Investigations of the Influence of Culture on the Job Interview:

Need for a Grounded Theory Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature on the cross-cultural job interview and highlights the need for theory development. It explores the influence of culture and its impact on the processes and outcomes of the job interview. The paper adopts interpretive theory to understand how participants of the job interview, ie the interviewer and candidate, may develop meaningful cultural experiences. It uses symbolic interactionism to examine how the different cultures of the participants may produce their differing experiences which impact on the processes and outcomes of the job interview. The paper concludes with a justification for the development of a grounded theory of culture in the job interview by examining multiple cases of the cross-cultural job interview.

Keywords: cross-cultural human resource development, recruitment, selection processes, voice

BACKGROUND

Communication is a central process in organizations (Katz & Kahn 1978; Schein 1969). The influence of culture in communication and its associated consequences has long been known (Ross 1978). However, it is the current intensity of globalisation that is the driving force behind the need to understand culture in communication (Lai & Wong 2000). Relatively recent macro studies of culture (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars 2000; Hofstede 1980) have been pivotal in popularising and disseminating the knowledge of culture in the workplace. They offer broad generalisations of how cultures differ in terms of various cultural dimensions such as identity, hierarchy and time (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars 2000; Hofstede 1980). Culture however is more complex than broad generalisations suggest (Harrison & McKinnon 1999). Countries with the same score for particular dimensions may exhibit the same dimensions in quite different ways (Triandis 1995). While broad dimensions may have some use in formulating broad policies, they are inadequate in managing actual day-to-day affairs and particularly at the interpersonal level of a single interaction (Molinksy 2007).
The cross-cultural job interview is an example of such a single interaction (Gumperz 1978) and is the focus of this paper.

There has been an increase in foreign workers, particularly the skilled migrants, in the Australian labour market and this increases the need to understand the cross-cultural job interview (Healy, 2008). The main cause for this is the ageing workforce driving the current labour shortage in the country. Increasing training places in tertiary and trade institutions are supplemented by an active migration policy to address the problem. Perhaps for the first time in our modern history, China has become one of our main sources of skilled migrants (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007a; Ho 2007). This paper is in response to the challenges of the cross-cultural job interview when Australians interview Chinese candidates. The paper proposes a three-dimensional definition of culture and presents a case for studying Australians interviewing Chinese candidates. It reviews and identifies the gaps in the literature on the cross-cultural job interview. The paper explains how the theoretical lenses of symbolic interactionism and interpretive theory are relevant to the development of a theoretical framework of culture in the job interview. It argues for the use of grounded theory in research to focus on the job interview as a social interaction process.

THREE DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE

Using descriptive terms such as “Black” and “White”, race studies have tended to use visual cues to help identify the race of participants and how they impact on interview processes and outcomes (Frazer & Wiersma 2001; Stewart & Perlow 2001; Prewett-Livingston, Feild, Veres & Lewis 1996; Liden & Parsons 1986; Mullins 1982). In contrast, ethnicity studies of the cross-cultural job interview use terms such as Caucasian, Asian, Chinese, Pacific Islander, African American and Maori to emphasise the historical roots of participants (Purkiss, Perrewe, Gillespie, Mayes & Ferris 2006; Cargile 1997; Singer & Eder 1989). Additionally, culture is also related to one’s nationality (Hofstede 2001) denoting the physical and social environments of where people were born and brought up. There are, therefore, many different ways of defining culture and identifying cultural groups.
Consequently, the cultural groups selected for the sample in this qualitative study will be deliberately specific (Charmaz 2006) by identifying the culture of participants along the three dimensions of race, ethnicity and nationality.

Contrasting Anglo Australian and Chinese Cultures

In a Singaporean study exploring cross-cultural issues in communication, it was found the “East” and the “West” are racially and ethnically polar opposites in the job interview (Lai & Wong 2000; Wong & Lai 2000). This section outlines the rationale for selecting the two contrasting cultural groups of the Anglos from Australia and the Chinese from China. Significantly, the rate of increase of migrants from Asia since the turn of the century has increased (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007a). Between 2001 and 2006, the number of migrants from China alone increased by 44% from 143,000 to 206,000 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007b). During the same period the migration rate from traditional Anglo source countries of the United Kingdom, Ireland and New Zealand increased by a mere 2 ½ % (Table 1).

