

Dilemmas in the Intercultural Negotiation Research

Received July 15, 2008; accepted October 18, 2008

Abstract

The article analyses some common dilemmas in the contemporary intercultural negotiation research. Intercultural negotiation is presented as increasingly popular research topic that is linked not only with cultural background of negotiators but also of researchers. That situation is causing many problems and difficulties that must be solved before any research outcome can be interpreted. Among those problems are: multiplicity of cultural backgrounds, culture-rooted filters in perceiving and interpreting negotiation process, dilemma of research focus – seeking similarities or differences in intercultural behavior, and eventually the problem of research multi- and interdisciplinary character of the research.

Introduction

Nowadays, negotiations are seen as the key competences necessary to achieve competitive advantage by entrepreneurs. Currently, their role is so important that it is hard to imagine a business project not related with any kind of negotiations (Ertel 2005). In the last few years the speed and growth of negotiations' importance has been so rapid, that the changes in this field are sometimes called "Negotiation Revolution" (Ury 2007). The most important factor for increase of negotiations' significance is the economic transformation in many countries and the increase in importance of services.

Intangible, impermanent and changeable conditions of services as well as the lack of knowledge of service price in advance, causes that each time the ne-



cessity to specify the conditions and factors for trade exchange does require negotiation processes. The new role of services in the economy generates situations where currently offered products are different to those offered many years ago. Nowadays, the entrepreneurs' market offer is rarely based on a product understood in a narrow way, as a typical tangible good (Kotler 2005; Payne 1997).

For example, computers' manufacturer is producing not only computers, but also offers a wide range services linked closely with it, such as instruction, software services, maintenance, warranty system, etc. This tendency is currently seen in a wider range of products. Contemporary client while buying a computer, a car or a house, meets also the "Added Value" chain, so he negotiates with goods provider or with his agent with respect to many features of the purchased good. An entrepreneur which is not offering additional values along with his regular products, and is not flexible in this field, is not able to successfully operate in current market.

The rapidly spreading internationalization and globalization caused the situation where more often negotiations are understood in the international context, and they are more often performed within the cultural diversification of negotiations' behavior. Negotiations are recognised as the field of business activities where the cultural differences are seen very clearly. This is because of the circumstances which set transactions in the situation of contradictory interests between parties and the presence of emotions which cause a situation where these differences are present more often and clearly than in the other activities.

The negotiators' behavior derived from various cultural environments are various as they present different opinions regarding the nature of negotiations and how negotiations should be led. Negotiators from one cultural circle are characterized by a specific set of indexes regarding communication. It describes the range of context, the allowance of undertaken subjects, the ways of presenting arguments, values of nonverbal communicators, frequency of communications and the ways of interpretations of verbal and non-verbal symbols, and many others.

In spite of existence of evident differences between negotiators representing various cultural environments, the scientific analysis of those differences in managerial sciences is not a simple, easy, and obvious task. The lack of spectacular results of such researches is mainly caused by the existence of many barriers causing difficulties in their conduction; in addition, the individuals realizing such difficult research tasks face the problems of solving many complicated tasks. This article takes the challenge to describe most important of them. The focus and dilemma associated with the research on the cultural factors' influencing negotiations should be considered an essential aspect of the study as well as a main criterion for the evaluation of its results.

The article is constructed as follows. Its first part provides general characteristics of cultural research on negotiations, presents differentiation of negotiators' behavior and it attempts to find a niche within managerial sciences for this problem. The second part of the article highlights some additional aspects of such research work, in particular some dilemmas arising

1. Inter-cultural negotiation as research focus

Research works aimed at inter- and multi cultural determinants of the behavior in the negotiation process are being realized within the following two trends:

- comparable analyses, where their main goal is to specify differences in the negotiations' conduction, depending on culture circles, but also undertaking research on how negotiators coming out from various countries have different attitude to chosen negotiations' element;
- intercultural researches, specifying how the cultural factors influencing negotiation process influence the negotiations course and their results.

