intercultural communication problems in a workplace.

In this era of globalization, multinational organizations are dominating the world economy (Shuter & Wiseman, 1994). One of the central challenges faced by multinational organizations is to manage a workforce composed of people from different cultures (Joshi, Labianca, & Caligiuri, 2002; Shenkar & Zeira, 1987). Because employees from different cultural backgrounds often have different values, beliefs, and assumptions concerning various issues, misunderstanding or conflict could easily occur during intercultural interaction (Earley & Mosakowski, 2000; Ting-Toomey, 1999). As a matter of fact, problems relating to inadequate intercultural understanding have undermined international organizational effectiveness (Lindsley, 1999). On the contrary, effective intercultural communication contributes to a healthy working environment and productive collaboration among culturally diverse staff (Tokarek, 2006). Therefore, it is necessary to study intercultural communication in a multicultural and multilingual workplace. Although there is extensive literature on intercultural communication, existing intercultural communication theories still have limited direct application to communication in a business setting (Beamer & Varner, 2008).

To address this need, this study examines intercultural communication effectiveness in multinational organizations operating in China. As the fastest growing economy in the world, China has achieved great success in attracting foreign direct investment (FDI). China is the top destination among developing countries for FDI for 17 consecutive years ("China to remain a FDI's favorite," 2009). The United States is one of the main sources of FDI in China

(“China’s absorption of foreign fund,” 2009). Most large western multinational corporations have established operations in China (Björkman & Lu, 1999). Specifically, this study investigates: a) how American and Chinese employees perceive the effectiveness of communication between them; and b) what prevents them from communicating effectively.

Based on Hofstede’s national cultural dimensions and interviews with 42 employees from 28 multinational organizations, this study offers a detailed account of how national culture affects communication between American and Chinese employees in the workplace. The examples and themes identified in this study not only bring fresh insights into intercultural organizational communication, but are also beneficial to practitioners. If multinational organizations incorporated some of the findings into their employee training programs, it would help employees become more effective in dealing with cultural differences and perhaps become more competent in their future intercultural communication.

Literature Review

Intercultural communication refers to “communication between people from different national cultures” (Gudykunst, 2002, p. 79). Dodd (1998) argued that effectiveness is the ultimate goal of intercultural communication. According to him, effective intercultural communication produces three outcomes: task effectiveness, relationship effectiveness, and cultural adjustment. The task outcome results from effective job performance. The relationship outcome concerns the quality and number of relationships. Some examples of a good relationship include understanding others, decreasing tensions, and managing conflict effectively. Cultural adjustment means going through transitions and adapting to a new culture.

Examining intercultural communication effectiveness requires a conceptual understanding of how national culture influences communication behaviors. This study employs a few theoretical frameworks: Hofstede’s (1980) national cultural dimensions, Hall’s (1989) high-context vs. low-context dimensions, and face concern.

Hofstede’s (1980) National Cultural Dimensions

Through analyzing employee values within subsidiaries of the International Business Machines (IBM) corporation in 40 countries, Hofstede (1980) identified four major cultural dimensions: individualism-collectivism, power distance, masculinity-femininity, and uncertainty avoidance. This study will mainly discuss the two most relevant dimensions: individualism-collectivism and power distance.

Individualism-collectivism. Individualism-Collectivism (I-C) has been considered to be “one of the most powerful relationship indicators across cultures” (Dodd, 1998, p. 92). Briefly speaking, people of individualistic cultures are self-oriented and stress independence and individual achievement, whereas people of collectivistic cultures are other-oriented and emphasize connectedness, harmony, and conformity (Hofstede, 2001). Differences in individualistic and collectivistic orientations entail different communication styles. Individualistic cultures encourage people to speak up and express themselves openly, whereas collectivist cultures teach people to control their feelings and express themselves in subtle ways (Singelis, 1994). For instance, one could expect a great deal of self-disclosure, assertive

behavior, and other personal-advancement issues to arise in an individualistic culture. On the other hand, there are far more strategies of pleasing people, solidarity, relational issues, and face saving that occur in a collectivist culture (Dodd, 1998). Some studies (e.g., Hofstede, 1980; Hui & Triandis, 1986) have shown that American society is highly individualistic and Chinese society tends to be collectivistic.

