

Primacy of Personal over Cultural Attributes Demonstrating Receptiveness as a key to Effective Cross-national Interactions

LA PRIMAUTÉ DES ATTRIBUTS PERSONNELS SUR LES ATTRIBUTS CULTURELS DÉMONSTRATION DE LA RÉCEPTIVITÉ COMME UN ÉLÉMENT CLÉ DE L'EFFICACITÉ DES INTERACTIONS TRANSNATIONALE

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Abstract: This Dubai-based study investigates local Emirati women's attitudes to professional interactions with different nationalities. Its findings reveal that respondents' perceptions of personal attributes play a stronger role in who they prefer to engage with in work-related interactions than markers of national, ethnic, cultural, or religious identity. Responses indicate that the presence or absence of displays of interactive receptiveness strongly impacts on willingness to engage or not with another individual. This suggests a fresh theme for business communication instructors, namely, training students to develop and demonstrate receptiveness in order to facilitate open and successful interactions. It supports the notion that business communication research should place greater emphasis on interpersonal, rather than specifically intercultural, skills.

Key words: intercultural communication; interpersonal communication; receptiveness; cross-national working groups; Dubai

Résumé: Cette étude, basée à Dubaï, mène des enquêtes sur les femmes Emiraties locales face à des interactions professionnelles avec des gens de différentes nationalités. Ses conclusions révèlent que chez les femmes interrogées, les attributs personnels jouent un rôle plus important dans leur choix d'engager des interactions liées au travail que les repères nationaux, ethniques, culturels ou religieux. Les réponses indiquent que la présence ou l'absence de l'affichage de la réceptivité interactive ont de forts impacts sur la volonté de s'engager ou non avec une autre personne. Cela suggère un nouveau thème pour les professeurs en communication d'entreprise, c'est à dire, ils peuvent former leurs étudiantsla de développer et de

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démontrer leur réceptivité en vue de faciliter des interactions ouvertes et réussies. Il soutient l'idée que la recherche dans communication d'entreprise doit mettre davantage l'accent sur les relations interpersonnelles, plutôt que spécifiquement sur les relations interculturelle ou sur les compétences.

Mots-Clés: communication interculturelle; communication interpersonnelle; réceptivité; groupe de travail transnational; Dubaï

Reinsch and Turner (2006) define "interpersonal communication as a process in which one person encodes or creates a series of symbols and signs while another actively (and selectively) decodes or creates a message based partially on some signs emitted by the first person" (p. 344). This preliminary research seeks to investigate what, in a multicultural setting, are "the symbols and signs emitted by the first person" that encourage a receiver to choose to decode and interact effectively with that person? Its findings suggest that, rather than being strongly influenced by the cultural, ethnic, national, or religious identity of potential interlocutors, respondents were more affected by the personal attributes they perceived in an interlocutor. Facts of cultural, national, and religious identity were rarely mentioned by my respondents as having an impact on their willingness to engage with another person. However, positively perceived personal characteristics were cited as encouraging respondents to engage in an interaction and negatively perceived characteristics as generating reluctance to interact with particular individuals.

1. STUDY

Research question

The research issue directing this study was an investigation of the features perceived in a potential interlocutor that affect an individual's willingness or reluctance to engage orally with that person. More specifically, are people influenced more by a potential interlocutor's cultural background or more by personal qualities perceived in that individual? Do individuals tend to privilege people of a cultural background similar to their own or are they more influenced by personality attributes that they identify in a potential interlocutor?