The above two trends are most frequently placed in managerial sciences within the widely understood works on cultural aspects of management. Moreover, they are mostly seen as a result of partial integration between intercultural and comparable management fields and the theory of organisation. These research works have been conducted from the mid fifties of last century. Because of the conceptions used and methodological attitudes, they are being classified by a few easily visible trends:

- orientation concentrated on macro scale; here the existing management practice and individual negotiation contents are sacrificed on behalf of "macro archetypes" characterizing attitudes and behaviors stemming from different cultures,
- environmental orientation, where negotiations' attitudes are seen in the context of external factors, socio-economical environment as well as political, legal and other constraints,
- orientation concentrated on behavioral features of negotiations, explaining typical kinds of relations between individuals and groups in the organizational context. Its main assumption is that behaviors, beliefs, value systems and hierarchy of needs derive from of a specific culture. By establishing relations between these concepts and properly undertaken empirical research, influences of negotiation cultural determinants on management and organisational efficiency is achieved (Negandhi 1983).

Interestingly, research works on cultural aspects of negotiations were commonly classified within broader context. Specific emphasis have been put on defining the negotiations' styles, negotiation elements being less dependant on cultural factors, and the negotiations effectiveness within a broader management framework. In particular this research interest is to be seen in the context of:

- strategic planning, negotiation planning, and choice of negotiators in order to increase the negotiation process efficiency;
- training of negotiators.

Based on researches conducted so far, it is known that the cultural factor can have very wide influence in negotiations, conditioning them by:

- acceptable and typical for each culture set of behaviors and preferences;
- type of behavioral and institutional control and each parties' decision making;
- level of mutual trust among the negotiation team members as well as between the team and negotiation opponents;

- tolerance toward uncertainty with special regards to possibly different interpretations of behavior faced during the negotiation process;
- emotional needs of negotiators, expressed explicitly and implicitly in the relations with other party;
- typical for each cultural circle patterns of behavior rooted in – among others – negotiating team’s organisation, its structure, number of negotiators, their roles, participation in decision making, preferences to establish long-lasting cooperation, risk taking, and so forth;
 - ways of understanding time, its flow and importance; time arrangement for the negotiation process is specific for each cultural setting and it has a strong influence upon the negotiations’ speed, length, willingness to assign amount of time to specific stages of negotiations; it may also have an indirect impact on the number of conceded concessions and attention paid to different stages of the negotiation process;
- methods used for information exchange, including the use of verbal tactics by negotiators, the way of argumentation, emotional involvement, body language expressions, importance and meaning of symbols, and differences in special behavior of negotiators;
- possibility to take advantage of a third party intervention during negotiations¹.

It means in practice, that having the knowledge of differences in cultures, it is possible to foresee many key elements of negotiations which may have a deep influence on their final results. From practical standpoint many questions arise here and must be answered, for instance:

- are the negotiations led by an individual, while the other party would prefer to work and lead negotiation in a team?
- how decisions will be made – individually or collectively?
- how long it would take to make decisions?
- What is the likelihood that the negotiations will be let by decision-makers, or by their representatives?
- how communication will be organized during the process of negotiations?

2. The major dilemma of research on negotiations cultural determinants

Any research on the cultural factors of negotiations is a real challenge and sooner or later leads to problems meriting the name of “dilemmas”. The most important of them are presented below.

¹ For further information on some the influences please see: Kamiński J., (2007), *Negocjowanie. Techniki rozwiązywania konfliktów*. Poltext, Warszawa:, p. 162–185.

2.1. Introductory dilemma – defining the “culture” expression

The main dilemma of research on the cultural factors of negotiation process is linked closely and connected with problems arisen around the culture expression. There is a lack of agreement how to define the culture expression and which type of variables should be included as cultural variables. The problems which face authors interested in this subject are clearly seen in the opinion of J.G. Herder in his preface to *Myśli o filozofii dziejów* (*The thoughts on philosophy history*): “... there is nothing more indefinite than the culture word.” (Herder 2000). In the analysis of cultural variables affecting negotiators’ behavior we can easily detect many ways of understanding this concept and link them to underlying theoretical traditions and perspectives. Authors working on this subject describe and interpret the culture concept in various ways and so they define the areas in which cultural variables are to be found. This situation has important consequences for the comparison of the research results. In we define and interpret the culture concept differently, we set links between culture and negotiations’ behaviors at different and frequently incompatible levels.

