**Lecture 9. *Stereotypes and communication in interpersonal relationships in the context of intercultural business communication***

**The aim:** to point out the importance of intercultural business communication within the constraining framework of cultural stereotypes and cultural differences; to take a look at the vitally important topic of interpersonal relationships and explore what kinds of communication make a relationship interpersonal.

**Plan**

1. Characteristics of interpersonal relationships.

2. Cultural dimensions and stereotypes.

3. Some fundamental patterns or stereotypes of cultural differences.

**Keywords:** behavioral stereotypes, cross-cultural communication, cultural differences, context, communicative competence.

**1. Characteristics of interpersonal relationships.**

What is interpersonal communication? How does it differ from other types of interaction? When and how are interpersonal messages communicated? The most obvious way to define *interpersonal communication* is by looking at the number of people involved. In this sense we could say that all communication between two people, or *contextually interpersonal communication,*is interpersonal. Although looking at communication by context is useful, this approach raises some problems. Consider, for example, a routine transaction between a sales clerk and customer, or the rushed exchange when you ask a stranger on the street for directions. Communication of this sort hardly seems interpersonal or personal in any sense of the word. In fact, after transactions like this we commonly remark, «I might as well have been talking to a machine». The impersonal nature of some two-person exchanges has led some scholars to say that quality, not quantity, is what distinguishes interpersonal communication. *Qualitatively interpersonal communication*occurs when people treat one another as unique individuals, regardless of the context in which the interaction occurs or the number of people involved. When quality of interaction is the criterion, the opposite of interpersonal communication is *impersonal* interaction, not group, public, or mass communication. The majority of our communication, even in dyadic contexts, is relatively impersonal. Considering the number of people we communicate with, qualitatively interpersonal interaction is rather scarce. This scarcity isn’t necessarily unfortunate: Most of us don’t have the time or energy to create personal relationships with everyone we encounter or even to act in a personal way all the time with the people we know and love best. In fact, the scarcity of qualitatively interpersonal communication contributes to its value.

In every conversation and every interpersonal relationship there is some distribution of *stereotypes*. Stereotypes can be distributed evenly among relational partners, or one person can have more and the other(s) less. Stereotype in its original sense is composed of two ancient Greek terms: stereos, which means rigid or solid; and typos, which means letter, type and character and a «stereotype» was a metal printing plate cast from a mould. Harvey informs us that stereotypes were first used in social sciences and defined as pictures in our heads. Stereotypes are «oversimplified standardized images of a person or group», denoting a fundamental human way to process information and make sense of experiences, providing efficient first guesses, and facilitating our individual perceptions of complex environments.

Stereotypes have thus been argued to provide so-called cognitive tools or routine strategies of inference and evaluation. As energy-saving devices they provide a sufficiently effective analysis and free up limited cognitive resources for the performance of other necessary or desirable mental activities. Stereotypical thinking is a ubiquitous feature of interpersonal relationships, providing an efficient means of simplifying social interaction which can be adjusted when the need arises; therefore, researchers should not only focus on the negative aspects but also adopt a more functional perspective of the use of stereotypes.

In one of the rare empirical studies, Zaidman found evidence of the prevalent use of stereotypes in a large-scale qualitative study of Indian and Israeli managers. The stereotypes were considered commonly used and only a very small percentage of the interview subjects avoided using generalizations, achieved by only describing specific people and avoiding making reference to the group. The identified stereotypes could be defined as either positive or negative in nature, but common in the analysis was that the stereotypes helped to define the relationship between groups. A link was found between the holding of a stereotype, whether consciously or not, and the behaviour of the stereotype holder towards the group.

Stereotypes are also often used to create positive self-images for in-groups compared to less positive images for those in out-groups. Osland talks about low-level forms of stereotypes, usually based on dislike for people one has never had any contact with, when they introduce what they call sophisticated stereotyping. Sophisticated stereotyping replaces the emotional laden low-level stereotypes with theory-based stereotypes, but lead to similar constraints on individual’s perceptions of behavior in another culture. When reducing complexity and attributing specific properties to whole groups, the sophisticated stereotypes may sound more scientific, but still possess evaluative and deterministic properties and can have a self-fulfilling capacity.

Recent research has displayed negative effects of stereotyping threats on individual performance outcomes in a number of settings. Despite their potential harm to those who are being categorized, having knowledge of stereotypes is not the same as acceptance or endorsement. Making the distinction between automatic and controlled components of stereotypes, Devine explains how automatic components that lead to stereotype congruent responses can be disassociated, a change process that requires intention, attention, and time. Intentionally changing beliefs concerning stereotyped group members does not eliminate stereotypes, but controls them. The authors encourage scholars to explore which variables are likely to lead to such controlled stereotype-inhibiting processes, limiting automatic components of stereotyping in inter-group settings.

