



The Research Method of Participative Action Analysis as a Means for Reconstructing Occurring Intercultural Communication Problems

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Abstract

The author conducted a qualitative research project in Warsaw from 2002 to 2006 by giving and analyzing guide-line interviews with managers from different Western countries. In contrast to research which considers “culture-shock” to be orientated around an individual, the author uses a theoretical model of social acting. According to this model, “culture shock” is analyzed as a matter of a social interaction crisis which occurs because of existing differences in social forms of acting at the work-place. The metaphor of “culture shock” obscures the social fact that collective knowledge, which guides the process of social acting and on which actors mostly do not reflect, may become dysfunctional in intercultural contacts. This results in personal disorientations and frustration which are caused when this collective knowledge fails to function. As a helpful research instrument to detect existing cultural differences the author analyzed the “complaints about the natives” which expatriates typically use to communicate their “culture shock” and by which interviewees show that they have accepted the author during the interviews as being “one of them”: a foreigner too.

This current presentation of research findings, which were reached by this Participative Method of Action Analysis, concentrates on existing differences in moral values which are defined here as maxims of social acting. Four relevant events which concern a manager’s tasks are selected: the work progress control, loyalty to the company, stealing goods and money from the company, and work discipline. Based on the ignorance that recent Polish history, which differs from the history of Western countries in many regards, may currently influence social behaviour in Poland, Western managers try to cope with social interaction problems which may arise with pejorative generalized judgements, although the recognition of existing differences in maxims would be relevant. In general, most of the problems about which the interviewees were complaining are shown to be connected to existing differences in the organizational culture or to the differences between the orientation of a modern society and phenomena which are characteristic of a transitory country like Poland. This approach of research can be applied to intercultural contacts in other countries than Poland, when “culture shock” occurs.



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Prof. Dr. Dieter Flader



ANALYSIS

In the course conducting of qualitative interviews with 52 expatriates from different Western countries living and working in Poland, I became aware that my research (see Flader 2006, 2008) had to differentiate between two different groups according to how they participated in the interviews. One group of participants explained their interests in the foreign country (Poland) regarding their personal experiences with the willingness of Poles to learn “the Western way” of working, their experiences with fundamental changes in Poland and their personal readiness to learn at least some sentences of the difficult Polish language. The other group of participants used the interview for what we can call “complaints about the natives”. I was aware that this group was continuing a type of discourse which took place when they met with other Western expatriates in bars and restaurants. According to the model of culture shock by Oberg (1994), we can identify such complaints as a typical communication form for the phase of culture shock labelled “alienation”.

If we define “culture” as being based on an implicit knowledge, we cannot access this knowledge by asking questions to the host country nationals, because they would not be able to answer properly. In addition to that, proper questions cannot be asked by the expatriates because their ignorance of the existing cultural differences is an indefinite one: they do not know what they do not know. Instead of asking questions, culture shock can be a helpful research instrument for detecting existing cultural differences. In opposition to the individually-centered psychological research tradition as presented by Ward et al. (2001), culture shock is defined as a phenomenon of social interaction crisis which reoccurs in the process of collaborating with host country nationals (see Maletzky 2008). This crisis includes the failure of a proper identification of the social meaning of the behaviour of the partner, and, to a certain degree, the failure to predict the course of social interaction. The reliability of the means-goal-relation in social acting at the work place become especially questionable.

My research, being oriented to the approach of qualitative research methods, started with the analysis of these complaints and using them as an access to the existing cultural differences, of which these expatriates were not aware. In the first step of analysis, such complaints were reconstructed according to the typical social interaction difficulties at the work place. These difficulties have caused the Westerner, on the basis of his ignorance of the existing cultural differences, to reach generalized judgements about the host country nationals like: “The Poles all lie”, “The Poles do not follow the rules”, etc.

Such generalized judgements are often taken as “stereotypes”, and are seen as being responsible for existing forms of misunderstandings in intercultural contacts. Contrary to this well-known position, within the framework of action theory in my research in Warsaw, I found a slightly different approach: When we consider that important parts of the stock of knowledge concerning social forms of action do not function as orientating the actor (in the situations of interaction crisis) these generalized judgements can be analyzed as a result of a first step in learning within the process of intercultural learning. With this first step of learning, everything that is new is subsumed under that which is known. Because what is known (the stock of knowledge about social forms of acting) cannot be changed and reorganized at the beginning of intercultural learning, this knowledge is automatically used to explain “what is wrong” with the difficulties which arise in situations of social interaction crisis. “What is wrong” is generalized and taken to be something for which the host country nationals are responsible. Only when the intercultural learning process does not go beyond this first step of learning, do such general judgements become set stereotypes. Furthermore, according to my approach, culture shock should not



be seen as a matter of illness or as a psychological problem. Instead we should be aware that this metaphor obscures the social fact that collective knowledge about forms of social action may become dysfunctional in intercultural contacts. Furthermore, irritations, disorientations, even forms of anxiety, which are caused by the failure of this collective knowledge to function, motivate the actor to continue the intercultural learning process in order to overcome these psychic reactions.

