

Nonverbal Communication between the Disabled and Nondisabled People: An Intercultural Communication Perspective

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Abstract. Recently, the research on the co-cultural groups gradually becomes a new focus. In the midst, the study on the disabled co-culture is a typical example. Going from this perspective, this paper mainly summarizes the influence of physical appearance, interpersonal space and distance, and paralanguage etc. to the disabled and nondisabled people's communication and analyzes the cultural foundations based on Hofstede's theory of value orientations. Finally communication principles are proposed. The purpose is to improve the intercultural communication between the disabled and nondisabled people.

Introduction

In daily communication, people not only use verbal message to convey information but also take advantage of nonverbal behaviors, eye contact, body movements even personal distance etc. to express their ideas and emotions. Samovar (1981) figures out that in face-to-face communication, only 35% of the message are conveyed by verbal communication and rest are by nonverbal communication. [1] "Nonverbal communication is defined as the nonlinguistic behaviors (or attributes) that are consciously or unconsciously encoded and decoded via multiple communication channels".[2] Although nonverbal communication is a universal phenomenon, it does have its own cultural hints. Going from this aspect, the author mainly explores the disabled co-culture from the nonverbal communication perspective. The purpose is to make nondisabled people have a better understanding of the disabled group, thus promoting their intercultural communication with the group of disabled co-culture.

Co-Cultural Theory

Co-culture refers to the nondominant cultural groups that exist within a national culture such as ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities as well as gays, lesbians and bisexuals etc. whose, comparatively speaking, population is small, life experience similar and social status low. Members of these groups usually hold dual or multiple cultural identities. "They may share a same religion, social status, ethnic background, race, age and gender and so on". [3]

Co-cultural theory is based on five epistemological assumptions and each of them reflects its theoretical foundations. [4] Firstly, there are hierarchies in nearly every society and such hierarchies often endow some groups of people certain privileges. For instance, in China, a nondisabled dominated society, nondisabled people usually enjoy privileges both at home and in the workplace. Secondly, with the privileges mentioned above, dominant group members, in most cases, hold power that enables

them to reinforce their field of experience in communication. Thirdly, co-cultural group members' progresses are directly and indirectly impeded by the dominant communication systems. Fourthly, despite the differences among co-cultural group members, they do share certain similarities, such as marginalized and underrepresented position in the mainstream society. Fifthly, co-cultural group members skillfully adopt some communication strategies to negotiate their cultural identities. Simply stated, co-cultural theory seeks to "give voice to various ways in which co-cultural group members negotiated larger dominant structures". [4]

Nonverbal Communication between the Disabled and Nondisabled People

Due to their physical conditions and some social factors, persons with disabilities, both mentally and linguistically, form characteristics of their own. As the Braithwaites (2007), after investigation, point out that the persons with disabilities use distinctive communication models that implicate specific models of personhood, society, and strategic actions that are qualitatively different from the models used by the able-bodied people. [5] These models usually make the people from mainstream culture get confused. Thereby, it is of significance to see the disabled and nondisabled persons' nonverbal interactions from the perspective of intercultural communication.

Physical Appearance

Physical appearance is of great value in human interactions especially in the initial encounters because, most of the time, we make judgments based upon others' personal appearance, clothes even the objects they carry with them. The scholar Ruben points out that we make inferences of others' intelligence, gender, age, approachability, financial conditions, class, values and tastes and so on from their general appearance.[6] "More importantly, those initial messages usually influence the perception of everything else that follows". [3]

The first impression that persons with disabilities leave to the nondisabled persons is their physical appearance, specifically their deformities, which convey a lot even before they start their communications or relationships. Nearly everyone investigated tells that in his/her communications with the persons with disabilities, the first thing catches the nondisabled people's attention is the disabled persons' deformities. Naturally, the persons with disabilities are classified as a special group different from the majorities. Usually, "women and men with disabilities are seen as less attractive, less able to marry and be involved in domestic production". [7]

China, according to Hofstede's (2001) study, is a country that values collectivism.[8] "Collectivism is characterized by a rigid social framework that distinguishes between in-groups and out-groups"[9] and tend to treat out-group members much different from the in-group members.

Being categorized as the out-group members, persons with disabilities are treated so differently by the majorities in society. Most of the time, persons with disabilities are plagued by their physical conditions. One of the disabled people being interviewed tells the author that most nondisabled people have prejudice against the persons with disabilities and see them as a group of weird people who are different to communicate and have relation with but most of them are not. Nondisabled people also tell about their opinions. On seeing the deformities of the disabled people, they feel uncomfortable even horrified that they are, to some extent, fear of communicating with that group of people. Even having conversations, they still feel unnatural. Consequently, some nondisabled people refuse to have interactions with persons with

disabilities. Gradually, persons with disabilities feel more inferior to others and do not like socializing with the nondisabled persons and become marginalized in the mainstream society.

Interpersonal Space and Distance

Interpersonal space and distance is also known as immediacy behaviors. The use of interpersonal space and distance possibly signals the communicators' mutual closeness, intimacy and availability or avoidance psychological distance. That is to say, we only allow the people whom we share intimate relationships to get close to us. Conversely, to the unknown or out-group members, our distance, comparatively speaking, is longer. Besides, when our space is invaded, we will react in one way or another. Samovar et al (2000) point out that "our response is a manifestation not only of our unique personality, but also our cultural background".[9] For the Chinese, a typical collectivistic culture, we tend to assume a passive, withdrawal stance when our personal space is invaded upon.[10] In studying the intercultural nonverbal communication between the disabled co-cultural group and the dominant nondisabled cultural group, the above mentioned phenomena are all reflected.