**2. Cultural dimensions and stereotypes.**

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz defines culture as a «historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols … by means of which men can communicate, perpetuate and develop their own knowledge about and attitudes towards life». In other words, culture in general is concerned with beliefs and values on the basis of which people interpret experiences and behave, individually and in groups. Broadly and simply put, «culture» refers to a group or community with which you share common experiences that shape the way you understand the world. However, for the business environment, the concepts of cultural stereotypes and cultural differences rather than that of culture are much more active in approaching the most appropriate behaviour and conduct business people should be able to handle.

Hofstede see culture as the «software of the mind»; that is, while human beings all have the same «hardware», the human brain, our «software» or «programming» is rather different. It is the same experience when you interact with someone from a different culture – their words, assumptions, gestures, values, and other aspects of their culture will not make sense when transferred to your frame of reference. Roughly interpreted, all human beings are completely the same, completely different, and partly the same and partly different. We are all the same as our «human nature» is regarded – we are all part of the same species, we all have the same «hardware». We are all completely different as our personalities are regarded. And we are «partly the same and partly different» on the territory of culture. As far as culture is concerned, a special notice should be taken into account here: the same person can belong to several different cultures depending on their birthplace, nationality, ethnicity, family status, gender, age, language, education, physical condition, sexual orientation, religion, profession, place of work and its corporate culture.

However, culture is the «lens» through which you view the world. It is central to what you see, how you make sense of what you see, and how you express yourself. Cultures – both national and organizational – differ along many dimensions. Among them, four are the most important: *directness* (get to the point versus imply the messages); *hierarchy* (follow orders versus engage in debate); *consensus* (dissent is accepted versus unanimity is needed); and *individualis*m (individual winners versus team effectiveness).

As we will try to demonstrate, the four dimensions may appear with slightly different connotations or descriptions in various interpretations in the toolbox of cultural stereotypes. According to the Webster Dictionary, a stereotype is «an idea or statement about all of the members of a group or all the instances of a situation». The American Heritage Dictionary defines it as the «conventional, formulaic, and oversimplified conception, opinion, or image» or «One that is regarded as embodying or conforming to a set image or type». According to a further definition, «a stereotype is a simplified mental picture of an individual or group of people who share a certain characteristic (or stereotypical) qualities. The term is often used in a negative sense, and stereotypes are seen by many as undesirable beliefs which can be altered through education and/or familiarization».

National cultures and organizational cultures should be studied interactively, as Geert Hofstede did when he came up with the four cultural dimensions, but more than that some behavioural patterns should be identified as stereotypes for a better understanding of each and every culture and for a comprehensive image of how values in the workplace are influenced by culture. Becoming more aware of cultural stereotypes and cultural differences, as well as exploring cultural similarities can help us communicate with others more effectively. When someone encounters a confusing situation, that person should analyze how culture may be shaping his or her own reactions, and try to see the world from the other's point of view.

**3. Some fundamental patterns or stereotypes of cultural differences.**

One should be aware, first and foremost, of some fundamental patterns or stereotypes of cultural differences, such as different communication styles due to specific culture-influenced beliefs, different attitudes towards conflict due to a distinct set of values, different approaches to completing tasks due to particular perceptions, different decision-making styles due to inherent culturally-shaped expectations, different attitudes towards disclosure due to specific attitudes, or different approaches to knowing due to culture-influenced assumptions. The above-mentioned differences produce, at an inferior level, behavioural stereotypes commonly encountered in business environment. The most common areas in which certain patterns of behaviour may occur are non-verbal business communication, the dress code in business, intercultural business communication, communication barriers in business communication, culture shock, cross-cultural negotiations, and cross-cultural marketing.

Non-verbal business communication styles are generally associated with business meetings. In some cases, it is common sense that may help us (i.e. leaning on the back of the chair is perceived as rude in Europe and America; leg crossing is perceived as threatening or accusatory in Muslim society). In other cases we rely on the assumption that messages conveyed by laughter, smiling, and crying or expressing emotions of enjoyment, anger, fear, sadness, disgust, and surprise are universal and if there is a culture where their connotation differs, it is only the smallest exception of them all. When it comes to nonverbal language, even though one can never understand and apply it fully, universal common sense has been turned into politeness by millennia of experience and goodwill.

