

Original Paper

A Research on Identity Negotiation of Chinese Overseas

Students

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Abstract

In the interpretative paradigm, it's believed that culture can be reflected in people's behaviors in their identity negotiation processes. In this course paper, the identity negotiation processes of three Chinese overseas students are analyzed with the guidance of Identity Negotiation Theory. Based on the five themes of identity dialectics, the researcher designed semi-structured interviews and collected data from the three interviewees. And the analysis is also carried out from the five themes in identity dialectics. But there are also some limitations in this paper as well to be further improved.

Keywords

Intercultural communication, Identity Negotiation Theory, Chinese overseas students

1. Introduction

The term *identity* can be defined as “the reflective self-conception or self-image that we each derive from our family, gender, cultural, ethnic, and individual socialization process” (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 212). It is such a broad concept that it includes family identity, social identity, ethnic identity as well as cultural identity. Family identity refers to the values, beliefs and so on which we receive from our family. Gender identity is about how we concern ourselves as well as others “femaleness” and “maleness”. Cultural identity refers to the identity of a group or the identity of an individual in a cultural group. In other words, it is a sense of belonging of an individual and a group. And ethnic identity is “inherently a matter of ancestry, of beliefs about the origins of one’s forebears” (Alba, 1990, p. 37).

Intercultural communication occurs when people from different cultural backgrounds come together and communicate ideas, information, as well as emotions with each other, and “individuals acquire and develop their identities through interaction with others in their cultural group” (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 211). According to the statistics collected by Center for China and Globalization (CCG), the number of Chinese overseas students reached 544.5 thousand in 2016, with a year-to-year increase of 3.97%. And according to the statistics issued by the Ministry of Education of People’s Republic of China on 30th April 2018, the number of Chinese overseas students reached 600 thousand for the first time, and China

has remained the country with the largest number of overseas students around the world.

For an overseas student who lives abroad alone, intercultural communication occurs every day. And in their boundary-crossing communication, it will be a journey that has many ups and downs as he/she moves from a familiar culture to an unfamiliar one. What's more, their identities, especially cultural identity and ethnic identity are undergoing challenges every day. So in this long and demanding journey, an incremental process of identity change and transformation is inevitable (Ting-Toomey, 1997). Therefore, it is necessary for them to know how the cultural identity is constructed through intercultural interactions and how to build a positive identity in a new culture, which as well is of vital significance. In Intercultural Communication (IC) field, there are mainly four theories related with identity, they respectively are (1) Cultural Identity Theory; (2) Identity Management Theory; (3) Identity Negotiation Theory; (4) Communication Theory of Identity. Among these four theories, the one related to this course paper is Ting-Toomey's Identity Negotiation Theory.

2. Identity Negotiation Theory

It's assumed that everyone desires identity respect in spite of which culture he/she comes from. But the way how to show and gain identity respect varies from one culture to another. In intercultural communication, the communicator hopes that his/her identity will be supported and respected, meanwhile, he/she will challenge or support the identity of the other.

So in Ting-Toomey's Identity Negotiation Theory, it is emphasized that "identity or reflective self-conception is viewed as the explanatory mechanism for the intercultural communication process" (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 217).

Ting-Toomey (2005) raised ten assumptions in the Identity Negotiation Theory: (1) people's identities are formed through interaction; (2) everyone and every group has a basic need for security, inclusion, but there is an optimal range existing; (3) individuals tend to feel secure in a familiar culture and otherwise, insecure; (4) individuals tend to feel included if their desired identities are recognized, otherwise, excluded; (5) identity predictability leads to trust while unpredictability leads to distrust; (6) intercultural-interpersonal relationships can promote identity security and trust; (7) identity changes when the cultural background changes; (8) dimensions like culture and situation will influence the identity-related themes; (9) appropriate communication needs necessary identity-related knowledge, mindfulness and communicative skills; (10) a satisfactory identity negotiation includes the feelings of being understood, respected and affirmatively valued.

As a matter of fact, the ten assumptions aforementioned illustrate the precondition, process and the result of the process of identity negotiation. The precondition of identity negotiation means that the identity is formed in communication and individuals from different cultural backgrounds have similar needs for identity security, identity inclusion, predictability, connection as well as identity stability. And the meaningful identity negotiation refers to the relationship in terms of five identity dialectics, identity security-vulnerability, identity inclusion-exclusion, identity predictability-unpredictability, identity

connection-autonomy, and identity consistency-change (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 219).

3. Research Design

In this chapter, the method used in this research —semi-structured interview, the basic information of interviewees, the interview questions as well as the environment and the process of the interview are introduced. The main aim of this chapter is to know about the communication activities and the cultural adaptation of Chinese overseas students, so that a further analysis in terms of identity negotiation will be discussed.

