Criticality and Reflections of Intercultural Communication Education during Post-pandemic Era in China

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Abstract. The occurrence of Covid-19 as both a Black Swan and Grey Rhino has taken a toll on international education and intercultural communication. Notwithstanding that the post-pandemic period has officially arrived, the phenomenon of ethnocentrism and right-wing populism has grown exponentially during pandemic, exacerbating the detrimental effects on intercultural communication, which are consistent during post-pandemic period. Hence, it is necessary to rethink intercultural communication education, research and training with criticality and reflections. This article examines the practice of intercultural communication education, research and training in China and explore possible countermeasures to cope with those issues.

1. Introduction

On May 5, 2023, the World Health Organization made an official announcement that the Covid-19 epidemic no longer constitutes a "public health emergency of international concern", but "this does not mean that the Covid-19 epidemic is no longer a global health threat." This marks the beginning of the post-epidemic era. Now that it has officially arrived, the basic feature of the post-epidemic era is that uncertainty and potential risks still exist, and the mid- to long-term impact of the epidemic on world politics, economy, and culture is uncertain. During the outbreak of the global epidemic, unilateralism and trade protectionism as well as the decoupling of the economic and industrial chains of Western countries have further intensified anti-globalization and reverse-globalization trends. Ethnocentrism and right-wing populism have given rise to international cooperation and exchanges in higher education and intercultural communication. Both theory and practice have had a direct negative impact, leading to the amplification of issues such as racism and xenophobia. Changes have also occurred in all aspects and levels of people's lives. The relationship between humans and the world, communication between people, the adjustment of global supply chains by multinational companies, structural crises, etc. all require people from all over the world to re-examine and think, it is uncertain whether the world can return to the "normal" before the new coronavirus epidemic. Human beings need to adapt to new living habits and communication patterns.

2. Theoretical Foundation and Framework

2.1. Essence of ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is originally defined as the technical name for the view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all the others are scaled and rated with reference to it (Sumner, 1906). Hewstone suggests that people hold ethnocentrism have different attitude towards in-group members and out-group people, which is characterized as in-group favoritism and out-group derogation (Hewstone, 1985). Berry tends to view ethnocentrism as "the synonym for general antipathy toward all out-groups" (Berry, 1995). Gudykunst notes that ethnocentric people use their own cultural standard to evaluate other culture and to communicate with other people, which would easily lead to a self-centered dialogue (Gudykunst, 1997). Research shows that there is a link between higher degrees of both ethnocentrism and communication apprehension and lower levels of willingness to engage in an intercultural communication (Lin & Rancer, 2003). The direct relationship between ethnocentrism and intolerance of uncertainty in intercultural interactions is also examined and proved that these constructs are associated (Cargile & Bolkan, 2013). Fundamentally, ethnocentrism is the trend of pride and prejudice in intercultural communication, centered on one's own group, using one's own cultural values as the standard to judge other cultures, and understanding and measuring everything in other cultures according to the concepts and standards of one's own culture, including people's
behaviors and communication styles, social customs, management models and values, etc. [7]

2.2. Right-ring populism

With various definitions and interpretations, the fundamental characteristics of populism is the opposition and hostility between two oppositional and homogenous groups, the pure people and an antagonistic "Other". Populism can be understood as a "thin-centred ideology" (Mudde, 2007), a type of discourse (Laclau, 2005), as well as "a cultural-relational performative style" (Moffitt, 2016). Right-wing populism is mainly focused on protecting the cultural identity of a particular culture, the concept of otherness (Stefančík 2022).