The dress code in business submits to some general rules commonly accepted within the international business environment but it can also be inferred from a culture’s beliefs and customs. Therefore, another rule one has to take into consideration is a common sense one, asserted by Ashley Rothschild: «You have to honor the country and the culture». The conservative dress has generally become a business stereotype; almost all the business etiquette guides contain the well-known piece of advice: «Men should wear dark conservative attires… Business suits are most suitable… Women’s dress should be conservative too…» What in fact is really important is that one should seriously take into consideration and respect the dress codes of the countries that they go to.

Intercultural business communication represents a major source of producing behavioural stereotypes that may contribute to the success or failure of a business enterprise. However, business can be considered a fundamental type of cross-cultural communication; a history of international business practices can be framed in terms of the evolving structures of rules that governed how people ought to communicate to make decisions, trades, and partnerships. The major differences among business organizations follow cultural patterns that are found among all discourse communities, and some principles of cross-cultural communication can help an outsider to predict an organization’s expectations.

Communication barriers in cross-cultural business communication are generally considered factors such as language, modern technology, stereotyping and prejudice, anxiety, assuming similarity instead of difference, ethnocentrism; all these may lead to intercultural miscommunication by providing a narrow image of the «other» culture. Such barriers that may be perceptual, emotional, cultural or interpersonal need to be avoided, first and foremost by becoming aware of possible preconceptions (prejudice and stereotypes) to function along with the intercultural dialogue. Perceptions are determined by the person’s life experience and the history of the culture – and they differ from culture to culture. Furthermore, the role society prescribes for persons varies greatly by culture; cultures commonly impose roles by gender or social class. Another outstanding barrier in communicating cross-culturally is ethnocentrism, already mentioned above. Judging other cultures by the standards of our own culture, and associating this with a feeling of superiority of one’s own culture should be counterbalanced by not stereotyping other cultures and by increasing mutual cultural awareness.

Culture shock represents another area of cross-cultural communication, in which behavioural patterns are worth discussing, especially for the business environment; how culture shock is experienced and how it can be faced while being included into a particular culture is another discussion closely connected to the idea of multiculturalism. At present, any modern nation is a complex society with corresponding variations in culture. It is made up of different ethnic groups, it is stratified into classes, it is differentiated into regions, and it is separated into rural and urban settlements, each having its distinctive cultural characteristics. These facts indicate that it is not a simple matter to acquaint oneself with the culture of a nation, let alone the culture of another nation.

When it comes to cross-cultural negotiations, theories take largely into account the human behaviour and the way it is perceived during negotiation. When considering negotiation at an international level, several underlying factors are extremely important for a cross-cultural perspective of negotiation. How to avoid stereotyping in negotiations? By assimilating knowledge about the other culture, discovering and evaluating the cultural differences, and being tolerant towards the other culture. Doing or saying the wrong thing at the wrong time makes all the difference in negotiation process. Cultural patterns such as eye contact, personal space and touch, time, meeting and greeting norms, gift-giving etiquette are only several factors that pass beyond stereotyping and help businesspeople tailor their behaviour in a proper way to maximise their negotiating potential.

Last, but not least a few words on cross-cultural marketing, which is a strategic process of marketing among consumers whose culture differs from that of the marketer’s own culture; it demands marketers to be aware of and sensitive to cultural differences. When an interaction is not working, the following questions can help explore the underlying assumption generally induced by stereotypical judgment: What is the basis for this assumption/stereotype – is it personal experience or someone else’s opinion? Does this assumption/stereotype check out against what can be objectively observed? If the assumption(s)/stereotypes were set aside, how would it help the interaction? First of all, special treatment must be addressed to the specifics of national business culture because having an insight into the cultural dynamics of a country or region can be very helpful to understand why people act the way they do, and the appropriate way you should act while in that country.

There are three areas of interest which account for the impact of business stereotypes, no matter the culture differences: *appearance,* which highlights business etiquette do’s and don’ts involving dress, clothing, body language, and gestures; *behaviour*, which highlights business etiquette do’s and don’ts involving dining, gift-giving, meetings, customs, protocol, negotiation, and general behavioural guidelines; *communication,* which highlights business etiquette do’s and don’ts involving greetings, introductions, and conversational guidelines. These three areas address the business instances most commonly practiced within the organisational environment, i.e. business meetings, negotiations, presentations, and interviews.

Starting from the above-mentioned business landmarks, stereotypes – seen not as undesirable beliefs which can be altered through education and/or familiarisation but as something that is regarded as embodying or conforming to a set image or type – play the role of functional indicators of different cultural categories that require different patterns of treatment. Consequently, from this perspective, Geert Hofstede’s dimensions analysis can assist the business person or traveller both in a better understanding of the cultural stereotypes and intercultural differences within regions and between countries, and in choosing the most appropriate code for intercultural business communication.