

# Cultural Differences, Stereotypes and Communication Needs in Intercultural Communication in a Global Multicultural Environment

## The Employees' Perspective

*Arkadiusz Gut, Michał Wilczewski and Oleg Gorbaniuk*

*John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin and the University of Warsaw*

### Abstract

This study examines the personal opinions of Chinese employees working in a multicultural environment on the relationship between cultural diversity and the efficacy of their communication in a multicultural environment. To better understand the connection between cultural background and efficient business communication, we conducted a questionnaire survey in 2014 among 20 employees from a Chinese subsidiary of a European top global manufacturing company. Analyses showed that even if the respondents expressed negative effects of cultural differences on communication, they also manifested positive attitudes toward intercultural interactions. Moreover, ignoring or even disrespecting the different cultural values of interactants were regarded as basic barriers in intercultural communication, and such barriers can be avoided when a different cultural background is respected. Although cultural differences were considered to hinder the respondents' performance and often to be a source of dissatisfaction, they did not discourage them from entering into intercultural communication.

**Keywords:** *intercultural communication, business communication, cultural diversity, stereotypes, Chinese managers, collectivism, psychological needs*

---

### 1. Introduction

Previous studies have shown that despite progressive globalization and the blurring of borders between national markets, a phenomenon of the reinforcement of cultural differences between nations, regions and ethnic groups can be observed (Lillis & Tian 2010), which often leads to communication problems in globalised business (Ferraro 2002). Any research into the influence of culture-relevant factors on communication practices in a business context is a step towards recognizing these problems and is indispensable for designing and developing any intercultural business method that could be applied to facilitate the efficacy of communication between and among employees working in global corporations.

This study examines the personal opinions of Chinese employees working in a multicultural environment on the relationship between cultural diversity and the efficacy of intercultural communication in a workplace. That relationship needs to be continuously explored due to globalization and the internationalization of European companies, especially in the context of the latest attempts by Central European politicians to make European and Chinese business collaboration closer than ever before. As new businesses between East Asians and Europeans will place managers in new cultural contexts, it is

worth considering the opinions of Chinese employees who have so far been exposed to communication with Europeans.

After a brief presentation of the aim and the parts of theory most relevant to our study, we present specific research questions and design. In the subsequent sections, we present survey results and describe participants' attitudes towards communication interactions with co-workers from other cultures, participants' feelings about communication barriers and their impact on the satisfaction of their psychological needs, and their personal views about possible means to overcome those difficulties. The empirical part is followed by a discussion and concluding remarks on the advantages of continuing research into the influence of culture-specific factors on the efficacy of intercultural communication contacts in business contexts.

## 2. Research Aim and Theoretical Perspectives

The main aim of this study is to determine to what extent culture—understood from the anthropological perspective as knowledge, beliefs, art, moral rules, ideas, standards, law, customs, capabilities and habits acquired by people and shared by them with other members of society (Benedict 1934; Tylor 1958; Hill 2005), and from the cognitive perspective as collective programming of the mind, cognitive patterns, ways of thinking, feelings, interaction styles which are acquired, described and communicated by means of symbols, and socially transmitted from one generation to another (Kluckhohn 1951; Geertz 1973; D'Andrade 1984; Triandis 1994; Hofstede 2001; Swaidan & Hayes 2005; Matsumoto 2006)—affects the ways company employees perceive communication practices in a multinational business environment, and to what extent intercultural interactions shape the picture of intercultural business communication as seen by the very participants of the process of communication.

We will examine two basic and general relationships which have to be taken into account when planning any research into intercultural communication in a business environment. The first one concerns employees' orientation to the process of communication in the company and the cultural background of the employees. Such an opposition has been projected because measuring an individual's attitude to communication, i.e. the level of his or her understanding that the needs and feelings of others—being signaled, expressed, maintained and developed through communication practices—are important in social relationships, to a certain degree reflects the level of awareness that co-workers should care for one another's well-being and satisfaction with intercultural interactions.

The second relationship regards cultural barriers and communication obstacles in intercultural business communication as determined by stereotypes toward other cultures as well as by the attitudes toward cultural differences of interactants from the same corporation. What we mean here is a reconstruction of the link between the professional communication experiences of employees with representatives of other cultures, and their individual perception of intercultural business communication.

### 2.1 Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Business Communication

The works of Markus *et al.* (1997), Hofstede (2001), Kitayama & Cohen (2007) or Nisbett (2007) show that the area of social cognition has for several decades been a subject of discussion on the influence of culturally, linguistically and socially specific factors on the cognitive styles and structures which determine people's preferences as for communication styles (Gut & Wilczewski 2015). Recent studies into the influence of socially and culturally specific factors on business communication show that among the categories affecting communication practices in a multinational environment are (1) the behavior of individuals toward a community, (2) construing the self dependently or interdependently, and (3) sensitivity to philosophies, traditions and values.

### 2.2 In-group Relations

Cultural dimensions of individualism vs. collectivism account for the behavior of individuals towards themselves within a group and towards other members of the group. Because collectivism has been recognized as dominant among Eastern cultures (Hofstede 2001; Robertson *et al.* 2001), as opposed to

Western cultures characterized by strong individualism, the participants in our study are assumed to present collectivistic behavior, i.e. they will by definition take into account their co-workers' welfare, and that account will be even stronger than their own (but just within the in-group relations; cf. Triandis 1988). Drawing on the fact that "cooperation is high in in-groups but is unlikely when the other person belongs to an out-group" (Triandis *et al.* 1988: 325) and that the basic values for collectivistic individuals are benevolence, conformity, and tradition (Ralston *et al.* 2012: 482; Schwartz 1994), we predict that the employees surveyed will (i) demonstrate strong communal orientation, (ii) they will recognize culture as a primal factor affecting the process of building relationships in their multicultural workplace, (iii) they will strongly express a willingness to have their culture respected in communication interactions with co-workers from other cultures.

