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Belichenko M. A., Ph.D.

(State University of Telecommunications, Kiev. +380 (67) 980 25 27. 0102345@ukr.net)

METHODICAL INFORMATIONAL CHALLENGES IN RESEARCHING CROSS-CULTURAL AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Беліченко М. А. Методологічні інформатизаційні проблеми в дослідженні крос-культурної і міжкультурної комунікації. В статті розглядається застосування якісних методів дослідження міжкультурної комунікації. Поняття крос-культурної й міжкультурної комунікації виступають частиною колективної діалектики з декількома поняттями, що виникли з широкого спектру соціальних і культурних перспектив. Дослідження в області міжкультурної комунікації направлено на вивчення цих систем, розглядаються перспективи й роль культури в інформатизаційних і комунікаційних процесах.

Ключові слова: інформаційні технології, комунікаційний процес, культурологія, крос-культурна комунікація, міжкультурна комунікація

Беличенко М. А. Методологическо информатизационные проблемы в исследовании крос-культурной и межкультурной коммуникации. В статье рассматривается применение качественных методов исследования в межкультурной коммуникации. Понятия крос-культурной и межкультурной коммуникации являются частью коллективной диалектики с несколькими потенциальными смыслами, возникшими из широкого спектра социальных и культурных перспектив. Исследование в области межкультурной коммуникации направлено на изучение этих систем, рассматриваются перспективы в роль культуры в информатизационных и коммуникационных процессах.

Ключевые слова: информационные технологии, коммуникационный процесс, культурология, крос-культурная коммуникация, межкультурная коммуникация

Belichenko M. A. Methodological informational challenges in researching cross-cultural and intercultural communication. This article attempts to offer a response, from a general perspective, to the question of how culture reveals itself in the application of qualitative research methods in intercultural communication. When we use the term "culture" it is important to bear in mind that culturally attributed social interaction processes are themselves the result of socially constructed processes. They are part of an individual-collective dialectic with multiple potential meanings, which are emergent and in constant reformulation from a wide variety of social and cultural perspectives. Much of the recent research in intercultural communication has been directed towards the study of these systems of culturally related meanings.

Keywords: information technologies, communication process, cultural research, intercultural communication, cross-cultural communication

Introduction. The appropriate methodology to apply in any given study into cross-cultural and intercultural communication depends on the actual problem which is being investigated, on the knowledge available to the researchers, on the degree of acceptance by those being studied of the techniques used in the study, among many other factors. These authors recommend emic approaches such as ethnographic techniques, systematic observations, content analysis, and in-depth interviews when commencing a study in culturally unknown scenarios with the objective of coming to know this reality either in depth or from a holistic but unique perspective. When there is an interest in generalizing the results or in facilitating possible comparisons between the works in hand and other similar research, it is desirable to use etic approaches in which mixed or exclusively quantitative methods are employed. That is, it would seem to be the case that in carrying out qualitative research the use of emic type approaches is more appropriate. But this should not be taken to mean that such research may not include recourse to an objective instrument or the incorporation of a component more typically associated with etic type approaches.

In terms of the information gathering process it should be pointed out that the researcher needs to keep constantly in mind the diversity of the elements in which culture can manifest itself. In this sense the question of the extent to which culture influences the approach, development and outcome of the information gathering process needs to be asked. In order to offer a concise response to this question we would refer to contemporary epistemological arguments. In general it is not accepted that scientific knowledge reflects and describes the reality of an object in and of itself, and that the object can be identified and grasped in a value free way. That is, an interpretative epistemology assumes the presence of culture, among other factors, in the activities and processes which form part of the approach to empirical reality. Today it is widely accepted that it is an error to imagine that observational evidence enters our field of perception in a way which is totally independent of the theoretical interpretation which is applied to it. Theories about culture offer us important indications about the potential influence of culture in the design and application of the differing techniques and strategies used in qualitative research in order to proceed with information gathering. The contributions are diverse both in terms of sources and in indications, so we will try to structure them around four principal axes: the content of the information being gathered, the nature of the interpersonal intercultural relations generated in applying a technique or strategy, and the language in use in the research process [1].

