

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION ACROSS CULTURES: THE CASE OF BLACK INDIGENOUS ZAMBIANS AND WHITE WESTERN MIGRANTS LIVING IN ZAMBIA

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Abstract: This paper emanates from a study on the differences in the use of nonverbal communication cues and other cultural practices between the cultures of black indigenous Zambians and white Westerners. Furthermore, the study investigated the implications of these differences. The exploratory research design was adopted using qualitative approach to carry out the research. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were used to collect data, using a video recorder to capture the discussions. The focus group comprised of 6 black indigenous Zambians and 6 white Western migrants living in Zambia. The collected data was then transcribed from the video records and analysed using thematic analysis. The conclusion to this study was that there were differences in the use of certain nonverbal communication cues by black indigenous Zambians and white Westerners informed by their individual cultures. When not managed, these differences tend to negatively impact communication between people of the two cultures.

Keywords: Nonverbal communication, culture, intercultural communication, indigenous, migrant.

I. INTRODUCTION

Studies in intercultural communication have gained prominence in recent years due to increase in interactions between and among people hailing from different cultures with increased migration of people from one region to another around the world. Macionis (2001, p.80) states that human migration has been made easy by advancements in transport and communication technology. The increased human migration has made globalisation a reality. Croucher (2011, p.10) defines globalisation as the gravitation of nations towards a single “global village”.

West and Turner (2000, p.32) point out that intercultural interactions occur when individuals of different cultures meet and engage in intercultural communication. Gudykunst and Kim (1992, p.13) define intercultural communication as a “transactional process involving the sharing of meaning between people from different cultures”. Different cultures possess different verbal and non-verbal communication rules, symbols and practices (Gamble & Gamble, 2002, p.32). Duronto, Nishida and Nakayama (2005, p.550) posit that differences in communication practices according to individual cultural values and practices of people of different cultures may create misunderstanding and misinterpretation often times rendering intercultural communication ineffective.

II. SIGNIFICANCE AND AIM OF THE STUDY

In order to appreciate the value of effectiveness in intercultural communication, studies such as this one that interrogate the differences in communication practices as well as the implications of those differences are necessary because they guide in enhancing effectiveness in the intercultural communication encounters. This study was specific to the case of black indigenous Zambians and white Westerners. The aim was to investigate in order to gain an understanding of the

differences in nonverbal communication practices between the people of the two cultural groups cited. Furthermore, the study sought to gain an understanding of the implications of the differences. The knowledge sought in this study is for purposes of prescribing ways in which intercultural communication between people of the two cultural groups under study can be made effective.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following are the research questions for which the study sought answers:

1. How do the cultures of black indigenous Zambians and white Westerners contrast with regard to use of certain non-verbal cues?
2. What other cultural practices exist within the two cultures that differ, but have an impact on the intercultural communication effectiveness when people of the two cultures interact.
3. What are the implications of these differences for intercultural communication, and how can communication between the two groups be improved?

IV. STUDY AREA

Although a landlocked country, situated in Africa's southern subcontinent and is one of the countries dubbed third world, Zambia, has not been spared from the impact and effects of globalisation (Kragelund 2014, p.146). According to Jere-Malanda (2000, p.16), Zambia's rich mineral wealth that has attracted foreign investors, coupled with the global integration of its economy through the privatisation of its mining and other industries, the involvement of donors, development agencies and other non-governmental organisations as well as the interest the country has generated in the recent years in international students and academics, have all resulted in an inflow of foreigners into the country.

A reasonable fraction of the migrants into Zambia come from Western countries. They come into Zambia with their Western prismatic glasses as far as cultural perspectives are concerned thus hugely influencing their contact and interaction with black indigenous Zambians (Gearhart 2005, p.70; Grainger, Mills & Sibanda, 2009, p.2158). Similarly, the manner in which black indigenous Zambians relate with Western migrants is hugely dictated and influenced by their indigenous cultural values and practices. However, both Zambians and Westerners are influenced by global cultural changes associated with the spread of American-Western tastes and cultural practices, which could also have an impact on their communication and interaction (Jere-Malanda, 2000, p.16).