### 2.3 Construing the Self

Because Asian cultures are described as collectivistic and Western cultures as individualistic, we assume that Chinese employees will express a tendency to construe their selves with reference to social context, somehow construing a form of interdependency between themselves and their in-group members, which in turn is linked to defining the concept of "self" in a relational manner by referring to others. Accordingly, we predict that survey participants will concentrate on their co-workers more often than on themselves, or that concentrating on themselves will be relational, i.e. that they will express their psychological needs with reference to their co-workers' needs. As it comes to intercultural contacts, we hence assume that even if some team members come from different cultures and their cultural values might be regarded as foreign to Chinese culture, Chinese employees will still present positive attitudes to them and accentuate the need of respecting cultural values—as collectivistic cultures are more focused on promoting others' goals and sustaining harmony as opposed to individualistic cultures being focused on personal goals and an individual's autonomy (Markus & Kitayama 1991: 241-2).

### 2.4 Cultural Values

As for the role of cultural values in intercultural business communication, recent studies have signaled a relationship between Hofstede's dimensions (esp. power distance, collectivism vs. individualism, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation and masculinity vs. femininity) and modes of decision-making, communication models, management styles and the values which guide managers when building business relationships (Abramson *et al.* 1993; Tang & Ward 2003; Kobayashi & Viswat 2011; Neuliep 2011). Some research findings show that the selection of a style of communication may be affected by the values which guide employees. For instance, Koreans prefer an indirect style of communication because of such Confucian values as harmony, consensus or egalitarianism (Merkin 2005), and also because they are sensitive to face (saving face), preferring compromise to resolve conflicts (Park 1993; Lim & Choi 1996). Most comparative research into the influence of axiological systems (e.g. in Confucian, Buddhist or Protestant philosophies) on business communication practices has traditionally consisted in comparing Asians with Americans and exploring the values which guide them in business communication (harmony, cooperation, win-win principle, long-term relationships, respectful manners, etiquette, perseverance, attitude to changes, flexibility to the rules, loyalty, etc.), treating these two groups as model representatives of high-context and low-context cultures (see e.g. Ting-Toomey *et al.* 1991; Gernet 1995: 471; Yook & Ahn 1999; Aune *et al.* 2001; Li & Moreira 2009). However, unique research into the presence of Confucian and Protestant values in the work ethics of Asian and non-Asian countries (Phuong-Mai 2005; Domurat *et al.* 2012) shows that Confucian values do not have to be limited to Asian cultures, and—surprisingly—certain non-Asian countries (e.g. the Polish one) are characterized by a high level of collectivism and even higher level of "Confucian Work Ethics" than, e.g., Koreans.

These findings indicate that communication practices are not exclusively determined by cultural categories (by belonging to a specific type of culture), but also by axiological preferences (e.g. working for the common wealth, specific perspective on material issues) and by external contexts (e.g. by an economic interrelation between a country's economic development and the values of collectivism and individualism). Accordingly, we believe that categorizing employees according to their cultural backgrounds and predicting their attitudes toward other cultures, co-workers with different cultural background as well behavior toward community in general leads to reductionism resulting in a distorted image of the process of intercultural business communication—especially if we take into account the role of corporate culture in determining communication interactions in a company. Therefore, we agree with

Chao (2000) that individual beliefs, opinions, preferences and attitudes toward the process of communication involving other cultures should be explored from an individual's perspective, i.e. theorized and then measured at the individual level, yet discussed with regard to the employers' external cultural background, imposing certain cultural categories on them, and to group-level implications such as values shared collectively (Nguyen *et al.* 2010: 181). In our study, which is focused on employees' individual experiences, opinions, preferences and attitudes toward the process of intercultural communication, we assume that Chinese employees will regard communication with people from other cultures as a positive and significant process due to a high level of collectivism, construing the self interdependently, and hence—considering it in terms of a means to maintain in-group relations which works for the group's welfare.

## 2.5 Stereotypes

Such employees' features as parochialism, ethnocentrism, cultural imperialism and stereotyping have been found fully pejorative in the context of multicultural management, as well as attempts to manage employees from different cultural backgrounds in the same manner have turned out to be a challenge to global businesses (Chaney & Martin 2011; Okoro 2013). As stereotypical perceptions of interactants lie in the field of our interest, it is worth specifying that stereotypes are “widely-accepted, culturally shared beliefs describing personal traits and characteristics of groups of individuals” (Ramasubramanian 2011). According to W. Lipmann (1922), stereotypes are simplified and often distorted “pictures in our heads” which refer to phenomena and people, and which help people overcome an overwhelming amount of information, complexity of the surrounding world (cf. McGarty *et al.* 2002: 2-3), and enable them to “make sense of their worldly encounters” (Hager 2010: 127). Even if a stereotypical perception may be false, stereotype answers the question of what something should be like if we want to believe—basing on our cultural experiences—that that thing is what it is (Habrajska 1998: 117). Some linguists believe that stereotypization is an epiphenomenon of thinking that is oversimplified, schematic, and often wrong (Shaumjan 2006: 179), and that it falsifies the picture of people and objects it refers to. However, performing the nominal function, stereotype helps people categorize the elements of the surrounding reality and understand their experiences. Similarly to symbol or myth, stereotype is of ambivalent character and conveys both positive and negative meanings and references, relying on such factors as age, gender, race, religion, profession and nationality (Permyakova 2015), which are modeled by history tradition, politics, and essentially by the mass media (Michajłowa 2007: 176).