Power distance. Power distance is “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 98). Hofstede (2001) argued that inequality in power is inevitable in any society, however, the exercise of power and degree of power distance differ among cultures. In a high power distance society, inequality is accepted; supervisors and subordinates are considered as two different types of people; and the powerful are entitled to privileges. Comparatively, in a low power distance society, people will try to minimize inequality and pursue egalitarian ideas; and the use of power should be legitimate. The predominant organizational features in a high power distance society include centralized structure, authoritative leadership, frequent role ambiguity, and constrained access to information. In comparison, organizations in a lower power distance society prefer a decentralized structure, consultative leadership, less role ambiguity, and open information flow. Hofstede’s research findings show that Chinese cultures (such as in Hong Kong and Taiwan) are in the upper part of the scale (high power distance), and the United States is in the lower half of the scale (low power distance).

High-context vs. Low-context

Through examining different communication styles and contexts across cultures, Hall (1989) categorized two types of culture: high-context culture and low-context culture. In a high-context culture, meanings are implicit and mainly reside in the socio-cultural context or are internalized by the individual. People in a high-context society usually do not directly express themselves. They are often reluctant to say no to others and are careful about what they say in order not to offend others. They also have a high degree of tolerance of ambiguity and inconsistency between verbal and nonverbal messages. On the contrary, in a low-context culture communication is linear and direct; meanings are manifest in explicit verbal messages; clarity and accuracy are highly valued. People of a low-context culture accept direct confrontation and do not consider open argument as offensive. Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) observed that “all cultures Hall labels as low-context are individualistic, given Hofstede’s score, and all of the cultures Hall labels as high-context are collectivistic in Hofstede’s schema” (p. 44).

Face Concern

Face is “the claimed sense of self-respect or self-dignity in an interactive situation” (Ting-Toomey, 1994, p. 3). Researchers have looked at face from different perspectives, and most of them agree that face is a common phenomenon in every culture. Although face is a universal concept, its meaning varies across cultures. For instance, in the West although a person’s face is negotiated socially, it is not associated with others’ face (Goffman, 1967). On the contrary, face is an interdependent phenomenon in China. As Chang and Holt (1994)

pointed out, Western understanding of face has been influenced by the ideas of impression management, whereas the Chinese concept of face emphasizes the nature of the relationship. Jia (1997) further identified four major characteristics of the Chinese notion of face: social or communal, relational, hierarchical, and moral. First, the Chinese concept of face is social: It is not only cherished by an individual, but also scrutinized by others and the community where that person lives. Second, the Chinese concept of face is relational: Through giving or claiming face, relational partners express their emotional concerns for each other. The extent of their concerns varies depending upon the closeness of the relationship and one's social status (Chang & Holt, 1994). Third, the Chinese concept of face is hierarchical. Face is exercised according to "the relational hierarchy within the family, which is constructed by age, blood ties, and the hierarchical nature of the society" (Chang & Holt, 1994, p. 105). Finally, the Chinese concept of face is moral. Loss of face entails "not only the condemnation of society, but the loss of its confidence in the integrity of ego's characters" (Hu, 1944, p. 61).

Empirical Studies on Communication in Multinational Organizations in China

During the past two decades, a number of studies have been done on multinational organizations in China. Much of the literature has discussed human resources management, marketing strategies, knowledge transfer, and expatriate training. Studies that examine communication issues are still limited. Among those limited studies, conflict is often a central topic. Because the focus of this study is not on conflict, I did not include conflict literature in the following review.

Hoon-Halbauer (1999) performed an in-depth analysis of managerial relationships in two Sino-foreign joint ventures in China. She identified some factors that often cause problems in communication between Chinese and foreign staff. These factors include distinct differences in organizational and cultural backgrounds, mistrust, language barrier, and organizational disorder (e.g., too many managerial levels, lack of clear policies and rules, etc.). She also pointed out that most collaborative difficulties could be alleviated in an organization with effective leadership and a strong corporate culture.

