INTERCULTURAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION: AN ANALYSIS OF ETHNOCENTRISM IN A GLOBALIZED BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

Melvin C. Washington,
Howard University

ABSTRACT

Twenty-first century organizations, rather small, medium, or large are increasingly finding themselves competing in global rather than local markets. This paper explores the current literature on the increasing global influence of ethnocentrism and its affect on international business communication. It also provides a model for overcoming ethnocentrism in a multicultural business environment. The goal of the paper is to provide practitioners with a realistic approach for overcoming ethnocentrism in a multicultural workplace.

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-first century organizations have become increasing aware of the major benefits and broader perspectives that globalization creates in the domestic and international marketplace. Globalization is the capability of a corporation to market a product to the entire civilized world (Chaney & Martin, 2007). Bowes (2008) defines globalization as a means of creating a multicultural work force through welcoming new employees from various countries into their workplaces. According to the 2007 U.S. Census bureau, by the middle of the twenty-first century, the United States will cease to have a majority race. Non-Hispanic whites will comprise about one-half of the total population, while Hispanics will account for about one-quarter of this country's population. African Americans will grow to about 13 percent, while Asian Americans are projected to become about 8 percent of the nation's citizenship. Out of more than 278 million people living in the U.S., over 33 million speak Spanish; while more than 10 million speak another European language and more than 8 million speak an Asian language.

Globalization brings about significant international competitive advantages. A diverse workforce can yield a significant competitive advantage by employing new ideas and communication skills (Bovee & Thill, 2010). It can also provide a diversity of thought that result in better business solutions (Gupta, 2008). Here, the author explains why companies are embracing diversity and argues that embracing diversity is a positive motivational tool that can attract and retain the best employees, as well as achieving a better level of competitiveness. However, with these benefits come challenges. As Bovee & Thill (2010) and Ferraro (2001) noted, to be effective in interacting across cultural boundaries, organizations need to be sensitized to the values of understanding, appreciating, and respecting human and cultural differences.

Organizations face the challenge of coexisting with business partners and the community, while managers and supervisors face the challenge of motivating and creating harmony among their workers. For example, Earley (1997) noted that Chinese business etiquette is most reserved and unlike the United States. To the United States businessperson, a personal relationship can be separated from business. Friendships are formed quickly and dissolved. Hence, ethnocentrism may lead China businesspersons to view the U.S. business relationship as insensitive and shallow (Martin & Chaney, 2006). Similarly, Teagarden (2008) argues that traditional views of

opportunities must move beyond market opportunities to people who populate those markets and create the potential for opportunity. The author further explains that organizations must incorporate the human face of diverse cultures as they develop and execute global business strategies. Ruch (1989) agrees, noting that as a result of the rise of the internationalized business environment, the managing of human diversity has become a daily task for a major part of the business community. The authors stress that in this globalized business environment, organizations ability to unify with other cultures is more important than product, price, or quality advantages. Unification however, can prove to be difficult because of the presence of ethnocentrism.

Sumner (1906) coined the word "ethnocentrism" as "this view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it… Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders. Each group thinks its own folkways as the only right ones, and if it observes that other groups have other folkways, these excite its scorn" (p. 13). Bennett (2008) describes ethnocentrism as an attitude or mindset conceived in three stages: (1) the denial stage, (2) the defense stage, and (3) the minimization stage. People in the denial stage are completely ethnocentric and do not recognize the existence of cultural differences. Those in the defense stage recognize the existence of other cultures, but not their validity. People in the minimization stage of ethnocentrism try to minimize other cultures by telling themselves that people are more similar than dissimilar. Hence, it is easy to understand how these attitudes can lead to breakdowns in effective intercultural communication. For purposes of this research, intercultural business communication is defined as communication within and between businesses that involves people from more than one culture (Chaney & Martin, 2007).

