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Cross-cultural communication and leadership in the United Arab Emirates

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Author's Biography

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Abstract

As part of a larger study into cross-cultural workplace communication in the United Arab Emirates, this paper presents research on communication and leadership in the UAE, with a focus on perceptions and communication between UAE National managers (Emiratis) and expatriates. Sixty Emirati managers (52 males and 8 females) from a wide variety of organizations in Dubai completed a questionnaire which asked them to describe an interaction they recently had with an expatriate employee. Communication accommodation theory (CAT), and social identity theory (SIT) were the major theoretical frameworks used in the research, to examine how Emirati managers perceived expatriate workers in either "ingroup" or "outgroup" terms, and the impact these perceptions had on the managers' leadership style. The results indicated that negative perceptions of expatriates were related to Emiratis' sense of social distance from expatriates; that is, expatriates were perceived in negative outgroup stereotypes. There was a relationship between these managers' perceptions and a power-marked directive style. However, the results also showed that many Emiratis reported positive perceptions of expatriates, and that these managers perceived their employees at a more individualized level, as opposed to perceiving them in stereotypical cultural outgroup terms. There was a relationship between positive perceptions of expatriates and a more consultative style. This study contributes towards a better understanding of cross-cultural communication between Arabs and expatriates in a workplace context, where individuals of different nationalities, religions and values are required to adopt a more inclusive approach to communicating with each other, enabling them to share a common identity and purpose when working together towards their organization's vision and goals.

Introduction

As part of a larger study, this paper presents research on leadership and cross-cultural communication and between United Arab Emirates (Emirati) managers and their expatriate employees. Sixty Emirati managers (52 males and 8 females) from a wide variety of organizations in Dubai completed a questionnaire which asked them to describe an interaction they recently had with an expatriate employee. Communication accommodation theory (CAT), and social identity theory (SIT) were the major theoretical frameworks for the research, to examine how Emirati managers perceived expatriate workers in either "ingroup" or "outgroup" terms, and the relationship between the Emirati managers' perceptions and their leadership style.

This study contributes towards a better understanding of cross-cultural communication between Arabs and expatriates in a workplace context, where individuals from different nationalities, religions and values are required to adopt a more inclusive approach to communicating with each other, enabling them to share a common identity and purpose when working together towards their organization's goals.

Theoretical frameworks

Communication accommodation theory (CAT). As communication accommodation theory is the main theoretical framework in this research, it is now discussed (for more comprehensive overviews of CAT, see Coupland, et al., 1988; Gallois et al., 1988; Shepard et al., 2001). Central to CAT is the argument that during interactions, people often modify their communication style (e.g., accent, dialect, formality) in order to achieve various goals (see Street, Brady & Putman, 1983). For example, interactants may have *accommodative* goals or motivations, such as seeking the other's social approval (Giles, Mulac, Bradac & Johnson, 1987), making communication as smooth and effective as possible (Gallois, Franklyn-Stokes, Giles & Coupland, 1988), or signaling that they belong to the same social group, such as a

particular ethnic or socioeconomic group (Bourhis, 1983; Giles & Johnson, 1981, 1987). Conversely, CAT proposes *counteraccommodative* goals or motivations, such as signaling disapproval, or emphasizing social distance (Giles, 1973; Street, 1982), or even making communication problematic (see Coupland, Wiemann & Giles, 1991; Gardner, 2002; Gardner & Jones, 1999; Petronio, Ellemers, Giles & Gallois, 1998).

Social identity and CAT. As CAT takes a largely intergroup perspective when examining interpersonal communication, social identity plays a major role in accommodation processes (see Callan, Gallois & Forbes, 1983; Giles, Scherer & Taylor, 1979), so an understanding of social identity theory is necessary to understand the complexities of accommodation processes. For a comprehensive introduction to social identity theory, see Hogg & Abrams, 1988.

Social identity was defined by Tajfel (1974) as 'the individual's knowledge that he (sic) belongs to certain social groups, together with some emotional and value significance to him of the group membership' (p31). Social identity theory proposes that one's self-concept is comprised of a personal identity (based on idiosyncratic characteristics such as bodily attributes, abilities, and psychological traits), and a social identity, based on salient group memberships. A fundamental concept in social identity theory is that of ingroups and outgroups. An ingroup is "a group to which one belongs, whereas an outgroup is a relevant comparison group that is viewed in contrast to one's ingroup" (Williams, 2001, p. 5). When one's social identity is salient, so too are intergroup processes. The more a person identifies with his or her ingroup (e.g., manager), the more he or she will feel distinct from outgroup members (e.g., employees).

