Original Paper

A Socio-cognitive Discourse Analysis of Expats' Construction of COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

This study employed socio-cognitive discourse analysis to examine interviews with expatriates in China and explore how their cognitive discourse regarding collectivism amid the COVID-19 pandemic was formed. It revealed that the discursive strategies that the expats adopted to address disparities in values included reframing and de-ideologization. Additionally, the context model was introduced to investigate the process of how the interviewees' social memories evolved into discourse, further unveiling the significance of intercultural communication elements in context, such as the politeness principle and intercultural ethics.

Keyword

socio-cognitive discourse analysis, expats, covid-19 pandemic

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was a global catastrophe rarely seen in human history. Amid this crisis, governments took prevention and control measures to fight the pandemic and protect the wellbeing and safety of people. Yet, among different societies, huge disparities were present regarding the policies and logic of pandemic prevention. The underlying causes of this phenomenon could be discrepancies in social and political systems as well as cultural differences. One distinct divergence was whether collectivism or individualism was embraced by these societies. Collectivism in East Asian society is believed to be the philosophical foundation for a public consensus on the necessity to follow the regulations aimed at controlling the pandemic and to support lockdown measures (Liu et al., 2020). With first-hand experiences of different cultures, the expats in China, who resided in the country during the pandemic, comprehended various behaviors and regulations in a way that not only reflected the deep-rooted divergences between the Chinese and Western values but also indicated reflections upon

the divergences in a new cultural context. In addition, this paper adopted the value system of collectivism-individualism as a macro cultural perspective because it not only provides logical bases for the Chinese and Western philosophical trends and political roots but also explains how these two societies dealt with the pandemic. This paper focused on foreigners who lived in China during the pandemic. The narrative discourse obtained from interviewees based on their observations and experiences provided linguistic data for research. The focus of the study was on the process of how cognitive discourse regarding collectivism and individualism were constructed after individuals from the Western value systems went through China's COVID policies that called for the actions of all residents.

2. Collectivism and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Most studies on collectivism have focused on cultural psychology. In his groundbreaking intercultural study, Hofstede (1980) summarized four dimensions of cultural values from statistical data obtained from experiments involving different cultures, including collectivism-individualism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity-femininity, and power distance. Nowadays, collectivism-individualism has become the most important dimension in the research of cultural differences (Triandis, 2004; Smith & Dugan, 1996). Intercultural studies often regard collectivism and individualism as two poles of social value orientations, along with comparison of the behavior and psychological patterns typical to these two values. For instance, parental control is often regarded as "love" in a collectivist culture and as efforts that parents make to help their children become useful social members. On the contrary, in an individualistic culture, parental control is typically viewed as "over control" (Triandis, 1989). Similarly, the extent to which a country's political system should exert control depends on whether the society is individualism or collectivism oriented (Triandis, 2018 [1995]). Research also finds that individualism means selfishness and indifference to others in the Chinese society, while in the West, it means appreciation of the uniqueness, independence, and internal value of an individual, and the fact that an individual is responsible for their own behavior, well-being, and redemption (Ho & Chiu, 1994). In some studies, collectivism is regarded as Asian values, and the Chinese culture is considered as the prototype of collectivist cultures (Hsu, 1983). Yet, such claims were challenged in some studies. Ren et al. (2021) demonstrated regional differences regarding collectivism on the Chinese mainland through an evaluation framework, while Steele and Lynch (2013) pointed out an increasingly evident tendency toward individualism in the Chinese society. Yet, overall, it is widely believed that China is a typical collectivist society whether in the top-down design or the real-life presentation (Michailova & Hutchings, 2006; Lu & Gilmour, 2004; Wang, 2002).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, less attention has been paid to research on collectivism, and people rarely mention the concept in real life. However, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation of