For instance, Hilton & Kameda (1999) argue that ethnocentrism left unchecked, can lead to great misunderstanding in intercultural business communication. Flatley, Rentz and Lentz (2012) note that it is crucial that the business communicator is able to adapt to quickly changing responsibilities and work relationships. Increased globalization of business, immigration, the aging of the "Baby Boomers," the escalation of women in the workforce, and the changing educational environment are all fueling these trends. Fisher (1997) defines ethnocentrism as a mindset that believes that your own cultural background is the central culture and that other cultures are incorrect or defective. The author notes the importance for individuals to build a sense of identity and self-esteem, but points out that people sometimes develop the mistaken belief that others are not as good as they are. For example, Tung & Miller (1990) suggest that American managers and executives prove to be consistently ethnocentric in their approach to management including the development and implementation of policies, practices, and procedures. The authors point out that many American corporations do not integrate an international perspective in their management agenda.

Hence, this article begins with a review of the current literature exploring ethnocentrism in a globalized business environment. The literature review is followed by a discussion of the research methodology and the development and administration of the research tool, followed by a discussion of the finding. In the final section, the conclusions are summarized and implications for overcoming ethnocentrism posited.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review examines ethnocentrism from two different but related perspectives: communication and culture. Culture is the structure through which communication is formulated and when cultures interact, knowing all the cultural factors that affect the situation is essential (Chaney & Martin, 2007). Communication, both intercultural and international is necessary for upward mobility in tomorrow's corporate world (Martin & Chaney, 2006).

Ethnocentrism and Communication

A number of studies (Moon & Wooliams, 2000; and Victor, 1992) emphasize the pervasiveness of ethnocentrism on effective international business communication. The authors explain that ethnocentrism is deceptive precisely because members of any culture view their own behavior as correct. For example, since no one individual is likely to recognize the different forms of ethnocentrism within themselves, business communicators must be especially careful when conducting business across cultures. That is, businesspersons need to understand how the perception of a message changes depending on the cultural context of the business situation. Victor (1992) argues that the difficulties of communicating at a global level have become increasingly difficult because of the lack of understanding deriving from ethnocentrism or ignorance of culturally based assumptions. Different types of people tend to have different ways of expressing themselves. For example, formal cultures place a high emphasis on following business communication protocol and social customs, while informal cultures, notably the United States, dispense with ceremony and are more casual in the workplace, and thus the level of directness and explicitness that individuals display in their communication is determined largely by their particular culture.

Grimes & Richard (2003) describe ethnocentric communication as interactions between natives and non-natives. Natives are people considered by the communicator as part of their own group, that is, those they understand, and thus they are able to communicate with their own group without any discomfort because their assumptions are not challenged. Here, the authors emphasize that even though natives see themselves as the dominant group, both dominant and non-dominant groups may be ethnocentric communicators. The difference being that the non-dominant groups do not control such institutions as the media, the legal system, or business, thus their ethnocentrism does not have the same power as the ethnocentrism of dominant groups. For example, Peltokorpi (2007) asserts that ethnocentric recruitment and language policies are expected to have a negative impact on international employee relationships and business communication. Similarly, Harzing and Feely (2008) argue that inadequate host country language skills and possible categorization of non-dominant group members can make important information inaccessible and foster feeling of rejection and psychological distress.

In efforts to overcome such negative feeling, Chen and Starosta (2004) explain that there must be a level of intercultural sensitivity that serves as a prerequisite for intercultural communication competence. The kind of competence meant here is an ability to accomplish goals while also reducing misunderstandings and building strong interpersonal, cross-cultural relationships (Cheesebro, O'Connor & Rios, 2010.) As one's intercultural communication sensitivity increases, so do ones level of intercultural communication competence. Intercultural communication sensitivity is related to cognitive, affective and behavioral aspects of our interactions with others and focuses on concepts such as managing and regulation emotions.

Ethnocentrism and Culture

Chaney and Martin (2007) note that whereas communication is a process, culture is the structure through which the communication is formulated and interpreted, and both ethnocentrism and culture have been cited as the cause of serious communication problems in the world. Lin, Rancer, and Trimbitas (2005) found that Romanian students were more ethnocentric than American students. Here, the authors proposed that these results may result from Romania's history of unrest and polarization. Similarly, Neuliep, Chaudoir, and McCroskey (2001) postulate that because of found differences on a socialization scale between Japanese students and their American counterparts. They noted that Japanese thinking and homogenous culture may account for these results. In addition, in both studies, men scored higher than women (Lin et al., 2005), suggesting that socialization accounts for this difference (Neuliep et al., 2001).

