

Professionalism in Intercultural Job Interviews?

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Abstract

This is a slightly revised manuscript from my keynote speech at the NIC conference 2003 in Göteborg, Sweden. The aim of the speech was to put forward research towards a critical intercultural multiperspectivism in order to understand professional intercultural communication in multicultural societies. This will be discussed in relation to a case, a job interview with an untrained Danish interviewer and a Chinese candidate.

In this written version I have tried to keep the oral form, as far as possible, and my original idea of the speech, which was to create the ground for discussion at the conference concerning intercultural communication at work and reflecting on theories in relation to changes in societies. As a consequence of this the article, I will, to a certain degree, be offering fairly simplified descriptions of various positions held within the field of intercultural research.

Keywords: Intercultural communications, concepts of culture and professional job interviews

Thank you very much for the invitation. I would just like to say that every time I have participated in an NIC conference I have been left with a very positive feeling about meeting so many other researchers and teachers who have intercultural communications as *the* central issue in their professional life. In Denmark, intercultural communication does not play a central role within the universities. Apart from the Copenhagen Business School as an exception, research and interest within this field is fairly limited. Nevertheless, I have been studying, working, teaching and researching within the field of intercultural communications now for more than 15 years. In 1998 I had my PhD entitled "*Intercultural communication in complex societies*" (Jensen, 1998), published in Danish and which has now just been reprinted for the third time. This seems to point to a growing interest in intercultural communication *outside* of the university sector and I have met this increasing awareness in intercultural communications through my teaching experience with teachers, nursery teachers, union workers, nurses, engineers, dentists and priests. The main ideas of my teachings have been to give professionals a *critical* knowledge of concepts relating to culture, ethnicity, globalisation, media and intercultural communications (Jensen, 2000).

The concepts of culture – in relation to professionals

One way of understanding the field of intercultural communications is to focus on the concept of culture. When I teach professionals I underline two positions from the field of intercultural communications: The dominant 'descriptive concept of culture' as well as the 'complex concept of culture'. These positions have been put forward in order to create a discussion about professionals' everyday understanding of various cultures.

'The descriptive concept of culture' can be illustrated by the following key sentences:

- Culture is something you can *see, describe* and *have*.
- Culture is ideas, values and rules you learn in society from the previous generation and try to pass on to the next generation often, in a changed form.
- Cultures are homogenous – i.e. culture is shared equally by all members.
- Culture determines the actions that humans take.
- Culture can be seen as explaining the actions of people.

- Body language is central in all cultures.

Researchers working with this understanding of culture are e.g. Edward Hall (1959), who is one of the pioneers within the field of intercultural communications. One of his most famous contributions to the intercultural field is a division between cultures as high and low context cultures. In a high context culture very little need be done or said because the context will tell you what to do. (An often used example is the traditional ritualised Asian tea party.) Samovar and Porter, who as editors of a reader in intercultural communication, have also had a continuing influence. Their textbook was published for the first time in 1984 and is now in its 10th edition. Geert Hofstede has also had important impact with his statistical survey about cultures and organisation. His description of culture is that: "culture is the collective programming of the mind" (Hofstede, 1984).

A minor, but ever growing part within the field of intercultural communications uses the 'complex concept of culture'. The biggest influence on the future generation is Fred Jandt, who wrote a competing textbook about intercultural communication based upon the complex concept of culture. Fred Jandt along with Dolores Tanno have also developed some very interesting work about constructing "The other in multicultural research" (1996). Gonzales & Tanno (1999) have also played an active part within the field by editing the International and Intercultural annual about cultural identity (1997), and rhetoric and politics (1998).

Written in key sentences this perspective of culture can be formulated as follows:

- Culture is common knowledge and meaning shared with others.
- Culture is something you do.
- Culture is constantly being recreated over and over again and is constructed between people.
- A culture can not be seen as being homogeneous, but must be seen as being divided up into different spaces, each of which contain different values and meanings.
- Every individual can participate in many different social categories and should therefore not only be portrayed as a national category, but also in categories such as gender, education, social background, age etc..

Three years ago I was convinced that many of the 'right' answers could be found in the complex concept of culture, and I have found hardly any 'rights' in the descriptive perspective. But after many discussions with professionals, who have developed their everyday experiences through the multicultural society, it has been made clear to me that even though the complex concept does indeed emphasise complexity, it has problems in grasping hold of the stable parts of culture. Therefore, professionals very often turns to applied perspectives which are often based on the descriptive concept of culture since this awards recognisable results relating to their everyday practice.

I would therefore like to use this forum to initiate a discussion on how we can rethink the concept of culture used in intercultural communications in a globalised, multicultural society. In order to do so, I will give you an example of intercultural communication within a multicultural society. In this case a job interview held in a Danish company.