Setting

I conducted my study in Dubai, the most liberal and cosmopolitan of the seven emirates of the United Arab Emirates, and a city undergoing exponential socio-economic change. The 2005 census revealed Dubai's population to be approximately 1,272,000, of which only 16.8% were locals. The 83.2% foreign residents included 51% from India, 16% from Pakistan, 11% from other Arab countries, 9% from Bangladesh, 3% from the Philippines, 1.8% from Sri Lanka, 1.1% from Europe, 0.3% from the USA, and 6.8% from other countries (www.uae.gov.ae). The private sector workforce consisted of 95% foreigners (<http://www.hrw.org/reports/2006/uae1106/4.htm>) and the government sector, 73.76% foreigners (*Emirate of Dubai*, 2004). It is not only since the economic boom following the discovery of oil in 1966 (Dubai Government, 2004) that the people of Dubai have been interacting with foreign migrants and visitors. For many centuries the Emiratis were a great maritime people, travelling as far as China and East Africa (Hawley, 2000). Moreover, the natural ports of the Emirates coastline constituted popular stopping-off points for other seafarers with locals interacting with these foreign visitors (Johnson, 2001).

The enormous frequency of professional interactions among people of different nationalities in Dubai appears to be creating an extreme example of what Jameson (2007) terms "transaction culture" or

“third culture” (p. 230). Commonly, interactions in Middle Eastern cultures are conducted with people with whom the speaker has long established trust-based relationships, and the interlocutor’s identity establishes her/his degree of credibility (Weiss, 1998). In such cultures, interactions with foreigners are typically viewed with suspicion (Richmond, 1995). However, perhaps because of the long association with foreigners experienced by Emiratis in Dubai, they are more used to communicating with foreigners than is common in such cultures. The *lingua franca* of business in Dubai is English but the vast majority of workers are non-native speakers. This fact means that most professional interactions are being conducted in a non-native language endowing a greater homogeneity to communication acts than if there were a considerable mix of native and non-native speakers of English (cf. Poncini, 2003).

Population sample

The population sample of my study consisted of 56 final-year female Emirati business students aged between 22 and 24 and majoring in Accounting or HR at a female-student-only campus of an English-medium university. They all had some work experience, either in part-time or summer jobs or through their internships. This homogeneous sample was selected for this preliminary study in order to exclude variables of age, education, nationality, religion, cultural background and gender. It was considered desirable to explore a single-gender sample initially given the substantial differences in communication practices between males and females illustrated in much communication literature. I plan to conduct a similar study of male respondents in a male-student-only campus and to compare this with the findings of the present study. The shortcoming of this sample is that the respondents with their limited work experience are not necessarily reflective of typical business communication professionals. However, they all have had experience of work-related interactions and this limitation is offset by the advantage offered by a homogeneous sample.

One could argue that the fact that Dubai is a multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic environment makes receptiveness to foreigners a given. However, in this intensely cross-national setting, individuals typically have a choice of which national groups to choose their interlocutors from. Consequently conducting this kind of study in such a mixed cultural setting is valid given the broad choice of national groups to interact with. The results can therefore be extrapolated to refer to other intercultural groups such as cross-national working groups.

Methodology

My initial attempt to explore interactions within this extraordinarily rich multi-national context was to administer a research instrument adapted from that of Reinsch and Shelby (1996, 1997). This was used in earlier studies in Singapore and Cyprus and it revealed useful findings (Goby, 1999, 2007). As a preliminary investigation, I administered this questionnaire to 60 respondents in Dubai, again all final-year female Emirati business students aged between 22 and 24. The responses constituted a general refusal to identify any kind of communication difficulty. A typical statement ran “Emiratis are gracious people who communicate without conflict with all people.” This non-report of experience of conflict is probably explained by the collectivist nature of the UAE culture (Trompenaars, 1994). In such societies “Often, the self is measured by how well it orchestrates relational solidarity” (Thatcher, 2001, p. 471), and this cultural reality would have generated a desire for expressions of harmony among my respondents. Clearly, rather than an assertion of fact or opinion, such statements represent an example of what Ting-Toomey (2005) describes as a process of identity negotiation in which individuals of different cultures attempt to construct a desirable self-image.

