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Is Communication in a Multicultural Workplace as easy as 1, 2, 3?

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BACKGROUND

Communication takes place between two or more people, and is considered an interpersonal relationship (DeVito 2014). When individuals influence each other in one culture, communication can be considered difficult, however when these influences are in a multicultural setting, it can be considered almost impossible (Lanier, 2010). As language is a large portion of communication, the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Hussein 2012) suggests that speakers of different languages have different cognitive and perceptive abilities. Therefore, language must have its own worldview. However, "…it is just as important to learn the non-verbal communication of a culture as it is to learn the language." (Perkins 2008: 169).

Culture is a pattern of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual realities, effecting how people eat, speak, dress and move (Hofstede et al. 2010). As Hofstede et al. describes, culture is like an onion, and has values at the core, surrounded by rituals. This, in turn, is surrounded by heroes, and finally the symbols (Figure 1).
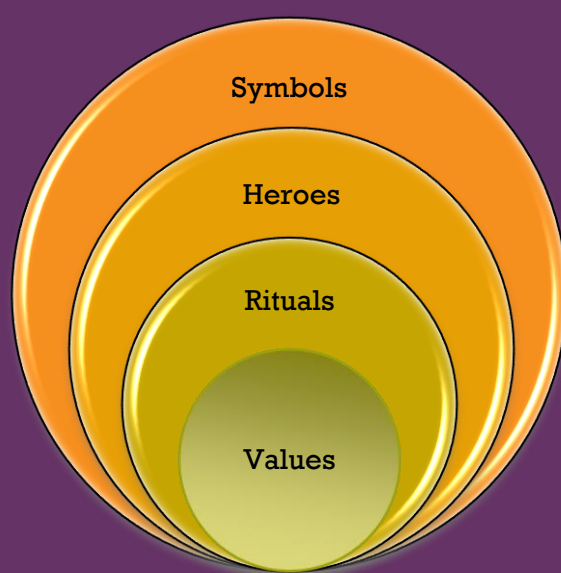
Symbols
Heroes
Rituals
Values

Figure 1: "The Onion": a Metaphor for Organisational Culture. Adapted from Hofstede et al. (2010)

The quality of communication skills underpins the quality of working cross-culturally (MAC 2005). Therefore, intercultural communication is between individuals or groups from different cultural backgrounds, whose cultural perspectives influence the communication exchange (Perkins 2008).

Research Aim: To explore the implications of cross-cultural communication in the workplace.

METHOD

A qualitative, semi-structured interview was carried out with four male participants (Mean age: 53). The participants were from a single international manufacturing company based in the UK, with extensive international business experience.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn 2011) was used as it is based on phenomenology. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed to obtain the clusters and themes.

RESULTS

Cross-cultural Communication

Verbal Communication
• Greetings
• Sensitivity
• Slang
• Translation

Non-Verbal Communication
• Relationships
• Body Language
• Dress Code
• Time is Money