Professionalism in job interviews

In Denmark, "Cultural diversity" (translated to "mangfoldighed" in Danish) has been a major issue within the multicultural labour market in the last few years.

My interest in this field has been to study how professionals, who claimed that they were working for cultural diversity, dealt with intercultural communication on a professional level. Was it common practice in job interviews, as I have been told, that ethnic minorities were asked about their religion? Were they also asked about their personal feelings towards Denmark? Were these professional interviewers really posing these kinds of questions to the interviewees, even though this would reduce the time available for the candidates to present themselves as professionals?

The research project, which I am now working on, is focused upon the negotiation of ethnicity, gender and professional competence. I have, as part of the project, participated in over 30 job interviews in large Danish companies. All these companies had a cultural diversity policy. The job types I observed covered a broad spectrum. From those requiring no education at all, to others which required further education and finally to those which required a university degree. Three types of interviewers were involved: 1) professional recruiters, 2) untrained local leaders, 3) first time recruiters (and colleagues participating in the session where they had the option to ask questions).

I observed about 10 different interviewers during the 30 interviews. Only one of them had some formal experience within the field of intercultural communications. One professional recruiter's interviewing technique was so well developed that cultural differences made very little impact. All the other interviewers (recruiters) lacked knowledge about intercultural communications (Jensen, 2004).

I would now like to share my interpretations with you by giving you all a specific example of a job interview. I would like to emphasise that this example was chosen in order to illustrate an extreme situation. In focusing in on this point I hope to show you how misunderstandings in communication between an untrained interviewer from Denmark and an applicant from China can occur and therefore lead to an amplification of the problem.

The Chinese job interview ... three misunderstandings

The contact between the young female Human Resource employee (about 30 years old), and the candidate (a woman, slightly older) is good. They are chatting on their way to the office, and the atmosphere is fine. The interviewer is doing one of her first job interviews and the language of the interview is English.

First misunderstanding

In order to create a gentle introduction to the job interview the interviewer starts by saying: "*I don't know what you know about the organisation?*" This was meant just as an introductory phrase but the candidate believes the question to be real and starts to tell her everything she knows about the organisation. This includes the number of employees, the history of the company, the annual budget etc.. The interviewer expressed, in her feedback, that she found the situation quite embarrassing and tried several times to stop the applicant by leaning forward in order to mark the beginning of a new question.

Second misunderstanding

The usual practice in this interview concept is that the candidates are given a 'personality test' in Danish. After the computer has calculated the scores, they are usually discussed in relation to the actual job. In this case, the candidate was not tested since she did not speak Danish. This situation created a job interview where the interviewer tried to fill in the gap created by the missing personality test scores. The result being that the Chinese candidate was not supposed to say anything about her professional qualifications but was only expected to talk about her "personal and social skills". (The following is a transcript from the English interview).

(I= Interviewer, C= Candidate)

I: I would like to hear about your *personal aspects*. How you would describe yourself as a social person?

C: You want to know how I would describe myself?

I: Yes. (a little harsh)

C: I think the first thing, to be honest ... (laughs)

I: Yeah? (wondering)

C: ... and I think I have a little part of analysis and solve the problems, because I have been a leader and ...in China ...

I: hm hm

C: From 1996 to 1998 and from 1992 to 1996 was my project to work in the national ... and after that from 1998 to 2000 I work at a company at the...

I: hm

C: ... after that I come, I think, I work as the leader it has much deal and solve problems ... I think - and another ...

The candidate never says anything about herself as a "social person", „She is presenting herself as a professional candidate, who is expected to describe her values (being honest) and her skills as a leader with experiences from many different projects. The "hm hm" response given by the interviewer shows that they are not satisfied with the answers. In other parts of the interview the interviewer provides positive responses e.g. "yes", "I see" etc.

Third misunderstanding

The interviewer tries to change her strategy by posing some more direct questions:

I: Could you describe what a good leader is for you?

C: What a good leader is for me?

I: Yes ...

C: I don't have to decide what a good leader is. I have to be a good employee ... in my work ...

The Danish interviewer seems to be quite confused by this answer and tries afterwards to guide the candidate back to her own descriptions about her own values where she was describing herself as a leader. For the interviewer, who did not have any professional intercultural experience with people from, for example, Asia, it did not make sense to her that a candidate did not have any preferences as to what a good leader should be.

Useful studies from the field of intercultural communication

We can, in the field of intercultural communications, come across different theoretical approaches to analyse job interviews such as this. "Crosstalk" is the most famous study of intercultural job interviews. It was done by John Gumperz, Jubb and Celia Roberts back in 1979. Generally speaking, the study was based on an anthropological and linguistic approach, which was based upon the complex concept of culture. The study was done in cooperation with the National Centre for Industrial Language Training and is published along with an accompanying video and booklet. In the booklet they describe how and why misunderstandings seem to occur in job interviews.- and the study goes on to show that common misunderstandings seems to be based on:

1) Different assumptions and experience – for example, different expectations as to the outcome of a conversation or different interpretations of what are right procedures.