Mohr (2005) interviewed 27 managers of Sino-German joint ventures in China and found that many respondents regarded "the lack of, and the difficulties associated with the communication as a major problem within the interaction between the partner firms" (p. 15). In particular, cultural and language differences made intercultural communication difficult. He also noticed that in some cases, German partners were more satisfied with communication than Chinese partners were. Hence, he argued that different cultures have different ideas as to what effective interaction or communication entails.

Dolles and Wilmking (2005) also conducted their research in Sino-German joint ventures. They found that all managers interviewed (ten German and ten Chinese) positively perceived open communication modes and open information sharing. In addition, only Chinese managers offered positive statements about the work style, whereas German managers complained about the local workplace behavior. Chinese managers also reported that some behaviors of German expatriates, such as confrontation during meetings, are not culturally appropriate in China. On the other hand, German expatriates did not consider some Chinese practices, such as *guan-xi* (inter-relation) and face-saving, to be acceptable business norms.

Du-Babcock and Babcock (1996) have done much research on languages in multinational organizations. Through examining communication dynamics between Western expatriates and local Chinese in 14 multinational organizations in Taiwan, they categorized three communication zones depending on Western expatriates' Chinese proficiency. Their findings indicate that communication systems differ in these three zones. Since expatriates in zone one had no or little Chinese skills, they modified their communication strategies (e.g., using simple English vocabulary) according to the English competence of Chinese staff, and relied on intermediaries to clarify their message. Expatriates in zone two were partially bilingual. They used similar communication strategies as those in zone one, but engaged in a higher proportion of direct intercultural communication. Expatriates in zone three were fully bilingual and their communication with Chinese staff was unrestricted. In their later publication (2001), Babcock and Du-Babcock provided more thorough explanations of communication dynamics and strategies in each zone.

In another study, Du-Babcock (1999) analyzed communication behaviors of Hong Kong bilingual employees in Cantonese (their native language) and English (their second language) decision-making meetings. She found that in a Cantonese meeting participants demonstrated a circular and interactive communication pattern (high-context pattern), whereas in an English meeting their communication pattern became linear or sequential (low-context pattern). She also found that participants (especially those who were not proficient in English) were reluctant to communicate spontaneously in English meetings because they were afraid of losing face and looking foolish. Her research findings indicate that the language people speak influences their thought patterns and communication behaviors.

Research Questions

Previous research on intercultural communication in multinational organizations is often restricted to the perspectives of managers or expatriates, while little attention was given to lower level employees (Moore, Holloway, & Rees, 2008). Additionally, little has been documented about how employees think about intercultural communication effectiveness at work. In attempting to fill this void, I posed the following two research questions:

RQ 1: How do American and Chinese employees think about the effectiveness of communication between them?

RQ 2: What kind of barriers do American and Chinese employees encounter during their interaction?

Method

Because the primary purpose of this study was to understand participants' perceptions of intercultural communication, I conducted in-depth interviews to collect data. This method allowed me to gather detailed explanations from participants about their real life experiences. It also encouraged participants to reveal issues that I did not consider but were of interest to this study.

Participants

Participants were either American or Chinese employees who worked in multinational organizations and had intercultural communication experiences. In this study “American” refers to a citizen of the United States, and “Chinese” refers to a Chinese citizen. I tried several ways to recruit participants, yet at the end, only two ways worked. They are: 1) asking family members and friends to refer participants to me (network sampling), and 2) requesting participants to recommend qualified people to participate in this study (snowball sampling). It is appropriate to use network and snowball sampling techniques when the target research population is not easily available (Keyton, 2005), which is the case for this study.

In all, 42 people voluntarily participated in this study, including 20 non-Chinese Americans, 19 Chinese, and 3 Chinese Americans. All of the non-Chinese Americans identified themselves as Caucasian. One Chinese American grew up in the United States and did not speak Chinese, and the other two Chinese Americans were naturalized American citizens who grew up in China. Twelve participants were female and 30 were male. All participants have received at least a bachelor’s degree. Many participants were mid-level or low-level employees in their organizations. The majority of non-Chinese American participants had extensive overseas experience before they came to China. Six of them were expatriate managers, and 14 were hired in China. Almost all of those 14 American participants had studied in China before they started working in their current organizations. Of the 19 Chinese participants, 10 had studied or worked abroad. Of the remaining nine participants, six had been to the United States on business at least once. The majority of participants were less than 40 years old. All Chinese participants spoke English during intercultural communication. Three American participants communicated with their Chinese coworkers mainly in Chinese, and all other American participants mainly used English at work.

