State of the art themes in cross-cultural communication research: A systematic and meta-analytic review ☆

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ABSTRACT

Based on a meta-analysis of 60 empirical studies, a systematic review and integrative analysis of the empirical research on the effects of cultural values on communication is provided. The most commonly stated hypotheses pertaining to the links between cultural values and communication are summarized and quantitatively tested by the means of meta-analysis. Specifically, the analyses assessed the direct effects of cultural values (individualism, masculinity, power distance, uncertainty avoidance) on communication patterns (indirectness, self-promotion, face-saving concerns, attitudes to silence, openness, interruption, personal space, high-context communication, deception, dramatism, and ritualism). Significant results showed that: (1) individualism is positively related to direct communication and self-promotion, and negatively related to sensitivity and face-saving concerns and the propensity to use deception; (2) high power distance is positively related to sensitivity and face-saving concerns and indirect communication and negatively related to a propensity to interrupt; (3) masculinity is positively related to a self-promoting communication style and direct communication and negatively related to sensitivity and face-saving concerns; and (4) uncertainty avoidance is positively related to both sensitivity and face-saving concerns. Finally, a moderator analysis indicated that cultural effects are stronger for men and culturally tight societies. The small dataset and the a possibility of systemic omission of relevant data due to the file-drawer problem is a threat to validity of the reported findings, so this report should be taken as a meta-analytic summary of the available empirical evidence and not as conclusive results.

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1. Introduction

Due to globalization, digitalization, and improved transportation, the ability to effectively communicate across cultures is becoming increasingly important for companies that want to be successful in highly competitive markets (Schilcher, Poth, Sauer, Stiefel, & Will-Zocholl, 2011). However, communication problems have emerged as one of the most significant

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contemporary challenges facing project managers in an increasingly international business marketplace (Tone, Skitmore, & Wong, 2009). Culture and communication are intimately intertwined. As argued by Lehman, Chiu-yue and Schaller (2004), "the defining features of culture – the coalescence of distinctive shared beliefs and norms within a population – can arise simply as a consequence of interpersonal communication" (p. 693). Similarly, Van de Vliert (2011) wrote that "oral and written languages. . . are tools to create, send, and receive cultural values, beliefs, and behaviors" (p. 177). It is not surprising then that cultural differences play a significant part in workplace miscommunication. For example, differences in communication that originate from cultural variations may lead to misunderstandings and suspiciousness among employees working on project teams (Schilcher et al., 2011). Moreover, mistranslations can severely inhibit the quality of intercultural communication (Heller, 2011).

Cross-cultural communication challenges are not limited to difficulties of translations. Communication difficulties can continue even after mastering a language's vocabulary and grammar. One needs to grasp not only the literal meanings but also the social context and subtle possible misinterpretations (Wlotko & Federmeier, 2012). Because communication is vital to a host of business functions (e.g., management, marketing, law, and public relations), the consequences of such miscommunication can and have spelled disaster for many, including: expatriates, cross-cultural workgroups, organizations employing immigrants or serving international cliental, international joint ventures and partnerships, and inter-governmental foreign affairs (Lloyd & Härtel, 2010). While for businesses, cross-cultural communication problems usually impact the bottom-line, impeding potentially profitable relationships (Kutz, 2012), the consequences can be much more severe in other domains. For example, a series of airplane crashes resulting in the deaths of thousands were traced back to a difference in cross-cultural communication styles among Korean pilots and North American air traffic controllers (Aviation Safety Network, 2000). Understanding what causes communication styles to differ is the first step toward mitigating cross-cultural communication mishaps (Frauenheim, 2005). Research reflecting the importance of cultural differences in communication has been extensive. Several attempts have been made to systemize the wealth of publications on cross-cultural communication (e.g., Gudykunst, 2003; Taras & Rowney, 2007; Ting-Toomey, 2010), but unfortunately these summaries were largely qualitative and focused on reviewing existing theories of cross-cultural communication or proposing new theoretical concepts and not integrating the findings of empirical research.

Taras, Kirkman, and Steel (2010) and Taras, Sarala, and Muchinsky (2010) conducted a large-scale meta-analytic review of the effects of culture on a wide range of outcomes, including communication styles and patterns. However, the purpose of their study was a general review of the effects of culture, and not the specific effects of culture on communication. Their study did not provide an in-depth explanation of specific relationships, review the theory on the role of cultural values in communication, or discuss limitations of extant research on cross-cultural communication, and offer direction for future studies.

This study seeks to fill this gap by offering an integrative systematic review of the extant empirical research on how the relationship between cultural values and communication styles has been studied and discussed in literature, as well as summarizing all available empirical evidence on the reviewed relationships. We focus on the studies that utilized Hofstede's (1980) model of culture. The immense popularity of Hofstede's model in cross-cultural research has resulted in numerous studies that used similar operationalizations of culture and communication, a pre-condition for a meta-analytic summary.

It is not our goal to provide support to or refute particular hypotheses. Rather, we seek to review all relevant information and show which culture–communication relationship patterns are strongly and consistently supported by the available evidence. In addition, we point out where such evidence is inconclusive, where meaningful evidence may be completely absent, and point toward where further research is needed.

Focusing on Hofstede's model, we begin by reviewing the literature's most commonly stated hypotheses that connect cultural values to communication patterns as well as their theoretical justifications. Next, we meta-analytically synthesize the empirical research that has explored culture–communication relationships and analyze the magnitude and significance of the effects of culture on communication. Reports on the relationships that have not been studied enough to produce sufficient data for a meta-analysis are also reviewed in the paper as part of our systematic review. Furthermore, this study addresses research questions that usually go beyond what is permitted within traditional empirical studies and qualitative reviews because meta-analysis allows for exploring the moderating effects of research design, sample characteristics, and characteristics of the environment from which the samples were drawn. Based on moderator analysis, we explain a few inconsistencies among earlier empirical findings. Finally, we conclude our analysis with a review of the challenges of cross-cultural communication studies, discuss limitations, identify gaps in extant research, and suggest promising venues for future research.

2. Cultural dimensions and themes in cross-cultural communication research

Geert Hofstede was one of the first researchers to offer a model of culture that went beyond ethnographic narratives and that could be used in quantitative cross-cultural social scientific research. Despite some criticism (e.g., Baskerville, 2003; McSweeney, 2002; Spector, Cooper, & Sparks, 2001; Taras & Steel, 2009), Hofstede's (1980) model enjoyed unmatched popularity for decades and overshadowed earlier attempts to describe culture (e.g., England, 1967; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Rokeach, 1973). Most of the later cultural frameworks were rooted in Hofstede's work and offered only incremental improvements (c.f., Taras, Rowney, & Steel, 2009). Alternative models of culture have been offered in recent years, notably those by Maznevski, DiStefano, Gomez, Noorderhaven, and Wu (2002), Schwartz (1994), and the GLOBE team (House, Javidan,