Right-wing populism emphasizes the opposition between elites, ethnic minorities and middle- and lower-class whites, that is, the people are not only opposed to the political elite, but also to ethnic minority immigrants as the "third element." As a political ideology, right-wing populism advocates the supremacy of national interests, isolationism, and protectionism, incites racism and xenophobia, and is characterized by anti-immigration, anti-globalization, and reverse-globalization. As a political discourse, right-wing populism explains and deflects crises by constructing the "other" as the "enemy of the people" and dividing the people with the opposition between the "people" and "enemies of the people". Among them, the category of "people" is relatively narrow, and the "other" is constructed as an imaginary enemy outside the community. Ethnic minority immigrants or specific ethnic groups become scapegoats. The external "other" represented by immigrants is incompatible with the national culture. In this way, a certain culture, language, identity and other groups become the creators of misfortune for the "people" on the grounds of cultural incompatibility and clash of civilizations.

3. Aggravation of COVID-related ethnocentrism and right-wing populism

Ethnocentrism has always been accompanied by human social activities and intercultural exchange. During the Covid-19 epidemic, the ethnocentrism syndrome has exploded while the fear and anxiety of the virus is transformed into hatred and hostility towards out-group (Bo Shan, 2020). The culturally stereotypical speech and behavior among groups of different races, ethnicities, and regional backgrounds has intertwined ethnocentrism with racism and xenophobia, leading to all kinds of discrimination, insults and slurs. The behavior of nominalization occurs frequently, and interactions between groups face conflicts and dangers.

Jing Xin interviewed seven communication scholars all over the world to explore intercultural communications problems in the context of global pandemic (Jing Xin, 2020). The research demonstrates that epidemic has become a magnifying glass of cultural differences when culture and identity are constructed as the other since the ideological virus and the epidemic are superimposed and merged. During the epidemic, there are innumerable cultural conflicts and the rise of prejudicial statements and exclusive behaviors between groups based on race, ethnicity, and regional background. Under such circumstances ethnocentrism can lead to great-power chauvinism, cultural hegemony and cultural imperialism while the structures of racism, colonialism and Western centralism will become even stronger in the West. Kulich urged a call to reexamine intercultural research and relations in the COVID pandemic by listing COVID's potential impacts on a vast array of intercultural communication themes. (Kulich, et al., 2021). The study highlights that "culture is the means by which a community communicates", nonetheless, the lasting effect of COVID on intercultural communication at all levels (people, community and nations) should be targeted and addressed. Fred Dervin even points out that the COVID-19 epidemic shows that the IC education and training over the past 70 years have failed to help us escape the influence of ethnocentrism (Fred Dervin, 2021). "The COVID-19 crisis has removed the intercultural veil over some sections of society and revealed prevalent forms of injustice, xenophobia and racism, which have been in society throughout human history, yet, often regarding global and intercultural competencies, we hear that one needs to be more respectful, more tolerant, more open towards the other. Why? To masquerade the self as being open, tolerant and respectful when one potentially may hold racist and xenophobic views?" [15]

A typical manifestation of group superiority within ethnocentrism is one EU diplomat’s remarks that "Europe is a garden and other places are jungles." This Euro-centrism is related to colonialism, racism and will jeopardize IC at any level.

There is a reciprocal effect between COVID and Right-wing populism in Euro-American socio-political contexts with opposition of people not only to political elites, but also to immigrants who are minorities as a "third element". As a right-wing populist political leader, Trump’s rhetoric during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States reflects his representation of these two "opposites". The real intent behind this is for Trump and his campaign team to divert attention from the public and thereby rally voters as the 2020 presidential election approaches.

COVID has intensified the anti-globalization trend, decoupled economies between countries, impacted the global industrial chain, and made right-wing populist groups a force for anti-globalization and reverse-globalization. The role of anti-globalization policies on populism will continue to strengthen, and the two are closely related. Trump's right-wing populism has used the epidemic to create confrontation between the people and elites and immigrants, blaming elites and out-groups for poor epidemic management, exacerbating inter-ethnic tensions and ideological conflicts. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor expelled a group of Iranian students, and declared that his government was only focused on "saving the lives of the Hungarian people." They also tried to equate the virus with immigrants. The
economic and political crisis in the "post-epidemic era" will be constructed by right-wing populists as a sharp opposition between "self" and "other". Both ethnocentrism and right-wing populism share a cultural essentialist epistemology that constructs "the other" through constructing cultural identity, thereby creating a dichotomy between self and other. The stereotypes can widen the communication distance in intercultural communication, cause misunderstandings or destroy the willingness to communicate, leading to communication difficulties or failures.