The study of nonverbal communication across cultures particularly with regard to black indigenous Zambians and white Western migrants set out to investigate with a view to gain an understanding of the differences in nonverbal communication and other cultural practices between people of the two cultures. The knowledge gained was to assist in enhancing intercultural communication as well as adding to the body of knowledge in the field of intercultural communication.

V. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This study utilised an exploratory design using qualitative approaches. Barbie (2009, pp.87-89) identifies three exploratory research, and these are: [1] tackle a problem not yet fully understood in the preliminary stage, [2] topic or issue is new and when data is still a challenge to, [3] address all types questions including what, why, how, because of its flexible nature. Exploratory research seeks to investigate how people get along in social settings and what meanings they assign to their actions as well as what issues concern them. The goal of exploratory researches, according to Schutt (2006) is to learn "what is going on..." to investigate social phenomena without explicit expectations. The results of exploratory research are not usually useful for decision-making by themselves, but they can provide significant insight into a given situation.

Cooper and Schindler (2008:162) posit that qualitative research includes an array of interpretive techniques, which are employed to describe, decode and translate in order to come to terms with the meaning and not the frequency of certain phenomena in the social world. Qualitative research is an inquiry method aimed at gathering detailed data for understanding the behaviour of humans and the reasons for their behaviour (Silungwe, 2017, p.109). The *why* and *how* of different phenomena are addressed in qualitative research.

A qualitative research design was favoured in this study because the study was investigating a social phenomenon, and that was the intercultural interaction between black indigenous Zambians and white Western migrants living in Zambia. As opposed to the quantitative approach, a qualitative study such as this one was favoured to yield detailed qualitative data that revealed experiences, feelings and attitudes.

In collecting information, this study used focus groups discussions (FGDs) in which the participants were asked to discuss at length their personal knowledge and experience of intercultural interactions with members of the other cultural group. A focus group discussion is a form of qualitative research that is used in collecting qualitative data. Zikmund (1994, p.95) states that focus group discussions are unstructured, free-flowing discussions with a relatively small group of participants, who express their views, perceptions and reactions towards a specific subject.

Focus group discussions were appropriate for this study because they provided an environment and opportunity for the participants to express fully their views and experiences of aspects of intercultural communication. In the course of this interaction, they could explain, reflect and seek clarification on any of the issues being discussed, and even modify an idea. In contrast, when questionnaires are used, these possibilities are seldom pursued for lack of time.

The discussions were video-recorded. The video recorder was the most appropriate method for capturing the data, as it allowed for recording of verbal communication and the non-verbal behaviour of the participants in real time (Schensul 1999:7). According to Collier and Bornman (1999:141), videotaping provides better access to participants' conduct and their interpretation of the issues concerned.

A total of 12 participants were selected for this study using convenience sampling. Convenience sampling is the process of sampling participants who are easily recruitable (Alreck & Settle 2004:43). Additionally, convenience sampling is best used for exploratory studies (Zikmund 1994:364), as this study indeed was. Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling method.

Convenience sampling was chosen because it was impossible to select participants randomly, especially white Westerners living in Zambia. At the time, there were only a few Westerners that this researcher could access. Therefore the focus groups consisted of six white Westerners and six black Zambians. The six whites were recruited from Lusaka, where they worked as volunteers in non-government organisations, while the Zambians were sampled from within the Monze community, where the hosting of the FGDs was done.

Three different FGDs were conducted, each lasting 45 minutes. They were held as follows: [1] Two discussions of each of the cultural groups (homogenous groups) [2] One combined discussion, where the two groups sat together.

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse and interpret the qualitative data collected during the focus group discussions. According to Merton (1967, p.73), thematic analysis focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of living and/or the behaviour of participants. Themes are units derived from patterns, such as conversation topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, feelings, or folk sayings and proverbs (Taylor & Bogdan, 1989, p.131).

