Cross-Cultural Communication: Interpreting Human Nature

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**Summary:**

As a Chinese student studying in the United States, I am especially interested in cross-cultural communication and the ways culture influence the way we interact with others outside our ethnic group. Andre A. Pekerti's and David C. Thomas's examine cross-cultural communication between Asians and Caucasians in New Zealand and how their cultures influence their interaction. Their research has two parts. The first study places the subjects' interactions within a larger cultural context of values: white individualism and Asian collectivism. Given the increased economic globalization, Pekerti and Thomas assert their research contributes to a larger discussion of how companies can learn from cross-cultural interactions as they build their businesses to reach a worldwide clientele.

Drawing from earlier studies, Pekerti and Thomas graph their Asian and New Zealanders' "cultural profiles" based on established social systems. White ethnic groups traditionally value individual freedom and/or equity while Asians generally sacrifice individualism for collectivist harmony (168). Pekerti and Thomas also accounted for styles of communication: i.e. whether messages are conveyed explicitly through verbal and written means, or whether the message is embedded in a larger social enculturation. From this historiography, they contend individuals from western cultures—here, New Zealand—are more argumentative and individualistic. Conversely, Asian populations are guided more by consensus and avoiding arguments and are willing to accept contradictions (Pekerti and Thomas 171 and 173).

Pekerti and Thomas drew their participants from a large university in New Zealand which has an Asian population. For the study on argumentativeness, Pekerti and Thomas utilized pre-existing tests to judge whether students, when placed in a situation of conflict, chose to argue or not. They quantified the data and the graphed results indicate Caucasian New Zealanders were

slightly more prone to argue than Asian students (174). The data supported the hypothesis that independent, individualistic cultures were more prone to argue rather than maintain harmony among conflicting views. The researchers attribute the closeness of the numbers to the western-orientation of the university which encourages students to think independently (177).

For the second study—actual observation of interaction—and determine whether Asian students were more likely to accept inconsistencies to avoid disharmony—Pekerti and Thomas drew from a different group of New Zealand students. Unlike the first study, the Asians here were mostly Chinese while the Caucasian participants were from New Zealand, Europe, and the United States (182). Students were paired randomly, the subject discussed in each case was crime, and their conversations were taped for later observation. The results indicated New Zealanders were more dominating, aggressive, and relied on logical persuasion while Asians were more prone to avoid arguments and shifted their opinions accordingly (182, 185). Although Pekerti and Thomas concede their participants' demographics are a narrow sample, but they contend that their data can be applied to a larger working population worldwide. The larger conclusion states that interaction reinforces a participant's cultural behavior. When communicating, people will tend to draw from their ingrained cultural characteristics for support.

**Determination:**

In my opinion, the authors are attempting to apply an Objective analysis, but their study works better as an Interpretive model. One of the main goals of a scientific and objective theory is to build a working model that can *predict future events*. Pekerti and Thomas work from previous scholarship that shows the consistency of cultural traits in certain ethnic groups: individualistic New Zealanders and collectivist-minded Asians. Using these traits as a backbone, the researchers build their studies to show whether these traits influence the way they interact.

That the Asians in their studies tended to prize harmony over assertiveness and argumentativeness supported their underlying hypotheses. Their data, carefully *quantified* into data points and plotted along a standard distribution using a mathematical formula, explains how the participants followed their cultural modes of behavior.

Pekerti's and Thomas's study is not completely objective, however. Some of their data analysis reflects an Interpretative perspective. In viewing video recordings, Pekerti and Thomas must judge for themselves what qualifies as "argumentative" or "individualistic." These judgment calls rely on *textual readings*, such as watching for eye contact, facial and hand gestures, and body language. All of these evaluations are interpretive factors. Indeed, the researchers are careful to note their study does have some limits and caution readers not to shift their analyses into general stereotypes (i.e. the "pushy" Caucasian and the "docile" Asian). They note some individual outliers did not necessarily conform to their ethnic "type." One Asian participant in the second study, for example, was more outspoken than his ethnic peers (182).

Not only can people defy their cultural norms, but those norms can also shift. Pekerti and Thomas assume that culture does not change: they ethnic characteristics themselves are set in stone. They cite studies which have analyzed Japanese customs of "saving face" or ancient Confucian principles to explain Asian passivity, but by doing so they ignore the industrialization and "westernization" of Asia in recent periods. Similarly, Pelerti and Thomas lump their "Caucasian" students as one group; even though they note they comprise of North American, European, and New Zealanders, the researchers assume that white people from three separate continents (and multiple ethnic groups in each) share the same traits. In opening up their research to account for ethnographic variations in white culture (for example, Slavic students vs. Germanic) and Asian culture (two Indonesian students participated in the second study, but the

researchers lumped them with the Chinese students under the broad umbrella of "Asian"), their study will have more nuances that will give insight into the human condition.

Before I can accept Pekerti's and Thomas's conclusions about the correlation between cross-cultural communications, I would like to see similar experiments which can duplicate their results. One of the scientific standards of a good objective experiment is to *verify the authors' hypotheses with repeated tests*. Thus, variations of their experiment should be performed. For example, would the results from a New Zealand university, where Asians are a minority, be the same in an Asian setting where white students are the "foreigners" and therefore, can feel subconsciously intimidated? Since Pekerti and Thomas direct their conclusions' applicability to the workplace, I wonder if workers of different backgrounds or education levels would interact in the same way. In addition, since Pekerti and Thomas segregate their participants by race, would African-Americans and indigenous African students reflect similar traits regardless of cultural backgrounds? As global communications become more effective and more people interact, I suspect the studies of this type will become less scientific in nature: human variation defies categories. The Asian students in the first study were less argumentative, but, as the researchers note, were more argumentative than they suspected. Human nature changes, and this adaptability defies the permanence of universal maxims.

Pekerti and Thomas attempt to create an objective "truth" about cross-cultural speech which can be applied as a universal rule. While their general conclusion is sound—that culture can influence the way people speak to each other—their work needs a larger system of analysis, especially duplication of their experiments with different subjects and locations. As an interpretative analysis of *understand human behavior*, their study provides greater insight into societal development. The relationship between enculturation and communication has greater

consequences than maintaining harmony in the workplace. Rather, it opens the door to reforming

conflict on a global scale.

Works Cited

Pekerti, Andre A. and David C. Thomas. "The Role of Self-Concept in Cross-Cultural

    Communication." *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management* 15.2 (2015):

    167-193. Web. 10 Oct. 2015.