With the help of native experts – from applied sociology as well as from management science in Warsaw – I reconstructed the situations in the work place, in which difficulties in social interaction occurred. I have validated the findings of my research by discussing them with Polish experts (e.g. HR-directors of international consulting companies in Warsaw) as well as with German colleagues (linguist and sociologists). This reconstruction included both: the presumed typical mental activities (on the Western as well as on the Polish side) and the typical action processes which were presumably connected with the mental activities. The data from the interviews, as well as the input from the aforementioned experts, lead me to differentiate between three different cultural systems, all relating to the existing ignorance of the Westerners, who were suffering from culture shock:

- a) The national culture,
- b) The organizational culture,
- c) The transitory process which has affected Poland, namely changing from a traditional society to a modern society.

One important finding was that although many Western expatriates believed that the interactional problems which they had with Polish staff were “typically Polish”, most of these problems could be reconstructed as being connected to the differences in the organizational culture or to the differences between the orientation of a modern society and phenomena which are characteristic of a transitory country. What makes the analysis more complicated is the fact, that b) and c) can be historically connected.

At any rate, the impact of recent history on the forms of social interactions at the work place was of utmost importance for understanding cultural differences. Westerners who suffered from culture shock were typically not aware that this history currently influences social behaviour in Poland.

In this presentation, I concentrate on differences in moral values. According to my approach, I define moral values as being structural elements of forms of social acting, explaining how general pejorative judgements about the Poles can be reconstructed as the result of a clash of the different existing maxims of “work morals”.

1. Work progress control

An important case of interaction crisis occurred when the pattern of social interaction which we call work control was initiated by the Western expatriate by asking the question “Everything okay?”. “Poles tell lies” is a typical general judgement resulting from the fact that although the Poles answered “Everything is okay, everything is okay”, the Western manager eventually became aware that there were several problems in the work progress. The Westerner, who is perplexed and deeply frustrated, especially because this is a reoccurring phenomenon, comes to the conclusion: “Poles tell lies”.



What has happened? The answer given by the Polish staff of “Everything is okay.” was oriented to a maxim of social acting within the organizational cultural system of bureaucratic socialism: “In the case that any problem in the work progress occurs, hide it and do not mention it in public!” Opposite to this maxim, Western managers, performing work progress control, follow the maxim: “Communicate any problem of work progress when it occurs!” This maxim of social acting is connected to work efficiency as a high ranking social value in Western companies. Given these cultural differences, both sides of this social interaction are oriented to two distinct organizational cultures. In fact, it was the Western manager’s failure that he did not inform the Polish staff about this Western work culture. As a consequence of this, the Polish workers fell back to the former orientation of bureaucratic socialism (or individually they have never overcome it).

2. Loyalty to the company

“Poles have no sense of loyalty.” This pejorative judgement is an outcome of the following interactional difficulties: The Western manager is confronted with the fact that his Polish workers easily leave the company when another company offers them a somewhat better salary and they do this despite the fact that they have signed a contract with them. Because the Westerner interprets this Polish behaviour on the basis of his own organizational culture where people follow the maxim: “Have and demonstrate a sense of loyalty to the company where you are employed”, the general judgement is a statement about the lack of such a sense of loyalty on the Polish side. The Westerner does not know that it is up to him to help the Polish workers identify with the goals of the Western company and to develop a feeling of belonging to it. This management task is of importance because of an existing readiness on the Polish side to lay stress on the dominance of the Western manager and to mistrust him. This readiness stems from Polish history. The country has been occupied several times by powerful neighbour-states which have dictated rules. As a consequence of this, there is a collective pattern of thinking in Poland to distinguish “them” (the mighty and powerful foreigners) and “us” (the Poles as victims). The Poles then are following the social maxim “do not trust foreigners who are in a position of power.” A Western manager must be aware of this way of thinking in order to avoid the Polish staff putting him mentally in the position of “them”. If this happens – e.g. because the Western manager encourages participation in important decision making processes or because he individually demonstrates social behaviour which is seen as being arrogant – it is very difficult to develop a feeling of trust on part of the Polish staff. Why should a Polish worker not leave a company which he does not feel associated with?