Since the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, a large proportion of Australia’s population has been made up of migrants (Table 1). However, modern day Australia while multicultural in form is still predominantly Anglo in substance (De Costa, 2000; Hage 1998; Vasta & Castles 1996; Jamrozik, Boland & Urquhart 1995). The White Australia Policy is still a living memory with White Anglo inhabitants and descendants still the majority of the population. Australia’s culture remains strongly marked by its Anglo heritage, particularly the Anglo British. White Anglo values and beliefs, and traditions and practices are embedded within our political, economic and social structures and processes (Jamrozik et al. 1995). They drive the behaviours of the majority of the population and set the expectations for all new arrivals including those looking for work. For all practical purposes, present-day Australia presents an opportunity to study the contrasting cultures of Australians whose heritage is White Anglo with those of more recent migrant groups from other nations, races and ethnicities, particularly the Chinese. This study chooses to contrast the experiences of the White
Anglo Australian interviewers with those of the Chinese candidates who have migrated from China. It seeks to understand the interaction between White Anglo interviewers born in Australia and Chinese candidates born in China.

**CULTURE AND THE JOB INTERVIEW**

The job interview is one of the most popular selection tools (Posthuma, Morgeson & Campion 2002), and psychometric evidence attests to the continuing improvements in the validity of the interview (Judge, Higgins & Cable 2000). However, culture influences the job interview in a number of ways and can impact on its effectiveness (O’Grady & Millen 1994; Gumperz 1978). Cultural values can disadvantage candidates (Wong & Lai 2000). Cultural cues can affect judgment and hiring decisions (Purkiss et al. 2006). Cultural bias in the job interview can impact on interview outcomes (Lim, Winter & Chan 2006) and perpetuate discrimination (Vasta & Castles 1996). Culture influences interview processes and outcomes (Buzzanell 2002; Buzzanell 1999) and it affects the validity of the interview (Hough and Oswald 2000). This has significant consequences (Arvey 1979) when suitable job applicants are overlooked by organizations because of the different cultural backgrounds of interviewers and candidates.

**Demographic Studies**

Studies examining interviewer-candidate race-similarity effects on interview outcomes have produced inconsistent results. Some studies show that interviewer evaluations can be impacted by interviewer-candidate race similarities (Goldberg, 2003; Prewett-Livingston et al. 1996); others show that race similarity has no significant impact on hiring decisions (Sacco, Schu, Ryan & Schmitt, 2003; Rand & Wexley, 1975). Where it has been shown that the effects of racial similarity on candidate ratings are stronger in the conventional structured interview than in the situational interview, such effects may be nullified by using mixed race interview panels (Lin, Dobbins & Farh 1992). In contrast,
Prewett-Livingston et al. 1996, found for same race effect in a balanced interview panel and stronger identification when the panel is unbalanced.

A meta-analysis of 31 studies found the race differential effect on job interview evaluations to be less than the race differential effect of mental ability tests (Huffcutt & Roth 1998) concluding that the job interview is not a significant racially biased selection tool. It, however, found that interview structure, job complexity and sample size are moderating influences on interview outcomes. Differences in interview evaluations are higher for low than high-structure interviews, and within high-structure interviews differences are higher for situational than behavioural description interviews. Differences are greater for less complex jobs and smaller for more complex jobs. Differences are higher when the sample size of a minority group is proportionally higher than when it is lower.

Two studies on stereotypes supported these findings of Huffcutt & Roth. DeGance 2001, examined race and race-related stereotypical job-type preferences and their relationships to suitability ratings, hiring decisions and pay levels, and found no significant effects. Stewart & Perlow 2001, found candidate race, job status and racial attitude of interviewers do not impact on hiring decisions. However, they found that racial attitude impacts on the level of confidence of interviewers in their choices of candidates for stereotypical jobs. Interviewers with a biased-toward-blacks attitude are more confident than non-biased interviewers about their choices of black candidates for the lower status job and about their choices of white candidates for the higher status job. This suggests subtlety of discriminatory behavior in the job interview is possible.

While Cargile 1997, found Chinese accent has no impact in the context of employment even across different job status, Purkiss et al. 2006 found that accent and name are sources of bias in the job interview. These ethnic cues produce prejudicial attitudes that influence judgments and hiring decisions. Another study found accent impacts on processes but not on outcomes whereas ethnicity impacts on outcomes but not on processes (Singer & Eder 1989).
The literature that explored race as a demographic variable and how it impacts on the job interview has produced mixed results. It highlights instead the active role that intervening variables such as interview format, stereotypes and attitudes can have on interview outcomes. Rather than race not influencing the job interview, it is its presence that may be masked. The call for researchers to go beyond simply studying demographic effects to studying underlying factors such as attitudes and values (Posthuma et al. 2002) is justified.