I found inspiration for an exploration of my research question topic from Grounded Theory (GT) methodology. GT methodology proceeds with an inductive perspective attempting to gather data rather than testing an hypothesis. It attempts to expose theory that is implicit in the data it gathers (Glaser, 1998; Willig, 2001). Typically focus group discussions are employed in GT methodology. However, I suspected from my earlier research attempts with this kind of population sample that attempting to draw

out spoken contributions in focus groups on issues such as who participants like and don't like to speak to and on opinions on interacting with other Arabs would probably not generate true responses. I decided to use an anonymous, written means of gathering respondents' experiences and opinions. The method I chose has been used in other research, for example, in New Zealand in studies of cultural identity among young people (<http://www.elections.org.nz/study/>). In this exercise respondents are given prompts to which they write their reactions individually and then place them in a large envelope attached to a notice board in the room (a "postbox"). I asked my respondents to reply to my prompts from their experience of work-related interactions. Arguably a significant advantage of this instrument is that it provides insights into individual conceptions of particular communicative contexts which, according to Jameson (2007), "can help reveal the hidden dimensions of culture that are so hard to penetrate" (p. 231).

Limitations of methodology

Apart from the novelty of this methodology in communication research, this approach has several shortcomings. One obvious one is that respondents could be equally guarded in their responses given their cultural imperative to maintain good relations and display "graciousness" as noted above. However, the data I gathered displayed no such reticence. Many of the statements were very bold and direct. Such candor was probably made possible for respondents as their responses were written and posted into the "postbox" individually and anonymously.

Another limitation is that one could suspect that negative comments about personal characteristics may be coded references to stereotypes of group characteristics (as "lazy" is often racially or ethnically coded in the US). The responses I gathered indicated no such coding. For example, Americans were described variously as "hardworking," "unhelpful," "friendly," "unfriendly," British as "friendly," "racist," "arrogant," and "polite," and non-Gulf Arabs as "dishonest," "honest," "polite," and "rude." In other words, there appeared to be no generalized stereotyping of national, religious, ethnic, or cultural groups by respondents.

Methodological instrument

The four prompts I supplied were blunt statements of who respondents were willingly to engage with in work-related interactions of choice rather than obligatory ones, and why. Respondents were informed that they were taking part in a study of cross-cultural communication. They were instructed to consider only interactions from work-related interactions rather than purely social environments. This point was stressed for two reasons. One was that the purpose of the study was to explore work-related interactions. The second was that Emirati women are restricted in their social movements. They typically conduct social relations with individuals to whom they are related and cannot leave their homes without a chaperone. While exposure to foreigners in social contexts would be rare for most of them, dealing with foreign workers is commonplace given the multicultural workforce of Dubai.

The prompts provided were the following:

1st. The foreigners I most like to communicate with are _____ because ...

This was intended to explore the reasons respondents are willing to engage with certain individuals.

2nd. The foreigners I hate to communicate with are _____ because ...

This prompt was included to probe the reasons for which respondents prefer not to engage with particular individuals. The direct term "hate" was used here as it was considered a strong statement that would provoke personal responses.

3rd. I prefer/do not prefer to interact with non-Emirati Arabs rather than non-Arab foreigners because ...

This prompt attempted to assess the impact of sharing a common language, namely, Arabic, with a prospective interlocutor.

I simply prefer/do not prefer to communicate with other Emiratis because ... This was included to assess how strongly a common national identity impacts on willingness to engage with particular individuals.

Analysis of responses

The written reactions to these prompts were encouraging in that they yielded rich descriptions of respondents' own experiences of interacting with different national groups and the attitudes they had formed on the basis of these experiences. For the purpose of my study, I was not, of course, concerned with the nationalities mentioned but the reasons respondents cited for their willingness or unwillingness to engage with such nationals.

My analysis of their responses was based on a calculation of the reasons offered by respondents. For example, the responses (underlining mine), "*The foreigners I most like to communicate with are non-Gulf Arabs because in work they are very helpful and always very polite,*" "*The foreigners I most like to communicate with are Americans because I had an American colleague who gave me a lot of help,*" and "*The foreigners I most like to communicate with are Filipinos and Indonesians because Filipino and Indonesian workers always help me as much as they can*" were counted as three occurrences under a category "Helpfulness" and as one occurrence under "Politeness."