Exploring the role of social stereotype (which constitutes a “standardized opinion on certain social groups or representatives of these groups”, Kotorowa 2014: 187) in intercultural communication provides an opportunity to understand cultural foundations of the cognitive process of categorization, and hence enables us to grasp folk perceptions of people from other cultures, in particular—it allows us to reconstruct the way people perceive themselves and others. This task seems indispensable in the context of intercultural courses for students and trainings for employees working in multicultural environments as it contributes to their “general knowledge base about the target culture as well as increase reflection on the foreign culture, the learners' own culture, and the process of forming judgments in general” (Weber 1990: 137).

## 3. Research Questions

The present study aims at exploring the influence of cultural diversity on intercultural business communication, considered from an employee's perspective. We are particularly interested in employees' attitudes towards communication interactions with professionals with other cultural backgrounds, as well as in their feelings and opinions about sources of difficulties in such communication, their impact on the satisfaction of the interactants' psychological needs, and—finally—possible means to overcome those difficulties. Accordingly, the research questions are: *What are participants' experiences of and opinions on (1) the influence of cultural diversity on the process of communication in a workplace?, (2) the influence of stereotypical perceptions of employees on professional communication and the satisfaction of their psychological needs, (3) the sources of communication problems and means to overcome them in the future?*

## 4. Method

To explore the connection between belonging to a specific cultural background and efficient business communication, in May 2014 we surveyed through questionnaires 20 Chinese people working for one of the top global manufacturing companies operating in an international environment (the name of the company is not given for reasons of confidentiality) in one of the company's subsidiaries in China. The company has around 70 factories worldwide and employs over 100,000 people. The respondents answered questions in writing. Although the researchers could not ask any further specific questions, the respondents had a chance to give extra information under each question when necessary.

### 4.1 Participants

A total of 20 Chinese high-level white-collar workers (males = 7, and females = 13) participated in the present study. They had been working in the same global company for the period between 2-17 years ( $M = 7.50$ ;  $SD = 4.97$ ). Among all of the employees, 10 were specialists, 7 were managers, and 3 were administrative workers, of whom 9 worked for support service department, 6 for production department, and 5 for communications department. All the managers reported that their intercultural communication encounters concerned communication with their subordinates, whereas all the other respondents indicated their co-workers. Accordingly, the results discussed below refer to intercultural communication contacts between managers and their inferiors as well as among employees at the same level (within in-groups).

The questionnaire survey was conducted in English. That was possible due the employees' sufficient knowledge of English—all of them declared a regular use of English in the workplace for 50% up to 80% of their time ( $M = 49.25$ ;  $SD = 16.56$ ), and a regular use of Chinese up to 80% of their time spent at work ( $M = 47.25$ ;  $SD = 20.22$ ). Additionally, apart from English and Chinese, two managers and two specialists spoke French as well.

### 4.2 Questionnaires

Besides the Background Questionnaire including basic information concerning demographic data, professional position held in the company, years of employment, and the use of languages at the workplace, the participants completed 3 questionnaires (see Appendix) gathering data at three levels: cultural, socio-cultural, and psycho-cultural, i.e. respectively: (1) Cultural Differences in a Work Environment (an altered and developed version of L. Ablonczy-Mihályka's questionnaire "Business Communication Between People With Different Cultural Backgrounds" (2009)—dealing with the influence of cultural differences on professional intercultural communication and with actual communication situations in which participants had experienced cultural differences, (2) Stereotypes in Intercultural Communication Contacts—containing statements measuring the level of prejudice towards participants, how it is manifested in communication interactions, as well as its effects on their willingness to communicate at work, and (3) Cultural Basis for Communication Problems—checking an impact of cultural differences on participants' well-being, fulfillment of their psychological needs and their everyday professional responsibilities; moreover, that questionnaire checked participants' suggestions about the possible means to avoid (in their workplace) communication problems founded on cultural differences.

The results of analyses of respondents' answers to questionnaire questions will be presented in the form of means and standard deviations calculated individually for each question. All items in the three questionnaires were anchored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Accordingly, results close to 5 signify a high level of agreement with a given item, and results close to 1 signify a strong disagreement with the item.

## 5. Survey Results

### 5.1 Cultural Differences in a Work Environment

Communication problems deriving from intercultural interactions were evidenced in our questionnaire survey (results are shown in Table 1). First of all, it must be emphasized that all the participants recognized the concept of culture as important for them and their co-workers. The participants' responses clearly show that they have encountered negative aspects of cultural diversity impeding their professional communication and that they are aware of communication problems arising from intercultural contacts, which is seen in the answers to Statement 3 ( $M = 4.45$ ,  $SD = .76$ ). Moreover, 80% of the Chinese employees agreed or partly agreed that people with different cultural backgrounds communicate with difficulties, which may indicate that they themselves have experienced such communication problems at work ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = 1.05$ ). Importantly, the employees seem not to relate those difficulties to people, but rather to their cultural backgrounds because their culture favors different means of communication (Statement 5;  $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = .86$ ). That is why they value cultural adaptability as a way to overcome those differences (Statement 7;  $M = 4.75$ ,  $SD = .44$ ), which also suggests that the employees reflect positive attitudes toward intercultural contacts; this is not surprising because according to the concept of Positive Organization Scholarship in general (see, e.g., Kalinowska-Andrian 2006, Rozkwitalska 2011), and management psychology (Stevens *et al.* 2008), intercultural interactions between people who represent different experiences, models of perception and thinking, and their approaches to solving problems, positively expand the array of possibilities of solving problems and may result in increased job satisfaction due to diversity, personal and professional development, a chance to gain new knowledge and experiences as well as adventure (Stahl *et al.* 2010, Rozkwitalska 2011) which those interactions offer to company workers who work in an international environment. Another important cultural factor affecting intercultural communication at a workplace is stereotypes, with which 70% of the respondents agreed or partly agreed (Statement 8;  $M = 4.10$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ). That factor solely pertains to the employees' feelings about how they are perceived by their interactants as well as how they are perceived by them (that matter is discussed in more detail in section *Stereotypes in Intercultural Communication Contacts*).