Several researchers (e.g., Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000; Mael & Ashforth, 1995; Hartley, 1996) have argued that social identity theory can assist in our understanding of the intergroup nature of communication between individuals from different social (and cultural)

groups in organizations. Drawing on social identity theory, CAT proposes that interactants' communication styles contain social markers that convey not only content information (the actual words spoken), but also information about the speaker's personal and social identity (e.g., ethnicity, personality, age, social status; Giles et al., 1979).

Intercultural communication in the workplace is highly influenced by intergroup processes (Bourhis, 1991). As Gudykunst (1985) argued, when social identity predominates, intergroup behavior occurs. Hogg and Abrams (1988) argued that communication is more often a function of the ingroup or outgroup status of the interactants than of their personalities, and that if the interaction takes place in the context of an intergroup orientation, accommodation processes can fulfil an identity function. Thus, interpersonal communication in the workplace is not only a function of individual characteristics of communicators, but also of social group memberships, such as cultural background or status.

Intergroup communication and accommodation. When investigating the effects of intergroup processes on accommodation, much of CAT research has focused on approximation behaviors (e.g., convergence or divergence of accent, dialect or language). However, there is more work to be done in examining how intergroup processes may affect the other, more discourse oriented accommodation strategies that managers can draw upon. For example, Stohl and Redding (1987) argued that one way of distinguishing interpersonal from intergroup communication behaviors is by examining the formality of speakers' language; the less formal it is, the more interpersonal it is, while intergroup (and thereby distancing) communication is characterized by higher levels of formality. In CAT terms, managers may accommodate by becoming less formal in their language usage. This tactic can be conceptualized as falling under the CAT strategies of interpersonal control (role relations), and discourse management (informal tenor).

Contextual factors. CAT also highlights the importance of situational or contextual variables in interactions. These include macro-contextual variables, such as the communication rules of the society at large, or the organization, through to micro-contextual variables relating to the specific interaction, such as the social norms of the situation (McKirnan & Hamayan, 1984), interactants' goals (Argyle, Furnham & Graham, 1981), and relational rules (Williams, Giles, Coupland, Dalby & Manasse, 1990).

Pre-interaction mediators. CAT also indicates the importance of pre-interaction variables (Williams et al., 1990) or initial orientations (Gallois et al., 1988). These include variables such as personal and social identity, individual differences in social skills and conversation sensitivities, and pre-existing stereotypes about the other interactant or their social or cultural group.

Labeling and attributions. The CAT model proposes that interactants may make various attributions or evaluations about each other on the basis of the other's accommodative stance (Giles & Powesland, 1975). Such evaluations feed back into the interaction, influencing the interactants' subsequent communication strategies, then influencing their subsequent evaluations, and so on. For example, when entering an interaction with a stranger from a different ethnic or social background, stereotypes about the stranger's outgroup status may initially be salient. However, during the interaction, the stranger may adapt his or her communication to become more interpersonal (e.g., through linguistic convergence, self-disclosure, less formal tone, discussing common interests, etc; see Bonnesen & Hummert, 2002, Ladany & Walker, 2003). A likely outcome of such accommodative behaviors is that the stranger's outgroup status becomes less salient (i.e., he or she is perceived at a more individualized level), so his or her behavior is no longer perceived so highly on the intergroup dimension. This may result in the other manager modifying his or her own communication to become more interpersonal.

Accommodation strategies

In their present form, the communication accommodation strategies have proven to be a useful heuristic. However, as discussed below, they are in need of conceptual elaboration and refinement (particularly in the context of workplace communication) in order to allow CAT to be further empirically tested and developed.

Approximation. As noted earlier, the origin of CAT was the communication strategy of speech approximation. The main approximations are convergence, divergence, and maintenance. Communication convergence is a process whereby people modify their speech, nonverbal behavior or discourse patterns to become more like their interactant, in a bid to decrease social distance or to seek or signal approval (i.e., to accommodate). Researchers have found, for example, that when two people meet and seek rapport, they often become more alike in terms of accent (Coupland, 1984; Willemyns, Gallois, Callan & Pittam, 1997), language usage (Giles, Taylor & Bourhis, 1973), pronunciation (Giles, 1973), speech rate (Giles & Smith, 1979) and vocal intensity (Natale, 1975).

