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How Culture Influences Our Expectations of Others

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Abstract

Factors that lead into expectancies in certain communication situations will vary in great contrast according to the situation. This study tested whether thinking of a fundraiser as culturally similar to or different from oneself made a difference in several outcomes. Participants were asked to read one of two scenarios and fill out the corresponding questions. This study found that a combination of factors play a role in expected behaviors of others. It is a combination of age, race, ethnicity, gender, and social setting that influence perceptions of what should happen in a given situation. One factor may indeed have a greater role in perceptions of the behavior of others, but all of these factors have influence on expected behaviors. As was seen in this study, sometimes the social setting can trump all other factors in terms of the importance in gauging expectations.

How Culture Influences Our Expectations of Others

People expect certain behaviors from others given the situation. For example, one is expected to be polite and respectful when talking to a superior in the work place. People are expected to be quiet when the national anthem is being sung. How are these expectancies shaped? What factors play a role in determining how we expect others to behave in certain social settings? This study will look at these factors and how they shape interactions.

Expectancy Violations Theory

The Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT) helps to determine whether or not an individual's behavior is acceptable in a certain situation. Burgoon (1993) notes that the EVT will “serve as perceptual filters, significantly influencing how social information is processed” (Burgoon & LePoire, 1993, p32). An example of an expected behavior is to say “thank you” after someone gives you a ride. Johnson and Lewis (2012) also mention that “Burgoon observed that expectancies develop based on: communicator, relationship, and context characteristics” (Johnson & Lewis, 2012, p.107). Within the communicator, there are certain aspects that affect these expectancies. Demographics, sex, culture, and social hierarchy all play a role in influencing expectancies amongst the communicator (Johnson & Lewis, 2012).

In regards to the EVT, expectancy has two different forms. The first form centers around how often a behavioral pattern takes place (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005). This form can refer to the communication acts that a certain culture expects. For example, high context communication and low context communication. High context communication is seen as indirect and often times one has to figure out what another person is trying to say, while low context communication is very direct and gets straight to the point. The second form of expectancy is how much a certain behavior is seen as acceptable, suitable, wanted, or favored (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005, p161).

These two expectancies have been coined the terms predictive and prescriptive expectations (Staines & Libby, 1986).

An example of breaking expectancies is swearing. Swearing often violates the expectations of people in most situations. Through the EVT, Johnson (2012) studied how swearing varies depending upon the context that it is used in. For example, he noted that people “develop a sense of swearing etiquette, or a sense of how one should or should not use swearing” (Johnson, 2012, p.139). It is nearly universally approved that swearing at a teacher would be a violation of expected behavior.

The predictive communication expectancies can be formed into three distinct features: characteristics of individual communicators, characteristics of the relationship between the sender and receiver, and features of the communication context (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005, p151). For example, the factors of the individuals (sender and receiver) will depend on their personality, social skills, and communication style, which in turn will be the determinant for how people will communicate. Within this realm, “females are expected to be more affiliative than males” (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005, p151). This means that women are more willing to be in close connection with organizations.

Interaction Adaption Theory

The Interaction Adaptation Theory attempts to go into more depth using the basis of the Expectancy Violations Theory. It “increases the scope of previous adaptation models by highlighting the strong entrainment effect that occurs in normal interactions and by incorporating a broader range of communication behaviors and functions” (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005, p161). The Interaction Adaption Theory (IAT) has 9 principles, which the first one being that humans are predisposed to adapt to each other’s interaction styles (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005). People

will adapt other's interaction styles in order to "help to fulfill needs for survival, communication, coordination of activities, and socialization" (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005, p161). The IAT notes that it is beneficial to converge, or to become more like the other person, as far as in intercultural communication experiences. People will change their behavior by adapting as a way to become more entwined with other people. By changing one's interaction styles, one is becoming more alike to a person of a different culture. This attempts to cut down any boundaries that may be extremely prevalent between two different cultures. For example, this may be beneficial in certain social situations. Having dinner at a family's house for the first time that has a drastically different interaction style than one's own is a prime example. Changing one's own interaction style to be more aligned with the hosts would prove to be the most favorable decision, especially in this case because the hosts significantly outnumber the one guest of the house. Keeping a considerably dissimilar interaction or communication style than the hosts would, in most situations, make them extremely uncomfortable. This could very well be the first time that the family has interacted with a person that has such a unique interaction style to them. Also, it is quite possible that the hosts would feel extremely disrespected.