**Table 1:** Participants' views on cultural diversity in communication

	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Culture is important for me.	4.45	.69
Culture is important for my co-workers.	4.60	.60
Cultural differences cause problems in business communication between people with different cultural backgrounds.	4.45	.76
People with different cultural backgrounds communicate with difficulties.	4.05	1.05
Different cultures favor different means of communication.	4.00	.86
Cultural differences make my work more difficult.	3.05	1.15
Cultural adaptability is important in business communication in the global workplace.	4.75	.44
Stereotypes in culture influence business communications.	4.10	1.21

1 — strongly disagree, 5 — strongly agree

In turn, the results of the part of survey asking about circumstances when participants observe cultural differences in their workplace (Table 2) clearly show that those differences are strongly noticed during communication interactions when talking to co-workers ( $M = 4.50$ ,  $SD = .51$ ) and supervisors ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ), as the contexts of focusing on their work activities ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = .81$ ) and having a break at work ( $M = 3.55$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) (which do not entirely involve communication) were marked "undecided" and "disagree" by some of participants. Although the differences were also not spotted by some

employees when meeting with co-workers after work (15%), 80% of the respondents stated that they had noticed such differences after work, which means that because they must have met with the co-workers from different cultures after work they had been open to intercultural contacts.

**Table 2:** *Participants' responses specifying when cultural differences are observed*

<b>Cultural differences are observed...</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
When I talk to my co-workers.	4.50	.51
When I talk to my superiors.	4.05	1.19
When I work.	4.15	.81
When I have a break at work.	3.55	1.19
When I meet with my co-workers after work.	4.00	1.17

1 — strongly disagree, 5 — strongly agree

### 5.2 Stereotypes in Intercultural Communication Contacts

It is worth noting that the participants expressed a positive attitude to working with people from different cultures ( $M = 4.25$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ), which was confirmed by their responses concerning a respect for the cultural values of their co-workers ( $M = 4.80$ ,  $SD = .41$ ) and the significance of the concept of respect regarding their view of cultural values in general (see: "I feel well when my co-workers respect my cultural values",  $M = 4.80$ ,  $SD = .52$ ). 75% of the respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that their co-workers' self-construal is better than their factual perception, i.e. than the way they are perceived by other employees ( $M = 3.90$ ,  $SD = .85$ ). However, what is interesting is the fact that such perceptions are weaker as it comes to construing the self interdependently—what is typical of East Asians as representatives of collectivistic culture. In that case, only 30% of the Chinese responded that their co-workers viewed themselves as better workers than them ( $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = 1.25$ ). Even if a majority of employees indicated that some workers did not want to communicate to others ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) and that gossiping was common in their workplace ( $M = 3.70$ ,  $SD = .98$ ), a comparable number of them responded that this fact did not derive from cultural differences ( $M = 2.25$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) nor from disrespecting one's beliefs or cultural values ( $M = 2.10$ ,  $SD = 1.37$ ), and that it did not influence their willingness to communicate with employees from different cultures ( $M = 1.65$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ). Such results indicate that even if some of the employees mentioned the gossiping problem or they did feel that their co-workers did not want to communicate with them because of their cultural backgrounds, there seems to be no direct correspondence between stereotypical perception of people from other cultures and communication at a workplace. Nevertheless, a cultural background of the gossiping issue needs to be further investigated to support or disprove that conclusion, and to explore the extent to which it is an "us" vs. "them" issue.

**Table 3:** *Participants' views on stereotypes affecting communication*

<b>Stereotypes in culture influence business communication because...</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
I like working with people from different cultural backgrounds.	4.25	1.02
My co-workers think they are better workers than they are.	3.90	.85
My co-workers think they are better workers than me.	2.90	1.25

Some workers do not want to talk to others.	3.40	1.19
I respect cultural values of my co-workers.	4.80	.41
There are groups of workers who gossip about others.	3.70	.98
I feel well when my co-workers respect my cultural values.	4.80	.52
Some workers do not want to communicate with me because of my cultural background.	2.25	1.16
I do not want to communicate with people from other cultures.	1.65	1.14
Some people do not respect my beliefs and cultural values.	2.10	1.37

1 — strongly disagree, 5 — strongly agree

### 5.3 Cultural Basis for Communication Problems

When responding to the question: “Have you ever had a communication problem that resulted from cultural differences? If yes, what kind of problem was it?”, 30% of the participants pointed out that such differences impeded their professional duties, and most of them did not regard them as a factor that could discourage them from work ( $M = 2.30$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ). Interestingly, most of them (55%) responded that cultural differences led to arguments with their co-workers ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ) and that the main source of those arguments was a disrespect for their culture by their interactants, which even made them upset. ( $M = 2.90$ ,  $SD = 1.45$ ). It should be noted here that the sources of argument are different in the case of communication with co-workers and supervisors. Namely, as it comes to co-workers, there is moderate correlation between the statement “I argued with my co-worker” and the statements “I unintentionally offended the person I talked to” ( $t = .478$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and “I was personally offended by the person I talked to” ( $t = .434$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), whilst there is strong correlation between the statement “I argued with my manager” and the statements “I unintentionally offended the person I talked to” ( $t = .469$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and “I felt guilty” ( $t = .611$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Accordingly, these correlations reveal that when communicating with their co-workers, the participants seem to be sensitive to both their own and their interactants’ cultural backgrounds, and in the case of communication with supervisors, they tend to be less sensitive to their own cultural backgrounds and seem to focus on the supervisor’s perspective (arguments lead to a sense of guilt). That tendency proves power distance, i.e. “a measure of the interpersonal power or influence between the boss and subordinate as perceived by the less powerful of the two” (Hofstede 2001: 83), to be deeply embedded in such a highly collectivistic culture as Chinese one.