CAT draws upon similarity-attraction theory (Byrne, 1971) and social identity theory (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) to propose motivations for convergence. According to similarity-attraction theory, the more similar people are on various characteristics, the more likely they will approve of or be attracted to each other. Accordingly, interactants may increase the likelihood of interpersonal attraction or approval by making their communicative behaviors more similar to each other (either consciously or subconsciously). Support for this proposition comes from many studies. For example, Natale (1975) found that speakers with a high need for approval converged more to their partner's vocal intensity and pause length than speakers with a low need for approval. Similarly, in employment interviews, applicants have been found to converge to the interviewer's turn duration and response latency (Matarazzo & Weins, 1972) and

communication style (Mathison, 1988). At a more intergroup level, CAT draws upon social identity theory to propose that individuals often converge to signal that they belong to a similar social group. An interactant may emphasize his or her accent or dialect to signal that he or she belongs to a similar social class as the other interactant (Trudgill, 1986). For example, Willemyns et al. (1997) found that job applicants converged to their interviewers' accents, including converging "downwards" to less prestigious accents.

The opposite of convergence is divergence, where interactants accentuate their communication style differences. Again in line with similarity attraction theory and social identity theory, CAT proposes that people diverge to signal disapproval or social distance between themselves and the other (i.e., to counteraccommodate; Ball, Gallois & Callan, 1989). For example, a person with a "prestigious" accent may diverge when speaking to someone with a regional accent, by emphasizing their prestigious accent, thereby emphasizing that they belong to different social groups.

CAT Strategies: Theoretical and Operational Development

Coupland et al. (1988) added a more discursive dimension to CAT, by adding the strategies of interpretability, interpersonal control, and discourse management.

Interpretability. Interpretability strategies are seen as arising from an interactant's perceptions of the other person's interpretive abilities (i.e., the other person's ability to understand what is being said). It is also possible to use interpretability tactics in a counteraccommodative manner (i.e., to increase social distance, and/or to make an interaction more difficult for the other person). For example, an interactant from one nationality may maintain his or her own language to maintain social distance from a person of another nationality, and to make communication difficult. Apart from language, there are many other forms of interpretability that may be used. For example, interactants may adjust their jargon, level of vocabulary, syntactic complexity, and vocal clarity, to become more easily

understood (Gallois et al., 1988). Further, an interactant may influence the selection of conversation topics, for example, by staying with topics familiar to the other person, and thereby encouraging smooth interactions (Giles & Coupland, 1991).

Interpersonal control. This communication strategy is seen as influencing the role relationship of the interactants. Thus, interpersonal control strategies may be used to try to keep the other person in either an ingroup or outgroup role (counteraccommodation). To date, few explicit operationalizations of interpersonal control behaviors have been articulated by CAT theorists.

Discourse management. Discourse management is seen as arising from interactants' attention to each others' conversational needs (Giles et al., 1988; Williams et al., 1990). Thus, one may accommodate by helping the other to meet such needs, or counteraccommodate by hindering the meeting of such needs. For example, Coupland et al. (1988) proposed that accommodative interactants may facilitate their partners' contribution to the interaction by offering speaking turns, eliciting information, and using conversational repair. Like interpersonal control, and, to a lesser extent, interpretability, this strategy has not been clearly operationalized.

Face issues. Recent research and theorizing in organizational communication has emphasized the importance of *face* in interpersonal or intergroup communication, particularly in intergroup interactions (e.g., Morand, 2000; Tracy, 2000). Consideration of face issues is especially important in cross-cultural communication involving Middle-Eastern interactants, as face is a major moderator of communication behavior in the Middle East. Xx REF

In his pioneering work, Goffman (1967) conceptualized face as a self-presentation concept where individuals desire positive value for the public face they present. Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) similarly described face as the wish to appear desirable to significant others, by way of various forms of linguistic politeness. Face concerns include both positive

and negative face. Positive face is the "want to be desirable to or solidarity with significant others", while negative face, conversely, is the "want that actions be unimpeded by others" (MacMartin, Wood & Kroger, 2001, p. 222). Note the relevance of positive and negative face to the central CAT goals of approval seeking and ingroup solidarity or affiliation.

Giles and Coupland (1991) suggested that much of the theorizing by Brown and Levinson regarding "positive politeness" discourse strategies could be readily integrated into CAT. The strategies include interactants' moves to redress face threats, including face-promotion and face maintenance. As Giles and Coupland argued, such politeness strategies are clearly linked to the central accommodative motivations of approval-seeking and desire for communicative smoothness and efficiency.

Face issues are clearly integral to accommodative communication in the workplace. In his sociolinguistic study of facework and power in an organizational context, Morand (1996) described various positive and negative facework tactics which individuals may use during interactions to show consideration and support for the face of others. Positive politeness tactics or behaviors may include compliments, appropriate use of first-name or ingroup name or claiming a common point of view. They also involve the avoidance of face-threatening acts such as criticizing, disagreeing, interrupting, embarrassing, and imposing by making requests.

