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A Blueprint for Assessment of „Selfhood and Strangeness"
through Culture and Language

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Abstract

This paper looks at the issue of understanding intercultural encounters from the standpoint of selfhood and posits that one can better understand „differences" or „foreignness" by first understanding „strangeness" within the self. In an effort to reach this understanding and ultimate assessment of „strangeness" as mediated by culture and language is viewed utilizing a theoretical framework and critical incidents to discuss selfhood, strangeness and intercultural encounters.

Introduction

It has been argued, by some that until recently most people lived in relatively narrow and fairly defined social worlds and could thus afford the luxury of not looking into themselves for the reasons behind their attitudes and behaviors towards „others". A pretext given for this was that because we lived in these narrowly defined social worlds our dealings with others were such that we „knew"the group's member(s) and could relate to them to accordingly.

Today, the European patterns of discovering and experiencing the world's foreignness have lost much of their former innocent self-certainty. Intercultural encounters are becoming a constant rather than an exception wherein dealings with people from different backgrounds cannot be marked by mutual suspicion or varying degrees of hostility and misunderstanding. Ethnocentric attitudes and perceptions do not advance cultural understanding, encourage respect for differences, or prepare people to interact productively with others whose lifestyles are

significantly at variance with their own. One of the means of dealing with the issue is to develop a reflected form of encountering foreignness or differences in others through looking into oneself.

In this paper we will attempt to begin the reflective process of outlining the parameters of what an assessment of strangeness through an understanding of the self entails and to summarize the role of culture and language in the intercultural learning process. To do this we will put forth the rudiments of a theoretical framework on the issue. We will then proceed to employ critical incidents produced by Greek university students as part of an undergraduate course in intercultural communication to discuss strangeness, selfhood and intercultural encounters.

Foreignness, strangeness and self: A theoretical framework outline
An effort to achieve a reflected form of encountering foreignness necessarily extends beyond an isolated self-declaration of one's experience of foreignness. Openness towards the otherness of a counterpart must moreover take into account the fact that this may result in situations where unknown forms of reacting to the experience of foreignness are present. When one is confronted with new meanings that don't fit into their acquired cognitive system a decision between Piaget's „assimilation and accommodation" needs to be made (Schaeffter, 1999a). Intercultural learning stresses the need for acquiring a new context of meaning by initially accepting the difference of two autonomous contexts. In an effort to understand the meaning of potential situations of non-comprehension, it is important to determine from which delimitations one derives its own „selfhood" and against what it contrasts itself.

As put forth by Schaeffter (1999b), foreignness or strangeness can be seen as a sounding board of the self. The sphere of selfhood or the place of oneís belonging may be considered a universe of meaning for the self; selfhood needs strangeness for its constitution wherein boundaries are a surface of sensitivity through which we come into contact with the rest of the world. The meaning of the contact one has may come about from a relationship such as:

Spatial contact: inside-outside, personal space, territorial borders, symbolic thresholds, etc.
Norms: the normal versus the anomalous, ill, bad, mad, criminal, deviant, dissident, etc.
Knowledge: that which is still unknown but in principle is knowable.

The unrecognizable or that which transcends selfhood.

The uncanny: the strangeness that comes from the center of a selfhood- where the uncanny draws its significance from its contrast to that of the comfort of the familiar.

A boundary for a system of order so that we can understand the world is an important element in dealing with the both the self and strangeness. Boundaries allow us:

To distinguish between the accessible and inaccessible.

To discriminate in a binary sense (i.e. inside/outside, dark/light/lighter, warm/cold, etc.).

To set a limit of the horizon of meaning.

To get into contact with something or someone.

To cross over from one side to the other.