Probably, at least for the inter-cultural negotiation research purposes, so called “mental conception of culture” has gained popularity. Here culture is understood as a “collective, intellectually programmed mind, which allows to differ members of one team from other” (Hofstede 1984, p. 21). Contrary to this definition are the ways of understanding the culture as “configuration of trained behaviors”, where the main stress is put on predetermined behavior of an individual (behavioral attitude). Other existing definitions go even further and they try to combine both presented conceptions, affirming, for example, that “organisations are the cultures” (Smith 1992, p. 39).

Clearly seen differences in the attitudes along with cultural embodiment should be considered a causative factor of negotiation on one hand an integral elements of negotiators’ behavior on the other. It is not surprising, therefore, that fundamental question arising on the account of that type of researches is “what should be researched?”. One of the most frequently used concepts, although not the only one, is the proposition by E.T. Hall, who claims that culture is reflected in human mind, and is expressed mostly in communication behavior, in particular that of nonverbal character (probably because it is only partially controlled). The author refers to that culture reflection as the aboriginal level of culture².

The lack of consensus on the fundamental issue of the culture express itself causes that many authors while undertaking research on the intercultural aspects of negotiations do not define nor operationalise the culture expression. Implicit and interpretative conceptions of cultural expression make difficult to compare the results of research as well as lead to unexpected and often misleading interpretations. For example, in one of earlier works J.L. Graham sees culture as “differences in a nation’s heritage” (Graham 1983, p. 49).

² Wider insight into those thesis the author presents in: Hall E.T., (1978), *Ukryty wymiar*, PIW, Warszawa 1978; Hall E.T., (2001), *Poza kulturą*, PWN, Warszawa 2001

2.2. Remarks on definition of the scope of cultural differences

Cultural differences can not be separated from the national membership of the negotiators. In that context it is not difficult to detect the tendency to treat culture as synonymous with a nation. In consequence, national differences detectable in the behavior during the negotiation process are interpreted as cultural and automatically considered a cultural difference that can be extended into the negotiation process.

Research works on negotiations are based mainly on two fundamental elements. The first one is described as “one nation – one culture” approach. The other one is described by often simplified statement that “all international negotiations are intercultural”. Both are linked with the opinion that cultural differences are being identified only in relation to representatives of various countries. However, substantial number of cultural differences can be seen among local groups – even within the same national community. Therefore, a question arises here: should the culture be linked with national community, local community, group or community class or should it be left as a lateral and not directly linked to intercultural negotiation topic? W. Tatarkiewicz offers an interesting insight into this issue. Definitions of culture, civilization, and alike are rooted in the XIX century intellectual tradition and they point to those features of societies which have either disappeared or diminished in contemporary societies. According to W. Tatarkiewicz culture is a subjective condition stemming from the people’s geographic proximity, thus similar for various people leaving close to each other, and the civilization is an objective formation belonging to external world. Cultures are created within the civilization framework.

2.3. Dilemma of descriptive versus empirical analysis

Another controversial issue in the intercultural negotiation research work is associated with the investigation approach. Some works in this field do have clearly descriptive character and relate their findings to the streamline of the history and philosophy. Within this current the authors attempt to analyze cultural differences in the negotiation process by pointing to culture of countries the negotiators come from. In these studies observations and findings related to countries under analysis are extended to the negotiation process, thus direct research is replaced by indirect conclusions. No wonder that these works are not always flawless and are usually justified by behavioral statement that culture’s diversification research is only possible when the researcher becomes a member of that culture. Conventionally, such perspective can be called as descriptive.

The alternative to the above is empiric perspective, narrowing the subject to what is actually being observed. Empirical data are collected and then treated in the context of sciences like sociology or social psychology.

2.4. The dilemma of other determinants of intercultural negotiation

The scientific analysis of the intercultural negotiations face a major and still unsolved methodological dilemma – it is the difficulty to distinguish between strictly national culture influence and other important circumstances not related with cultural background of negotiators. Regarding the latter – institutional and groups' relations seems to be the most important. Most of human relations occur in various organisations that possess organizational culture. In this situation, most interactions happen more under strong pressure of a group, than they stem from the predisposition of an individual (Mikułowski, Pomorski 1999). This problem can be seen in many empiric researches. The experimental methods used during research works on negotiations attempt to create negotiation conditions similar to natural. That allows to reduce the impact of situational and contextual factors; nevertheless, it makes almost impossible to correctly assess the influence of negotiators' individual attributes upon their behavior – like gender, education, assertiveness level, etc. Controversies are also linked with the research procedure. By concentrating on the culture's influence on behavior, the researchers are frequently not able to specify, how the culture diversity can influence an individual's opinion collected during the research work.