In some cases the actual word I use in the category appeared in the written response in some form. For example, only occurrences of some form of the word helpfulness ("help," "helped," "helpful," etc.) were calculated under "Helpfulness." I calculated occurrences of very close, unambiguous synonyms under one category. For example, I calculated occurrences of the words "rude," "impolite," and "not polite" under the category of "Rudeness, including shouting and quickness to display anger." Responses such as "*The foreigners I hate to communicate with are Egyptians because they shout a lot*" and "*The foreigners I hate to communicate with are Germans because they get angry easily*" were calculated under this category. The responses "*The foreigners I hate to communicate with are Syrians and Lebanese because they are very dishonest*" and "*The foreigners I hate to communicate with are British because they tell a lot of lies*" were counted as two occurrences of "Dishonesty."

In other cases where much longer phrases were used by respondents, I formulated a general classification to describe the category. For example, I listed statements such as "*The foreigners I most like to communicate with are Africans because they like talking to all different kinds of people*" and "*The foreigners I most like to communicate with are Arabs because they are not racist*" under the category "Willingness to interact with different ethnic groups." I classified reasons such as "*The foreigners I most like to communicate with are Italians because they are like us*" and "*The foreigners I most like to communicate with are Gulf Arabs because they have the same attitudes as us*" under a category I termed "Apparent shared values."

I developed the term "Sense of male supremacy" to classify two responses to the fourth prompt, namely, "*I simply ~~prefer~~/do not prefer to communicate with other Emiratis because the men look down on women*" and "*I simply ~~prefer~~/do not prefer to communicate with other Emiratis because the men do not respect women enough*." Another response to this prompt, "*I simply ~~prefer~~/do not prefer to communicate with other Emiratis because I don't like working with Emirati women,*" was listed under the category "Dislike of working with females." Also in response to this prompt, one respondent wrote "*I simply ~~prefer~~/do not prefer to communicate with other Emiratis because they always think about 'wasta'*" (an Arabic word meaning influence/personal connection) and this was classified under the category "Focus on personal connections ('wasta')." I developed the category "Social commitment" to cover responses such as "*I simply prefer/~~do not prefer~~ to communicate with other Emiratis because they are interested in the development of our country*" and "*I simply prefer/~~do not prefer~~ to communicate with other Emiratis because they care a lot about our country*."

These calculations generated 46 categories within which to place the 224 individual responses written by my 56 respondents to the four prompts. This large number of categories ensured that each response was reported faithfully and precisely rather than being placed under broad categories with limited descriptive validity. For example, the perceived traits of friendliness and helpfulness could be

construed as very similar. However, I categorized them separately. Similarly, "Sensitivity in speech" and "Politeness" could legitimately be classified as the same but I made separate categories for these, listing under "Politeness" only responses including some form of this word, a close synonym, or a negative expression of its antonym (e.g., "courteous," "never impolite") and placing only responses including some form of the words "sensitive" or "tactful" under "Sensitivity in speech." I generated a separate category for "Graciousness" although again this could be considered to be very similar to politeness. However, I wanted to retain the actual words used by my respondents as much as possible and only later, in the broader classifications, make generalizations deriving from the individual responses. Given that the words used in the prompts are reflected in my narrow categories, it was not necessary to speculate as to the respondent's intended meaning in using a particular word. For example, in the case of the word "gracious," we could wonder if the respondent meant a polite, tactful, way of speaking or was she referring to a more general character trait.