It is evident that although the employees did not pay any special attention to communication problems and treated them as something natural at a workplace, they manifested a caring attitude to their own culture, which means that respecting one’s cultural values is a significant psychological need to be satisfied for the sake of employees’ well-being and positive attitudes towards co-workers.

**Table 4:** *Participants’ negative experiences with cultural differences in communication*

<b>I had a communication problem because of cultural differences, which resulted in a situation in which...</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
I could not do my job.	2.50	1.28
I argued with my co-worker.	3.05	1.19

I argued with my manager.	2.60	1.54
I felt badly and did not feel like working.	2.30	1.22
I unintentionally offended the person I talked to.	2.85	1.39
I felt guilty.	2.05	1.32
I was personally offended by the person I talked to.	2.50	1.43
I felt upset because my culture was offended.	2.90	1.45

1 — strongly disagree, 5 — strongly agree

When asked the question “What do you think causes most problems in communication and how can they be avoided in the future?”, most of the employees surveyed positively responded (see Table 5) to the whole repertoire of solutions that may be adopted to mitigate negative effects of intercultural contacts—both formal ones such as communication/language trainings ( $M = 4.47$ ,  $SD = .51$ ) and meetings ( $M = 4.21$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ), and informal ones such as conversations and social events ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = .98$ ). Apparently, most important for the reduction of intercultural tensions is the need to have one’s culture respected ( $M = 4.68$ ,  $SD = .58$ ), as it was expressed by 95% of participants. That need seems congruent with the concept “willingness to communicate” which—as regards communicating in L2 (here in English)—is “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons using a L2” (MacIntyre *et al.* 1998: 547). Such willingness is founded on the satisfaction of interactants’ psychological needs, the most basic one being “respect”: “When people of two different cultures interact, cultural fluency is the appropriate application of respect, empathy, flexibility, patience, interest, curiosity, openness, the willingness to suspend judgment, tolerance for ambiguity, and sense of humor” (Inoue 2007). Indeed, when given a question about a recent work-related experience in which communication was particularly effective or ineffective, one of the specialists mentioned that his/her recent communication experience with a co-worker was effective due to body language showing respect: “(...) considering others’ needs and feelings when making a decision is showing respect to others. In my opinion showing respect, being friendly and a smile are effective during communication”.

**Table 5:** Participants’ responses to possible ways of avoiding intercultural communication problems

<b>Communication problems can be avoided in the future when...</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Some trainings on different cultures are organized.	4.47	.51
All the workers in my company are given instructions about how to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds.	4.05	1.03
My cultural background is respected.	4.68	.58
All the workers who communicate in a foreign language learn it more.	4.37	.76
Workers socialize more after work.	3.79	.98
Workers from the same department have regular meetings during which they can talk about their problems.	4.21	1.03
There is a friendly person to whom I can talk whenever I have a problem with	4.16	.96

1 — strongly disagree, 5 — strongly agree

## 6. Discussion

In our paper, we have aimed at examining employees' orientation to the process of intercultural communication in a global company, and such cultural foundation of communication barriers as stereotypes and self- and other-construals. The analyses of results of the questionnaire survey conducted among 20 Chinese white-collar workers from a Chinese subsidiary of a European global corporation allowed us to answer three research questions.

In the case of the first question about participants' experiences of and opinions on the influence of cultural diversity on the process of communication in a workplace, we found that the respondents had encountered negative effects of cultural diversity in their workplace, being reflected in difficulties in communication with supervisors and co-workers from different cultures both during work hours as well as after work, which in some instances even lead to a decrease in their performance and frequently to a decrease of their satisfaction. However negative the effects could be, the participants manifested positive attitudes toward intercultural interactions and pointed out cultural adaptability as a means to overcome those effects.

As to the question about participants' opinions on the influence of stereotypical perceptions of employees on professional communication and the satisfaction of their psychological needs, the results clearly show that in Chinese culture, where collectivistic mode of making decisions dominates, as well as perceiving the "self" interdependently, survey participants manifest the following beliefs:

- i. the basic source of barriers in intercultural communication is ignoring or even disrespecting the cultural diversity of interactants, as well as stereotypical perception of the employees with a different cultural background (such opinions prevail as "My co-workers believe they are better workers than they really are"), and that
- ii. communication problems in intercultural interactions can be avoided when a different cultural background is respected.

Therefore, the results confirmed the collectivistic way of construing the self interdependently that is typical of the Chinese, namely even if the respondents believed that their co-workers had construed the images of themselves that had been better than in reality (in fact better than in the eyes of the respondents), their own self-construals seemed to be rather collectivistic, i.e. they did not perceive themselves as better than their co-workers. Importantly, direct correspondence between stereotypical perception of co-workers with different cultural backgrounds and communication barriers at a workplace were not spotted.

The answers to the last question about participants' opinions on the sources of communication problems and the means to overcome them in the future showed that the Chinese respondents saw cultural differences as a factor hindering the performance of their professional duties, yet not strong enough to discourage them from work. Most respondents regarded disrespecting cultural values to be the greatest source of dissatisfaction and decrease in their well-being and in positive attitudes towards co-workers. The results showed that the survey participants looked forward to cultural trainings as well as formal and informal meetings at which they could get (themselves and others) familiar with other cultures better (which corresponds with cultural adaptability being a way to overcome negative effects of intercultural interaction problems) so that their cultures could be respected more.

## 7. Conclusion

We believe that special attention should be paid to culture-specific factors when characterizing the efficacy of communication, because numerous investigations indicate that they are key and positive factors that enhance the negotiation and decision-making processes, stimulate the performance of multicultural teams members, and increase their satisfaction and decrease work absence (see, e.g., Clampitt & Downs 1993; Daily *et al.* 1996; Daily & Steiner 1998; Schachaf 2008; Wilczewski 2015).

