New transdisciplinary methodology based on semiotics for cross-cultural comparisons

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Introduction

One of the most difficult methodological challenges in cross-cultural comparisons, especially in the field of intercultural communication, is the difficulty of interpreting and translating knowledge transmitted between cultures. New forms of participation and empowerment in the information society can only take place when the information transmitted by using codes of one culture is successfully interpreted and converted as knowledge in another culture.

Different schools of thought have used different methodologies and research paradigms in the field of cross-cultural comparisons. For example, defining culture as a latent variable (Smircirch, 1983) external to the organisation and based on national difference has been expostulated in comparative management literature by 'Hofstedians' (Magala, 2009) like Geert Hofstede (1984), Hall (1984), Trompenaars (1996): variable internal to the organization by system theorists in terms of system-structural view (Van de Ven and Astley, 1981) or social-factist paradigm (Ritzer, 1975). However, one of the main weaknesses in all these paradigms of culture is the simplification and reduction of culture as a variable thereby ignoring the complexity, context dependency and dynamism of the cultural processes within organizations and cultural processes that influence the organization in different nation-states. Also, reducing it to the level of a uniform national culture that remains constant over time is oversimplification of the term 'culture'. Treating culture in this way has been also been criticized for its racial myopic tendency (Gupta-Biener, 2005), ignoring fragmentations and inconsistencies across groups as depicted in the work of many scholars (Martin, 1992). In the past two decades, another school of thought has emerged as a result of development in the field of sociology and psychology. Here, culture is no more considered as a 'bounded world of beliefs and practices' (Sewell, 1999) which is learnt in childhood and passed on from one generation to another but is rather considered as a 'tool kit' (DiMaggio, 1997) or 'culture as practice' (Sewell, 1999) which is used by the actors in contextual and opportunistic way as for example, in cross-cultural boundary spanning (Author, 2009). However, even this concept has its critics. One of the main criticisms is that if culture is such a conscious act, then intercultural conflicts would not exist (Magala, 2009).

Methodology

In this paper, I suggest a new transdisciplinary methodology and research paradigm based on semiotics to analyze culture and to frame communication in a language which can be translated in the language of another culture. This translation is necessary as the actors within the sphere of a particular institution can only interpret the signs using the cognitive cultural translation tools available in the institutional culture. I have used the basic concept of Biosphere and Lotman's concept of Semiosphere to develop new ontological concepts which can be used in transdisciplinary research projects dealing with cross-cultural comparisons.

In my work, I have defined culture in terms of epistemic communities sharing certain common knowledge categories, which are implicit. Here knowledge categories imply the unwritten rules, norms, taken-for-granted assumptions which determine the interaction and information dissemination between the actors. If we now assume that these knowledge categories are conveyed in terms of signs which can be represented in a language, then we can use semiotics to analyse these knowledge categories. In organisational literature, researchers have used symbols like stories, myths, rituals and artefacts to analyse organisational culture. For example Barley (1983) has used semiotics to analyse the culture of funeral homes and recently Gupta & Mishra (2007) have used it to analyse the culture of an Indian organisation. However, until now, one of the main weaknesses of using semiotic was that one tried to interpret individual symbols and signs and the entire semiotic phenomenon was considered a succession of signs (Lotman, 1990). Hence, one has to ontologically look for an approach which would include epistemic communities which are ignored in the study of individual signs. As Lotman (1990) has pointed out, analysing only the signs would be 'heuristic expediency'. We have to analyse and translate the signs with reference to the system in which they are embedded. Therefore, we would be using the concept of Semiosphere borrowed from Yuri Lotman to analyse the societal and organisational culture. Based on the concept of biosphere, culture and cultural processes can be imagined encapsulated in a semiosphere consisting of all possible signs which reflect the culture. According to Winner (1984), semiosphere can be defined as "dynamically related systems of information, conveyed by sign systems in all possible modalities and organized by underlying psychobiological and related cultural perceptions of time and space as well as by central metaphors (or fundamental symbols), and values, all of which participate in the construction of world-views". One of the advantages of using the concept of semiosphere is that it allows for heterogeneity with all its irregularities and dynamism in culture. Moreover, translation and deciphering of signs becomes easier as one uses the semiosphere as a base for understanding the meaning of signs. Like the description of Biosphere, Semiosphere is a closed system with its own self-regulating mechanism. The semiotic space within a semiosphere consists of different layers and levels of other semiospheres. For example, organisations are one of semiospheres existing within the large semiopsphere. The inner dynamic is a result of the movement of signs and symbols from the centre to the periphery and vice versa. The signs and symbols on the periphery are responsible for filtering the information to the world outside the semiosphere and vice versa. This filtering process is necessary so that the stability within the Semisophere is not disturbed which is a natural homeostatic process.