Content of the information being gathered. Interviewing is one of the fundamental techniques used in qualitative research on cross-cultural and intercultural communication. One of the principal concerns when conducting an interview is whether an emic or an etic approach is more appropriate - that is, whether to ask different, tailor-made and culture-specific questions or ask the same questions in all the cultural contexts being studied. If the same questions are to be used, researches should avoid emic concepts. It is often useful to use random probes. One should also examine what ideas the respondents have about the interviewer, about the questions themselves.

The interviewer's perspective can bias both what is observed and how it is observed. The most frequent errors to be found in cross-cultural research are the result of the reactions of those being observed to the observer, to the encoding system used and to the fact that the definitions of boundaries for behavior were culture-specific. They also recommend the use of multiple observers, encoding systems that have been pre-tested in a variety of cultures and extensive observer training as being likely to reduce such problems.

The interpersonal intercultural relation climate. In referring to the interpersonal relations which inevitably develop during processes of qualitative research into cross-cultural and intercultural communication there is an extensive body of literature which has examined both the presence and the manifestations of culture.

Psychological factors associated with anxiety and its effects on intercultural relations have been studied by numerous researchers. When individuals who come from different groups interact, they experience in one way or another a certain preoccupation. This preoccupation can be due to the possibility of not being sufficiently able to remain detached, fear of being negatively affected by the encounter, apprehension about being the victim of misunderstanding, confrontation, etc. The anxiety generated by all these possibilities can in and of itself create difficulties for the interview and generate effects which negatively affect the relationship between interviewer and interviewee [2].

One of the most widely disseminated theories in the context of intercultural processes when viewed from the psychological perspective is that Management. AUM takes the view that managing the anxiety which is generated by uncertainty is a process which exerts a fundamental influence on

the efficacy of communication and intercultural competence. The most important axiom in this theory holds that:

"Uncertainty anxiety management has a direct influence on the efficacy of communication in interpersonal and intergroup encounters. Individuals can communicate effectively to the extent that they are able to manage their anxiety and that they feel themselves able to predict the attitudes, feelings and behaviour of the interlocutor (or interlocutors) with a certain degree of success" [3].

What this means is, that when it comes to setting up a qualitative research process involving study participants from different cultures it is important to be aware of the anxiety which, even if unconsciously, can affect all those involved. Such anxiety can place limits on the communicative relations which are produced and influence the other intellectual and relational processes which are developed in the research. Thus it is essential to be aware of such potential anxiety, to anticipate its influence, and to incorporate strategies for reducing its impact, thus facilitating mutual confidence and making the communication process more effective.

Symbolic interactionism places considerable emphasis on the importance of structuring intercultural interaction. It stresses the need for compromise in initiating the interaction, the role of negotiation throughout the encounter, the significance of the positions which each of the participants occupies, and the frameworks or action guidelines they use, and which configure interaction as a ritual. These contributions are especially necessary in the development of strategies for contexts where (inter-)cultural interaction is especially intense and free, as, for example, in the case of ethnographic studies.

The theory of rhetoric which argues that the first studies in intercultural communication had their origins in anthropology and rhetoric. This theory facilitates the analysis not only of individual differences but also of the properties of the context in which the interaction takes place. This makes it easier for the researcher to identify those cultural traits and norms that need to be understood to produce a better intercultural relation.

There are examples of qualitative research where the existence of a good relation is fundamental. This is the case, for example, in action research. If such action research is realized in an intercultural context the key role of the relations between the researcher and the participants of the study is fundamental. The importance of negotiation, construction, mutual confidence between the various participants in such transformative processes should constantly be borne in mind. It has been an important reference point for analyzing the interpersonal relations dimension within the context of relations between different cultures too. This theory holds that any interpersonal intercultural relation between two or more interlocutors passes through five distinct development stages: orientation, exploratory exchanges, affective exchanges, stable exchange and mutual awareness [4].