The relation between culture/cultural diversity and the efficacy of their communication in a multicultural environment needs to be continuously explored due to globalization processes and internationalization of European companies, especially in the context of the recent frequent political attempts to get Chinese and European business collaboration closer than ever before (e.g. by consolidating sea and land links between China and Europe, see the Chinese concept of “New Silk Road”). This is why it is worth diverting researchers’ attention from intercultural communication practices between East Asians, Americans and Western Europeans onto Central Europeans, as new international businesses will possibly place many of Central European employees in new cultural contexts.

Being aware of cultural differences among their co-workers prepares employees to understand their behavior better and to face communication obstacles as well as understand culturally-relevant patterns of doing business in an international context. This is not only crucial for effective communication in work-teams, or cooperation between employees and employers, but also for cooperation with the company’s international subsidiaries, for negotiation with stakeholders and other companies, as well as for increasing communication potential in global corporations.

## References

- Ablonczy-Mihályka, L. (2009). Business communication between people with different cultural backgrounds. *Proceedings of the Conference of the International Journal of Arts and Sciences*, 1(19), 121-129.
- Abramson, N. R., Lane, H. W. Nagai, H., & Takagi, H. (1993). A comparison of Canadian and Japanese cognitive styles: Implications for management interaction. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 24(3), 575-588.
- Aune, M-SKKS., Hunter, J. E., Kim, H-J., & Kim, J-S. (2001). The effect of culture and self-construals on predispositions toward verbal communication. *Human Communication Research*, 27(3), 382-408.
- Benedict, R. (1934). *Patterns of Culture*. New York: Mifflin.
- Chaney, L. H., & Martin, J. S. (2011). *Intercultural Business Communication(4th ed.)*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall.
- Chao, G. T. (2000). Multilevel issues and culture: An integrative view. In K. J. Klein, & S. W. J. Kozlowski (Eds), *Multilevel Theory, Research, and Methods in Organizations: Foundations, Extensions and New Directions* (pp. 308-348). San Francisco, CA: Jossey—Bass.
- Clampitt, P. G., & Downs, W. (1993). Employee perceptions of the relationship between communication and productivity: A Field Study. *Journal of Business Communication*, 30(1), 5-28.
- D’Andrade, R. G. (1984), Cultural meaning systems. In R. Shweder, & R. LeVine(Eds), *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self, and Emotion* (pp. 88-119). Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Daily, B. F., & Steiner, R. L. (1998). The influence of group decision support systems on contribution and commitment levels in multicultural and culturally homogeneous decision-making groups. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 14(1), 147-162.

- Daily, B., Whatley, A., Ash, S. R., & Steiner, R. L. (1996). The effects of a group decision support system on culturally diverse and culturally homogeneous group decision making. *Information & Management*, 30(6), 281-289.
- Domurat, A., Zajenkowska, A., & Grzegorzewska, M. (2012). Confucian and Protestant work ethics among Polish and Korean employees and small business owners. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 28. Retrieved September 15, 2015, from <http://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr28/domurat.htm>
- Ferraro, G. P. (2002). *The Cultural Dimension of International Business (4th Edition)*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic.
- Gernet, J. (1995). *Buddhism in Chinese Society: An Economic History from the Fifth to the Tenth Centuries*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gut, A., & Wilczewski, M. (2015). Porównawcze badania kognitywne (O wpływie czynników kulturowo zależnych na poznanie społeczne) ('Comparative Cognitive Research in the Scope of the Influence of Culture-Specific Factors on Social Cognition'). In K. Morita (Ed.), *Spotkania Polonistyk Trzech Krajów—Chiny, Korea, Japonia. Rocznik 2014/2015* (pp.117-136), Tokyo: TUFS.
- Habrajska, G. (1998), Prototyp—stereotyp—metafora. In J. Anusiewicz, & J. Bartmiński (Eds), *Język a kultura, Vol. 12: Stereotyp jako przedmiot lingwistyki. Teoria, metodologia, analizy empiryczne* (pp. 116-123). Wrocław: Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Polonistyki Wrocławskiej.
- Hager, M. (2010). Teaching Intercultural Communication in a Professional Language Course. *Global Business Languages*, 15. Retrieved November 27, 2015, from <http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/gbl/vol15/iss1/9>
- Hill, C. W. (2005). *International Business Competing in the Global Market Place (5th ed.)*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Cultures Consequences (2nd ed.)*. Thousand Oaks: CA: Sage.
- Inoue, Y. (2007). Cultural Fluency as a Guide to Effective Intercultural Communication: The Case of Japan and the U.S. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 15. Retrieved November 27, 2015, from <http://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr15/inoue.htm>
- Kalinowska-Andrian, K. (2006). Positive Organizational Scholarship—nowy trend w nauce zarządzania. Zaproszenie do świata pozytywów. *E-mentor 1*(13). Retrieved June 16, 2015, from <http://www.e-mentor.edu.pl/artykul/index/numer/13/id/235>
- Kitayama, S., & Cohen, D. (2007). *Handbook of Cultural Psychology*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Kluckhohn, C. (1951). The study of culture. In D. Lerner, & D. Harold (Eds), *The Policy Sciences* (pp. 86-101). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Kobayashi, J., & Viswat, L. (2011). Intercultural communication competence in business: Communication between Japanese and Americans. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 26. Retrieved December 30, 2014, from <http://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr26/kobayashi-26.htm>
- Kotorova, E. G. (2014). Describing cross-cultural speech behavior: A communicative pragmatic field approach. *Procedia—Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 154, 184-192.
- Li, T., & Moreira, G. O. (2009). The influence of Confucianism and Buddhism on Chinese Business: The case of Aveiro, Portugal. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 19. Retrieved December 30, 2014,

from <http://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr19/tianbo.htm>

Lillis, M., & Tian, R. (2010). Cultural issues in the business world: An anthropological perspective. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 6(1), 99-112.