Participants were from 28 multinational organizations operating in China. Most of these organizations had their headquarters in the United States. These organizations were in a variety of industries, including telecommunication, accounting, advertising, public relations, agriculture, cosmetics, manufacturing, information technology, and legal services.

Data Collection

I interviewed each participant face to face using a semi-structured interview protocol. I developed the interview protocol based on literature review and suggestions from a few communication scholars. To be more specific, I first asked participants about how much intercultural experience they had and what language(s) they used in intercultural communication. I then asked how they think about their intercultural communication experience, whether there were any problems or conflicts, and what caused these problems. I also asked if there are cultural differences between American and Chinese coworkers and how they deal with these differences. All but three interviews were tape recorded with permission from participants. Interviews with all Chinese participants and two Chinese Americans were conducted in Chinese, and interviews with all American participants and one Chinese American were conducted in English. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two

hours, with most interviews lasting approximately 50 minutes¹. I stopped doing interviews when the data became redundant and no or few new themes were evident from new data collection (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

I interviewed all participants either in their office or in a public setting, such as a coffee shop. All interviews were conducted in 2005 in China. Specifically, I conducted 35 interviews in Beijing and seven in Qingdao. Both Beijing and Qingdao are in northern China. Beijing is the political and cultural center as well as the largest science and technology center in China. Qingdao is one of the open coastal cities in China that has provincial-level economic management rights and is an important trading port of China.

Data Analysis

All 39 tape recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. All transcribed Chinese scripts (n=21) were translated into English for analysis. All transcriptions and translations were done by me as I am fluent in both Chinese and English. I also asked two native English speakers to verify some words to ensure accuracy. A constant comparative method was used to analyze the data in order to identify categories and thematic patterns (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method involves constant comparisons of different people, incidents, times, and categories (Charmaz, 2000). To be more specific, data analysis commenced with open coding (unrestricted coding) in order to identify as many categories as possible (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). That is, I read each script line by line and marked meaningful data; then I labeled and categorized the marked passages. Next, I compared these categories and tried to distinguish patterns or connections. Similar categories were further grouped into a broader category, creating a higher level of categorical abstraction (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In the following stage, each theme was examined and analyzed in accordance with the posed research questions. In an effort to capture the essence of the phenomenon under study, I constantly reviewed and reexamined the labels, categories, patterns, and themes.

Findings

In this section, findings are presented according to the two research questions. Participants' names are not revealed in order to protect their privacy.

Perceptions of Intercultural Communication Effectiveness

When asked whether their intercultural communication is effective, about one-third of the participants responded positively, and others answered, "ok," "somewhat effective," or "depending on circumstances." Participants' explanations indicate that they used different criteria, such as having good work relationships, getting the job done, or getting their points across, to evaluate communication effectiveness. A few participants said their intercultural communication was effective because they got along with each other. For instance, a Chinese employee said she enjoyed working with Americans because there was no pressure and they

¹ This paper was written based on some interview data, which were parts of the author's dissertation research.

became good friends.

Some participants regarded task completion as their primary goal in intercultural communication. As an American director stated, "I mean YES at the most basic level. We get our job done. We do our reporting. We get the administrative tasks done, and we do activities." Another American participant expressed a similar point in detail:

There are two ways of measuring my effectiveness. One, is my client happy? Two, does my team not hate me? So, usually I keep my clients happy. Some days my team is not happy with me, but to me my first priority is my client....When my clients are happy, I achieve my objectives. So, when they sign the check and send us money, and they keep doing that, I know that I have achieved my objectives.

In addition, a few participants stressed the importance of clarity and accuracy in intercultural communication. For instance, an American participant said his biggest challenge while working in China is "100% communication." According to him, there was always some uncertainty: "To communicate my ideas to the persons and have them understand, and vice versa, is hard." A Chinese participant told me that if he is going to communicate with someone, he will prefer to communicate with Chinese people because it is easy to understand Chinese.