2) Different styles of communication between people of different class or regional background – for example degrees of explicitness and of politeness.

3) Lack of intelligibility – for example, not being able to actually understand someone's pronunciation or choice of vocabulary." (Gumperz, Jubb & Roberts, 1979)

In this case we can see examples of misunderstandings at the first and the third level in particular.

At the first level the interviewer and the candidate have *different expectations* of the outcome of the conversation. The candidate is not following the unwritten rules anticipated by the interviewer. She does not talk about herself as "a social person". She is apparently following her own ideas about a job interview, based upon her own expectations, and therefore being unaware that her information does not seem relevant to the interviewer.

Lack of *intelligibility* is dominant on both sides. To talk about "yourself as a social person" is a Danish expression which has been translated directly into English. This poses the candidate with an incorrect and confusing question.

The Chinese candidate, on the other hand, lacks a lot of words and does not complete her sentences etc.. Interestingly, as related to the Crosstalk study, is that it is normal that none of the partners in an interview dare (or like) to mention the misunderstandings during the interviews. They just move on pretending they have no kind of problem understanding each other. The Swedish researcher Viveka Adelsvärd (1988) stresses in her study of job interviews that the responsibility of this part of a job interview belongs to the interviewer. This leaves the professional job interviewer, who strives to work for cultural diversity, with an obligation to acquire a professional knowledge of intercultural awareness.

Expectations of power distance

Another study that both the candidate and the interviewer could have benefited from is Dutch researcher Geert Hofstede's *Cultures's Consequences* (1980). It was a quantitative empirical study based on the descriptive concept of culture. Hofstede develops four different dimensions, which describe cultural differences in 40 different nations: 1) power distance (small/large), 2) uncertainty avoidance weak/strong, 3) individualism/collectivism and 4) masculinity/femininity. (Hofstede, 1980). Central to our case is the dimension: power distance.

"*Distance of power: Which relation do the employees have to power? Is it accepted that the power is unequally shared?*" (Hofstede, 1980).

When the Chinese candidate is asked about her opinion of what a good leader is her answer is immediate. It is not for her to decide how a leader should be. She just has to be a good employee. From her point of view, this question is not relevant. With Hofstede's dimension of power distance, the example illustrates how the Chinese candidate expresses her attitude towards a leader.

The Danish interviewer is rather confused by this response and she interprets the answer, as if the candidate did not understand the question or was weak or depended too much on others decisions.

The misunderstanding, in this case, relates to the interviewer and the interviewee's different relation to power. In the mind of the Danish interviewer, it is her duty to ask frankly about the candidate's expectations. But for the candidate these questions in themselves are not legitimate ones. This interviewer could, in my opinion, have done better. She could have got more useful information from the candidate if she had had more knowledge of intercultural communications.

With these short theoretical examples from the field of intercultural communications, I wish to argue that, from a practitioner's perspective, it is useful to work with tools from different theoretical fields. Both theoretical approaches give professional job interviewers a number of intercultural competences which enable them to be aware of how culture influences communication.

The second question I wish to address during this forum is: What kind of theoretical perspective is able to describe the complexity which exists within postmodern, multicultural societies? What kind of theory is able to cope with the differences in job interviews in multicultural societies, as in the example?

Towards a critical multiperspectivism

Firstly, I would like to stress that I do not have any definitive answers to these questions. But I am hoping to generate a discussion about the possibility of rethinking intercultural communications based upon a critical multiperspectivism. In short, multiperspectivism refers to a theoretical research framework based upon different approaches. It may be compared to the triangulation of methods, where different methods are used in combination, each of which contributes with its own strengths.

In relation to discourse analysis, the Danish researchers Louise Phillips and Marianne Winter Jørgensen argue for their use of multiperspectivism:

"If knowledge can only be obtained from particular perspectives, then different perspectives produce different forms of context-bound, contingent knowledge rather than universal knowledge based on a neutral, context-free foundation. When combined, the different forms of knowledge produce not a universal understanding but a broader, albeit contingent, understanding." (Phillips and Jørgensen, 2002: 147)

"And another ground for multiperspectival research is that it suits critical research as different perspectives demonstrate that the social world can be understood and constructed in different ways, thus pointing out that things could be different and opening up for the possibility of social change". (ibid.)

Using different perspectives is not the same as being eclectic. Phillips and Jørgensen strictly emphasise the importance of avoiding eclecticism:

"Rather, multiperspectivism requires that one weighs the approaches up against each other with respect to philosophical premises, theoretical claims, methodology and method, identifying what kind of contingent knowledge each approach can supply and modifying approaches in the light of these considerations. It is only by identifying their individual premises and comparing them that we can pinpoint the nature of that contingent knowledge, and what each approach can and cannot do." (Phillips and Jørgensen, 2002: 148)

When I use the concept (term) critical multiperspectivism, I wish to emphasise my critical approach. It is possible to translate critical analysis into functional mainstream descriptions. This is not my purpose.