Another principle of IAT states that "degree to which adaption can occur is limited by tendencies toward consistency and constancy in an individual's own behavioral style, internal causes for adjustment, self- or partner monitoring skill, performance adjustment ability, and cultural differences in communication practices and expectations" (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005, p162). This can explain how countries with a high power distance value role relationships and how certain cultures will have values for social interaction which can clash with other cultures. A prime example of this is when looking at power distance in China versus the United States. In China, their culture is classified as having a high power distance. Whatever the boss says, the

workers are expected to obey and inequalities are to be expected. The hierarchical structure is accepted and everyone has a set place in the organization. In the United States, there is a relatively low power distance. The hierarchies within organizations are seen more as flat and there is strive for more equality within the organization, which people attempt to have the power distribution equally and question the inequalities.

An important principle that helps explain what influences interaction adaptation is the notion that certain pre-interactional variables, which include cultural background and the physical setting of a communication episode, play a role in moving people towards adaptation (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2005). Of course, the conversation style between the two individuals as well as other aspects of the interaction will have the most influence on whether one chooses to adapt to another interaction style. Yet, a pre-interactional variable that can prove to play a major role in interactions with intercultural groups is the notion of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism can not only shut down the possibility of adapting to another culture's standards, norms, and ideas, but shut down the communication episode entirely.

Ethnocentrism

In regards to culture, one will make judgments about people outside of the group and measure these judgments based off of our own culture's values, groups, and norms (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). This further includes the idea that one's culture is the center of attention. Each individual's culture is constantly being measured up against a different culture. In addition, outsiders are viewed based upon what one's culture values. In ethnocentrism, we see the world through our own specific eyes (Kim, 2007). This is important for the formation of our own specific cultural identity. However, this can provide limitations for the acceptance of other cultures. Ethnocentrism can even lead to our compliance levels to communicate, with others who

are a different culture, to go down (Lin & Rancer, 2003). Again, ethnocentric views can lead to a “my culture is better” type of view. This makes intercultural communication extremely challenging. If one maintains this viewpoint, then they are very likely to not care what someone from a different culture has to say. Often, people do not even want to speak to someone of a different culture because of their ethnocentric way of thinking. Ethnocentrism can even turn into prejudice.

In a study done by Butcher and Haggard (2007), American students scored significantly high on levels in terms of ethnocentrism. This is typically not surprising for Americans to be ethnocentric. Americans score very high on Hofstede’s individualistic score. Being individualistic, one is not concerned with another person’s group or culture. This in turn, leads to ethnocentric views.

Cultural Identity

Cultural identity includes the subculture, racial identity, and national aspects of an individual (Kim, 2007). This includes a personal identification of a certain group. Each individual has a unique cultural identity that explains their values, behaviors, and norms. Assimilation, then, is coined “the principle behind the American ethos that seeks to transcend a tribal, ancestral, and territorial condition” (Kim, 2007, p239). Assimilation endorses individualism (Kim, 2007). It is also important to note “that individuals have multiple identities, of which cultural (as well as relational) identities are central to interpersonal relationship development with culturally dissimilar others” (Kim, 2007, p244). In fact, individuals who face others who have different identities, in relation to their own, can be extremely flexible in changing their identity. A key example of identity management in action is saving face (Kim, 2007).

Rationale

With the prevalence of ethnocentrism being relevant in America, I expect respondents to react in such a manner. I am expecting respondents to be willing to spend more time with someone who physically resembles a family member of theirs because they can connect with them through their culture. I believe that the 'my culture is better' thought will be prevalent in my findings. Due to the fact that ethnocentrism can lead to extreme conflict in intercultural communications, I expect respondents to spend less time with the man who does not resemble their culture. Also, I would expect the respondents to perceive the Chinese man as less friendly, again, due to ethnocentric reasons.