Given the intention in my analysis to accurately represent responses, many of the categories I generated have very few occurrences. For example, I generated the category "Peaceful nature" since one respondent stated "*The foreigners I most like to communicate with are Chinese because they are very peaceful.*" Similarly, I included a category "Conservative nature," which has only one occurrence, to classify the response "*The foreigners I most like to communicate with are Gulf Arabs because they are conservative people.*"

After all the responses were placed in the "postbox," I randomly formed four groups of respondents and distributed one set of prompt responses to each. Each group studied the responses to a single prompt and developed a summary of the reasons cited. I included this follow-up as it provided an opportunity to further clarify reasons since many respondents identified their own responses and expanded on the reasons they cited in their written responses. The lack of reticence at this point was probably generated by the opportunity they had had to discuss all the responses to a single prompt with their group members, possibly noticing that other respondents had also offered reasons similar to their own. Had I chosen an oral method of eliciting opinions initially, such as focus group discussions, respondents may not have been prepared to discuss their views so openly.

My analysis would have been more straightforward had I provided in my research instrument a range of terms for respondents to select from and then calculated the number of selections of each term. However, this would not have allowed respondents the freedom to answer in any way they wished, but would rather have directed and limited their reactions. The open-ended prompts allowed data relating to attitudes to cross-cultural and intra-cultural interactions to emerge freely rather than being forced; this is a very important consideration in GT methodology (Kelle, 2005).

For the purpose of drawing a larger picture of responses and attempting to identify the categories of meaning sought in GT methodology, I classified reasons cited under broader descriptive terms. For example, "Helpfulness" is categorized under the broader category of "Responsiveness" since I considered a disposition to help someone reflects a general wish to respond to that person as an individual and help them as needed. I categorized "Politeness" under a category called "Good communication skills" and "Dishonesty" under the broader classification of "Undesirable personal/professional characteristics." I placed the category "Openness to interacting with different ethnic groups" under the broader category of "Responsiveness" since, again, we can interpret it as the perception of a person as being open and responsive to another individual regardless of the individual's ethnic/national group membership.

Some reasons were cited many times; for example, "Helpfulness" has 36 occurrences and was the most common reason cited across all four prompts. Other reasons were rarely mentioned. For example, reference was made to having a common religion with an interlocutor only once and this is calculated under a narrow category "Common religion," and under a broader category, "Identity with interlocutor." In GT methodological procedure, we would identify "Helpfulness" and "Responsiveness" as major categories of meaning but not "religious identity."

Perceptions of a potential interlocutor encouraging interaction

In response to my first prompt (*The foreigners I most like to communicate with are _____ because ...*), respondents described their experiences of, and attitudes to, engaging with individuals they felt happy to interact with. Below I list the characteristics cited for making them happy to interact with other individuals.

Responsiveness #67

<i>Perceived characteristic</i>	<i>Number of times cited</i>
Helpfulness	36
Friendliness	21
Willingness to interact with different ethnic groups	10

Good communication skills #37

<i>Perceived characteristic</i>	<i>Number of times cited</i>
Ability in communicating	15
Sensitivity in speech	9
Politeness	7
Straightforward/honest manner of speaking	6

Professional characteristics #25

<i>Perceived characteristic</i>	<i>Number of times cited</i>
Strong work ethic	12
Respect for time as a resource	6
Good education	4
Professional competence	3

Personal characteristics #15

<i>Perceived characteristic</i>	<i>Number of times cited</i>
Trustworthiness	3
Suitable physical appearance	3
Fun-loving nature	3
Graciousness	2
Loyalty	2
Peaceful nature	1
Conservative nature	1

Identity with interlocutor #8

<i>Perceived characteristic</i>	<i>Number of times cited</i>
Apparent shared values – this was identified five times with other Gulf Arabs, once with people from the USA, and once with Italians	7
Common religion	1

Perceptions hindering interaction

My second prompt (*The foreigners I hate to communicate with are _____ because ...*) garnered responses concerning the perceptions of a potential interlocutor which reduce willingness to interact with that person. Again, I list the characteristics cited by respondents under broader descriptive classifications.