3. Stealing goods and money from the company

“You can never trust Poles when money is involved.” This pejorative judgement is a result of Western managers being shocked by stories about Poles – even those in high position of a company’s director – who take goods or money which are not theirs and without any remorse. An international company built up a system of monitoring the Polish employees in order to prevent them from stealing the company’s goods. At the end of the year when the Western directors realized that despite this monitoring system even more goods were stolen by the Polish employees than in the year before, they intensified the system – with the effect that the amount of stolen goods increased.



Here a lack of knowledge concerning recent Polish history may explain the Western's pejorative judgement. They were not aware that a lack of remorse was a consequence of the Poles' idea that had been involved in situations where the act of stealing was nothing else but an act of taking what the company owed them. This way of thinking and pattern of social behaviour was quite normal during bureaucratic socialism, where people worked in state factories which were not seen as belonging to anyone. They were following the social maxim "Secretly take goods or money from the company, when you think that the company owes you!"

Polish sociologists have pointed to this lack of public morality in the time of bureaucratic socialism and its tragic continuity preceding German occupation during the Second World War (see Wedel, 1992).

4. Work discipline

"Poles have no work discipline." Western managers complain that they encounter problems with quality, delivery dates not being met and flexibility not being as they imagined. These complaints are based on moral values which are integrated in Western work culture – in the work ethos as well as the individual's motivation to work. A maxim like "Concentrate on your work and fulfil given tasks carefully" belongs to the Western role pattern of an efficient and autonomously working employee which is taken for granted. The Western style of leadership, although there are variations in different Western management cultures (Lawrence & Adwards, 2000), is based on this maxim. The cultural difference between present day Poland and this general Western maxim is also founded in recent Polish history. An important consequence of being a transitory country is the lack of a social middle-class in the Western style. For this reason, the idea of an autonomously working employee, concentrating on his own work and interested in a mostly perfect result, is currently not very common. Instead of this, a personal relationship to the "boss" is of utmost importance for many Poles. They are following the social maxim, "Work hard at your job when the boss personally deserves it!"

For this reason leadership is crucial for any Western manager who wants to cooperate effectively with Polish colleagues and Polish workers. Only in the case that a Western manager is able to fulfil the Polish expectations of a good boss, will the Westerner be successful. Besides professional competence, these expectations refer to a paternalistic style of leadership which for most Western managers is unknown – a boss who is both: authoritarian in terms of showing personal strength and readiness to make decisions and giving orders, and his/her interests in personal matters of the Polish employees, for which, if these employees have any trouble, the boss is ready to fight like a lion fighting for its children.

Many Western managers, especially the Scandinavian ones, are used to a democratic style of leadership. Demonstrating this style they will be unable to be accepted by the Polish staff. In the case that Western managers do not show any interest in personal matters of their Polish employee, they will not get any respect. As a consequence of this, the Poles have no motivation to work hard, to meet delivery dates and to be engaged in projects for an extended period of time.

According to my experiences with intercultural training seminars, a good model of leadership which fits the specified Polish conditions is that of the "One-minute-manager" (Blanchard & Zigarmi, 1995).

Although I have developed this method of Participative Action Analysis with reference to intercultural problems occurring between Westerners and Poles in Poland, my approach of research can be applied to intercultural



communication problems occurring in other countries than Poland and involving other members of cultural systems as well. Regarding Romania and Bulgaria, Sigrun Comati (2008), on the basis of her work as an interpreter in business negotiations, has investigated problems similar to the ones I investigated in Warsaw. The latest past of the period of bureaucratic socialism is responsible for the occurrence of many intercultural problems between the Western managers and the “natives”. On the one hand it is the organizational culture of bureaucratic socialism which differs from Western organizational culture.

The method of Participative Action Analysis can be applied to intercultural contacts in other countries than Poland when “culture shock” occurs.

Culture, defined here as a tradition of habits (habits of social acting, of thinking, of feeling, etc.) cannot be properly analyzed without reference to a country’s history and without the researcher’s reflection on his own culture. It is a misunderstanding to think that culture can be an object of research in the traditional sense of science. It is impossible to completely step out of one’s culture and treat that culture as something that can be quantified to reach an “objective” point of view.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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