Psychology of Stereotype in Intercultural Communication

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Abstract. Intercultural communication is between people from different cultural and language backgrounds. Stereotype is an important concept in the theoretical research of intercultural communication, which induces the recognized characteristics of a certain social group by generalizing and acknowledging some distinct ethnic, racial, and cultural features. Through the analysis of the psychological causes and different types of stereotype, this paper assumes that stereotype produces positive and negative effects on intercultural communication, proposing some methods to deal with stereotype in the process of intercultural communication. It is significant for the research of cultural psychology and the improvement of intercultural communication ability.

Introduction

Intercultural communication is not merely a dynamic and bilateral interaction, but a decoding and encoding process influenced by different language and cultural contexts. With the existence and development of the common cultural space of both parties, intercultural communication is performed in different cultural patterns, in which how the cultural attitude affects the cultural psychology tendency really matters. A positive attitude can shape positive psychology tendency, promoting both parties to seek common ground and harbor difference and improving communication effect; while a negative attitude is full of emotions and sensibilities, influencing cultural psychology and leading to insurmountable barriers in communication [1]. Therefore, it is significant to study the relationship between cultural attitude and cultural psychology tendency in intercultural communication.

Intercultural Communication

Intercultural communication is the process of communication and exchange of those who are from different cultures. Communication is inseparable from culture and people’s communication activities are restricted and dominated by their culture. Generally, people understand the activities of those from the same or similar culture because they are familiar with each other’s behaving and thinking pattern. However, there are difficulties in understanding those from a different culture. Now that different ethnics are under different social and cultural environments, different language habits, social cultures and local customs are created. Without adequate mutual understanding, diversity occurs more than similarity in the process of intercultural communication [2].

Gudykunst (1992) defined the attitude created in everybody’s psychology to influence communication as psychology culture, whose effect tends to prevent both parties from reaching a consensus cognitively and emotionally. As an important aspect of communication, attitude is considered as a psychological tendency to deal with any person, idea, or matter. Attitude determines in advance that people deal with a person, a matter, or a behavior, positively or negatively. In order to avoid the obstacles produced by misunderstanding in intercultural communication, people and things from a foreign culture are classified into different categories. The classification partly consists with the facts and partly goes against the facts, so that it is easily fixed into a “type”, namely, stereotype. More importantly, deviation could occur to the result in different situations, which hinders intercultural communication.
Stereotype

Conception

Stereotype is a mind-set which was firstly proposed by Walter Lippmann in 1922. He points out that people perceive everything through categorization and generalization and then use stereotype to evaluate the group. Be confronted with heterogeneous culture, people create stereotype about other cultural groups out of cognitive needs and instinct response to the world, so as to perceive the world more easily and generally. Stereotype reflects human’s cognitive traits, that is, “people tend to obtain the maximum cognitive effect with the minimum cognitive effort in coping with information” [3]. Stereotype is the anticipated evaluation of a certain social group and the norms and opinions obtained [4]. Hu Wenzhong suggests, stereotype is a set of convictions about some attribute of individuals or groups. Some are positive, and others are negative. We depend on the highly generalized information to evaluate things, regardless of its accuracy or conformity. This preconception can increase predictability and decrease the worry about uncertainty. But its disturbance prevents us from making objective judgments [5].

In socio-cultural psychology, stereotype includes auto-stereotype and hetero-stereotype. Auto-stereotype is the general statement about the universally acknowledged values and behaviors of a certain socio-cultural group, which is made to evaluate the group itself. Those values are considered as self-image in intercultural communication research. Members of the same group usually identify with them without reflection. If some stereotype is derogatory, it is called negative stereotype; otherwise, positive stereotype. Hetero-stereotype is the common recognition of values and behaviors made by one socio-cultural group for another group, which is referred to as others-image. Members of one group usually impose those values on any member of the other group with priori belief.

Influence of stereotype

Stereotype is an important concept about attitude in intercultural communication research. It reveals the communicating psychology of individuals and their profound cognition and evaluation. As a psychologically cognitive process, stereotype deals with people by generalization and categorization. For instance, different people are classified into different categories according to their nationalities, professions, strataums, personalities, and roles, and their traits in each category are identified.

In intercultural communication, stereotype does not always bad results. In the aspects of socio-psychology and learning psychology, stereotype is described as an effective method to categorize the information of individual traits, aiming to use the information more clearly and easily. In this sense, stereotype helps communicators quickly understand each other’s superficial information. It can be accepted as a starting point in intercultural learning and communication.

Undeniably, hetero-stereotype is one of the primary barriers in intercultural communication. With preconception, individuality and distinction are ignored, preventing people from obtaining precise knowledge. Normally, stereotype and prejudice coexist, which means that prejudice is created when cognition or belief exists. When stereotype is endowed with prejudice, discrimination is produced.

Methods to deal with stereotype

In the practice of intercultural communication, people not only accumulate cultural experiences, but also make a pre-judgment to every individual or matter from foreign cultures through various channels according to their previous knowledge and acquisition. This pre-judgment includes both reasonable evaluation and arrogant and subjective prejudice. A key element in the training process of intercultural learning and ability is to make good use of stereotype to make self-introspection and perceive other people.

In the global age with knowledge and information explosion, the world and culture are both diverse, while humans’ time and energy appear to be extremely limited. To understand foreign cultures and improve intercultural ability, stereotype should be used to play its positive role. The general conception made by stereotype helps us to treat the world not as such a chaos. It should be
noticed yet, that stereotype also results in some negative influence, forming some rigid prejudices, shackling our mind, and constraining our understanding about the world’s diversity [7]. Therefore, some methods are proposed to deal with stereotype in intercultural communication and improve intercultural communication ability.

(1) Stereotype is unavoidable in intercultural communication. When analyzing and evaluating the personalities and psychological attitudes of a group, we have to pay the price of individuality for considering the group as a whole to simplify information processing and comprehend the macro world.

(2) Stereotype is a matter of cognition as well as a matter of value. It oversimplifies the classification of a certain group. As a result, improving intercultural communication ability not only means learning knowledge from books and forming a general impression about foreign cultures, but also involves some specific cultural experience. Real contact with individuals in another culture will help obtain objective conception.

(3) Culture is changing and developing, while stereotype is characterized by stability and continuity. Once formed, it is hard to change during a period of time. And it is likely to infect other people’s attitude towards the same thing. The world should be treated in a dynamic viewpoint, historically and realistically.

Conclusion

By analyzing the influence of stereotype in intercultural communication, it is realized that if stereotype appears in actual social exchange, we should give full play to its positive function and take some measures to resolve its negative influence, instead of ignoring it. Stereotype is of great use. But the specific issues are to be analyzed in the actual situation. The world is changing and the culture is diverse. Distinctions do exist between individuals. Only with suitable measures for different individuals can those problems caused by cultural gap be solved effectively.

References