Lim, T-S., & Choi, S-H. (1996). Interpersonal relationships in Korea. In W. B. Gudykunst, S. Ting-Toomey, & T. Nishida (Eds), *Communication in Personal Relationships Across Cultures* (pp. 122-136). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public Opinion*. New York: MacMillan.

MacIntyre, P. D., Dörnyei, Z., Clément, R., & Noels, K. A. (1998). Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2: a situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82(4), 545-562.

Markus, H., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Review*, 98(2), 224-253.

Markus, H. R., Mullally, P., & Kitayama, S. (1997). Selfways: Diversity in modes of cultural participation. In U. Neisser, & D. Jopling (Eds), *The Conceptual Self in Context: Culture, Experience, Self-understanding* (13-61). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Matsumoto, D. (2006). Culture and nonverbal behavior. In V. Manusov, & M. L. Patterson (Eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Nonverbal Communication* (pp. 219-235). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

McGarty, C., Yzerbyt, V. Y., & Spears, R. (2002), *Stereotypes as Explanations: The Formation of Meaningful Beliefs about Social Groups*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Merkin, R. S. (2005). The influence of masculinity-femininity on cross-cultural facework. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 34, 267-289.

Michajłowa, K. (2007). Opozycja swój/obcy w kształtowaniu stereotypu Polaka wśród Bułgarów zamieszkałych w Polsce. In J. Bartmiński (Ed.), *Etnolingwistyka. Problemy języka i kultury*, 19 (pp. 175-190). Lublin: [Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej](#).

Neuliep, J. W. (2011). *Intercultural Communication. A Contextual Approach (5th ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Nguyen, H.-H. D, Huy Le, & Boles, T. (2010). Individualism—collectivism and co-operation: A cross-society and cross-level examination. *Negotiation & Conflict Management Research*, 3(3), 179-204.

Nisbett, R. E. (2007). Eastern and Western ways of perceiving the world. In Y. Shoda, D. Cervone, & G. Downey(Eds), *Persons in Context: Building a Science of the Individual* (pp. 62-83). New York: Guilford Press.

Okoro, E. (2013). International organizations and operations: An analysis of cross-cultural communication effectiveness and management orientation. *Journal of Business & Management*, 1(1), 1-13.

Park, M-S. (1993). *Communication Styles in Two Different Cultures: Korean and American*. Seoul, Korea: Han Shin Publishing Company.

Permyakova, T. M. (2015).The Image of Russian Business through Linguistic Stereotypical Means. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 37. Retrieved November 27, 2015, from <http://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr37/permyakova.html>

- Phuong-Mai, N., Terlouw, C., & Pilot, A. (2005). Cooperative learning vs Confucian heritage culture's collectivism: confrontation to reveal some cultural conflicts and mismatch. *Asia Europe Journal*, 3(3), 403-419.
- Ralston, D. A., Egri, C. P., Riddle, L., Butt, A., Dalgic, T. & Brock, D. M. (2012). *Managerial values in the greater Middle East: Similarities and differences across seven countries*. *International Business Review*, 21, 480-492.
- Ramasubramanian, S. (2011). Television Exposure, Model Minority Portrayals, and Asian-American Stereotypes: An Exploratory Study. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 26. Retrieved November 27, 2015, from <http://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr26/ramasubramanian.htm>
- Robertson, C. J., Al-Khatib, J. A., Al-Habib, M., & Lanoue, D. (2001). Beliefs about work in the Middle East and the convergence versus divergence of values. *Journal of World Business*, 36(3), 223-244.
- Rozkwitalska, M. (2011). *Bariery w zarządzaniu międzykulturowym. Perspektywa filii zagranicznych korporacji transnarodowych*. Warszawa: Wolters Kluwer.
- Schwartz, S. H. (1994). Beyond individualism/collectivism: New cultural dimensions of values. In U. Kim, H. C. Triandis, S. Ç. Kagitçibasi, G. Choi, & Yoon (Eds), *Individualism and Collectivism: Theory, Method, and Applications* (pp. 85-119). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Shachaf, P. (2008). Cultural diversity and information and communication technology impacts on global virtual teams: An exploratory study. *Information and Management*, 45(2), 131-142.
- Shaumjan, S. (2006), *Signs, Mind, and Reality: A Theory of Language as the Folk Model of the World*. Amsterdam—Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Stahl, G. K., Maznevski, M., Voigt, A., & Jonsen, K. (2010). Unraveling the effects of cultural diversity in teams: A meta-analysis of research on multicultural work groups. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 41, 690-709.
- Stevens, F. G., Plaut, V. C., & Sanchez-Burks, J. (2008). Unlocking the benefits of diversity. All-inclusive multiculturalism and positive organizational change. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 44(1), 116-133.
- Swaidan, Z., & Hayes, L.A. (2005). Hofstede theory and cross-cultural ethics conceptualization, review, research agenda. *Journal of American Academy of Business*, 6(2), 10-16.
- Tang, J., & Ward, A. (2003). *The Changing Face of Chinese Management*. New York: Routledge.
- Ting-Toomey, S., Gao, G., Trubisky, P., Yang, Z., Kim, H-S., Lin, S-L., & Nishida, T. (1991). Culture, face maintenance, and styles of handling interpersonal conflict: A study in five cultures. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 2, 275-296.
- Triandis, H. C. (1988). Collectivism vs. individualism: A reconceptualization of a basic concept in cross-cultural social psychology. In G. K. Verma, & C. Bagley (Eds), *Cross-cultural Studies of Personality, Attitudes and Cognition* (pp. 60-95). London: Macmillan.
- Triandis, H. C. (1994). *Culture and Social Behavior*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Triandis, H. C., Bontempo, R., Villareal, M. J., Asai, M., & Lucca, N. (1988). Individualism and collectivism: Cross-cultural perspectives on self-ingroup relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 54(2), 323-338.