Compared to communication with a person from the same cultural background, most participants agreed that intercultural communication is not as smooth and effective. They were also more tolerant about mistakes and misunderstandings during the process of intercultural communication. Some participants also reported that their intercultural communication has become more effective over time.

Although participants were generally satisfied with their communication at work, many reported they did not have much intercultural interaction outside of work. As a result, the width and depth of their intercultural communication was relatively limited. One Chinese interviewee, who believed that American and Chinese cultures are irreconcilable, mentioned that not only in China but also in the United States, Chinese people tend to stick together, and American people tend to hang out together. He provided a detailed explanation of his argument:

Because of cultural difference, when we [the Chinese] are communicating with them [Americans], we don't feel completely at ease. It is not because Americans discriminate against Chinese people. Instead, it is because many of our backgrounds and worldviews are different from theirs....To a great extent, we don't share the foundation and only interact at the surface level. The parts underneath the iceberg can never be merged together.

Some American participants expressed a similar opinion. An American director said that he tried to hang out with his Chinese team members as often as he could, but he admitted that "there are certain distances that can't be penetrated because of language and cultural differences." Another American employee did not think there was a barrier preventing American and Chinese coworkers from getting the work done well, but he thought there might be some barriers in terms of them becoming best friends outside of work:

When you deal with the personal level, sometimes it is hard to find the common ground to talk about things. I have lived here [China] for five years. I only have a handful of Chinese friends, not a lot. Still, most of my friends are foreign friends. But at work, I don't feel that is a problem at all, because you always have common things to talk about: the work.

He also noted that because more and more Chinese people have international experience and are open to new things, the situation is changing.

Despite the language and cultural barriers in intercultural communication, some Chinese participants told me that they prefer to or find it easier to communicate with Americans at work. Here are a few reasons cited: Americans are straightforward; Americans separate business from personal issues; and American bosses respect subordinates.

Intercultural Communication Barriers

Regardless of how effective they rated their intercultural communication, all participants reported some kinds of communication barriers, including language barriers, face concern, different thinking patterns, different communication styles, lack of shared knowledge, and inefficient organizational structures.

Language Barriers

Many American participants identified language barriers as a big challenge while working in China. As one of them stated,

If you are communicating with a person whose English is not strong, then you have to go through a translator, then the translator doesn't understand exactly what you are saying. If the translator is wrong, you have to take some time to find the right connection, and sometimes you have to draw pictures right up on the board.

Another American participant provided a specific example:

I had a situation where I wanted to do a conference call, and I assumed that my colleague knew that we were going to do a conference call. The meeting was at 3:30pm. She came to me at 3:00pm and said, "When are we leaving to go to the site?" I said, "We are not leaving. It is a conference call."

On the other hand, not understanding Chinese while working in China can lead to frustrations at work. As an American participant said, "Lots of things are happening, you are just not aware of that." For example, an American manager said that when his Chinese staff was answering phone calls, he did not know whether these phone calls were business related or personal. Another American employee said that the fact he had to use a translator made him feel not in total control all of the time, and he had to put a lot of trust in the translator.

Language cannot be completely separated from the social and cultural environment to which it belongs. With this in mind, it was not surprising to hear some participants mention

that sometimes they understood every single word but did not understand the meaning, especially when it comes to jokes or slang. As an American manager pointed out, "The words are right, but the context is not."

Face Concern

Face concern was constantly mentioned by both American and Chinese interviewees. The concept of face emerges as an essential part of Chinese values (Hwang, 1987). However, it is not easy for American people to understand such a total emphasis on face. As one American participant described:

In China, there is a great emphasis on not losing face. So, you have to be very aware of how you are reacting with people, how you make them look, not just what you are saying. While in America, the bottom line is getting the job done. Obviously in America, people lose face, but it is a little bit different in terms of how sensitive people are toward these things.