The anthropologist Edward Hall (1959) defined culture as an unseen powerful force. He states, "Culture is not an exotic notion studied by a select group of anthropologists in the South

Seas. It is a mold in which we all are cast, and it controls our lives in many unsuspected ways" (p. 52). Chaney and Martin (2007) argue that many times, ethnocentric communication does not account for cultural differences in the workforce. For example, U.S. cars were not selling in Japan because of the U.S. car manufacturer's lack of effective intercultural communication. These manufacturers failed to change the position of the steering wheel from the left to the right for driving on the opposite side of the road from the United States.

METHOD

The study utilizes a qualitative research method by employing Orbe' (1998) theory of co-cultural communication as a conceptual framework to analyzing the current literature on ethnocentrism in today's international business environment.

Orbe's Model of Co-Cultural

The main purpose of this study is to provide communication practitioners with a template for overcoming ethnocentrism in today's multicultural organizations. To accomplish this task, this study will utilize Orbe's (1998) Model of General Orientations of Co-cultural Communication that occurs during intercultural relationships, as a guide and map to analyzing and overcoming ethnocentrism in the organization.

As you can see from the Table 1 below, Orbe has identified three general orientations that occur during co-cultural communication. These orientations are labeled nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive and within each orientation, communicators may emphasize modes of assimilation, accommodation, or separation in relation to the dominant group. The goal of this process is to determine which, if any strategy is the most effective in overcoming ethnocentrism in a globalized business environment. Thus, the discussion section of this paper focuses on accommodation theory, assimilation theory, and separation theory, and how each of these theories lend themselves to overcoming the pervasiveness of ethnocentrism in a globalized business environment.

Table 1

Types of Separation, Accommodation, and Assimilation Strategies

	Separation	Accommodation	Assimilation
Nonassertive	- Avoiding - Maintaining interpersonal barriers	- Increasing visibility - Dispelling stereotypes	- Emphasizing commonalities - Developing positive face
Assertive	- Communicating self - Embracing stereotypes	- Communicating self - Using liaisons - Educating others	- Extensive preparation - Over compensating
Aggressive	- Attacking - Sabotaging others	- Confronting - Gaining advantage	- Disassociating - Mirroring - Strategic distancing

Source: M. Orbe, 1998.

DISCUSSION

Overcoming Ethnocentrism: Accommodation Theory

Overcoming ethnocentrism under the framework of accommodation offers several insights. Businesspeople understand that ethnocentrism is a principle barrier for achieving intercultural accommodation. Initially proposed by J. Piaget, the term accommodation refers to the process of altering one's existing schemas, or ideas, as a result of new information or new experiences (Piaget, 1977). For example, when a young person moves away to college, they suddenly find themselves surrounded by people from a foreign group that causes that person to act ethnocentrically. However, through experience and real interactions with members of that group, they realize that their existing knowledge of the group was incorrect, thus overcoming the fears leading to ethnocentrism. Huang (2012) noted that respecting other cultures through accommodation must become a fundamental attitude in business transactions.

Chaney and Martin (2007) argue that with an increased recognition of differences as well as similarities, businesspersons can adjust their mode of communication to fit the individual culture with which they are communicating. For example, communication accommodation theory developed by Giles (1991) argues that when people interact they adjust their communication patterns and strategies to accommodate others. Communication accommodation theory aids in overcoming ethnocentrism by utilizing two main accommodation processes described by the theory, which are convergence and divergence.

Several studies (Gibbons, 2005 & Giles, 2007) refer to convergence as strategies through which individuals adapt to each other's communicative behaviors, in order to reduce their social differences, while divergence refers to the instance in which individuals accentuate the speech and non-verbal differences between themselves and those to which they communicate. According to Giles and Coupland (1991), convergence reflects an individual's desire for social approval, and that the greater the individual's need for social approval, the more likely he or she is to converge. Here, the author notes that converging increases the effectiveness of communication, which in turn lowers uncertainty, interpersonal anxiety, and increase mutual understanding, all of which are factors in the reduction of ethnocentrism. Similarly, divergence reflects a desire to communicate in a positive manner by emphasizing group distinctiveness and maintaining cultural identities. Here, accommodation of circumstances is viewed as taking place quickly, where the person or group is typically highly conscious of the process of accommodating. By contrast, this paper now turns to assimilation theory in its quest for an answer to overcoming ethnocentrism. Rumbaut (1997) describes the process of assimilation as more subtle and gradual than accommodation, and is typically unconscious. The author further explains that it is through communication that gradual and unconscious changes of attitudes and sentiments are produced, and thus a common language between groups of people fostering ethnocentric attitudes is indispensable in the process of assimilation.