One of these semiospheres is the semiosphere of the organisation. To analyse the semiosphere of the organisation, we would be analysing the group culture where I would like to introduce new ontological categories namely that of 'sociosphere' (J. Assmann, 2013) and the individual actors within an organisation in terms of 'idiosphere' (Author, 2009). **Sociosphere**, can be defined as "common elements of culture (knowledge categories along with their meaning) shared by members of a group". **Idiosphere**, can be defined in terms of "a collection of symbols, along with their meaning called knowledge categories in the mental sphere of an actor". One of the advantages of these ontological categories is that it covers the cognitive, symbolic, structural, and psychodynamic perspectives on

organization and culture. Interaction of Semiosphere, Idiosphere and Sociosphere can be analysed as follows:

If Semiosphere is represented as Se, Sociosphere as So and Idiosphere as I, then the relationship can be represented in the following equations:

$So = I_1 \cap I_2$
(where I_1 and I_2 represent the Idiospheres of two different person)

$Se = I_1 + I_2 + I_3 + \cdots + I_n + \sum X_{n+1}$
(Semiosphere is a sum of all Idiospheres and other symbols /signs represented by the sum of X_{n+1} which may not belong to any Idiosphere and maybe floating around freely in the Semiosphere)

and

$I_n = s1 + s2 + s3 + \cdots sn$
(where s1, s2—represent the signs existing within the Idiosphere)

It should be noted that Idiosphere can have signs belonging to two or more Semiopsheres as seen in bicultural personalities (Morris et.al, 2000) or immigrants who are integrated in their new culture.

Application of the methodology

One of the studies in which this methodology was applied was conducted for the Integration Ministry of the state of Baden-Wurttemberg (Germany). The purpose of the research was to find out the reasons why those immigrants who are integrated in the German society do not participate in voluntary civic activities in their German community (Gupta-Biener, 2013).

Using qualitative techniques of research, including focus group interviews, narratives of immigrants were transcribed and analyzed. Since culture is implicit and is context dependent, context was created to evoke responses from the respondents. These transcribed responses were understood as signs which had to be translated.

Results and Discussion

Using the idiosphere of the immigrants against the larger semiosphere as the base, it was concluded that, for example, most of the immigrants had had a 'traumatic experience' in relation to the German culture either as children or as adults. This trauma was then expressed in the word (here considered as symbol) 'cold'. The word 'cold' became a sign for this group of immigrants as it was related to their painful experiences which marked the boundary of their sociosphere. To understand Semiosphere, we used the 'collective memory' (A. Assmann) to demarcate the boundary of the Semiosphere. Demarcation of boundaries was necessary so as to make sociosphere, and semiosphere apparent. One of the suggestions which emerged as a result of this study was that German institutions have to make efforts towards creating positive experiences with verbal and non-verbal communication (especially for second generation immigrants). Also, an open public discussion about the traumatic experiences would help that signs within the boundary of the 'sociosphere' gain positive meaning thus motivating the immigrants to participate actively in the German civic community.

Conclusion:

This paper shows with an example of a research project, how the concepts of semiosphere, sociosphere and idiosphere and the related methodology could be used for deciphering tacit knowledge in intercultural field. Also, like with Biosphere, it is possible with the concept of 'Sociosphere' and 'Idiosphere' to work with different fields of social sciences and information together in cross-cultural research.

Acknowledgments

References and Notes

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