Negative politeness, conversely, implies or establishes social distance between the interactants. Negative politeness tactics are associated with common expressions of linguistic politeness (e.g., "excuse me …", "Sorry to bother you but …", etc). Such expressions are a form of deference and are often markers of non-familiarity, social distance or a lesser power differential. Finally, face threat or face attack refers to an interactant being impolite or attacking the value of the other person (Tracy & Tracy, 1998).

Methodological approach.

Thematic content analysis. At the operational level, this study used thematic content analysis (TCA; Popping, 2001), to develop a coding scheme of communication accommodation themes from Emirati managers' descriptions of interactions (accounts) with expatriate employees in the workplace. The accounts were transcribed and segmented into meaningful text units, mainly at the micro-level of phrases and sentences. The transcripts were then coded using a grounded theory approach (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1990), where, over many readings of the data, and many iterations of constant comparison of themes and text-units, coding, as well as constant recoding and re-organizing of hierarchical coding categories, coding themes emerged from the data. While emergent from the data, the coding scheme was also guided by using a substantive theory-based approach, where concepts relevant to CAT were coded. Thus, the coding was both data-driven and theory-driven. The coding was facilitated using the qualitative software program QSR NVIVO (Richards, 1999).

Identity-implicative discourse analysis. This study aimed to examine communication processes at a qualitative level, and to interpret salient themes in Emirati-expatriate workplace communication and leadership. The content-coding was guided by the interpretive analytical approach advocated by Tracy and Naughton (1994), which they termed *identity-implicative analysis*. Tracy and Naughton argued that the identity-implicative approach is different to more traditional conversation analysis approaches, which tend to focus on structures of organization of conversation. The identity-implicative approach has a strong focus on inferring speakers' personal and social identities from their communication, including their ethnic and occupational identities.

General hypotheses.

As the present study was exploratory in nature, broad hypotheses were made. In sum, it was expected that the major content categories that would emerge from the analyses would include themes such as cultural distance ("outgroupness") and conversely, affiliation

("ingroupness"), as well as personal similarities, self-disclosure, active listening, inclusive communication, and positive and negative face.

Method

Participants

The participants were 60 United Arab Emirates National managers (52 males and 8 females, ranging in age from 25 to 52; mean age 36.22 years). They were recruited by Emirati university students who were asked to have questionnaires completed by a working Emirati manager (friend or relative). The participants' occupations and places of work covered a wide spectrum, including multinational banking and finance, as well as government departments.

Procedure

Questionnaires. Each participant completed a questionnaire which asked him or her to describe a conversation they had recently had with an expatriate employee. The questionnaires were written in English and Arabic. Participants wrote up to one page (responses ranged from approximately100 t o 250 words) describing the conversation in as much detail as they could recall, including specific statements made by themselves and their co-worker. The questionnaire also obtained brief responses (one or two sentences) to open-ended probe questions (e.g., "How important was his/her personality [or status] to the way he/she communicated? Please provide an example"). The Arabic written responses were translated into English.

Development of the coding scheme

The development of the coding scheme was conducted using the QSR NVIVO qualitative research software. Transcripts of employees' descriptions of the interactions were content-coded using a combination of a grounded theory approach (e.g., Strauss, 1987),

where salient concepts emerge from the data over several readings and iteratively refined recategorizations, and a substantive theory-based approach, where statements relevant to CAT strategies were coded. Thus the coding was both data- and theory-driven. The text units were coded at the micro level of phrases or simple sentences.

Results and Discussion

1, 226 text units (e.g., phrases and sentences) were coded into CAT-based categories (e.g., "Interpersonal Control", "Discourse Management" and "Face" strategies). Table 1 shows the major themes and typical examples of each theme.