Undesirable personal/professional characteristics #68

<i>Perceived characteristic</i>	<i>Number of times cited</i>
Dishonesty	22
Arrogance/display of superiority	21
Lack of seriousness	9
Excessive seriousness, including pettiness	6
Poor work ethic	3
Aggressiveness	3
Unsatisfactory physical appearance, namely, apparent lack of hygiene	3
Apparent lack of education	1

Poor/inappropriate communication skills #60

<i>Perceived characteristic</i>	<i>Number of times cited</i>
Rudeness, including shouting and quickness to display anger	16
Inability to communicate clearly	10
Talkativeness	9
Reluctance to engage in cross-national communication	9
Unwillingness to listen	5
Inquisitiveness	4
Flirtatiousness	4
Unsatisfactory English accent	2
Reluctance to communicate in English	1

Nationality-related factors #6

<i>Perceived characteristic</i>	<i>Number of times cited</i>
Poor image of foreign interlocutor's country (e.g., high crime rate)	3
Interlocutor's apparently poor view of Emiratis	2
Lack of familiarity with foreign interlocutor's culture	1

How helpful is a common language?

Language has long been understood as shaping thought processes and facilitating the upholding of basic assumptions. Consequently sharing a native language has been regarded *ipso facto* as an aid to effective interactions. To explore the truth of this in Dubai's multi-national setting, the third prompt I provided (*I prefer/do not prefer to interact with non-Emirati Arabs rather than non-Arab foreigners because ...*) attempted to gauge the degree to which sharing a mother tongue impacts on willingness to engage with a person. As stated earlier, 11% of Dubai's population is made up of non-Emirati Arabs, mostly from Lebanon, Syria, and Egypt, whose native language is also Arabic. Of my 56 respondents, 21 expressed reluctance to engage with other Arabs, 15 were neutral regarding interactions with Arab versus non-Arab foreigners, and 20 expressed a preference for engaging with Arab rather than non-Arab foreigners. Only six of the 56 respondents (11%) cited a common mother tongue as a reason for preferring to interact with non-Emirati Arabs. The 21 respondents who expressed reluctance to engage with other Arabic-speaking people stated the following reasons to account for their unwillingness:

Perceptions diminishing advantage of common language #20

Undesirable personal/professional characteristics #18

<i>Perceived characteristic</i>	<i>Number of times cited</i>
Talkativeness	5
Carelessness	4
Dishonesty	3
Self-interest	2
Lack of respect	2
Unhelpfulness	1
Rudeness	1

Nationality-related factors #2

<i>Perceived characteristic</i>	<i>Number of times cited</i>
Westernized attitudes (typically non-Gulf Arabs wear Western dress)	1
Poor image of Emiratis (this respondent referred to the common perception of non-Gulf Arabs that Emiratis are highly privileged economically)	1

Intra-national interactions

My fourth prompt (*I simply prefer/do not prefer to communicate with other Emiratis because ...*) was intended to gauge whether my respondents simply preferred to avoid foreigners and to interact intra-nationally. Out of 56 respondents, 47 declared a preference for intra-national interactions, eight preferred cross-national interactions, and one respondent remained neutral. The reasons cited by the 47 respondents who expressed greater willingness to engage with their co-nationals were as follows:

Perceptions encouraging intra-cultural interactions #75 (47 respondents)

<i>Perceived characteristic</i>	<i>Number of times cited</i>
Same attitudes	26
Easier communication	19
Helpfulness	9
Social commitment	8
Trustworthiness	5
Respectfulness	3
Seriousness	2
Shared minority group membership	1
Politeness	1
Special status accorded to women	1

The eight respondents who expressed a preference for engaging with other nationals cited the following reasons:

Perceptions negating advantage of shared national origins #9 (8 respondents)

<i>Perceived characteristic</i>	<i>Number of times cited</i>
Sense of male supremacy	2
Foreigners can share more diverse experiences	2
Lack of punctuality	1
Laziness	1
Lack of seriousness	1
Focus on personal connections (“wasta”)	1
Dislike of working with females	1