human beings and governments' decisions and measures against the disease forced people to reevaluate the topic and contemplate the relationship between collective interests and individual interests under the logic of pandemic prevention, and the boundary between government administration and personal power. During the early outbreak of COVID-19 when there were no vaccinations, non-pharmaceutical interventions, such as social distancing, quarantining, and border closure, were vital to reduce infections and contain the spread of the virus. However, since the disease could be disseminated through interpersonal contact, government strategies and the effects of such strategies largely depended on public obedience and intention to support these policies, as well as the cultural factors within a wider context (Yan et al., 2020). Liu et al. (2020) analyzed the achievements that East Asian societies, such as Hong Kong region, Singapore, Japan, Korea, the Chinese mainland, and Taiwan region, made in containing the spread of COVID-19, concluding that collectivism facilitated a consensus on regulations such as mask wearing and social distancing. Under such a background, collectivism and individualism became explicit values.

However, a research approach from the perspective of cross-regional culture cannot reveal an additional dimension in the values underlying pandemic control, specifically the perceptions and reinterpretations of those values by individuals from different cultural backgrounds. This study employed van Dijk's social cognitive discourse analysis as a theoretical approach to analyze how individuals from Western societies perceived and comprehended collectivism in the context of COVID-19.

3. Theoretical Approach: Socio-Cognitive Discourse Analysis

This study focused on the perceptions of disparities of values in the COVID-19 context, specifically examining how expats in China comprehended and constructed discourse about collectivism in the Chinese cultural context. However, as suggested by van Dijk (2014), the challenge lay in how exactly we could learn about what other people knew, what they were thinking, or how they were feeling. The key to address this challenge was to regard the differences in values as a process to construct and comprehend discourse rather than as an objective existence.

Van Dijk (2008, 2014) emphasized that a social macro structure could not influence discourse directly. It requires a crucial interface, which means a "context model", to act on discourse. This model explains why the way we talk is not decided by some objective social facts, but by the subjective way through which we understand or construct a social fact. The event model, which is relevant to the context model, often forms prior to it. To illustrate, Van Dijk (2014) used how a news report was developed as an example. Before writing about an event, a journalist already learns about the event, and an event model is formed. Yet, when it comes to what information stored in the event model is selected and the way the selected information is organized depend on the context model. A context model consists of a series of

processes, including filtration, selection, and recontextualization (van Dijk 2014). By going through these processes, the journalist transforms what is known to his or her writing. It can be seen that the context model comprehensively controls discourse production and perception. According to the context model, we strategically organize and construct discourse to fit into the overall communicative context. The event model offers information for the "content" of the discourse, while the context model decides how to talk in a specific situation, including the structure of voice (tone, pitch, speed etc.), syntax, wording, the overall style, register, and rhetoric (van Dijk 2014). According to van Dijk, the speaker needs to make hypotheses about the knowledge of the recipient even at every speech moment.

Therefore, the study viewed the results of interviews as discourses representation by interviewees through discursive strategies in a specific context, instead of regarding these outcomes as their attitudes and viewpoints about certain questions. One of the crucial contextual conditions is the identity of a speaker. For instance, the socio-cultural identities of expats in China significantly influence their viewpoints and attitudes toward China's social culture. It is also essential to consider their identity as "cultural sojourners," which makes it more proper to define them as international temporary residents who travel globally for cultural exchanges, because it is not much likely for them to become Chinese citizens (Liu, 2014). Unlike immigrants who view their differences as a "disgrace" for their status of being marginalized, cultural sojourners embrace these differences (Liu, 2014). This identity feature and their socio-cultural identity that changes based on specific contexts are crucial elements to analyze how the expats in China construct their cognitive discourse. Another aim of this study is to analyze what socio-cultural knowledge is shared by expats in China and local residents through the lens of the context model. As van Dijk (2014) suggested, when a speaker and a recipient belong to the same ideological group, the speaker may presuppose that they share general arguments. If not, the speaker has to presuppose that they share values or norms at higher levels. For instance, when a gentle feminist attempts to persuade a more aggressive one, they will presuppose that they share feminist values at a broader level. It can be seen that the research on expats in China not just involves the original values of both parties involved in communication and their viewpoints of each other but also includes the cultural values shared by both parties, particularly the more macro socio-cultural knowledge that they resort to when having different values, as well as relevant presuppositions and discourse construction approaches.