I expect respondents to give the man more time if they have similar norms, values, and interests. Since culture plays such a strong role in shaping these factors, I expect the amount of time respondents are willing to give the man will be correlated with their willingness to buy a magazine subscription.

Hypotheses

H1: The participants will be willing to spend more time with the person who physically resembles them as opposed to the Chinese man.

H2: The participants will say that the man who physically resembles them is friendlier in comparison to the Chinese man.

H3: In both options, the expected ability of the man to communicate his knowledge of the magazine will correlate with the expected social skills.

H4: For both options, the amount of time the participants would be willing to give will be correlated with the likelihood of the participants to buy a magazine subscription.

Methods

Procedure

This study involved each respondent viewing one of two descriptions of an encounter, and then filling out a survey about that encounter and the man described in it. Each scenario centered on a door to door salesman, trying to get the participant to buy a sports magazine subscription to fundraise for the local middle school. The two scenario options differed only in the salesman's ethnicity. In option 1 the man's ethnicity is never revealed, but he is said to have a physical resemblance to someone in the participant's family. Since a majority of the participants in this survey will be white they likely would think of him as Caucasian, but all participants, even those not white, will think of that person as ethnically similar to them. In option 2, the participant instead is given the fact that the salesman immigrated to the neighborhood from China four years previously.

Measures

After reading their randomly selected scenario, each respondent then filled out a short survey. The survey sought respondents' ethnicity, age, and sex, and offered a variety of 5 point Likert-type response options to questions. These questions ranged from expected knowledge of the magazine, perceived social skills, expected friendliness, expected time respondents would be willing to give, and the likelihood of the respondents to purchase a magazine subscription (see Appendix 1).

Participants

The survey generated responses from participants, each of whom clicked one of two links to a scenario and the survey. Participants numbered 27 who saw scenario option 1 and 36 who

saw scenario option 2. From the scenario option 1, 19 respondents were white, while 22 were male. The age range of scenario option 1 was 19-24, with a mean of 20.96 years of age. Scenario option 2 included 30 respondents who were white, while 19 were male. The age range of scenario option 2 was 19-29, with a mean of 20.85 years of age.

Results

Hypothesis 1 predicted that respondents would report willingness to spend more time with the man who physically resembles them than with the man who does not. Analysis revealed no significant difference between the two scenarios regarding how much time respondents would be willing to spend, $t = -.391, p = .45$.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that respondents would report that the man who physically resembles them is friendlier in comparison to the Chinese man. There was no significant difference between the two groups regarding how friendly they would expect the man to be, $t = -1.33, p = .55$.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that the expected ability of the man to communicate his knowledge of the magazine will correlate with the expected social skills in both scenario options. The participants' perceived knowledge of the man correlated with his perceived social skills, $r = .429, p < .05$.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that the amount of time the participants would be willing to give will be correlated with the likelihood of the participants to buy a magazine subscription in both scenario options. The willingness of the amount of time the participants gave correlated with the likelihood of the participants to purchase a magazine subscription, $r = .323, p < .05$.

Discussion

This study attempted to examine respondents' expectations of men who were of either similar or different cultural backgrounds than the respondent. Expectations about knowledge, social skills, friendliness, and the amount of time a participant would be willing to give were measured. There was no significant difference measured between either survey options. Culture and ethnocentrism played little, if any role, in this study. Ultimately, there are many factors that can determine the perceived expectations and the choices of the participants in this hypothetical situation. Perhaps, because it is a door to door salesman, the time measurement was not significant in either option. People could give the same amount of time to anyone at the door because it is a salesman. Culture could be seen as less important than the actual communication situation. The factor of a salesman seemed to be significantly more important than culture in determining the amount of time the participant would be willing to give. Time could have also been affected by the relationship between the sender and receiver of information. Due to the fact that these two individuals just met, this could have played a role as far as not wanting to or wanting to talk more with the salesman. Also, attraction and similarity play a factor. For example, if the participant had similar interests to the salesman, like tennis, golf, or racquetball, then perhaps the participant would be willing to give the salesman more time.