3.1 Semi-Structured Interview

The method of interview refers to a kind a discussion for a specific goal with two or more people involved. In terms of how structured interview questions are, interviewed falls into three types — structured interview, semi-structured interview, and unstructured interview. A structured interview means that the interview questions don't vary when the interviewee changes, which is quite similar to the method of questionnaire. An unstructured interview is at the other extreme, where there's no standard questions, and the research is able to explore the topic deeper. And a semi-structured interview may contain elements of both structured and unstructured types, where there are some standardized questions, but the order of the questions is not fixed and the researcher can also change, omit or explore some questions further depending on the situation (Gibson & Zhu, 2016, p. 182).

Considering that overseas Chinese students have something in common while their individual experience may vary from one to another. Therefore, in this research, the method of semi-structured interview is used.

3.2 Interviewees

The researcher chooses three friends who are learning abroad now to carry out a semi-structured interview respectively. And the following Table 1 is the basic information of them:

Table 1. Basic Information of the Interviewees

Name	YANG	NAN	YU
Gender	Female	Female	Female
Age	24	24	24
Current Residence	Essen, Germany	London, the UK	San Francisco, the US
The time having been studying abroad	About 2 years	About 1 year	About 1 year

3.3 Questions of the Interviews

The questions are set in according to the five dialectics in the Identity Negotiation Theory — security/vulnerability, identity inclusion/exclusion, identity predictability/unpredictability, identity connection/autonomy, and identity consistency/change. And following are the standardized questions in

the semi-structured interview:

Table 2. Distribution of the Questions in the Five Dialectics

Security/vulnerability	Q1: Have you ever felt extremely insecure or had a breakdown?
Identity inclusion/exclusion,	Q2: Has anyone done something that shortened the distance between you and him/her?
	Q3: Have you ever made a compromise to get included?
Identity connection/autonomy	Q4: Have you ever done something intentionally to establish or maintain a good relationship with overseas friends around you?
	Q5: Is there any goals for you?
Identity predictability/ unpredictability	Q6: What would you do when talking with someone you are not familiar with? Trust him? Or not?
Identity consistency/change	Q7: Have you found a different set of values?

3.4 Environment and Process of the Interviews

The time of each interview lasted 40-60 minutes by means of online video/voice call. The researcher recorded the interview for later analysis and discussion. The interviews mainly took the form of Q&A, and centered on the identity negotiation during the study overseas. Before the interview, the researcher had introduced the aim of the interview as well as that of the recording, and showed that the recording was only for this course paper so that the interviewee would feel easy in the interview.

4. Results and Discussion

In Ting-Toomey's Identity Negotiation Theory, five boundary-crossing themes—identity security-vulnerability, inclusion-differentiation, predictability- unpredictability, connection-autonomy and consistency-change, are playing an important role and can be reflected in the negotiation process of identity. In this chapter, the results of the interview will be discussed by the framework of the five dialectics in Identity Negotiation Theory.

4.1 Security-Vulnerability

Self-identification includes security and vulnerability. In Ting-Toomey's (2005) opinion, "identity security refers to the degree of emotional safety concerning one's sense of both group-based membership and person-based identities in a particular cultural setting" (p. 219) while vulnerability means the degree of anxiousness or ambivalence.

And in Ting-Toomey's Identity Negotiation Theory, it is pointed out that the more one feels identity secured, the more open he is to communicate with people from other cultural backgrounds.

All of the three interviewees experienced emotional vulnerability when studying abroad. When YANG started her first academic semester, multi pressure from both the study and language made her feel

anxious and insecure. Facing the huge pressure, YANG didn't give up her efforts but studied harder instead to catch up, from which her positive attitude to the emotional vulnerability can be shown. Similar insecurity also happened on other two interviewees when YU was faced with accumulative tasks at the end of the semester and when NAN felt lonely when arriving at London initially, and both of them dealt with the negative emotion positively similar with YANG, so as to adapt to the new life. What's more, although YANG admitted that she didn't want to communicate with anyone during the period of emotional breakdown actually, she still convinced herself to interact with people and concentrate on her study. And other two interviewees also behaved politely, positively and actively in daily communication with other people. Therefore, it is clear that all of the three interviewees are individuals with strong identity security in spite of temporary vulnerability.

4.2 Identity Inclusion-Differentiation

Identity inclusion and differentiation refers to membership-based boundary maintenance issues, and identity inclusion is an ingroup/outgroup boundary maintenance issue in which our self-image is attached to some emotionally significant group membership categories (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 220).

Among the three interviewees, NAN is the one who is better included in the foreign group because she tried to communicate more with other international students and dealt with the differentiation. While for YU and YANG, things seemed not that smoothly, especially for YU. In YU's opinion, she would not stay in the US for a very long time after finishing her study, and since it's almost impossible to be included by the American group, staying with Chinese friends may be a better choice.

However, for NAN, since the time is limited when staying abroad, she believed that she needed to make a better use of this period. So she tried to establish a good relationship with other international students and made herself included in the small group formed by dozen international students. Of course the process was not easy. As NAN mentioned, at first she just talked with them embarrassedly because there were few common topics for them, but as time went by, she found it gradually that there were quite a few common concerns between her and other international students which became the topics they talked about.