4. Data Analysis

The data analyzed in this paper were all obtained from interviews with expats in China. The interviewees, including teachers, salespersons, and professionals working in the art industry, all resided in the country during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, considering the research focus on cultural disparities, although overseas students from Southeast Asia were interviewed during the early stage of

the study, the study only incorporated the interviews with individuals from regions that were culturally distinct from China in the final data. The data were obtained from interviews with 12 interviewees who came from the United States, India, Canada, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Egypt, South Africa, Italy, and Azerbaijan. In-depth interviews were conducted in English around the perceptions of cultural values under the background of the pandemic, mainly around five questions: How was your life in China during the pandemic? What do you think of China's cultural values? How do you understand collectivism in China? How do you understand collectivism during the pandemic? How do you understand the concepts such as "sacrifice", "devotion", and "mobilization", amid the pandemic? Based on the outcomes of the interviews, the following two sections analyze the discourse about cultural differences that the interviewees constructed in the interviews and the cognitive discursive strategies they adopted.

4.1 The Strategies of Redefining and Framing

Discourse comprehension is required for the interviewees to product a discourse. They first decode the speech of the interviewer at the lexical and syntax level. During the process of discourse comprehension, they develop an individual cognitive model about the narrated event. If an interviewee has a different opinion from the interviewer, he or she will construct another version of the cognitive model. The construction of this model primarily depends on the interviewee's personal knowledge about the event as well as collectively shared knowledge and evaluation about the event stored in the memory of the interviewee (van Dijk, 2002, p. 212). This study found that, to construct a new discourse, the interviewees tended to redefine and frame the interviewer's interpretation of China's pandemic prevention and control measures through the lens of collectivism. To illustrate, please see Example 1.

Example 1

Interviewer: How do you understand the (pandemic control) behavior or policy?

Interviewee: Yes, I know, I can I understand the the collective will to keep everyone safe from the pandemic. And i've seen it in Thailand and in the US and everyone has given up a lot of personal freedoms and personal comforts to help mitigate the impact of the virus. And I think in the United States, they call it civic duty. It's your civic duty to wear a mask when you go out into public. It's your civic duty to get vaccinated your civic duty to help and support your fellow human being.

In the above conversation, the interviewer first explained to the interviewee the definition and connotations of collectivism as she understood them in the Chinese cultural context, such as the relationship between personal and collective interests (owing to word limits, the explanation is not included in this paper). Then she proceeded to ask whether the interviewee believed that the pandemic prevention and control measures embodied China's collectivist culture. The interviewee responded with an affirmative answer while emphasizing that the purpose of the COVID-19 policies was to "keep everyone safe". In the second and third sentences, the pronoun "it" served for cohesion, but what this

pronoun referred to transformed from China's pandemic prevention and control policies and policy implementation to the individual precautions in the United States and Thailand. In the third sentence, the interviewee redefined "it" through the expression "call it civic duty", and used emphasis in three sentences with the use of "civic duty" three times to reinterpret COVID-19 measures. According to Fairclough (1992), ideology comes into play when different speakers choose different words to express the same thing. In addition, discourse about values is not only embodied in isolated words but also demonstrated in various interconnected linguistic structures, including syntax, rhetoric, and semantics. For instance, in Example 1, the subject of pandemic prevention as constructed by the interviewee was "everyone" or "you", while the "group" was regarded as the target of behavior that needed "help". The linguistic construction that highlighted the individual and independent choice is more evident in Example 2.

