INCIDENTS OF SENSITIVITY: SEEING WITH NEW EYES

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Abstract: Taking as a starting point the definition of intercultural communication competence as appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioural orientations of the world by Spitzberg and colleagues (2009), we believe with Dalib and colleagues (2011) that competent communication must begin with an understanding of cultural beliefs, values, and worldviews vis-a-vis that of cultural others, thus developing cultural self-awareness through intercultural experiences. Intercultural experience takes place when people from different social groups with different cultures meet (Moosmüller, 1996; Alred et al., 2002). Holmes and O'Neill (2012) put it this way: "Monitoring and managing emotions, and reflecting on the feelings of Self and Other in the intercultural encounter require sensitivity, empathy and facework; these [are] all important processes in developing an awareness of intercultural competence". We analyse a case of intercultural entrée of a person into a culturally strange community and concentrate on extraordinary intercultural experiences – incidents of sensitivity – that leave a memory trace and evoke transformations in individuals (Riivits-Arkonsuo et al., 2013), thus promoting intercultural communication competence. The case is documented with the help of an ethnographic fieldwork based on the PEER model of Holmes and O'Neill (2012) and serves as a basis for developing a tool for training for intercultural sojourns.

Keywords: intercultural communication competence; intercultural experiences; intercultural sensitivity

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of the article is to enlighten the topic of intercultural communication competence, considering the incidents of intercultural sensitivity as tools of developing the latter, embedded in the understanding of intercultural communication competence as comprised of both theoretical knowledge that helps to become aware of self and others in communication as well as cultural experiences. We carry out a ethnographic fieldwork based on the PEER model of Holmes and O'Neill (2012), taking a closer look at a cultural sojourner with the necessary theoretical background and thus with the ability to enhance awareness, and accompany her in her first longer stay in a culturally strange environment with the help of a research diary, looking for the incidents of intercultural sensitivity – moments when the person becomes aware of strangeness and differences and has to work out strategies to deal with it, ergo, develops intercultural communication competence.

2. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

2.1 Intercultural communication competence. Many researchers have identified a number of variables that contribute to intercultural communication competence, have constructed theoretical models and worked out quantitative instruments to measure it. Research findings support the view that intercultural competence is a combination of one's personal abilities (such as flexibility, empathy, open-mindedness, self-awareness, adaptability, language skills, cultural knowledge, etc.) as well as relevant contextual variables (such as shared goals, incentives, perceptions of equality, perceptions of agency, etc.) (Arasaratnam, 2015:1). The most known models are probably Anxiety-Uncertainty-Management by Gudykunst and colleagues (Gudykunst, 1993; Hubbert et al.,1998; Stephan, Stephan and Gudykunst, 1999; Gudykunst and Nishida, 2001), face-negotiation theory by Ting-Toomey (Ting-Toomey, 1993) and of latest, Deardorff's pyramid model of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006).

While talking about intercultural communication competence, Spitzberg and Changnon (2009) concentrate on the notion of relationality, that is, how people manage intercultural interactions. From this perspective they define intercultural competence as the

appropriate and effective management of interaction between people who, to some degree or another, represent different or divergent affective, cognitive, and behavioural orientations of the world (Spitzberg and Changnon, 2009:7).

In the model, proposed by Spitzberg and colleagues, communication competence has been defined as an impression, comprising both effectiveness (related to one's goals and appropriateness (not violating norms), composed of knowledge, motivation and social skills (Spitzberg and Cupach, 1984 and Spitzberg and Hecht, 1984 in Martin, 1993*).*

Hence, competent communicators are considered those who are able to co-orient and coordinate their behaviours (verbal and non-verbal) to accomplish personal goals as well as fitting themselves in the expectation of a given situation. Appropriateness reflects politeness and is defined as the avoidance of violating social or interpersonal norms, rules, or expectations (Spitzberg and Cupach 1984:7 in Dalib *et al.*, 2014:131). Intercultural competence is not a feature an individual can obtain, like Western scholars often believe, but the matter of interpersonal relationship. For example, in Korea it would be the ability to harmonize with others – communication competence is achieved when interpersonal relationships become harmonious in that all parties maintain appropriate relationships (Dalib *et al.*, 2014:131). Thus, Dalib and colleagues see intercultural communication competence

in a relational sense that necessitates both communication partners to mutually understand and respect each other´s cultural standpoints – intercultural competence is a co-created process between both interlocutors in interaction that are viewed as interdependent beings (Dalib *et al.*, 2014:134)

– this mutual dependent connection with cultural others is exactly what is desirable to develop. Or as Behrnd and Porzelt (2012) put it, understanding other worldviews enables to communicate in intercultural context successfully and appropriately.