Being treated as a special group, persons with disabilities in most cases could not stand very close to the nondisabled people, especially to the unknown ones, to have conversations even they would like to. In the investigation, one disabled person in the study tells the author, "Nondisabled people always keep a long distance when they talk with me and when I go forward to get closer they often retrieve or move backward to that large space." Still a lot of other disabled persons have the similar experience. For the persons with disabilities, they see such behaviors of the nondisabled people as unwilling to talk with them. This really hurts them a lot. Identically, nondisabled people also expressed their feelings, which state that they feel uneasy to communicate persons with disabilities. Furthermore, they do not know what should talk and how to behave. To some extent, nondisabled people's longer distance might be understood as their psychological distance with the persons with disabilities. On such occasions confusions and miscommunications arise. In another case, the deaf people should be taken into consideration. Studies have shown that "many deaf people now proclaim, they are a subculture like any other".[11] Sign language is their unique cultural feature. When such language is carried out, a number of body movements, specifically hand movements are performed. Then an appropriate distance between such group of people and the nondisabled people is required.

Paralanguage

Paralanguage, according to Chen and Starosta (2007), refers to "the study of voice or the use of vocal signs in communication".[12] Usually, paralanguage studies include the study on tones, voices, even laugh and accents so on and so forth. As its occurrence always goes together with language, paralanguage also varies with different languages. Even within a dominant culture, groups still have their own specialties in paralanguage which may be troublesome to the intercultural communication between the co-cultural groups and the dominant cultural group.

Paralanguage, especially voice and tone, reflects both the disabled and able-bodied people's attitude such as willingness or refusal etc. to their communication. In the interviews with the persons with disabilities, the author is told that the nondisabled people's voice and tones somehow sound indifferent and impatient to them, which they regard as the nondisabled people's unwillingness in communications with them.

However, in encountering such questions, the nondisabled people do not totally agree. Actually, the author gets to know that nondisabled people's unwillingness is only part of their reasons. The upmost is their unsure of what and how to talk with persons with disabilities. The Braithwaites (2007) clarify the above phenomenon by figuring out that "for nondisabled people this may be caused by a lack of experience interacting with people who are disabled." And "this leads to high uncertainty about how to talk with a person who is disabled". [5]

The above mentioned nondisabled people's behaviors or thoughts are largely due to our Chinese culture. Here Hofstede's uncertainty-avoidance dimension could be employed as a best tool to make us have a deep insight of that phenomenon. "Uncertainty refers to the value placed on risk and ambiguity in a culture". [13] And uncertainty avoidance shows a culture's "avoidance or tolerance of uncertainty".[13] This dimension is divided into high-uncertainty – avoidance and low – uncertainty – avoidance. According to Hofstede's study, Chinese culture is a typical example of high-uncertainty-avoidance culture which emphasizes the avoidance of "uncertainty and ambiguity by providing stability for their members, establishing more formal rules, not tolerating deviant ideas and behaviors, seeking consensus, and believing in absolute truths and the attainment of expertise".[9] Therefore, in order to reduce their uncertainty, nondisabled people generally cut their conversations with the disabled people short. Nondisabled people's voice and tone are just revealing of their cultural feature of uncertainty reduction.

Principles for Successful Intercultural Nonverbal Communication between Disabled and Nondisabled People

From the above analysis, we can get a clear view of the communication barriers between the persons with disabilities and the nondisabled people, which from a cultural perspective, is the shock between the two cultures. The author in this section will propose communication strategies to facilitate their nonverbal communication thus helps the two cultural groups have better mutual understandings about each other as well as to promote the disabled people' incorporation into the mainstream society.

The first principle is termed as the politeness principle. As is known to all, Chinese people value politeness very much. Even at a young age we are told to be polite in our interactions with others and put into this context, it means that both nondisabled and disabled persons should be polite to each other and their behaviors. Impolite behaviors and actions should be completely avoided. The reason is that nondisabled or disabled people's politeness will makes the other part have a sense of being respected. With such feelings in mind, both the two groups are likely to interpret the other part positively. Thus harmonious relationships are established based on which mutual communications will be carried out.

The second principle is the flexibility principle. That is to say, in their communications, the nonverbal messages ought to be treated flexibly by both disabled and nondisabled people. Communication is a dynamic and complex process and what have been discussed in this thesis are only some general occasions or strategies for the two cultural groups. In real communication settings, behaviors or circumstances unknown will appear from time to time and although we have summarized the occasions of the two cultures it does not mean that everybody in that culture do the same thing. Actually differences exist from individual to individual and there are some people who do not follow the general norms of their culture. The disabled co-culture and the nondisabled culture work the same. Rigidly adopting a strategy or

some strategies certainly will lead to miscommunications. Therefore, being alert and holding a flexible mind is of great necessity between the disabled and nondisabled intercultural nonverbal communication. Only in this way can the two groups treat each other appropriately and lead their communication to the harmonious direction.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, we can clearly draw two conclusions. Firstly, nonverbal cues do cause troubles in the disabled and nondisabled people's communication. Therefore, in such intercultural communication, the nonverbal barriers, if not well understood and treated, will certainly do bad influence to the relationship and communication between the disabled co-cultural group and the nondisabled cultural group. Secondly, both disabled and nondisabled people's behaviors and thoughts towards one another are the products of our Chinese culture. As we have discussed, culture and communication, especially nonverbal communication, are closely related. Therefore, we can see the nonverbal communication between the disabled and nondisabled people as intercultural communication and propose some communication principles for both of the two groups. Well followed, these principles will be surely helpful to the development of their relationship and nonverbal communication.

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