When these boundaries become contact surfaces, foreignness becomes a significant experience. Thus it is only when we move towards the other that foreignness becomes discernible. Furthermore as a relational term the significance of foreignness only becomes apparent when we are able to take into account our own part in this relationship. To do this means being able to realize one's own position and angle of vision as but one possibility among others while concurrently being aware that what we experience as foreign and the way in which we perceive foreignness are very dependent on our own history (Schaeffter, 1999a). By extension this means realizing that this is dependent on our ability to reflect on the individual self. It is our own personal and social identity that constitutes the foreignness or strangeness of the other.

Culture and Language

Definitions on what is culture abound. Here we will employ culture in the framework of what Young (1972) references as material and nonmaterial culture. The culture of a group of people includes all of the systems, techniques, and tools that make up their way of life. Many manifestations of culture that are the physical artifacts of material culture can be readily seen: the architecture and materials used to construct shelters; modes of transportation, material and style of clothing; implements of protection. The manifestations of nonmaterial culture are less readily obvious yet go a long way towards helping us understand a groupís way of life. These include

such things as customs, beliefs, values, all of which are modes of regulating interaction with others.

Following through our earlier explication of self and strangeness it is evident that it can be argued that knowledge, perception and behavior are by definition strongly influenced by culture. Thus we can say that members of different cultures are in fact not living in exactly the same „real" world given that concepts in one language do not necessarily equate with those in other cultures.

Many consider a key component of culture language. It is a primary medium for transmitting much of culture. The vocabulary of a language reflects the culture of those who speak it. It constitutes an index to the way they categorize experience. The relationship between language and other aspects of culture has been argued to represent the extent to which language reflects a worldview or to what extent is language shaping and controlling the thinking of its speakers by the perceptual requirements it makes on them. If languages require social distinctions for form choice does this compel the speakers of the language to think in terms of social superiority or the reverse?

Communication through language is a dynamic, interactive, transactional and irreversible process that takes place in both a physical and social context wherein the social environment is culture (Spinthourakis, Katsillis and Moustairas, 1997). According to Bolten (1993) J. Habermas' communication theory provides us with useful insight for cross-cultural or intercultural communication and by extension insight into strangeness and foreignness. For Habermas three structural components make up communication, culture, society and personality where:

„. . . Culture is the store of knowledge which supplies participants in communication with interpretations when they are communicating about something in a specific 'world'. Society is . . . the legitimate order by which participants in communication regulate their membership to social groups, thereby ensuring solidarity. Personality . . . means the competencies which enable a subject to speak and act and therefore enable him to take part in the process of communication and understanding, thereby confirming his identity . . . The interactions, which are tied up in a

web of everyday communicative practice, form the medium by which culture, society and individuals are reproduced" (1981, vol. 2, p. 209).

Communication involves the whole message process, language, thought and culture. It is not merely the individual words or parts of the whole, rather it is greater than the sum of its parts (Chaika, 1989). It entails the words, actions, nuances, how and why one set of individuals perceive things versus the way another group perceives them. Thus, to be able to communicate requires more than merely knowing the words and what you want to express.

Messages, also a result of whatís called behavioral residue or a record of our actions and attribution, draw upon past experiences. Given that the behavior-message portion of communication is often unconscious, this linkage may also result in unintentional behavior --we expect our message to mean one thing but something else comes across. Consequently, knowing and understanding what it is we are communicating as well as what is being received takes on greater significance. This is especially true when language is filtered through the prism of Schaeffter's (1999a) modes of experiencing strangeness.

Intercultural Critical Incidents tools for developing understanding

According to Bruner (1986) we develop new understandings, not in isolation, but rather through the interaction of different viewpoints. Thus we can say that new understandings grow out of our active participation in the process of drawing out and considering such viewpoints in relation to each other and in relation to the viewpoints, which we ourselves express. Vygotsky (1978) used the term „scaffolding" to describe what develops in the course of learning discussions between peers. The interplay of viewpoints provides a structure to support new insights. We can move, cognitively speaking, up or along this scaffolding into areas of understanding that are new to us. This is not an abstract process but rather one that is closely linked to real features of the situation in which the learning occurs and to the tools that we use to help us reach our objective.