All in all, it is important to see intercultural competence development as a process that is multifaceted, cumulative and haphazard; not linear, cyclical, or discrete (Holmes, O'Neill, 2012:714).

Moosmüller (1996) has pointed out that as a precondition to obtaining intercultural communication competence, one needs basic knowledge about intercultural communication.

That enables making judgements about one's own communication vis-à-vis that of the Other, and then reflecting on and learning from those judgements (Holmes, O'Neill, 2012:715), often through feelings of discomfort and discovery. It is the self-evaluation that underpins the development of critical cultural awareness (Holmes, O'Neill, 2012:714). Dalib and colleagues (2014) point out that „competent communication must begin with an understanding of [personal] cultural beliefs, values, and worldviews vis-a-vis that of cultural others" (Holmes, O'Neill, 2012:133) – we develop cultural self-awareness through intercultural experiences (Holmes, O'Neill, 2012:135).

The fact alone that intercultural trainings are a major topic and concern since decades, is sufficient to claim that one can develop intercultural communication competence, although some do it better than others, be it due to higher internal sensitivity, advantageous personal traits (for example tolerating ambiguity, curiosity, openness, empathy, extraversion, self-distance) (Moosmüller, 1996:281) or cultural factors since some (cultural) contexts are more sensitive than others to noticing differences and tolerating them).

It is important to underline once again that cultural contact alone is not sufficient for developing intercultural communication competence since the latter develops during a sojourn abroad only if certain conditions are fulfilled. One of them is a preparatory training, the afore-mentioned theoretical knowledge, – without prior knowledge one can feel endangered when his or her personal beliefs are challenged –, the other the lengths of the stay abroad which is related to the amount of experiences one gathers over a certain time. For example Behrnd and Porzelt (2012) prove that a stay abroad that lasts less than a year has little effect on improving intercultural communication competence.

In developing intercultural communication competence, we in our study concentrate on a practical factor: the experiences.

2.2 Experiences in intercultural communication. In Meriam-Webster dictionary, experience is defined as "a direct observation of or participation in events as a basis of knowledge", "the fact or state of having been affected by or gained knowledge through direct observation or participation" and "a knowledge, skill, or practice derived from direct observation of or participation in events or in a particular activity". Experiential learning, on the other hand, is the process of learning through experience, or more specifically through reflection on doing, and it is the favoured

method used in trainings aiming at developing intercultural competence. The role of emotion and feelings in learning from experiences has been recognised as an important part of experiential learning.

Moosmüller, while pointing out the necessity of basic intercultural knowledge for obtaining intercultural communication competence, also reminds that this precondition for learning makes no sense unless one gains intercultural experience (see Moosmüller, 1996). Intercultural experience takes place when people from different social groups with different cultures (values, beliefs and behaviours) meet (Alred *et al.*, 2002:233-234).

Bennet's developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (1993) brings out that intercultural communication competence rises with enhanced sensitivity (cultural self- and other-culture-awareness aka mindfulness) related to subjective individual experiences with cultural difference. Bennet also reminds us with Kelly's words that

> [i]t is not what happens around him that makes a man experienced; it is the successive construing and reconstruing of what happens, as it happens, that enriches the experience of his life (Kelly, 1963 in Bennet, 1993:24).

Holmes and O'Neill put it this way:

> Monitoring and managing emotions, and reflecting on the feelings of Self and Other in the intercultural encounter require sensitivity (to the feelings of others), empathy and facework; these [are] all important processes in developing an awareness of intercultural competence (Holmes, O'Neill, 2012:714).

The stages of intercultural sensitivity in Bennet's model depend on the amount of experience one has with differences and the ability to reflect on the experiences. As a person's experience aka understanding of cultural differences becomes more complex, the potential for intercultural competence increases (Hammer *et al.*, 2003).

The various models and notions like awareness, mindfulness or sensitivity have all to do with experience. This is not to say that more experience automatically results in intercultural learning and intercultural communication competence – contextual and personal variables play a big role, but we can take experience, together with basic intercultural knowledge, as a precondition, as a way to develop and learn intercultural communication competence. Besides, "simply remaining abroad for a long period of time does not insure contact with more implicit

demands" (Shaules, 2007:97). It should not be overseen that

> when it comes to multicultural experience, the creative whole is greater than the sum of its parts ... each person can trigger in other members´ minds relevant categories of ideas that would otherwise not be accessible (Tadmor *et al.*, 2012:384).

Although Shaules (2007:97) offers us a differentiation between deep and meaningful experiences, that approach does seem rather philosophical.