Table 1: Major communication themes and typical examples of each theme

ACCOMMODATIVE (ingroup) codes	***COUNTERACCOMMODATIVE (outgroup) codes***
INTERPERSONAL CONTROL	
Equistatus e.g., He treated me as an equal.	*Cultural outgroup references* e.g., Just the way he talks, he thinks Westerners are smarter than locals.
Non-work role references References to employee in a non-work role. e.g., He said being a family man himself he could understand my problem.	
Friendship role references References to employee as a friend e.g., She is very approachable and treats me as a friend.	
Similarities (Interpersonal similarities, similar values) e.g., e.g., When she told me she was in the same club as I was, I saw her in a different way.	
DISCOURSE MANAGEMENT	
Willing to discuss/listen e.g., He listened intently and pointed out …	*Unwilling to discuss/listen* e.g., He would not let me explain, He would walk off while I was talking. He cut me off He would not give me an answer.
Small-talk References to the other speaking about non-work topics, chatting, pleasant conversation e.g., We gave examples of what sports we had played, or friends had played.	
Self-disclosure Where the person discloses relatively personal information about themselves, or their feelings about issues or other people e.g., I saw a side of him that I didn't realize existed - he apologized and explained he'd been brought up in a household where compliments weren't given much".	
FACE ISSUES	
Praise/Valued Praise, encouragement, thanks e.g., He said 'Great work - you have done a fantastic job'.	*Criticism* Any inference or reference to being blamed, accused, or criticized unjustly. e.g., He deliberately attempted to publicly embarrass me so that by the time he had finished I felt two inches tall.
Negative face Where the other person communicates in a way to help save face e.g., Taking the employee aside quietly to point out a mistake or give constructive feedback.	*Face threat (e.g., embarrassment, challenges)* References indicating the employee put the Emirati manager in a position of feeling "imposed upon" or embarrassed. e.g., He again asked me about my wife. It is not his business and he should not ask.

Statistical analyses on the broader study are still underway. While the present study is qualitative in its methodological approach, analyses indicate that managers who perceived employees in ingroup terms were consultative, and thereby accommodative in their communication style. Conversely, managers who perceived employees in outgroup stereotypical terms used a more power-marked, distancing, and directive communication style.

Interestingly, there were relatively few direct references to cross-cultural issues in the managers' descriptions of the conversations. This may be due to the largely westernized nature of many organizations in the UAE, where Emirati Nationals have adapted western norms, values and communication styles. Further, most educated Emirati Nationals, particularly those working in large organizations, are competent English speakers, so language difficulties were not an issue.

However, the results indicated a clear pattern of communication behaviours and characteristics salient for Emirati managers in terms of ingroup/outgroup relations with their employees. The content-analysis yielded a number of categories that were conceptually related to CAT's well-established strategies, Interpersonal Control and Discourse Management. This was expected, as the Emirati-Western communication context is very much an intergroup one, and these strategies relate to ingroup/outgroup dynamics. The results were also encouraging in that they provided empirical support for the recently theorised concept of "Face Issues" as a CAT strategy, with implications for perceptions of ingroup/outgroup membership.

Interpersonal control. The Interpersonal Control themes were highly salient in employees' descriptions of interactions with their co-workers. For example, the ingroup category "equistatus" (where the employee felt he or she was treated as an equal) was one of the largest categories that emerged from the analyses. Other ingroup "Interpersonal Control"

codes reflected communication behaviours that would reduce perceptions of cultural differences, emphasise interpersonal similarities, and position the co-worker more as an individual, rather than simply as a member of a cultural outgroup. Again, individualization breaks down Emiratis' stereotypes of their Western employees.

Discourse management. At the discourse level, the outgroup categories were indicative of lack of willingness to listen or communicate, and negatively perceived control of conversation patterns. Active listening is a communication skill that has long been known to indicate that the speaker is taken seriously and that the listener cares. Self-disclosure is a powerful form of communication in terms of breaking through the outgroup barrier and personalizing oneself. Small-talk, while not as revealing as self-disclosure, can also facilitate ingroup perceptions (e.g., fans of the same football team, type of movie, etc). Over time, such positive discourse management would lead to a decrease in perceptions of outgroup membership.

Face issues. As noted, "Face issues" emerged as a major theme in the study. While face communication is a relatively new and untested concept in CAT, recent theorizing of this concept has emphasized interactants need to feel valued and respected. Positive face included the manager conveying that the employee was valued (e.g., through praise and compliments.

Face threat was also a salient issue in the negative interactions. Face threat is defined by Morand (1996) as communication that is perceived as diminishing the value or worth of the recipient, and includes issues of criticism, blame and embarrassment. Poor handling of negative feedback also invoked negative intergroup perceptions. The study suggests that handled poorly, negative feedback (especially in public) is not soon forgotten by co-workers, and can be a major source of face threat, leading to a heightened sense of distance from the co-worker. As noted earlier, negative communication will often lead to negative perceptions

of the employee, and will often invoke a sense of cultural outgroup distance, despite it being an interpersonal interaction.

The results of this study indicate the importance of a manager's awareness and use of ingroup communication behaviours for building and maintaining a sense of affinity with employees. In sum, all of the ingroup communication in this study can be distilled into the core theme of communicating that the employees are valued as members of the organization and as fellow human beings. Thus, while cultural and status differences may exist, perceptions of outgroup memberships may be minimized by interactants use of accommodative communication styles.

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