Example 2

Interviewee: …but I think it's more of a like a protest in some ways just to say I'll put this mask on because I choose to do it, not because you tell me to it. Yeah, and that's I when I see Americans are independent like that, they don't. Yeah, they want to insert their free will or their choice into things. Yeah.

In Example 2, the interviewee associated values, such as "choice", "freedom", and "independence", with the act of mask wearing. From the perspective of transitivity, "mask wearing" was viewed as the outcome of the mental process of independent choice. It can be seen that, regarding the discussion of fighting COVID-19, the interviewee constructed a different event model from the interviewer, who adopted a framework marked by China's collectivism.

A common word in the discourse about collectivism and the mobilization to fight the pandemic is "sacrifice". The interviewer also asked how the interviewee understood the broad meaning of "sacrifice". It is noteworthy that the responses of the Southeastern interviewees, whose interviews were excluded from the final data, exhibited a highly moralized tendency in the discourse. For instance, they used words such as "noble", "valuable", and "meaningful" to describe the act of "sacrifice". On the contrary, the answers from the data examined in this study demonstrated a distinct discourse tendency, as shown in Examples 3 and 4.

Example 3

Interviewee: As I told you about freedom, I think everybody should choose for themselves if they feel like or don't feel like it, you can't impose the sacrifice on everyone. They don't do it out of their goodwill. No, I don't think they should like. There shouldn't be a force that actually pushes them to sacrifice in order to save somebody. If you're good at heart, you will sacrifice. But it should be your own choice. So I know lots of people who would sacrifice now in my country to stop the war, which we are having. Probably me myself included, but it cannot be imposed on a person cannot be forced. It has

to come from good heart.

…I know, I know for sure there are so many people who are willing to sacrifice if that saves so many people's lives. I'm very sure. So I don't think it needs an external, big power to push them towards this decision. It just has to be clear that, ok, you sacrifice yourself, but it's guaranteed that you are saving these people. I'm sure there are so many people who are ready to sacrifice.

Example 4

Interviewee: …If you didn't love yourself enough, you cannot love love anyone else. It's not about. This is not about and it's not about selfish. No, it's about self love. Why? I thought to sacrifice myself for other people. 100 person. Yeah, you get the point. Now I will sacrifice myself, sacrifice my life. Right? For 100 people live. This really actually worked. Is this really the meaning of self love? No, it's kind of, I have to sacrifice myself to let all the people live. I think there's a problem. It's a problem who think like this have a problem. He doesn't love himself enough. He think other people are important than him.

It can be seen from Examples 3 and 4 that the interviewees went through a process of rationalizing their discourse when answering the question, for instance, by asking questions and arguing from a pragmatic perspective. Their responses also presented a cognitive process in discourse comprehension marked by reframing. In the above two examples, viewed through the lens of transitivity, the term "sacrifice" primarily appeared in two positions within a sentence. The first was as the object of a coercive action in a material process (e.g., "impose" and "push"). The second was as the action itself, connected to modal verbs that express the agent's willingness or intention, such as "will", "would", "be willing to", and "be ready to". Consequently, the act of "sacrifice" was detached from the moral discourse, gaining a reinterpretation under the framework of "the right of independent choice". Hence, the evaluative tone of the term was also altered. Another discourse framework was "self-love", which was similar to the answer in Example 1, where the interviewee redefined the concept of "sacrifice" by using the framework of "self-love". It can be found that, in intercultural communication, people from different cultural backgrounds tend to perform cognitive construction of an event by resorting to values at a more macro level. When talking about concepts relevant to the collectivist context in the interviewer's questions, the interviewees tended to resort to the framework of individualistic values to reinterpret and redefine those concepts. For instance, the interviewees' interpretations of ultimate goals and motivations all revolved around the perceptions of individual value and contemplation about rationalism.