Tylor, E.B. (1958 [1871, 1873]). *The Origins of Culture and Religion in Primitive Culture*, Volumes I and II of the 1873 edition of *Primitive Culture*. New York: Harper & Brothers.

Weber, M. (1990). Intercultural Stereotypes and the Teaching of German. *Die Unterrichtspraxis/Teaching German*, (23)2, 132-141.

Wilczewski, M. (2015). Intercultural communication competence as a success factor for a manager operating in a multinational environment. In S. Grucza, & J. Alnajjar (Eds), *Kommunikation in multikulturellen Projektteams* (pp. 51-71). Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang.

Yook, E. L., & Ahn, B. L. (1999). Comparison of apprehension in communication between Koreans and Americans. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 89, 161-164.

## Acknowledgements

This paper is supported by the National Science Centre's grant (Poland) HARMONIA6 (UMO-2014/14/M/HS1/00436) for the research project entitled "The involvement of language, culture-specific factors and folk intuitions in mind-reading activity and social cognition".

We would like to thank all the Chinese business people who agreed to devote their precious time to participate in the questionnaire survey.

We also would like to express our gratitude to the reviewers of *Journal of Intercultural Communication* for their constructive suggestions.

## Appendix

### Background Questionnaire

Nationality \_\_\_\_\_

Mother tongue \_\_\_\_\_

Gender \_\_\_\_\_

Position at work \_\_\_\_\_

Department \_\_\_\_\_

Years of employment in the present company \_\_\_\_\_

How much English do you use at work? \_\_\_\_\_%

What other language(s) do you use at work and how much?

(a) language \_\_\_\_\_ how much \_\_\_\_\_%; (b) language \_\_\_\_\_ how much \_\_\_\_\_%

General Instruction

*Read each of the statements below and write down the number that best describes you for each of them.*

5 = strongly agree

4 = agree

3 = undecided

2 = disagree

1 = strongly disagree

### **1) Cultural Differences in a Work Environment**

Culture is important for me. \_\_\_\_\_

Culture is important for my co-workers. \_\_\_\_\_

Cultural differences cause problems in business communication between people with different cultural backgrounds. \_\_\_\_\_

People with different cultural backgrounds communicate with difficulties. \_\_\_\_\_

Different cultures favor different means of communication. \_\_\_\_\_

Cultural differences make my work more difficult. \_\_\_\_\_

Cultural adaptability is important in business communication in the global workplace. \_\_\_\_\_

Stereotypes in culture influence business communications. \_\_\_\_\_

*In what situations are cultural differences observed?*

When I talk to my co-workers. \_\_\_\_\_

When I talk to my superior. \_\_\_\_\_

When I work. \_\_\_\_\_

When I have a break at work. \_\_\_\_\_

When I meet with my co-workers after work. \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

### **2) Stereotypes in Intercultural Communication Contacts**

*How do you understand the statement: "Stereotypes in culture influence business communication?"*

I like working with people from different cultural backgrounds. \_\_\_\_\_

My co-workers think they are better workers than they are. \_\_\_\_\_

My co-workers think they are better workers than me. \_\_\_\_\_

Some workers do not want to talk to others. \_\_\_\_\_

I respect cultural values of my co-workers. \_\_\_\_\_

There are groups of workers who gossip about others. \_\_\_\_\_

I feel well when my co-workers respect my cultural values. \_\_\_\_\_

Some workers do not want to communicate with me because of my cultural background. \_\_\_\_\_

I do not want to communicate with people from other cultures. \_\_\_\_\_

Some people do not respect my beliefs and cultural values. \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

### **3) Cultural Basis for Communication Problems**

*To what degree the following endings of the statement:*

“I had a communication problem because of cultural differences, which resulted in a situation in which...”,

*are true for you?*

I could not do my job. \_\_\_\_\_

I argued with my co-worker. \_\_\_\_\_

I argued with my manager. \_\_\_\_\_

I felt badly and did not feel like working. \_\_\_\_\_

I unintentionally offended the person I talked to. \_\_\_\_\_

I felt guilty. \_\_\_\_\_

I was personally offended by the person I talked to. \_\_\_\_\_

I felt upset because my culture was offended. \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

*How do you think your communication problems can be avoided in the future?*

Some trainings on different cultures are organized. \_\_\_\_\_

All the workers in my company are given instructions about how to communicate with people from different cultural backgrounds. \_\_\_\_\_

My cultural background is respected. \_\_\_\_\_

All the workers who communicate in a foreign language learn it more. \_\_\_\_\_

Workers socialize more after work. \_\_\_\_\_

Workers from the same department have regular meetings during which they can talk about their problems. \_\_\_\_\_

There is a friendly person to whom I can talk whenever I have a problem with communication with my co-workers. \_\_\_\_\_

Other \_\_\_\_\_

## About the Authors

Arkadiusz Gut, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Departments of Philosophy and Sinology, and a Chairman of Cognitive Studies at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin.

Michał Wilczewski, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Applied Linguistics at the University of Warsaw, and a Visiting Scholar in the Department of Management, Society and Communication at Copenhagen Business School.

Oleg Gorbaniuk, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the Institute of Psychology at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin.

## Author's address

Please direct all correspondence regarding this article to:

Michał Wilczewski  
PO Box 512  
University of Warsaw  
Faculty of Applied Linguistics  
Institute of Specialized and Intercultural Communication  
Szturmowa 4 ST, 02-678 Warsaw  
Poland  
E-mail: [m.wilczewski@uw.edu.pl](mailto:m.wilczewski@uw.edu.pl)

---

Journal of Intercultural Communication, ISSN 1404-1634, issue 43, March 2017.

URL: <http://immi.se/intercultural>