This marked preference for intra-national interactions is not unexpected in any cultural setting; ethnic and cultural identity have been identified as exerting substantial influence over who we choose to talk to (Goby, 2004; Jameson, 2007, p. 223). However, particular facts of UAE culture may increase the preference for intra-national interactions. In cultures such as this, “people interact within relatively large and complex social networks formed from long-term relations developed between individuals over time or from strong familial ties and based on trust and senses of family duty and family honor” (St. Amant,

2002, p. 201). This sense of social solidarity is implicit in many of the reasons cited for preferring intra-national interactions (e.g., same attitudes #26; easier communication #19; helpfulness #9; social commitment #8; trustworthiness #5; shared minority group membership #1).

2. DISCUSSION: RECEPTIVENESS AS A KEY TO EFFECTIVE CROSS-NATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Many of the perceived characteristics cited in response to the first prompt (*The foreigners I most like to communicate with are _____ because ...*) can be classified as constituting characteristics of the quality of receptiveness, that is, features that indicate that the interlocutor is willing to engage appropriately in open, helpful communication. In reply to the second prompt (*The foreigners I hate to communicate with are _____ because ...*), respondents mentioned several characteristics which make them reluctant to engage with individuals, and we can define these as representing the opposite of receptiveness. That is, an indication of non-preparedness to engage in open, helpful communication. These traits include dishonesty (22), arrogance (21), rudeness (16), inability to communicate clearly (10), talkativeness (9), reluctance to engage in cross-national communication (9), unwillingness to listen (5), inquisitiveness (4), flirtatiousness (4), aggressiveness (3), reluctance to communicate in English, the accepted *lingua franca* (1). The characteristics of excessive talkativeness (5), dishonesty (3), self-interest (2), lack of respect (2), unhelpfulness (1), and rudeness (1), cited as countering the advantage offered by a common language, also constitute the opposite of receptiveness. In short, the attitudes expressed by my respondents seem to keenly underline that what is crucial for positive interactions is an unequivocal manifestation of commitment to the act of open, honest, helpful communication. We are reminded of the affirmations of Scollon and Scollon (1995) and Varner (2000) that communication takes place between individuals and not cultures, and that it is the individual who must connect with an individual of another culture. This stance reiterates Yuan's (1997) hypothesis that we should consider the intercultural as interpersonal. The present study's findings corroborate this view in that respondents focus more on perceived personal attributes of an interlocutor than on her/his national or cultural identity.

2.1 Receptiveness and solidarity

The finding that the demonstration of receptiveness is a significant factor in an individual's choice of who to interact with is reflected in a study by Clark, Rogers, Murfett, and Ang (2008) of Singapore call-center interactions. Their study reveals that the establishment of solidarity, over and above politeness, between the call center operator and the client is paramount for the provision of satisfactory assistance. Solidarity and receptiveness can be construed as the same quality in that they both involve individual demonstrating willingness to communicate towards a goal indicated by another.

2.2 Cross-national working groups – pitfalls and potentials

While research shows that successful communication is promoted by homogeneity (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992; Dodd, 1998), globalization has created more cases of heterogeneous, cross-national working groups. Working groups consisting of many different nationalities have been shown to be impeded by differences in communication behaviors and attitudes (Hambrick, Davison, Snell, & Snow, 1998) and this is likely to be a reality in organizations in Dubai. While I have made no attempt to date to measure organizational cohesion in Dubai (as per, e.g., Gully, Devine, & Whitney, 1995 or Siebold, 1999), a strong general impression gained in interviews with organizational leaders (not reported here) is that organizational members are strongly disposed to form groups based on national identity rather than on task identity. These leaders typically stated that organizational members tend to prioritize national identity in communication choices.