2.5. The dilemma of research focus: cultural differences versus similarities

There is no agreement between the authors of publications on cultural aspects of negotiations regarding intended outcomes of such a research. Some researchers attempt to "collect" differences in negotiators' behavior stemming from their cultural background while others assume more integrative attitude claiming that cultural dialogue and human universal attributes should be emphasized. Thus, according to the latter, it is possible to seek for intercultural similarities. This approach and research focus is frequently called in literature as *emic-etic* (<http://www.sil.org/anthro/emicetic.html>). The *emic* means that behavioral features of negotiators' behavior are specific for each culture and thus can not be subjected to direct comparison. The *etic* focus concentrates in turn mainly on the identification of universal elements characterizing behavior linked to various cultures³.

2.6. The dilemma of cultural "filter"

Research works are led by individuals who are not free from a cultural baggage and who themselves represent various and specific cultural traditions. An important question arises here whether or not it is possible to conduct objective analysis of others' behavior while being rooted in researchers' own culture. Original psychological beliefs and values determine research authors' perspective and heavily influence in the research design, process as well as the choice of the negotiation aspects choosen for the research. Those

³ This diversification comes out from linguistics and was introduced by E. Sapir (Sapir E., The Status of Linguistics as a Science. *Language*, vol. 5, 1929; p. 207–214, quoted by Usunier, Lee (2000), p. 212).

constitute a specific cultural “filter”, practically impossible to eliminate, that largely pre-determines the research outcomes (Lewicki, Saunders, Barry, Minton 2005). It is not surprising, therefore, that researchers are often accused of the lack of cultural impartiality. Apparently, cultural “filter” is not only the domain of the researchers but also negotiators. The existence of different “cultural filters” within the same research is quite a common situation and it causes many difficulties in collected data interpretation. Statistical data obtained through questionnaires and covering large sample of negotiators do not fit into the same scale; negotiation case studies are affected by culturally rooted researchers’ cultural “filter”.

2.7. The dilemma cultural bias and stereotypes

Stereotypes reflect ideas and opinions that groups of people hold about others who are different from them. A stereotype is usually embedded in single word or phrase (such as, “they drink much tea”, “they exchange business cards”, “they led formal conversation in their relations”, etc) an image, or a combination of words and images. The image evoked is easily recognized and understood by others who share the same views.

Since the culture diversity researchers have difficulties to take a required distance to the research findings, in particular during their interpretation, biases and stereotypes frequently take place. Under these circumstances understanding of found cultural differences and their consequences can not be complete.

Although a stereotype is a simpler and easier way of understanding the reality, the feedback between shared common sense (stereotypes characterize commons) and formalized research work results can be often misleading and even dangerous. In order to exemplify such dangerous attitudes, we can quote a few characteristics of Poles perceived and shared in many foreign countries, such us: very religious, always unhappy, untidy, wasteful and generous on one hand and living in poor conditions on the other, drinking too much (but less than Russians), unwilling to work efficiently in a team, more often competing than cooperating, more family than career oriented, emotional, and chaotic. As a matter of fact many citizens of our country would treat those “characteristics” as describing their attitude and behavior definitely wrong. Obviously, it is advised for a foreigner to know more someone else’s culture, preferences and beliefs. In practice, the line between the stereotypes existing deeply in peoples’ sub- and consciousness, and interpretation of research results is difficult to equilibrate.

2.8. The dilemma of multi- and interdisciplinarity

There are two co-existing postulates in contemporary sciences: cognitive and utilitarian. Both describe possible destinations of the research work. Administrative sciences (e. G. Management, organization theory) claim to pursue strictly utilitarian pathways and are destined to shape reality. Cognitive goals – description, generalization, interpretation, and justification have secondary importance according to some scientists (see: Sudół 2007).

It is probably that this utilitarian proposition stems from the inter- and multidisciplinary character of contemporary theories of management. Cultural aspects of negotiations are subject of interest of many disciplines, where the most significant heritage have had the communication science, psychology (especially social psychology), and sociology (especially organisation sociology). Since research works on inter-cultural negotiations have often interdisciplinary character, explanatory aspects are frequently subdued to utilitarianism.

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