Ethnocentrism defines groups within the scope of the country and emphasizes the opposition between in-groups and out-groups in a horizontal sense. Right-wing populism defines "commoners" in a vertical sense and highlights the confrontation between "commoners" and elites, especially ethnic minorities. The ethnocentric other is an "external outsider outside the country," while the populist other is defined as an "internal outsider within the country." The common feature of ethnocentrism and right-ring populism is the essentialist epistemology of culture, which constructs cultural identity by constructing the other, pitting the self against the other, thus questioning the identity, language, and culture of the other. The European Commission proposed a model for constructing intercultural competence in 2016, dividing the basic elements into four core aspects: values, attitudes, skills, knowledge and critical understanding.[17] These are all negatively influenced by ethnocentrism and right-ring populism during the epidemic. First, they have caused direct obstacles to individuals' willingness and ability to communicate across cultures. Second, they conflict with cultural diversity in terms of values. Third, with regard to attitudes, they show prejudices against cultural others. Fourth, the lack of skills in understanding, listening, observing and empathizing with others, collaborating and resolving conflict is in juxtaposition with lack of knowledge and critical understanding of politics, law, human rights, culture, religion, history, media, economics, environment and sustainability around the world.

4. Criticality and reflections of intercultural communication education in China

The concept of intercultural communication and an appeal for developing it as a field was first introduced in China in the early 1980s as a result of the “Open Door” policy and the first generation of study abroad or “visiting scholars” returning from stays overseas. As Language learning and teaching moved from just mastering content and improving learning and teaching method approaches, in the late 1980s a “language and culture fad” was popular in increasing conferences and publications, when the first few “intercultural” language learning-oriented books were introduced. In the middle of 1990s the need for a field was evident and the professional and academic association on intercultural communication was established domestically and collaborated with the international academia.

Now the post-pandemic era has arrived but the uncertainty and potential risks with medium and even long-term impact on intercultural communication still exist. Therefore, we need to reexamine intercultural communication research, teaching and training with critical and reflexive pedagogy.

4.1. Methodological reflections

A common phenomenon in current intercultural communication research is the tendency of cultural essentialism. Cultural essentialism believes that there is a universal unified essence and homogeneity within a specific culture. People's attitudes, concepts and behaviors are all manifestations of the culture to which they belong. Culture is used to explain, solidify or exaggerate a certain group or unity or exclude a group. Among them, cultural stereotypes are an inherent feature of cultural essentialism. Culture replaces language, class, power relations, socioeconomic status or ideology to explain differences or commonalities. A key process of cultural essentialism is that "others" and "self" are constructed simultaneously. "Others" are easily demonized while "self" is idealized. Essentialism will also lead to concretization in research, which is directly oriented to cultural differences, believing that differences are the most important and influential aspect in intercultural communication, which can easily lead to binary oppositional differences and value judgments. Essentialism is also intertwined with nationalism. In research, the nation-state (society) is used as the only analytical perspective. For example, research comparing Chinese and Americans presupposes differences in advance. Therefore, the research perspective of counter-cultural essentialism is necessary, but non-essentialism is an ideal state, because culture is not static, and a non-cultural essentialist discourse may be accompanied by a cultural essentialist behavior, and vice versa.[18]

The theories, methods and models of intercultural communication research are mainly Western-centric or Aglon-centric and lack diverse non-Western perspectives. The top international academic journals on intercultural communication are mainly in English and the most influential and frequently cited scholars are all western. In China, the appropriateness of applying those theories, methods and models to practice under Chinese context would be challenged as a dilemma because it’ll be monological when fully accepting all while it is not dialogical without borrowing them. It is difficult for Chinese scholars to get papers published and communicate with foreign scholars on an equal footing when using localization concepts. A typical example is that Chinese “Minzu Education” and “Suzhi Education” should be changed to “Chinese ethnic education” and “General Education” respectively in English academic journals to be published but the point is that those words have different connotations from Chinese milieu. Conversely, the newly developed concepts in China ranging from Road and Belt Initiative, Culture
Confidence to A Community of Shared Future for Mankind are all underappreciated or misinterpreted. In addition, as a complex multi-disciplinary field that is both academic and practical, intercultural communication lacks interdisciplinary research.