The role of language is fundamental in cross-cultural and intercultural qualitative research. We would like to give special attention to the mediating role of language in the process. Language is the main medium in which information circulates and it assembles itself as the message transmitter.

In order to understand and interpret utterances or gestures in a given language, a minimum degree of language equivalence between the language of those being studied and that of the researcher is needed. Clearly situations may easily arise in which the lack of such equivalence is a real barrier to communication and understanding for the research. These barriers extend from simple lexical non-equivalence to an experiential non-equivalence, passing through various other degrees of difficulty.

The references to the role of language which are to be found in theory of the coordinated management of meaning and rules are interesting and relevant. The theory of cross-cultural communication offers a great heritage of knowledge and resources to identify and understand communicative differences. Differences between verbal styles as well as affecting communication

between people of different reference cultures, may also, if ignored, lead to differences in interpretation. An individual with a circular style may interpret another, who has a more lineal style of discourse, as being simplistic or arrogant, while the latter may view the person with a circular style as illogical or evasive [5].

Some authors as Ekman and Friesen have analyzed problems of non-verbal gesture in intercultural interaction. In an interview or in a focus group, a look or a gesture, even a smile, may signify something different from one culture to another. In addition to influencing the effectiveness of the process of attributing meaning to such gestures, these differences may also alter the communication climate or influence the development of the research process, given the possibility of reducing confidence, producing doubts.

Culture, analysis and interpretation in qualitative research. In this section we consider the presence of culture in the cognitive processes of research. These processes include a wide spectrum of intellectual activities: knowing, understanding, comparison, analysis, synthesis, evaluation. To what extend does culture influence such processes? As Andersen suggests discussions of race, class, and gender need to be thoroughly integrated into debates about research process and data analysis. This requires an acknowledgment of the complex, multiple, and contradictory identities and realities that shape our collective experience.

First we will look at some theories and conceptual contributions which can provide orientation.

Contributions from theories that focus on the role of language in cross-cultural communication have been significant in clarifying the part played by culture in the processes of information interpretation. The role of Wittgenstein has been fundamental here, since he was the first who made the decisive break with the traditional separation between language and thought, justifying this move with the argument that language is organized through rules which are based on cultural use. It is precisely this structural organization which gives meaning to gestures and utterances. In this same sense, according Erickson, the base for theoretical constructions is the immediate and local meanings of action as defined from the point of view of the social actors involved. In other words, we interpret a reality, a given piece of information according to the parameters of our experience in which our culture occupies a fundamental position. Culture is the reason why a given phenomenon, a specific form of behavior can be given a very different meaning according to the origin culture of the person analyzing and interpreting the process [6].

With respect to the relation between culture and theories of cognitive organization, the contribution of constructionism to the processes of analysis, interpretation and intellectual creation is worthy of special attention. Among the many contributions of constructionism with special relevance to the relationship with culture we would highlight the construction of mental schemas. Mental schemas constitute a cognitive system which enables us to interpret the gestures, utterances and actions of others. Culture influences the organization of the schemas developed by individuals with the justification that different visions and interpretations of reality are culturally variable. In the same sense constructionism stresses the importance of socio-cultural background in the higher order psychological processes (Vygotsky) as an argument with which to demonstrate the union of culture with cognitive processes and the relation between learning, development and the contexts of personal relations.

Another contribution to our understanding of the relation between culture and cognitive processes comes from the tradition which studies the influence of roles and stereotypes in the creation of mental schemas and social categorization. In this sense the process of social categorization favors positive biases for "own-culture" groups and negative biases for groups belonging to other cultures. Summing up, theories of categorization and social attribution facilitate

the development of explanations concerning the perception and interpretation of the behavior of others in intercultural contexts.

Ethnomethodology, which focuses on the analysis of spontaneous conversation seen as a social activity, considers language as a privileged instrument which gives meaning to a situation. From this point of view reality is not discovered but rather interpreted, constructed, negotiated and maintained through social interaction. This focus suggests analyzing intercultural communicative situations from a constructivist and interpretative perspective [7].