**Underlying Factors Studies**

Underlying cultural factors can influence interview outcomes. Comparing Singaporean and American cultural values, studies show that candidates are discriminated against in their job interviews with multinational corporations (Lai & Wong 2000; Wong & Lai 2000). In addition, interviewers in different countries can use different selection criteria as well as weigh the same criteria differently (Hill & Birdseye 1989). Senior executives from different cultures rate work values differently (Peppas & Peppas 1999) and this has implications for how selection criteria are being determined, and hence impact on selection outcomes.

While interviewers have been shown to conduct their interviews fairly, it was also shown that three interviewer behaviours impact on the communication process which in turn influence the comprehension by interviewers and candidates in the job interview (van der Vorm 1995). These behaviours are respect (positive regard to candidates), interaction posture (non-judgmental responsiveness by interviewer) and empathy (interest and understanding). Establishing rapport, having an interest in and knowledge of cultural differences, being tolerant of differences and behaving in culturally sensitive ways are additional interviewer attributes that can contribute to successful job interview outcomes for interviewers, candidates and organizations (Lim et al. 2006).
These studies that explored the underlying factors influential in the communication experience of the job interview, and impacting on processes and outcomes are helping to extend the knowledge on earlier demographic studies. However, researchers remain ignorant about how this process works.

**Research Shift from “What” to “How” – from “Factors” to “Process”**

The call to research the interview process was strongly recommended in the first comprehensive review of the literature on discrimination in the job interview (Arvey 1979). In regards to applicant race effects on interview evaluations, the review found for little discrimination between “Blacks” and “Whites”, a finding that was supported by later research (Mullins 1982). However, in reviewing the processes and mechanisms in the interview procedures, it was found that interviewers displayed stereotyping and differential behaviours. ‘We may hire equally, but our memories harbour prejudice’ (Frazer & Wiersma 2001: 173). Different decision-making processes of interviewers impact on the interview (Graves & Karren 1996). Focussing on process has become a priority for researchers in the field.

Clearly, culture impacts on the cross-cultural job interview. What is unclear is how this influence takes place. As researchers started to focus on the impact that underlying race variables can have on the cross-cultural job interview, there has also been a corresponding shift in research questions from whether culture impacts on the cross-cultural job interview to how that happens. To understand this, an examination of process is desirable. Study of process allows for the exploration of contextual influences that may be useful for exploring the conflicting findings in the literature (Brown & Canter 1985). A change in this research emphasis has the added advantage of shifting research from the less friendly discrimination overtones to the more helpful understanding of diversity in the interview. This can lead to finding ways to mitigate the effects of cultural diversity in the job interview.

The cross-cultural job interview was first proposed as a worthy area of research in the late 1960’s with the acknowledgement that ‘Words do mean different things to different people and these shades of
meaning vary within subcultures and between ethnic groups as does the relativity of word-meaning’ (Wright Jr. 1969: 407). Early research on the cross-cultural job interview focussed on the effects of demographic variables in the interview process and outcome. Mixed findings led to studies exploring underlying factors that may be influencing the interview. This research wishes to extend on these studies to explain the process of the influence of culture on the job interview communication. Such a focus offers an opportunity to develop effective techniques (Yin, 2003) to address the problems of bias and discrimination in the job interview. The need is urgent to clarify not just the part that culture plays in the interview but also how this process takes place. This need can be met by formulating new theoretical understandings of the phenomenon of culture in the job interview (Buzzanell 2002).

JUSTIFYING A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

Culture is at once an intergroup and an interpersonal experience (Gallois 2003). The challenge for this qualitative research is to develop a theoretical framework illustrating how the group phenomenon of culture determines and explains the personal actions of interviewers and candidates in the cross-cultural job interview. Through the ‘… detailed study of interpersonal conversations ... we can understand how culture emerges in specific communicative practices’ (Moerman 2007). This paper proposes that it is appropriate to adopt the theoretical lenses of symbolic interactionism and interpretive theory, and to use grounded theory to understand how culture emerges in the job interview. This approach will help in developing the framework that maps the group influence of culture in the interpersonal communication process of the job interview and shows how culture impacts on processes and outcomes.

Theoretical Lenses

The hiring process and outcome in the job interview is a two-way communication and decision-making process (Connerley 1997) involving social interaction (Posthuma et al. 2002) that may be
understood through the theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism (Foddy 1993). Shared symbolic meanings of communication in the job interview are understood and experienced in the same way by interviewers of one culture and in a different way by candidates of another culture. Misunderstandings in intercultural communication (Gumperz 1978) arise because of differences in the symbolic meanings of the communication between interviewers and candidates of different cultures.