Because Chinese people do not want to lose face in public, sometimes they are reluctant to admit that they do not know or they are wrong. A Chinese participant said that Chinese people usually do not ask for help because they are afraid that others might underestimate their ability. An American manager observed that her Chinese staff did not tell her when they did not understand, and they would say "yes, yes, agree, agree" without having a clue about what is being said. Another American manager had similar experience and recalled an interesting story:

Our quality engineer did not speak English very well. One day in a meeting, we were going through some issues, and I said to her, "X, I need to discuss this issue with you. You and Y stay after the meeting. OK?" She said, "Yeah, yeah." Because I was not sure if she understood me, so I said, "X, after the meeting you stay, you are not going. Everyone else go." When the meeting ended, she was the first person out of the door. Everybody else looked at me and then started to laugh because everybody else in the room understood. I was very clear. I let her go and went to talk with her half an hour later because I thought if I stopped her immediately she would lose face.

Different Thinking Patterns

Because people are educated in different cultural contexts, their thinking patterns may be different. As an American participant stated, "Without the cultural understanding, sometimes it is easy to misinterpret what is happening in terms of motivation. Why somebody is asking you to do something? Different people might understand *why* differently and it is often not stated."

An American director said that miscommunication comes up all the time due to different cultural assumptions. For example, Chinese staff gave him too much respect, which, in his opinion, is not necessary. As he explained:

In order to do things, what I actually need is accuracy, not an information filter. I need the information right away, not the information that I have to go chase down and find out. From my perspective, they are not doing the job they should do. But from a Chinese perspective, what they are doing is being respectful toward me. So this creates a continuous problem.

One Chinese participant, who worked in the Human Resources department, said sometimes she had disputes with her American colleagues because of different mindsets. For instance, the Chinese government requires people to retire at the age of 60, but the American managers don't understand this policy. They think it is age discrimination. They think as long as the employee wants to work, he or she should work.

Different Communication Styles

Cultural differences are also manifested in communication styles. As a Chinese American participant, who had lived in both China and the United States for a long time, pointed out, "Americans are more outgoing and express their thoughts directly. They are more active in communication. Chinese are more reserved and passive." In terms of supervisor-subordinate communication, she noticed that American managers usually encourage open communication and their doors are always open, whereas Chinese managers usually keep distance from their subordinates. In addition, a Chinese employee stated that Chinese bosses are more likely to ask employees to follow their commands, whereas American bosses give employees more freedom.

Interestingly, it seems that most problems reported by participants arose because some Chinese people did not communicate directly and specifically. For instance, an American participant observed that not everything is clear-cut in China and there is much ambiguity: "What people say is not necessarily... *bu shi* [no]. So you have to be patient. You have to be able to read between the lines." Another American employee stated explicitly that indirect communication is harmful: "Chinese people usually don't want to offend others. They don't say 'no,' but 'maybe.'... Chinese may know that you are wrong but hesitate to tell you, maybe because they are modest. This creates a huge organizational communication problem." All Chinese participants agreed that in general, Americans are more direct than the Chinese, but many of them said that they were straightforward when communicating with Americans. In particular, a Chinese participant believed that Chinese people who work in multinational organizations are more likely to communicate directly than Chinese people working in state-owned enterprises.

In addition to the indirectness, an American participant thought the Chinese way of communication is not specific:

I find more generalizations and hesitations. In other words, people might say "gross like this; market would be good." But in any company, you have to say what percentage or how much, or what range. Give more specific answers. Lack of transparency at work makes people's business plans less specific than it should be.

Participants also reported that Chinese employees are less likely to speak up in public,

especially when an authority is present. For instance, an American participant noticed that her Chinese colleagues would not disagree directly with the boss even when the boss was clearly wrong. She pointed out, "The Chinese won't say 'we should do this or we should focus on that.' They just wait until the boss.... realizes the correct way. I feel this communication style takes longer for things to get to the point." A Chinese participant admitted that Chinese people sometimes are not good at, do not dare to, or are not used to openly expressing their opinions. Several Chinese participants tried to explain why Chinese people do not speak up. One pointed out that not speaking up has been influenced by cultural norms: "In a meeting, if one [Chinese] person speaks all the time, others will think this person tries to show off himself or herself. But Americans like this kind of employees." Another Chinese participant attributed this problem to language barriers: "Even you [the Chinese] speak good English, you still can't speak as well as you wish. You can't express yourself with perfect accuracy." He then added another reason, "In addition, in American companies Americans are the boss. Sometimes even you speak out, it won't make a big impact."