The work of Bhawuk and Triandis focuses on the level of analysis, and suggests that, depending on the objectives being pursued in research into cross cultural communication, it is possible to distinguish two levels of analysis: the individual and theecological. The etic-individual studies might include attempts to show the universality of a phenomenon; this might well be the approach which is closest to the positivist methodologies often associated with quantitative methodologies. The emic-individual studies might include studies of subjective culture, such as the ones that established the meaning of the word philotimo . Etic-ecological studies are holegeistic (whole-world) studies described by Naroll. The emic-ecological are attempts to show that certain cultures are high and other cultures low on some variable; Hofstede's study, for example, would fall into this category.

There is thus an extensive literature that attempts to demonstrate the influence of culture in cognitive processes, and extrapolating, in qualitative research. The researcher thinks, interprets and reasons on the basis of her or his cultural points of reference. When faced with one and the same phenomenon two researchers can arrive at opposing conclusions, and culture may be one of the factors which help to explain this kind of situation. Language and mental maps are cultural elements with which the researcher operates in the analysis and the construction of results.

Conclusions. In this article we have attempted, from a general perspective, to address the issue of how culture is conceptualized/manifests itself in the application of qualitative research methodology to cross-cultural and intercultural communication. Despite the numerous definitions of culture it can be asserted that the conceptualization applied in cross-cultural and intercultural communication studies is characterized by its complexity, dynamism and intersubjective character, and that in this conceptualization it is possible to identify a multiplicity of components of which the individual is not always aware. It has become clear throughout this article that culture constantly makes its presence felt in the research process, and especially in the context of qualitative research, starting with the theoretical-epistemological foundations of such research, as well as in the process of approaching and generating empirical data and in its analysis and interpretation. In the same way cross-cultural theory has contributed elements which make such influences more visible, with the result that it has become easier to accept, live with and manage this influence.

The current thematic issue seems to us to constitute an opportunity for the research community to re-examine the way we look at alterity and at the same time to develop research processes which broaden the opportunities for coexistence and social justice in a multicultural world. In the course of this article we have constantly drawn attention to the cultural relevance of social practices, as well as to intercultural communication and its symbolic dimension. Our short review of the theoretical questions which arise in connection with qualitative research as it interacts with the construct "culture" attempts to stress the need to address the substantive areas of intercultural communication and epistemology together.

The fallacy of the monolithic view of identity alerts us to the need for prudence and the importance of avoiding categorizing cultural studies of communication in stereotypical terms, as built on folklore beliefs and essentialist in terms of culture. On the other hand, it is already widely accepted in qualitative research that the researcher becomes the "principal information gathering

instrument," and thus some of the objectives which have been identified for studies of cross-cultural and intercultural communication are associated with the reflexivity of the researcher over her or his own cultural biases together with the associated theoretical, and even social and political standpoints.

This also applies to the possibility of learning the meanings of cultural interaction on the basis of transactions between different cultural worlds, symbolic systems, individual and collective cultures. Perhaps the process of renewal of qualitative research methods in the context of cross-cultural and intercultural communication really needs to start with a reflection over the life history of the researcher given that the researcher is also immersed in the norms, values and beliefs of the institutions, communities and movements in which she or he functions, and which give ideological form to the whole process.

For the outlook of researching cross-cultural and intercultural communication we would stress that culture is a "system" and not the sum of a collection of fortuitous traits. It is an integrated whole which cannot be understood by examining its components individually and in isolation. It is a dynamic whole which is in flux, and constantly changing, and which reveals itself as being in interaction with the world in a multiplicity of complex and diverse situations and contexts. Some authors, being conscious of this, have gone so far as to propose the possibility of approaching the study of human communication from the perspective of contemporary chaos theory or from that of the complexity paradigm, a proposal which could well be a task which could be explored in the future.

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