4.2 Discourse Analysis of Context Model

According to the theory of cognitive discourse analysis, the event model offers information for the "content" of discourse, while the context model governs the way of speech at a particular moment. In this study, the interviewees' perceptions of the pandemic prevention and control measures were also

27

built upon the event models constructed based on their personal understanding, and the final generated discourse was filtered and screened through the context models. Example 5 was the answer of an interviewee when asked how he comprehended and evaluated the concept of "collectivism". Through analysis, we can see that the context model acts as a mediator between the interviewee's event model and the production of a discourse.

Example 5

Interviewer: What is your personal understanding of this word?

Interviewee: I take it to mean that everybody is working towards a same goal. Yeah.

Interviewer: So do you think it is very typical in china?

Interviewee: Yeah, I mean good. That's a good word. I I can see how collectivism has turned its way into the interactions that i've had.

In the excerpt above, the interviewee responded to the first question by giving a positive comment on "collectivism". Regarding the second question of whether the interviewee agreed that collectivism could represent most Chinese people's way of doing things and their values, the interviewee also responded positively. However, the answer was remote from the intention of the interviewer's question. Grammatically, "I mean" is an appositive conjunction that serves an explanatory function, which is similar to the phrase "to put it another way". However, in Example 5, the interviewee said "I mean" to correct the preceding speech and continued with another emphasis of "good". Thus, the interviewer's question concerned the regional representativeness of the values, while the interviewee's response pertained to the evaluation of the values, falling into a different category from the question. It was likely that the term "typical", which was used in the question, created a discrepancy between the output of the interviewer's discourse and the perception by the interviewee. According to the *Longman Dictionary*, "typical" as an adjective means (1) having the usual features or qualities of a particular group or thing, (2) happening in the usual way, and (3) behaving in the way that you expect. In addition, according to the *Longman Synonym Dictionary*, one of the synonyms of "typical" is "stereotypical". Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that, when comprehending the interviewer's question, the interviewee relied on negative knowledge-based memories about the culture, which probably originated from his home country. However, during the process of discourse production, the interviewee repetitively expressed his affirmative attitude with it. We may interpret the discourse process from the perspective of cognitive discourse analysis: such emphasis in the output, filtered through a context mechanism, served to highlight the interviewee's disagreement with the evaluative "knowledge" in his or her event model, in addition to responding to the interviewer's question.

As stated in Chapter 3, the speaker comprehends, presupposes, and regulates for every moment in a conversation. Moreover, when analyzing context models that serve for filtration and regulation, it is necessary to consider the intercultural elements in the context of this study. The context model

elements involved in the study interviews could be summarized as below:

Setting (time: during the COVID-19 pandemic; location: China; interviewing method: online)

Communicative role: interviewee

Cultural role/identity: sojourner, or expats in China

Relationship with interviewer: strangers in intercultural communication

Current intention: to discuss cultural divergences under the background of COVID-19 prevention and control.

From the above summary of the elements involved in the context model, we can see that these elements, including the communicative role, cultural identity, relationship with the interviewer, and the current intention, are all closely associated with intercultural communication. In fact, in intercultural communication, when two parties from different cultures hold divergent views, the speakers often organize evaluative discourse strategically. This tendency also depends on the power relations between the two parties and how close they are. It is also essential to consider the significance of the politeness principle to discursive strategies in intercultural practice. The discussion of the politeness principle in intercultural communication is prevalent. However, most studies focus on the contexts of problems caused by cultural disparities, such as a situation where a party feels uncomfortable or offended, or the communication is interrupted, due to the impoliteness of the other party, and on the different ways to express politeness in different cultures. Few research has been carried out on how the politeness principle impacts the linguistic form and style of speakers engaged in intercultural communication and on how they actively adjust themselves to an interpersonal context (Ehrhardt, 2020; Kádár & Haugh, 2013). These aspects should also receive attention in the analysis of the context model in an intercultural discourse.