VI. FINDINGS

The data were analysed thematically. This resulted in the identification of themes as presented in following sections.

A. Theme 1: Demonstration of Respect

Respect means different things to different people. However, although it can be defined differently, both the black Zambians and white Westerners stressed the importance of demonstrating respect in dyadic and group communication. Respect was expressed in different ways, however.

Handshaking

The Westerners identified handshaking as a token of respect. The Zambians confirmed that this was also the case among them, although a visitor was first given a seat and then he or she was greeted by a handshake. This showed that the host was glad to be visited and appreciated, and respected the presence of the guest in the home. In the Western world on the other hand, when one is visiting a home, the visitor is at liberty to walk directly to the host and shake their hand and say, "Hi, how are you today?"

Age factor

Western participants identified respect towards the elderly as an important point of difference between their culture and that of the Zambians. The Western participants stated in their discussion group that when being given something by an elderly person, one did not necessarily have to receive it in any special way as was the practice in the Zambian culture. Apart from receiving something with two hands, kneeling was identified as a way in which Zambians expressed respect to the elderly. The Westerners expressed dismay and stated that from their perspective, demonstration of respect among black Zambians was over-dramatized. Within the Western culture, the segregation between the elderly and the younger people in the demonstration of respect is not that pronounced. What was critical was when one was in a position of responsibility. Although one is young, if they had done admirable things, they are respected much more than adults.

Gender factor

In Zambian culture, while children are obliged to show respect to all older people, parents included. However, more respect is accorded to the male parent. When a child wants to talk to the father, he or she has to communicate through the mother, making his or her request known of whatever it is he or she wants. In the Western culture, parents and elderly people are accorded the same kind of respect regardless of gender.

Kneeling down

Kneeling down when speaking to an elderly person is considered demonstration of respect, especially the male parent. A child will come politely and kneel nicely down and tell the father whatever it is that he/she wants. It is considered disrespectful to speak with a parent while standing. In the Western culture, this is not the case. Westerners thought that kneeling when speaking with an elderly person was overly dramatic.

Voice Projection

In the Zambian cultural context, conversations are usually carried out in soft tones to demonstrate respect. Especially in the case of a younger person speaking with an elderly person. Additionally, if a younger person is angry towards a parent or any elderly person, they will express their anger in soft tones as way to still demonstrate respect. This was not necessarily the case in the Western culture. In that culture, one had to speak their mind and feelings audibly. Not speaking audibly is considered a sign of disrespect.

Eye Contact

In the Zambian context, when a child or young person is being rebuked by a parent, they are expected to look down as a way to show humility and respect, and by doing so, they demonstrates sorrowfulness for the wrong they had done without uttering a word. Thus within the Zambian culture, a child or young person avoids direct eye contact generally even when engaged in a communication exchange with an older person. Within the Western culture, eye contact is promoted as a sign of confidence and paying attention in a dyadic communication including an exchange between a child or young person and an elderly person. In the Western culture, parents teach children to be confident and to maintain eye contact when talking to another person, whether elderly or not.

B. Theme 2: Public Display of Affection

The second theme identified in the FGDs was public display of affection. Affection in public between lovers and acquaintances is displayed differently in different cultures. In some cultures, it is perfectly normal to display affection in public, whereas in other cultures it is considered distasteful. An analysis of the cultures of black indigenous Zambians and white Westerners revealed the follow with regard to display of affection between lovers in public.

Kissing in Public

Within the culture of the white Westerners, two people who are intimately engaged can kiss in public without any repudiation or resentment. It was considered normal within the Western culture for people of the opposite sex, and even those of the same sex to kiss in public as a way of displaying affection without having to worry about sanctions on them. In the Zambian culture, however, kissing in public, although slowly being embraced, was considered unthinkable, distasteful and even offensive. It was not encouraged.