Carù and Cova (2003) distinguish between ordinary and extraordinary experiences; an ordinary experience has to do with everyday life, routines, the past, and the passive acceptance of events. An extraordinary experience on the other hand evokes emotions and transformations in individuals (Riivits-Arkonsuo *et al.*, 2013: 9). Pine and Gilmore (1999) state that experiences are memorable events, which, in order to leave a memory trace, must take place outside the daily routine (Sundbo, Sørensen, 2013 in Riivits-Arkonsuo *et al.*, 2013: 9).

3. ESTONIA AND FINLAND: "BROTHERS FROM DIFFERENT MOTHERS"

Although Estonia and Finland enjoy geographical proximity, being 80 km apart, and great linguistic similarity, both belonging to Balto-Finnic branch of the Uralic language family, the cultures have been shaped by different history which has meant the cultural influence of different cultures and cultural spaces. Without wanting to dive into the depths of differences between Estonia and Finland, which would distract us from the main topic, we would like to make mention of a few comparative studies that give insight into those differences: for example Pajupuu compares the nonverbal communication of Estonians and Finns (1998); Keltikangas-Järvinen *et al.* (1999) throw light on different values, as well as Tulviste and Wertsch (1994); Inglehart (2000) (with the follow-up from Realo (2013, 2016)) shows how different are the value clusters Estonia and Finland belong to, and although there are no credible GLOBE studies on Estonia, the former research together with considerable studies on Estonian values (for example Kalmus *et al.* (2004)) and the recent history give a reason to believe that while Finland belongs to the Nordic cluster, Estonia can be seen in the Eastern-European cluster (see Bakacsi *et al.*, 2002; Chokkar *et al.*, 2007; the GLOBE website).

4. INCIDENTS OF SENSITIVITY

Intercultural sensitivity has been conceptualized as a person's "active desire to motivate themselves to understand, appreciate and accept differences among cultures" (Chen, Starosta, 1998: 231). Shortly, it is a person's affective response to intercultural difference (Straffon 2003: 448). Relating intercultural sensitivity to intercultural communication competence, we can say that intercultural sensitivity is the awareness of cultural differences and similarities without being judgemental about them – a journey of discovery of a new more sensitive adequacy – presuming both intercultural knowledge and experiences.

In 2012, Holmes and O'Neill reported in the International Journal of Intercultural Relations of the PEER model that they developed and used to guide students towards enhanced intercultural communication competence in New Zealand. The students were guided through phases of Preparing, Engaging, Evaluating and Reflecting upon their competence with the help of an ethnographic fieldwork. The student had to prepare (reflect on subjective feelings of strangeness, expectations), the meetings had to be documented as a research diary and after the meetings, he/she had to analyse the research diary.

Inspired by the fieldwork described by Holmes and O'Neill, the authors, upon an incipient work-related stay abroad of one author, decided to start a research diary, following the PEER steps, and analyse the reflections present in the diary with a qualitative content analysis, assuring independent research results with the four eye principle. In accordance with the presumption, the sojourner had excessive knowledge in psychology, and sociology, and some on intercultural communication, but it was her first extended stay abroad, and her first opportunity to experience a business-related community in Finland. Following the maxim "one cannot 'see' or hear the familiar until it is made strange" (Edgerton, 1996:166 in Holmes, O`Neill, 2012:715), we looked for incidents of sensitivity aka key experiences in the diary. As a result, taking into consideration the limitations of the paper, we present herewith a very limited selection to illustrate our categorization of the incidents.

INCIDENT OF SENSITIVITY NO. 1: A PEACH AND A COCONUT. It's the birthday of a consultant for our company. I have liked him for a long time, from the start. As a human being, as a colleague. We get along famously. I invite him to the Café Ciao! in Ruoholahti to give him a present. This time, we do not even get around to talking about work because we're so busy with other topics, I really enjoy our friendly closeness. We discuss self-fulfilment, children and partners, the human existence. We are happy and talk about the fact that everything goes well in our lives. We share the happiness of being. The agreed time for the meeting has been forgotten. When we notice the time, we realise that the café is about to close. We are both late – he was supposed to pick up some goods ordered from an online shop, I need to go to work. It's time to call it a day. I think cheerfully that the invitation must surely come now and I will certainly accept it. He's so cool and he must have a similarly cool wife and daughter. I'm so glad! We must really be friends!

We say our goodbyes with a heartfelt hug. No invitation.

"A strange, unexpected distance," is what I think with a mild disappointment; an Estonian or a Russian would have demanded by now that I visited their home.

In the evening, I catch myself discovering the multitude of beautiful closenesses in the world – some of them being much more discrete, gentler, and lighter than the ones I've gotten to know so far. I see the wonderful potential of many different closenesses. And all of them still lie ahead of me, are mine to enjoy in this wonderful world!