For the purposes of this paper critical incidents are perceived as incidents involving miscommunication and/or problematic interaction among members of different cultural groups

(Brislin,1994). The undergraduate students who participated were asked to reflect on and write down such incidents they experienced. They were also asked include alternative explanations of the incidents and discussion about the appropriateness of each alternative. Learning takes place as participants choose one or more of the alternative explanations and then find out the reasons for the correctness or incorrectness of their choices. According to Malpass and Salancik (1977), those taking part in using a general assimilator benefit from reading discussions of all the alternative explanations. This includes those they chose as correct and those that they label incorrect. According to Brislin (1994), correctness of choice is ideally determined by a validation process. In this process members of the target culture give judgments concerning the various explanations for any one incident. The process of validation will be completed when all the critical incidents are collected as presently we only have those produced by the Greek university students.

The students were asked to write down incidents that attempted to capture experiences, feelings and thoughts about interactions with foreigners or those different from themselves. The suggested categories they were given followed those provided by Brislin (1994): host customs, interactions with hosts, settling in, tourist experiences, the workplace, the family, schooling and returning home.

When critical incidents are collected from both sets of universities, the authors will examine them using Schaeffter's (1999a) four modes of experiencing strangeness to categorize them. The modes are:

Foreignness as a sounding board of a sphere of selfhood.
Foreignness as a counter-image.
Foreignness as supplementary.
Foreignness as complimentary.

A comparison will also be made between the Greek university student's critical incidence and those of the German student's. The impact language and culture play on the number of disconfirmed expectancies (Brislin, 1993) will also be considered. A final facet of the analysis

each authors notes that result from the use of the different set of incidents. Before this can take place each set of incidents will have to be translated in to the other groups language. Then the students will have to read them, choose the correct explanation and discuss their choices.

Selected critical incidents as written
by Greek University students

1. „An empty place at a park bench"

During the summer of 1996, Dora went to the city of Alexandroupoli in Northern Greece with her husband who is from there. The population of the city includes Muslims. One day Dora after walking around for a while stopped at a public park and sat on one of the benches to rest. The bench was empty. After awhile Dora noticed two Muslim women enter the park. They approached the bench she was sitting on. She moved over to allow for both women to sit. The two women sat down by the bench on the grass and rested their elbows on the bench. After overcoming her initial dismay as she thought they didnít want to sit with her because she was not a Muslim, Dora asked the two women why they chose to not sit on the bench but to merely rest their elbows on it. The two women did not reply. Shortly thereafter, Dora left the part.

2. „A Night on the town of a Brit and a group of Greeks in Patras"

Several years ago, the factory Peraiki Patraiki had brought in specialized personnel from England to put in place certain machinery. One of the Englishmen, Steven, was the head of operations over a group of Greek Peraiki Patraiki factory workers. An excellent working relationship had been established between Steven and the Greek workers one marked by respect and understanding. The Greek workers decided to invite Steven to one of their regular „nights on the town". They took him to the taverna they liked to listen to live „rembetiko" music. The Greeks ordered wine, ouzo and „mezedes" and quickly began to exhibit a boisterous behavior, one marked by singing and getting up and dancing, individually and in groups of two or more. Steven

sat quietly at the table and occasionally drank from his glass. At the end of the evening, the group of Greek men, while having enjoyed their night out on one level were concerned that their „friend" Steven had clearly not enjoyed their night out.

Notes:

The framework and the grounding for this paper are an outgrowth of discussions the two authors had after taking part in European Union Socrates program entitled Adult Education in Europe Today where they were part of the team that taught the module ìLearning Strategies in a Multicultural Societyî.

An example from the German university students' critical incidents were unavailable at the time this paper was presented. It is anticipated that they will be included in the final version of the paper that is to be submitted for inclusion in the publication of the conference proceedings.

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