Holding Hands and Being Close in Public

In the Western culture, it is considered okay for a couple or lovers to hold hands and to walk while embracing each other. Often times when walking in public, or taking a stroll in a park, lovers will embrace each other and hold on to each other as they walk. In the Zambian culture, on the other hand, closeness in public, especially between two people of the opposite sex, was taboo. One Zambian participant stated that even a couple of husband and wife will walk normally in such a manner that the man was ahead, while the wife follows behind. In the Zambian village setup, holding hands by two people of the opposite sex was regarded sexual and thus offensive.

C. Theme 3: Other Nonverbal Communication Practices

The FGDs yielded further information that was categorised independently that did not fall within the thematic areas identified this far. These were the following:

Handshaking in Public

According to the Zambian participants, shaking hands in public, including plutonic interaction, was considered out of the norm especially between a male and a female. When a male engages in a handshake with a female, it meant that there was a sexual message being conveyed. This situation is more complex with the case of in-laws. A son-in-law cannot attempt to shake hands with a mother-in-law, whether in public or in private. The Westerners, on the other hand, stated that handshaking was acceptable in their culture in whatever circumstance.

Silence

The Western participants said that silence was a way of showing disapproval of what someone had said or done. Western participants in the FGDs said that one would avoid engaging in any form of conversation when in disagreement with what someone else was doing, had done or had said. Within the Zambian culture, silence is considered rude and disrespectful.

Personal space

The use of personal space was another nonverbal practice that were discussed in the FGDs. According to the Zambian participants, closeness in public between people of the opposite sex was not encouraged. Standing in close proximity to one another by members of the opposite sex was considered unacceptable in Zambia. In Zambia, however, members of the same sex, such as males, can stand very close to each other without attracting raised eyebrows or being considered out of line.

A Western participant within their culture, people prefer maintaining a relatively large personal distance when interacting with another person. They indicated that they experienced dissonance when someone invaded their personal space as this was common in Zambians especially between people of the same sex.

Dress in public

Dress was yet another nonverbal practice that constituted the discussions in the FGDs. In Zambia, dress speaks volumes as the participants stated. A short skirt, for instance, was considered a dare towards males. Women in revealing wear were considered to be indicating a desire for sexual attention. Among Westerners, a woman dressed the way she wanted and the way she felt. Wearing ear studs is cool for guys in the Western culture.

D. Theme 4: Other Cultural Practices

The following identified as cultural practices in addition to what has been discussed in the preceding sections:

Offering food to guests

In the Zambian culture, a host in a home offers food to a visitor without first asking whether they wished to eat or not. Westerners find this practice uncomfortable because in their culture, the host is supposed to ask the guest whether they want to eat or not.

Nose picking in public

Nose picking in public is a common practice within the Zambian culture. Zambians do not seem to have any issues with the practice of nose picking in public. Unknown to Zambians, people of other cultures such as Westerners, find this practice alien, rude and unacceptable.

Breastfeeding in public

The Western participants indicated that in the Western world, female breasts were not to be exposed in public or in a group of people. The Western participants complained that they had seen mothers breastfeeding their babies in public in Zambia without making any effort to cover their breasts. In the Western culture, breasts were a sacred part of a woman's body.

VII. IMPLICATIONS OF THE DIFFERENCES IN NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

A. Demonstration of Respect

Demonstration of respect is considered important in both cultures, although with varying degrees and attributions. The fact that respect plays a much lesser role in Western culture than in Zambian culture, however, can be derived from the fact that the Western participants did not identify any particular ways in which respect is conveyed in their culture. Respect as a prominent symbol within Zambian culture, in contrast, is reflected in the various actions identified by the Zambian participants that demonstrate respect such as receiving things with two hands, kneeling, not speaking directly to a person, keeping your tone of voice down and avoiding eye contact.