Overcoming Ethnocentrism: Assimilation Theory

Hao (2010) characterizes assimilation by four features: (1) inevitability, (2) full incorporation, (3) a lack of a positive ethic group role and (4) the most objectionable, ethnocentrism. The author explains that this approach has become increasingly inadequate since the United States entered into a new era of globalization. This theory sees other cultures as valueless and immigrants as giving up their culture if they are to assimilate. Similarly, Alba and Nee (2003) conclude that assimilation is a contested idea today. Here, the authors stresses that since the 1960's, assimilation has been seen in a mostly negative light, and has an ethnocentric and patronizing imposition on minority peoples struggling to retain their cultural and ethnic integrity. Rumbaut (1997) asserts that while assimilation was once often thought of as good and uncritically received, a compelling body of evidence describes assimilation as producing deteriorating outcomes and exposing ethnocentric pretensions over time and generation in the United States. There exists a

certain pressure to adopt the language, customs, and behavior that were seen as the norm in order to gain acceptance. As the author emphasizes, these pressures produce patronizing ethnocentrism with built in assumptions about adjustments that equates "foreign" with "inferior".

Vyrgo (2011) notes that complete assimilation requires a person or group of people to barter away his/her past for a future, however, without that past the person cannot remain whole. For example, the African American, although, apparently not Anglo-American, has assimilated into the American society and culture. They were brought to this country in chains and disassociated from their culture by force. In order to survive, the black American had to fully assimilate into the American culture and adopt the customs and ways of the dominant society. The author further observes that assimilation for the African American was a slow process, based on ethnocentrism and caused by America's bias against the "other". The need for survival and fear of the dominant culture forced the African American to attempt assimilation; however, white America did not believe that the "inferior" black race should or could ever become as "civilized" as they. Hence, assimilation into society occurred long after the African American had fully acculturated.

However, the last two decades have seen significant changes in cultural values which have led to emerging schools of thought on how to manage people and organizations in a globally competitive business environment (Amaran, 2007). According to the author, the traditional approach to handling issues related to multiculturalism in complex organizations has changed for three reasons: (1) a quest for social justice, (2) legal obligations arising from civil rights laws, and (3) the limitations of affirmative action which have led to calls for new proposals. The author states, "the strategic imperatives imposed on American businesses for competitive advantage in the global marketplace, have created more pressures to acknowledge and deal with cultural diversity in a way that recognizes and works with differences in cultures without denigrating or submerging some under others" (p. 2). As such, these changes offer insights into overcoming ethnocentrism, thus creating both opportunities and challenges in a globalized business environment.

Overcoming Ethnocentrism: Separation Theory

Unlike assimilation and accommodation, separation offers little hope in forming a common bond with other overcoming ethnocentrism. Those embracing this stance seek specific, separate group identities that will withstand the assimilation process (Parrillo, 1996), and believe that it is futile to try to work within different ethnic groups (Golden & Rieke, 1971).

CONCLUSION

Globalization of businesses and markets brings about significant international competitive advantage for organizations. Bovee and Thill (2010) stressed that a diverse workforce can yield a significant competitive advantage by employing new ideas and communication skills. Similarly, Gupta states that it provides a diversity of thought that result in better business practices and relationships. The authors agree on the importance of companies embracing diversity because diversity brings a positive motivational tool that can attract and retain the best employees, as well as achieving a better level of competitiveness for organizations. Finally, Bovee & Thill (2010) and Ferraro (2001) noted that to be effective in interacting across cultural boundaries, managers need to be sensitized to the values of understanding and appreciating cultural differences in their organizations.

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About the Author

Melvin C. Washington, PhD is an assistant professor of business and management communication at Howard University. He is the core course coordinator for the business communication program in the School of Business. His research focuses on intercultural communication, organizational communication, and critical pedagogy. Address correspondence to *Melvin C. Washington, Howard University School of Business, 2600 6th Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20059; e-mail: m_c_washington@howard.edu*.