INCIDENT OF SENSITIVITY NO. 2: TAKING TURNS. A meeting with an old acquaintance and former top manager, who has invited us to the fancy, innovative, wind- and solar-powered Café Carusel. The Finnish gentleman holds a position in the social hierarchy of Helsinki, but arrives earlier than us, as he usually does. We are only a few minutes late, but late nevertheless. Nothing to do but to blush and feel bad about myself in secret as I recall that he (unlike me) has never changed an agreement about a meeting time or place. It also comes to my mind that he rarely gives out promises, but when he does, they're iron-cast. "Once you've been honoured with a promise from him, you should try extra hard to be worthy," runs through my head, so I force myself to quit feeling embarrassed and focus instead on presenting the topics I've planned for the meeting with as much focus and enthusiasm as possible.

I talk. And talk. He listens kindly. And listens some more. Smiles. And listens. I talk. He does not say anything. I keep talking, although some feedback would be nice. Some praise or at least a well-wishing remark. In a gentle way that only he uses to correct my mistakes. I keep talking, a bit more anxiously. He listens. Kind and understanding like a father. But he still does not say anything. Why not? Are my ideas so stupid that he chooses to keep politely quiet? The thought scares me to silence. Stop! Not a word before I have found out whether I'm talking utter rubbish in his eyes and he only listens to me out of politeness, or my talk has

at least a grain of brilliance to his mind. I stay silent. "The moment stretches for too long," I think a bit nervously. And then he starts to speak. With a smile, he praises my ideas, he finds them brilliant. I'm overjoyed! With myself, with my conversational partner! How fantastic it is for such an intelligent man to agree with my thoughts! Oh, but I have more of them! He speaks so well that my new ideas do not want to be kept inside any longer, they come pouring out unwittingly and… oops, I think I interrupted, cut him off mid-sentence... That's not how one should behave! I still have time to think, "Why is it that I can never be as polite to him as he is to me," and then there's no more time to think because I'm talking again and he is silent again. He is waiting for me to finish, so that he, finally, could continue with his thought.

This day is saved in my mind as a day of a successful meeting, but also as a day of a nagging suspicion that my polite behaviour might have some room for improvement.

INCIDENT OF SENSITIVITY NO. 3: FLUID VERSUS ABSOLUTE VALUES. Coffee conflict in a production unit, where our company is renting and where we have been jointly using a cosy kitchen. Today we are unexpectedly approached by the manager of the other company, who used to be really nice, but at the moment seems to be in an exceptionally mean mood, and lets us know in a not-so-friendly manner, "Your employees have been drinking our employees' coffee." My colleague replies, unsuspectingly, "Yes, of course we've been drinking coffee, but we have always replenished the coffee stock afterwards, so that all of us – you and us as well – would have enough of it." The manager seems even more aroused by this, saying, "Our employees, then, have less coffee to drink because of you." It seems that she does not get our point at all. I get an inkling that as regards coffee, we have no shared meanings, no all-inclusive 'us' and 'our coffee'. She continues. I realise that they have neat coffee records in their heads. I begin to suspect that they might have never actually drunk the coffee that we have bought. We have no idea! Because we have never kept coffee records. Or, we did have them, but this record-keeping was never as absolute as the locals had it – our 'coffee-keeping' was more of a nice fluid kind of 'coffee-keeping'. Coffee was a fluid value for us, flowing freely into everyone's cup in our cosy kitchen, and the joint coffee pot was always refilled by any volunteer as he or she saw fit, at the same time taking care that the coffee would keep flowing.

Today, for me, coffee becomes a symbol of the absoluteness of the values of this society to be sensed and understood. If I wish to match this society here, I need to be even more attentive, I need to develop my meticulousness to the last penny, to the last coffee bean. In case I desire not to insult the local community – which I do. "What a great opportunity to work on precision and attentiveness," I think with a post-conflict decidedness and satisfaction.

5. DISCUSSION & ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Incidents of sensitivity happen to everyone who stays abroad, independent from the background and theoretical knowledge – independent of the level of intercultural sensitivity gained so far. The existing knowledge or the preparation of the sojourner helps to broaden the mind on aware basis and both recognize and memorize the experiences with cultural strangeness on the one hand, without judging, and on the other hand look for (and maybe even find) the explanation in cross-cultural comparison. To recap: the incidents of sensitivity are visible moments of personal intercultural growth and psychological development, i.e. of obtaining intercultural communication competence.

The research assumes that cultural adjustment is a never ending process were the feelings keep spirally repeating over the time (Moosmüller 1996:284; Kim, 2002:238-239). Thus it can be assumed that the incidents of sensitivity keep occurring in one's life, predicting a never-ending personal growth, and, if the awareness is at hand, also fun.

The only true voyage of discovery would be to possess other eyes, to behold the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the hundred universes that each of them beholds, that each of them is. – Marcel Proust

The authors take full responsibility for the contents and scientific correctness of the paper.

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