From the discussions, it was furthermore deduced that there were distinct differences between the two cultures with regard to the reasons why people should be respected. In the Western culture, respect is not linked to age, gender or a particular position in society. A person rather earns respect by his or her achievements. In Zambian culture, on the other hand, respect is closely linked to age, gender and position in society. Young people need to show respect to older people in various ways as well as to their fathers, while women should show respect to men.

B. Public Display of Affection

The Westerners accept the public display of affection, whereas the Zambians do not – among them even married couples do not show their affection for one another in public and walk a few inches apart. Indeed, the public display of affection has sexual undertones in the Zambian culture. Therefore, when a male and female Westerner show affection – even if only in a casual manner – to each other in public, Zambians become uncomfortable.

C. Other Nonverbal and Cultural Practices

Eye Contact

Since the Zambians avoid eye contact, communication may be compromised when they talk to Westerners, who usually maintain eye contact and regard its avoidance as behaviour that estranges them. The opposite is also true. An elderly black Zambian might regard a young Westerner as disrespectful when he or she stares at the Zambian instead of looking down during a conversation. Misunderstanding and misinterpretation are the natural outflow in both instances and boil down to ineffective intercultural communication.

Handshaking

It is confusing and even embarrassing for a Western visitor to extend his or her hand in greeting to a Zambian host, and the Zambian shows hesitance or offers the guest a seat instead. The Westerner may conclude that the host is displeased about the visitor's presence in the home. This situation may create anxiety and uncertainty in the visitor's mind and may compromise intercultural communication effectiveness between the two individuals temporarily.

Personal Space

Westerners appear to have a larger personal space when engaged in communication. Personal space could therefore be a cause for anxiety in their intercultural communication.

Offering Food to Visitors

The Westerners expect to be asked whether they would like to eat or not when they visit a Zambian home. If this expectation is not met, they may misconstrue Zambian hospitality and generosity as impolite. Zambians who notice Westerners' hesitation when being offered food before they are offered a seat might lead them to conclude that Westerners are aloof and ungrateful or look down on them. This may compromise the communication.

Exposing Breasts in Public

Since the Westerners consider a woman's breasts as a sacred part of the human body, they are opposed to the display of breasts in public. The Zambians have no problem with exposed breasts, hence their acceptance of mothers breastfeeding their babies in public. This is a source of discomfort to the Westerners.

Nose Picking

Nose picking in public does not bother the Zambians. In contrast, it is uncommon in the Western culture; hence the Western group find it disgusting. This difference might prompt Westerners to grow aloof especially when shaking hands with Zambians, which in turn might compromise effective intercultural communication.

VIII. EFFECTIVENESS IN NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION ACROSS CULTURES

Emanating from the study, the following were identified as ways in which nonverbal communication across cultures can be rendered effective:

1. Degree of Competence: Intercultural communication competence is about degrees. It is, therefore, important to attain the highest degree of effectiveness one can attain in order to render intercultural communication effective.
2. "We" Orientation: In order to be effective in intercultural communication, one must assume the "we" as opposed to "I" orientation. One must be empathetic and understanding of the other's situation and, therefore, aim at co-existing. Appreciating co-existence and interdependence contributes to the success in intercultural interaction.
3. Appropriateness: Appropriateness in communication is when a person avoids breaking intercultural, social or interpersonal norms and rules. Rules involve prescriptions of obligated, preferred or prohibited behaviour in certain contexts. Rules determine which behaviour is expected and regarded as appropriate in a particular context. With rules, appropriate behaviour is expected and thus communication becomes inappropriate if rules are deliberately violated.

IX. CONCLUSION

The overarching aim of this study was to explore in order to gain an understanding of differences in nonverbal communication and other practices in encounters between black Zambians and white Western migrants living in Zambia. The study also sought to understand the implications of these differences. It is evident from the data gathered and presented that the cultures of black Zambians and white Westerners have certain fundamental differences as far as nonverbal communication practices and other cultural practices were concerned. These differences, when not managed properly influence communication encounters between the people of the two cultures either positively or negatively.

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