Lack of Shared Knowledge

Sometimes intercultural communication is not smooth because the two parties have little common knowledge. A mid-level Chinese director said that his American supervisor did not know much about the Chinese subordinates' work and sometimes simply made judgments based on his assumptions. According to this participant, "Chinese society is complex. If the supervisor were a Chinese, the situation would be better. But because he [the American supervisor] is not a Chinese, you have to spend much time explaining things to him."

On the other hand, many Chinese people, especially in the early years, were not familiar with western ways of doing business and managing an organization. For instance, an American director found that:

People here [in China] doing business haven't been in a capitalist type of operation for very long, so they are not used to that. So when you start to get into issues related to marketing, that itself requires a lot of education and subsequent patience. Certain things related to business don't exist for older Chinese people.

Inefficient Organizational Structures

Due to inefficient organizational structures, communication problems often occur between the headquarters and the subsidiaries. For instance, a Chinese participant said that her organization was huge and there were many bureaucratic issues. She often felt frustrated about the low communication efficiency in her organization. She said her company was operating in a vertical way: Each department was responsible for its own work and inter-department communication was lacking. For example, a request from the regional Service Department should be sent to the headquarters first, and then sent back to the regional Engineering Department, even though both departments are in the same building. Another Chinese participant mentioned she once had a miscommunication with two supervisors at the headquarters. She believed some information was lost in the communication process because "the information had been transferred through a few levels and many people." She thought

that if she could have a direct line of communication with her supervisors, the result would have been better.

An American participant, who was the director of a branch office in China, also faced a similar dilemma. As he stated, "Lots of things in China are uneven, whether service, salary, or level of efficiencies. The headquarters is not always sensitive about how things are so uneven in China. There can be inefficiency."

Discussion

Implications of the Findings

Participants used different standards, such as having positive work relationships, getting the job done, or getting the points across, to evaluate intercultural communication effectiveness. The first two criteria are outcome oriented, which are consistent with two of Dodd's (1998) three outcomes of effective intercultural communication. The third criterion is process oriented. Noticeably, participants did not use all three criteria to evaluate their communication effectiveness. In many cases, one criterion was used, such as getting the job done. In fact, participants' perceptions of communication effectiveness often depend on their expectations and goals of communication. If their goals or expectations were achieved, they would consider their intercultural communication effective. Especially in a business setting, the outcome is often more important than the process.

Many communication barriers or differences identified in this study support previous research. First, people from an individualistic and low-context cultural background (Americans) highly value accuracy and clarity in communication, and express their opinions or emotions directly. They also tend to separate business from personal issues, which was considered a positive attribute by many Chinese participants. On the other hand, people from a collectivistic and high-context cultural background (Chinese) are more likely to communicate indirectly and to have a higher degree of tolerance of ambiguity in communication. They tend to control their feelings and express them in a more subtle manner. As a result, many Chinese, as American participants mentioned, are not willing to speak up or speak against others in public. Second, the theme of power distance is also illustrated in the data. China has been a centralized society for thousands of years, so the practice of hierarchy is deeply rooted in Chinese society. Chinese employees were reported to be more likely to obey or compromise to the authority compared to American employees. Finally, although both American and Chinese people do not want to lose face, the Chinese practice the notion of face to a greater extent. Giving face may help avoid conflict and preserve harmonious relationships (Knutson, Hwang, & Deng, 2000), yet many American participants found that this kind of face concern causes problems in intercultural communication.