There was no significant difference between the two groups regarding any of the outcomes tested. Expected friendliness was not a significant difference between the two groups, which was of some surprise. Due to the role of the ethnocentric and individualistic nature of the United States, I expected there to be a more perceived amount of friendliness for the man who resembled the participant as opposed to the Chinese man. Based upon the "my culture is better" viewpoint, I expected there to a wider gap between friendliness of the two men. Again, this could

be in part because of perceptions regarding door to door salesmen as a whole. In addition, other factors could have played a role in determining friendliness (i.e. fundraiser for local school, parent with children, etc.)

The participants' perceived expectation of the man to communicate his knowledge of the magazine did correlate with his perceived social skills, which was not surprising.

Communicating knowledge and social skills go hand in hand, so this result was expected.

Managing culture identities could very well have played a role in the perceived expectations of the participants. Because individuals have multiple identities, it is easy to manage one's identity as well as save face. It is likely that the salesman used multiple identities to not only communicate his knowledge, but also his social skills. Cultural identities are easy to be flexible with, so the salesman could be balancing multiple identities in attempting to get the participant to buy a subscription.

The willingness of the amount of time the participants gave correlated with the likeliness of the participants to purchase a magazine subscription. Again, if the participant was engaged, enjoying the conversation, and had some similar interests/values as the salesman, the more likely they would be willing to stick around.

For future research, the concept of cultural adaption could be implemented. For example, how was the Chinese man's communication style? Did he adapt to more American values? Was his communication high context or low context? As noted earlier, there are so many factors that go into adapting another culture's interaction style. These include the cultural background of the man and the communication setting for where the interaction took place. Expectancies are affected by a wide range of factors including demographics, sex, culture, and social hierarchy. In this particular situation, it would be advantageous to adapt the cultural values and norms of the

person answering the door. One factor does not determine the amount of time willing to spend with the individual or the perceived knowledge about the company that the man has. Personality may also influence these expectancies. If the man is very conversational, easy to talk to, and funny, then he will likely receive more time with the participant.

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Appendix

Scenarios and Survey Questions

Option 1: A man knocks at your door. When you answer, he pleasantly tries persuading you to buy a sports magazine subscription, telling you it's a fundraiser supporting the local middle school where he is a student's parent. He is well-spoken and has a pleasant manner, even physically resembling someone in your family. He tells you he's 39 years old with a spouse and two kids, and that he has lived in this school district his entire life. He also tells you he plays golf, tennis, and racquetball on the weekends.

Option 2: A man knocks at your door. When you answer, he pleasantly tries persuading you to buy a sports magazine subscription, telling you it's a fundraiser supporting the local middle school where he is a student's parent. He is well-spoken and has a pleasant manner, though he doesn't physically resemble anyone in your family. He tells you he's 39 years old with a spouse and two kids, and that he has lived in this school district ever since emigrating from China four years ago. He also tells you he plays golf, tennis, and racquetball on the weekends.

Survey Questions

1) How much would you expect the individual to know about the magazine company?

1-no knowledge 2-little knowledge 3-adequate knowledge 4-good deal of
knowledge 5-lot of knowledge

2) How well would you expect the man to communicate his knowledge of the magazine?

1-awful 2-poor 3-decent 4-good 5-very good

3) How would you expect his social skills to be?

1-awful 2-poor 3-decent 4-good 5-very good

4) How friendly would you expect the man to be?

1-extremely unfriendly 2-unfriendly 3-neutral 4-very friendly 5-extremely friendly

5) How much time do you think you'd likely be willing to give the man?

1-none 2-Two min 3-Up to Five min 4-Over 5 min 5-Over 10 min

6) How likely do you think you'd be to purchase a magazine subscription from him?

1-no chance 2-small chance 3-decent chance 4-large chance 5-very high chance

7) What is your ethnicity?

1-Euro-American (white) 2-Hispanic 3-African-American 4-Asian-Pacific Islander

5-Other

8) In regards to Question 7, if you responded with 'Other' can you specify?

9) What is your gender?

1-Male 2-Female

10) What is your age?