As meanings are the products of social interaction (Blumer 1969) and interaction is interpretive (Charmaz 2006), it is the interpreted communication of the participants in the interaction rather than the communication itself that is meaningful (Foddy 1993). Interpretation stands between culture and communication, and is integral to the process of developing culturally derived meanings during the interaction (Harrison & McKinnon 1999). To the extent that the cultures of interviewers and candidates are different, their respective interpretations of a communication will be different.

In short, symbolic interactionism and interpretive theory informs this study. They provide a way to examine the phenomenon of culture in the job interview by understanding the different culturally derived meanings of the experiences of interviewers and candidates in the job interview.

**Building Blocks**

In the job interview, the building blocks for a theoretical framework are the culturally-derived meaningful experiences of research participants (Rossman & Rallis, 2003) expressed through language (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994). Meaningful experiences arise because of the social nature of the interpersonal interaction (Moerman 2007) between interviewers and candidates in the job interview (Posthuma et al. 2002; Buzzanell 1999), and because of interviewers and candidates’ cultures acting as frames of reference for the meanings of their respective experiences (Taylor & Bogdan 1984). Using language and culture, interviewers and candidates make sense of and assess situations, before determining their responses (Charmaz 2006; Knoblauch 2001). They experience and act on meaningful communications that are culturally determined (Goodman & Monaghan 2007).
Culture therefore informs and is created through communication. As the job interview progresses and communications go to and fro, it is expected that the work of interviewers and candidates in making cultural meanings, experiences and actions will not only be linear but also iterative (Charmaz 2006). With each new communication, iteration allows for the ongoing possibilities of fresh meanings and actions to be created. Such an indeterminate nature of the communication process defines the cross-cultural job interview, and provides ample cultural data for analysis and theory building.

**Process Framework**

Culture, meaning and action are interconnected. Culture influences meaning and meaning in turn leads to action (Knoblauch 2001) thereby characterising communication as a process (Conquergood 2007). The phenomenon of culture may be studied by examining this process using grounded theory methodology that is consistent with the theoretical lenses of symbolic interactionism and interpretive theory (Charmaz 2006; Suddaby 2006). A process framework of antecedents, phenomenon and consequences may be established by answering the following research questions:

- What are the factors influencing the cross-cultural job interview?
- What is the phenomenon of culture in the job interview?
- What are the consequences of culture in the job interview?

Instead of studying a single case study of one job interview, multiple case studies can be used to increase the robustness of the study (Eisenhardt & Graebner 2007) by comparing and contrasting, and replicating and extending the emerging theory (Yin, 2003). Culture’s influence can be mapped by aggregating the commonalities across various symbolic interactionisms of multiple job interviews to produce the theory. In this way, applying symbolic interactionism and grounded theory will enable the study of the macro concept of culture in the interpersonal communication process between the interviewer and candidate in the job interview.
CONCLUSION

The cross-cultural job interview as an emerging research topic in its own right around the turn of the century (Hough & Oswald 2000) is now ready to take its place on centre-stage. Developing a qualitative theoretical framework of culture in the job interview will address the lack of theory in the literature (Buzzanell, 2002; Posthuma et al. 2002). Examining process allows for the exploration of the contextual influences of culture, and can be useful for understanding the conflicting findings in the literature (Brown & Canter, 1985), and particularly those from quantitative research (Burton & Steane, 2004).

Understanding communication as a process offers an avenue for improving cross-cultural communication (Asif & Sargeant 2000). Making such a process explicit will enable the development of intervention techniques (Yin, 2003) for the training of managers and candidates in sensitive cross-cultural interviewing. This can have positive, pragmatic and practical outcomes for all concerned (Lim et al. 2006; Krizmanic 1990). Particularly, if Anglo Australian interviewers and Chinese candidates can play their part and interview more effectively, the Australian employment market can tap into the wider pool of culturally hidden talents in the marketplace, maximise the potential of the workforce, and harness the competitive edge of cultural diversity in the current global economy. In developing a theoretical framework and effective techniques, this study will bridge the gap between research and theory in the cross-cultural job interview.

References


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Table 1: Country of Origin of Australia’s population

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<th>1901</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2006</th>
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<td>Australia</td>
<td>2,913,997</td>
<td>13,629,481</td>
<td>14,072,945</td>
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<tr>
<td>(% of population)</td>
<td>77.2</td>
<td>71.8</td>
<td>70.1</td>
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<td>China</td>
<td>142,780</td>
<td>206,589</td>
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<td></td>
<td>45% increase on 2001</td>
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<tr>
<td>UK and Ireland</td>
<td>1,036,245</td>
<td>1,038,159</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0.2% increase on 2001</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>1,392,010</td>
<td>1,427,625</td>
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<td>2.6% increase on 2001</td>
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<td>POPULATION</td>
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