Therefore, as what Ting-Toomey (2007) put, the more one needs differentiation, the more distance he/she will put between self and others. For YU, she thought it was not necessary to get included, so even though the time she stays at abroad is as long as NAN, NAN has made more international friends while YU still stays together with Chinese group. What's worse, a group of Chinese overseas students hold the differentiation and even tried to avoid communicating with foreign students as said by NAN, which of course made them much more distant from the foreign group. In the researcher's opinion, both YANG and YU are supposed to abandon their ideas that they would not get included into the local culture and deal with the differentiation better, so as to fulfill their identity negotiation.

4.3 Identity Predictability-Unpredictability

In Identity Negotiation Theory, it is believed that people will experience identity predictability when communicating with familiar others, otherwise, people will experience identity unpredictability. When

experiencing identity predictability, people will have more identity trust because of the predicted behaviors and routines, while when communicating with unfamiliar people, people feel awkward.

It is reflected from all the three interviewees. All of them mentioned that when interacting with unfamiliar people at abroad, they paid much attention on their words and behaviors in case of offense.

As YANG mentioned, if there's a stranger at the bus station talking to her, she would pretend not to understand him/her in case of unexpected problems. And YU would also greet her friends politely, say some complimenting words and avoid some sensitive topics because she didn't know what may be regarded as offensive for the other. Meanwhile, both of them would not disclose their basic information to unfamiliar others. What's more, the identity unpredictability can be better shown from NAN. Even though NAN was told that Muslim is nothing different with others except the diet taboo and the prayer, and that NAN did not need to pay much attention to it, NAN still dare not view it lightly because she didn't know about Muslim well and dare not try something may be offensive.

4.4 Identity Connection-Autonomy

Identity autonomy-connection is defined as an interpersonal relationship boundary regulation issue moving from an autonomy-privacy lens to a relational connection lens (Ting-Toomey, 2007). And both identity connection and identity autonomy are reflected from the experience of the three interviewees.

On the one hand, all of them paid attention to connection with people around them. They all greeted friends politely and positively in daily lives. What's more, they also did something intentionally to establish a good relationship. For example, YANG shared Chinese food with the lady downstairs, YU said some complimenting words and NAN provided generous dinner during Chinese traditional festivals and brought friends gifts after each travel. On the other hand, all of them also paid attention on self-autonomy, they all have some goals and requirements during the period at abroad for example, YANG wanted to do a little better than others, YU would try her best to study well and NAN concentrated not only on study but also on self-improvement.

Comparatively speaking, NAN is much more connection-oriented, while the other two interviewees are more autonomy-oriented which can be shown when they get into trouble. When getting into trouble, YU and YANG prefer to solve it independently but NAN doesn't mind asking for a favor at first. And from their goals it is clear that YU and YANG's mainly focus on study while NAN focus on multi-faceted development.

4.5 Identity Consistency-Change

Identity consistency refers to a sense of identity continuation or stability through time as practiced through repeated daily routines or familiar cultural/ethnic interaction rituals. And on the contrary, identity change means identity dislocation in the spiraling cross-boundary intercultural contact experiences (Ting-Toomey, 1993, 1999). And the identity change process of immigrants often involves subtle change to overt change.

Both identity consistency and identity change happened on the all three interviewees. For example, when two sets of values are in conflict, both YANG and YU would choose the rational one instead of

sticking on consistency or change blindly. And the process can be fully demonstrated in NAN's experience. Initially Nan was extremely change-oriented and wanted to westernize herself, not willing to admit her Chinese identity. While later on she found that the original identity could not be abandoned and began to change her mind to receive her original identity. At the same time, she didn't dare to make some changes. For example, she provided generous dinner and brought gifts for friends to show Chinese traditional virtue—hospitality, meanwhile she would not blame other's meanness which goes against Chinese hospitality.

When experiencing intercultural communication, one is supposed to find a balance in terms of identity rootedness and identity change, so as to avoid highly ethnocentric being and highly marginal type without moral center to help his/her identity growth and adaptation.

5. Conclusion

In Zhu Hua's (2016) five paradigms, this course paper follows the interpretative paradigm which "seeks to uncover and interpret culture through the context where it exists," (p. 8), and "culture and cultural norms can be captured through detailed observation and description" (p. 8).

In this study, with the guidance of Identity Negotiation Theory, the experience of three Chinese overseas students is analyzed. It's true that an individual's identity is not fixed but rather dynamic. It will evolve over time and when people move into a different cultural background, his/her identity would be negotiated. Although the theory provides a general trend, the researcher found that in the identity negotiation process, one's subjectivity and willingness plays a very important role. And those who are open-minded and who want to engage in the intercultural communication can better fulfill the task of negotiating mutually satisfactory identities. In addition, in the identity negotiation process, individual needs to find a balance in those five dialectics, so as to adapt into the new culture better.

There are also some limitations in this paper as well. Firstly, the age difference and gender difference are not analyzed here which are important factors in intercultural communication. What's more, the three interviewees are at different countries now and are facing different cultural backgrounds which also have an effect on their intercultural communication behaviors. Therefore, the aforementioned two points are what the future study needs to improve.

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