Conversely, construing diversity as a potential enrichment rather than source of conflict, it may be observed that within such groups, individuals are exposed to different communication practices and can choose which of these to incorporate into their interactive repertoires. An awareness of the practices which assist interactions may limit the number of times choices in contexts of professional interactions are made on the basis of the cultural identity of a potential interlocutor and increase choices based on observed displays of openness to successful interactions. "To meet the challenges of ... interacting across cultural (and other) differences, we must recognize the communicative dimensions of a situation, seek to understand others' perspectives, and adjust our own behavior to advance our short- and long-term goals (while acknowledging the goals of our communication partners and the larger community)" (Reinsch & Turner, 2006, p. 347). We need, perhaps, to begin with strategies for establishing openness and solidarity between potential interlocutors. There is no doubt that our cultural background determines our approach to communication. However, this study suggests that an interlocutor's clear demonstration of willingness to engage may play a stronger role in assisting the effectiveness of an interaction than the role cultural differences may play in impeding it.

In terms of enhancing organizational communication systems in which individuals feel comfortable interacting cross-nationally, it is important that people have more effective criteria for whom to choose to interact with than national identity. If interactive choices are made on the basis of nationality, the result will be organizational fragmentation along national lines. This situation is costly in that organizations need cohesiveness to thrive (Argenti, 1997; MacLeod & Brady, 2007). Further investigation of the dominant interpersonal attributes which enhance professional interactions suggested in the present study could provide the basis for communication training geared towards encouraging more open and successful interactions within cross-national working teams.

3. LIMITATIONS OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The fact that my population sample included females only undoubtedly had a big impact on my results. Theorists argue that women are more inclined to seek a sense of connectedness in interactions than men; what Tannen (1991, p. 81) terms "rapport talk." My female respondents placed a high value on expressions of receptiveness bearing out Tannen's (1981) argument that women tend to focus on establishing rapport with their interlocutors. I intend to pursue a similar study with male respondents with demographic variables similar to this study's female respondents to investigate the criteria applied by males in their choice of potential interlocutors.

Another limitation is the fact that the context of the study, Dubai, is unusual in the enormous cultural diversity of its workforce. DeVoss, Jasken, and Hayden (2002) suggest that "focusing on the characteristics of students' own cultures" (p. 76) is one of the challenges instructors must face in teaching intercultural communication. In the case of Dubai, cultural analysis has already taken place to some extent in that locals interact with foreigners throughout their entire lives and become aware of differences in foreign cultures (although possibly only at stereotypical levels), thus making them more aware of the nature of their own culture. GT methodology strives to identify propositions and categories of meaning that can serve as direction for further study. The present study suggests that individuals are strongly influenced by the personal, rather than cultural, attributes perceived in a potential interlocutor, and this proposition could be tested within a more homogenous cultural setting to explore if individuals overcome possible culture-based preconceptions in order to communicate with foreigners who exhibit positive communication traits.

The homogenous nature of the sample population and its lack of substantial work experience are limitations within the present study. They were considered advantageous for this preliminary study in that the demographic features of the population sample were very uniform. However, a study with a more diverse sample population with greater work experience would yield superior generalizability of results.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

This study suggests that receptiveness, which we may consider to be similar to solidarity, is of paramount importance in assisting successful interactions. Displays of solidarity have been identified as crucial in all forms of negotiation (e.g., Beamer, 1999). Perhaps we need to consider working towards discovering sources of genuine identity of purpose with interlocutors, clearly manifesting this identity, and building on the solidarity that results from the sense of commonality. Jameson (2007) states that “intercultural business communication needs to focus more fully on individual self-analysis” (p. 200) and perhaps the individual has to work on a personal compulsion to receptiveness towards interlocutors. Further research into the role of receptiveness in interactions and steps to build this would be a valuable direction for business communication analysis.

Given the fact that the methodology employed in this paper has not been thoroughly tested as a data collection technique, it would be informative to investigate this method against other methodologies to test the validity of results rendered. This could help us evaluate its employability as a strategy for revealing complex personal attitudes to communication choices, an area that may be difficult to probe.

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