The study of an intercultural job interview

In postmodern, fragmented multicultural societies I find it necessary to develop a kind of multiperspectivism, which is able to describe the many different negotiations going on in a job interview. My suggestion, of studying an intercultural job interview from a critical multiperspectivism, is to work with three different theoretical perspectives. In my theoretical research framework, I would include a) a sociological perspective, b) a discursive theoretical perspective and c) a perspective based upon a social constructionist approach.

a) A sociological perspective, represented by the works of Pierre Bourdieu, in which it is possible to break with the national discourse and view society as being divided into different fields. Within these fields we find different approaches, logics and values all fighting for dominance in relation to the amount of capital the participants have got (Bourdieu and Wacquant). The labour market can be seen as a social field, and the job interview as a ritual in order to get access to the labour market. In the job interview you are expected to perform and say how you control different types of capital. Bourdieu's perspective is also interesting in relation to the body, as he is working with the body in his concept of habitus. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1996,; Prieur, 1998)

b) A discourse theoretical perspective, represented by Laclau and Mouffe, who argue that all sociality is discursively constructed. This means, that the whole job interview is a discourse. Not only what the interviewer and candidate say, or write to each other, but also the shape of the company building, the body language, the clothes, the rules of the labour market etc..

Laclau and Mouffe also argue that some of our actions and some discourses are winning hegemony, resulting in the everyday understanding of what is natural to do (e.g. your relation to power distance).

c) A social constructionist perspective represented by Søndergaard, 1996, Davies and Harré, 1990 and Skeggs, 1998 ask the following questions: What is going on in the job interview? Which differences are legal? What kind of positions are offered to the candidate, and what are the reactions to the different ways in which the candidates position themselves within the communication process?

The central concept of this perspective in this study is the concept of subject positions, generating a very useful tool in the analysis of the intercultural communication process, as it is possible to document to which extent the interviewer takes different positions to people, according to, for example, their ethnicity or gender.

Sharings and conflicts

Important to my use of multiperspectivism, is the awareness of how the theories are developed in relation to the actual period, intentions, rhetorical arguments, other perspectives etc.. The three perspectives I put forward in this study are all critical to the idea of "an essence-thinking" and all share the idea of constructions. In the following I wish to suggest possible outlines for an understanding of culture, as relating to multicultural societies, which includes both the 'descriptive' and the 'complex' concepts of culture. These outlines are formulated into key sentences, as I did with the 'descriptive' and 'complex' concepts of culture. I have chosen this form in an attempt to force us (as researchers) to pinpoint our discussion in a relevant way for professional practitioners.

(The most important researchers' perspective in each sentence is represented in brackets).

- Culture is in the relations between us. (Social Constructionism: Gergen)
- All our experiences (from our culture) are kept in our bodies. (Sociological perspective: Bourdieu/Habitus)
- Culture is a social construction constantly negotiated by people who identify themselves with the culture and by people who exclude themselves from the culture. (Social Constructionism: Stuart Hall/Cultural identity)
- It is possible to *describe* common patterns in the culture if we regard the patterns as hegemonic discourses. (Discursive perspective: Laclau and Mouffe)
- You cannot predict, for example, intercultural communication, but it is possible to listen to the discourses of the speakers and get a picture of different fighting discourses in the actual social field. (Discursive perspective: Laclau and Mouffe)
- Societies are divided up into many different spaces and all individuals will position themselves culturally through the actual field and situation, which means that you cannot position yourself in national terms only, but will also always present your age, gender, social position etc.. (Sociological perspective: Bourdieu)

As with the other key sentences, these are written in order to generate a discussion about how we can rethink professional intercultural communications in fragmented multicultural post modern societies.

Intercultural communications in the future?

From my perspective, intercultural communication seems to be a very popular subject *outside of* the university sector as well as for practitioners working in a multicultural society.

In the research on intercultural communications in postmodern, multiethnic societies, the classic concepts of culture are not sufficient enough to describe the intercultural communication processes. We have to deal with the dilemma between the theoretical poles. By that I mean the descriptive concept which *excludes the complexity* and the complex concept which *excludes the stability* and the stable narratives of cultural differences. My proposal is that we, as researchers, concentrate on developing analytical tools based on critical multiperspectivism. In multicultural societies intercultural communication is closely related to political discourses, which is one of the reasons why I see us, as researchers, being forced to unearth some useful analytical tools for practitioners, which can provide them with a more professional outlook in their everyday life.

Thank you very much. I do hope that we will get the chance to discuss some of these theoretical and practical issues during this conference.

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