Example 6

The internet is amazing and just sharing information and showing people around the world that everywhere is just people doing people stuff. So I think that normally like I might have, but having traveled the world and having lived in China for as long as I have, this is the way that it is here, I don't. I don't. It's not for me to judge. It's how your culture has successfully operated for thousands of years. So I don't feel negative. I don't feel negatively about it. No. It's different yeah. It's different. It seems to work for you guys. Once again, you have a massive population like it. Maybe that's just a way of helping to keep that going. Who am I the judge? So.

Example 7

I would say to be honest, very honest, this relationship works for china. That's great. Would it work for another country? Maybe not. But if it's working for you, why disturb a system that is working for you?

Example 8

Again, that is working for them. That works for them. Great. This is a system that works for China. I

think it's probably one of the only countries that have this system.

The three examples above were also the interviewees' answers to the question of how they evaluated collectivism. First, we can identify the in-group/out-group constitution revealed in comparisons using pronouns such as "we" and "you", or "we" and "them", indicating that the interviewees constructed their cultural identities at the outer layer of the Chinese cultural circle. In addition, Example 6 exhibited a discourse strategy of implication. For example, the sentence "so I think that normally like I might have" established an implicit cause-and-effect relationship with its preceding text. It implied the negative views about the value identified in the online environment of the interviewee's home country. The speaker even employed the term "might" for ambiguity, indicating that she had reselected what information to be included in the discourse after a context filtration.

The three examples above highlighted the interviewees' concerns about negative evaluation of the values embraced by other cultures and the bias that might be generated in their discourse. For instance, the interviewee from Example 6 repetitively emphasized the word "judge", which evidently was a negative word in intercultural communication. As stated by van Dijk (2014), if a language user and the recipient belong to the same ideological group, they will presuppose general arguments, which no longer require explicit explanation. If not, the language user has to presuppose and resort to ideologies, values, or norms that are at higher levels and shared with the recipient. In this study, the shared values may be intercultural values that the interviewees believe to go beyond the competitive values of different countries. In this regard, the emerging field of intercultural ethics provides pertinent theoretical research. It mainly investigates the norms or values that groups from different cultures resort to in communication, which can regulate the interpersonal relationships in interaction (Evanoff, 2020). The anti-essentialist or cultural relativist perspectives in intercultural ethics argue that it is neither appropriate nor possible to assess the validity of cultural norms outside of their specific cultural contexts. This view posits that there is no objective standpoint from which to judge cultural norms, and any attempt to evaluate another culture's norms can only be made from within the framework of one's own culture. Particularly when cultural norms conflict, it is impossible to determine which norm is "right" or "wrong" (Evanoff, 2020). Foreign individuals in China often employed discursive strategies that avoided judgment when explicitly evaluating collectivism. This strategy was prominently manifested in the de-ideologization within the data. For instance, in Examples 6, 7, and 8, the construction of the term "work" focused on the implementation of cultural mechanisms in the local context rather than on evaluating the culture or its values. Similarly, "social behavior" was reframed as the value-neutral "people's life".

5. Conclusions

The discourse construction by expats in China regarding collectivist values and the differences between Chinese and Western values in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic was implicit and complex. The interviewees tended to reinterpret collectivist values and behaviors in conversation. Moreover, their construction of collectivist discourse was influenced by the "knowledge" shaped by the event models from their home countries or societies. However, through contextual model, they also reflected on or reconstructed this "knowledge" during the cognitive process of discourse construction. In evaluating cultural value differences, the interviewees employed discursive strategies such as de-ideologization under the regulation of contextual mechanisms. This study argues that context analysis in similar topics should emphasize the characteristics of intercultural communication, such as the politeness principle in intercultural communication, and intercultural ethics, especially anti-essentialist ethics or cultural relativism. Nevertheless, the study suggests that while avoiding the judgment of other cultural norms in intercultural communication can prevent stereotypes and other discourse of cultural power, this discourse marked by cultural relativism also somewhat reduces the possibility of deeply understanding cultural value differences.

Acknowledgements

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