4.2. Intercultural communication teaching, education and training

The cultivation of college students' intercultural communication skills is mainly integrated into foreign language teaching, especially college English teaching. The "College English Teaching Guide 2020" clearly points out that it is necessary to cultivate talents with "world vision, international awareness and intercultural communication skills", and intercultural communication courses. It aims to carry out intercultural education, help students understand the differences between Chinese and foreign worldviews, values, and ways of thinking, cultivate students' intercultural awareness, and improve students' sociolinguistic and intercultural communication skills. Some scholars have pointed out that the essence of foreign language education is intercultural education, and have proposed a reference framework for intercultural competency teaching.

However, intercultural communication competency is interdisciplinary in nature and it goes beyond the competency to use foreign languages. The professionalism for college English teachers in cultivating students' ICC has always been a challenge because their own ICC is not assessed with validity, let alone the theories and ideologies they pass onto students. Currently, in spite of the popularity of national college students ICC contest and the advent of ICC test, the reliability and validity of the intercultural communication competency assessment of students using various ICC assessment models and tools should be further explored and tested to show whether the assessment results could be applied to intercultural communication practice? ICC is the competency to interact between oneself and others when encounter occurs. Whether ICC is a myth or truth depends on the effectiveness and appropriateness of authentic encounter context, and the presence of other individuals. Additionally, there is a huge gap between the training in colleges, universities and that in industry.

5. Conclusion

The ontology and epistemology of intercultural communication need to be reconstructed by introducing critical thinking. In various theories, teaching, research, training and practice, we must beware of "culture as an excuse" or "nation-state as an excuse". There are also similarities beneath superficial differences and thus interculturality beyond cultures should be seen and done to avoid the danger of exclusive thinking. In intercultural communication, power, political economy and ideology are more influential than culture and therefore it is essential to deculturalize the intercultural and complexify the factors.

The research on intercultural communication is largely rooted in the fields of ideology and politics. It needs to supplement non-Western and decolonization research perspectives and issue different voices to break away from Western individualism and emphasize the value and care of groups and human communities. The culture of the South and the paradigms of Chinese culture discourses are of great significance in strengthening connections and cooperation between countries and jointly responding to challenges and crises in the post-epidemic era so as to establish a concept of cultural equality, respect multicultural differences, cultivate empathy and cross-cultural sensitivity, and gain understanding, coexistence, sharing and win-win through dialogue.

The field of intercultural communication education is also complicated and multifaceted across various disciplines. The emergence and development of intercultural communication is the history of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary development. The attributes of intercultural communication combine the theories, paradigms, goals and research of linguistics, sociology, communication, anthropology and psychology, for instance, an important revelation of emic and etic research in cultural anthropology is that emic research can be used as a reference to comparatively examine the assumptions of dominant etic research. Therefore, localized language or cultural barriers require the use of multilingual and interdisciplinary research methods to integrate. Language education in Chinese universities is the main channel for intercultural communication education. Language teachers, especially English teachers, are the main implementers and researchers of intercultural communication teaching. However, Language teachers' own intercultural competencies and practices need to be improved, so they must draw on the theories and results of other disciplines to conduct interdisciplinary dialogue or research. It would be reasonable for teachers to empower students to think independently and critically instead of offering static answers. Intercultural communication also requires crossing barriers and achieving diversified integration to bridge teaching, research, training and practice.

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