Meanwhile, we also need to pay more attention to some phenomena that have not been widely discussed in the previous literature. First, some participants deliberately changed their communication styles in different cultural contexts. For instance, some Chinese people are argumentative in a Chinese setting but quiet in an intercultural setting; and some Chinese are more direct in an intercultural context than in a mono-cultural context. Compared to their American counterparts, Chinese participants showed more varieties in their communication behaviors, for example, conforming to traditional Chinese styles, adopting American styles,

or blending styles. This finding partially supported Du-Babcock's (1999) claim that language shapes people's communication behavior. It should also be noted that at times people communicate in a certain way because of social pressure. As one Chinese participant said, "You know you should do it this way, although you don't want to do it." An American participant also observed, "When I had those direct Chinese people...I find that a lot of [Chinese] people don't find them very easy to work with." Understandably, Chinese people are still expected to conform to Chinese norms when communicating with other Chinese, but they may feel less restricted when communicating with foreigners.

Moreover, effectiveness of intercultural communication is context based. As many participants reported, although their intercultural communication at work was relatively satisfying, there was not much intercultural interaction in their personal lives. Therefore, when studying intercultural communication, it is necessary to distinguish intercultural communication at work (often required) from intercultural communication in one's personal life (freely chosen). It seems that communication between American and Chinese employees was more effective when the topics of discussion were not culturally related.

Another interesting finding is that some Chinese participants said they prefer to communicate with Americans at work, despite language and cultural barriers. In addition to Americans' tendency to communicate directly and professionally, another explanation could be that the relationship between American and Chinese coworkers (most often an American supervisor and a Chinese subordinate) is less competitive than the relationship between Chinese coworkers. As one Chinese participant summarized, "Competition is tough among the Chinese. Our relationship with Americans is not that competitive, so they are more open-minded and willing to help us. In addition, they are usually 10–30 years older than us." It could also be that in certain situations people are simply more tolerant and polite towards a person from a different cultural background. For instance, a Chinese participant said that Chinese people are usually polite when communicating with foreigners but are pickier when communicating with other Chinese. This phenomenon tells us that communication barriers or problems don't necessarily lead to negative impressions of the other party.

Fourth, variations within the same cultural group and similarities between two cultural groups are also of concern. Even though Americans generally are more direct than Chinese people, this does not mean they are direct at all times. As one Chinese participant commented, "As long as a corporation is big, there is always politics. In fact, Americans play politics in a more sophisticated way than we [Chinese] do." In addition, there are also some Chinese who communicate directly. In spite of the many differences, American and Chinese participants shared some similar perceptions of intercultural communication, and both groups stressed the importance of professionalism at work. These findings remind us not to look at cultural differences at the surface level. The issue of culture may be more complex than what is presumed.

Limitations of this Study

Findings in this study should be quoted with caution due to research limitations. First, this study was conducted in a specific context: western multinational organizations operating in China. The work environment in such organizations is relatively westernized, and the Chinese employees working there are usually highly educated and receptive to western

cultures. Their views may be different from Chinese people employed by state-owned organizations in China. Second, I did not know any of the participants prior to the interview. Lack of familiarity and our interaction during the interview may have influenced some participants' attitudes and selection of narratives. I tried to lessen this effect by being polite and attentive during the interviews as well as accommodating to participants' needs.

Suggestions for Future Research

Based on findings of this study, I wish to suggest the following topics for future research. First, communication in multinational organizations is certainly worthy of further exploration. During the interviews, participants constantly stressed the importance of communication at work. This study focused on analyzing communication between American and Chinese employees at the interpersonal level. Future research could examine communication in multinational organizations at the macro-level: to understand how organizational networks or corporate culture influence communication effectiveness at work.

Second, future researchers may interview intercultural coworkers in matched pairs. In this study I interviewed 42 employees from 28 organizations. This helped me gather many different viewpoints. Yet because these organizations are in different industries, some findings may not be comparable. Therefore, it would be helpful to interview intercultural coworkers in matched pairs to see how they perceive and react to the same situation in an organizational setting.

Third, the effect of cultural assimilation should also be further examined. Because this study is only a one-time study and there was a lack of consistency with respect to research sites, I was not able to more profoundly examine the long-term effects of cultural assimilation. If possible, researchers should conduct longitudinal studies to follow a multinational organization over a few years, in order to more accurately study the effects of cultural assimilation.

Finally, such a study could also be conducted in different contexts. For instance, future researchers may want to explore intercultural communication in Chinese organizations operating in the United States or in China. It would be interesting to note how the external environment influences the dynamics of intercultural communication in the workplace.

Note

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