General Cultural Influence
• Individualism
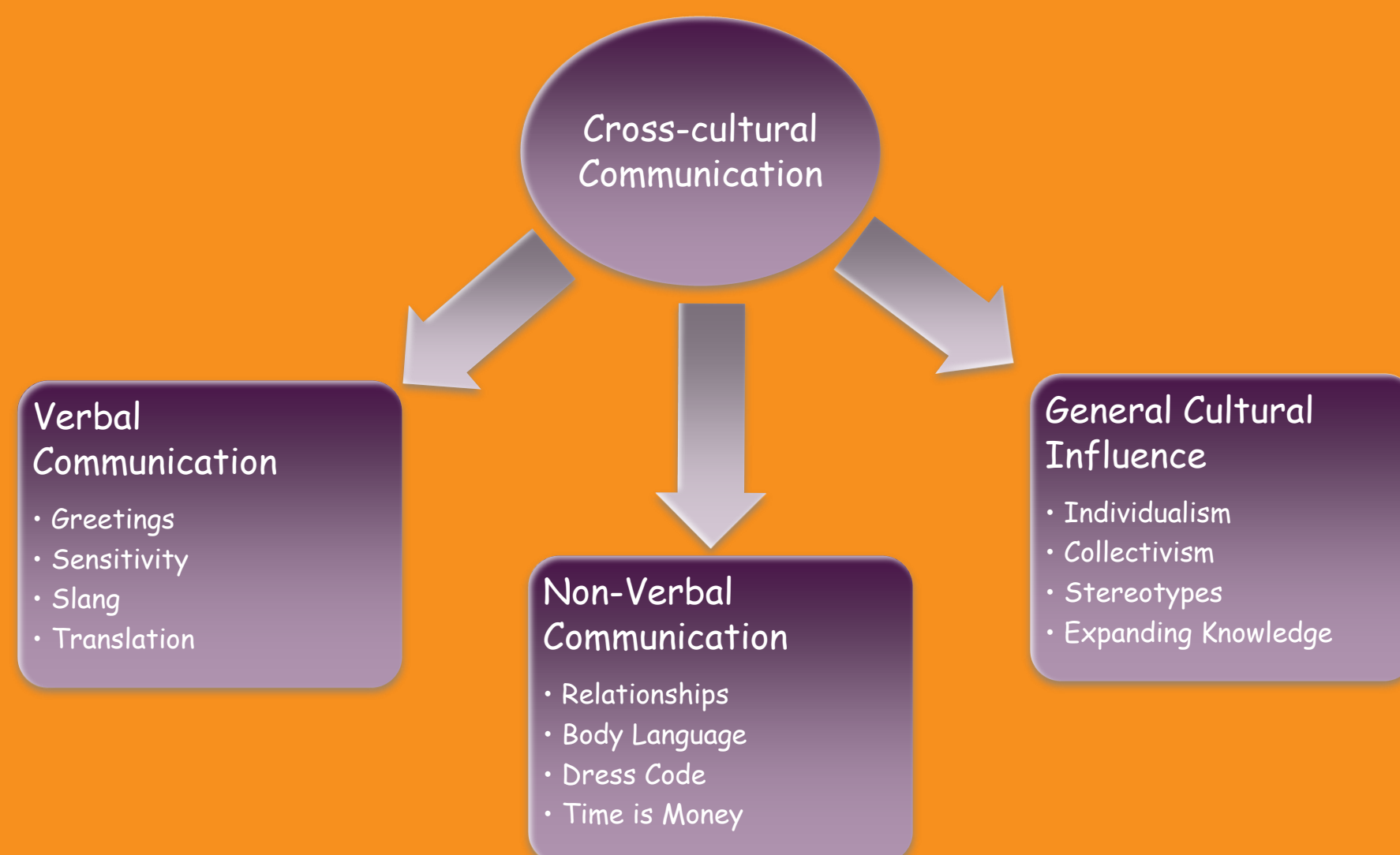• Collectivism
• Stereotypes
• Expanding Knowledge

Figure 2: Themes and sub-themes

Figure 2 shows that communication within a multicultural setting has three levels:

Verbal communication suggests that meeting someone for the first time, "…when you first meet somebody…'Oh, hello Mr Smith. How are you?' And if they say, 'Yeah, ok Clive', then you start to move on to Christian names". Other countries do not have the same sense of directness, so sensitivity in communication is important.

Relationships, body language, dress code and 'Time is Money' are all aspects of **Non-verbal communication** that can influence business sales. Observed were attitudes towards time, and in Western cultures, "…it's courteous…" to state a reason for lateness. However, many Eastern cultures do not have this value.

General cultural influences such as being from an individualist or collectivist culture influences communication, as well as stereotypes of cultures. "…it's just a tiny percentage that really spoil it for the mass majority." Finally, it was argued that an understanding of cross-cultural communication is needed to have effective communication within the workplace. If this understanding lacks, training is an essential tool.

DISCUSSION

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Hussein 2012) was evident in this small-scale study. Two participants suggested that there can be a deficiency in understanding social protocols, language etiquette and social customs, even though one can be fluent in English.

Perkins (2008) suggested that non-verbal communication is just as important to learn as verbal language, the participants agreed with this. As verbal communication is a learned skill, so is non-verbal communication. The participants agreed that business can be damaged if non-verbal language is not learnt.

Culture is learnt, therefore is a fluid notion. One participant observed a change in dress code after a natural disaster happened. Thus, even values can change.

Future studies can include a quantitative form of this study, using Hofstede et al.'s (2010) Values Survey. This would identify particular values linked with both verbal and non-verbal communication within a cultural setting, as these participants were all English, Caucasian men.

Management must recognise differences in verbal communication, and though one may be fluent in a language, colloquialisms exist. They must also understand that emotions are expressed differently in different cultures. Therefore management must ensure that all employees are familiar with verbal and non-verbal communication to ensure they have an effective team.

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