SITUATED KNOWLEDGE: A PRACTICE-BASED VIEW ON INTERCULTURAL INTERACTION

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INTRODUCTION

The complexity of intercultural phenomena in organizations has consistently been under-estimated by both practitioners and academics. In the domain of intercultural interaction, extant conceptualizations of face-to-face interaction involving people from different nations emphasize primarily cognitive, attitudinal, personality, and behavioral characteristics, typically at the individual or intergroup levels. These studies share a common perspective on intercultural knowledge that is built upon the assumption that knowledge about how to work effectively with those from another culture resides in the head (Hofstede, 1980) and is thus easily transportable across cross-cultural work contexts (Weisinger & Salipante, 2000). It is argued in this paper, however, that such a cognitive approach toward knowledge is helpful but insufficient in that it provides little insight into the playing out of broad cultural assumptions as well as power relations embedded in particular intercultural work contexts.

Four Contributions

I discuss the limitations of cognitive knowledge approach and the value of situated learning theory (SLT), developed by Lave and Wenger (1991), in evaluating the relevance of cognitive knowledge in intercultural interaction contexts. This approach is consistent with the sociological views that culture can be varied, contentious, and, in the making (Prus, 1997; Wagner, 1981), unstable across time and place, and that cultural knowledge is contextually based in the sense that local knowledgeability and agency play a key role in enacting and reproducing local social structures (Giddens, 1984). Arguing along those lines, I propose that people from different nations can gain expertise in working together effectively through the processes of situated learning (Lave, 1993). Specifically, I examine how SLT can help researchers and practitioners make sense of the intercultural interaction processes.

I develop four contributions that SLT can make to conceptualizing intercultural interaction. First, I acknowledge that SLT help foster and continually sophisticate collaborative understanding across cultural differences by emphasizing *how* to learn, instead of *what* to learn, when facing cross-cultural challenge in knowledge management. Second, I explain how SLT views knowledge and learning in the context of intercultural interaction. Third, I apply SLT to the context of temporary multicultural task team, with a special emphasis on international negotiation as a form of such teams. Fourth, I extend SLT by bringing in perspectives from Weick's sensemaking theory to make power relations more visible in intercultural contexts. These analyses are offered to help managers and researchers better interpret intercultural phenomena by encouraging them to look beyond the "mainstream" cognitive knowledge approaches. Additionally, the analyses can help clarify, for SLT theorists, the limits of relying on

traditional concepts such as community of practice in analyzing contemporary cross-cultural work environment.

Situated Learning Theory: A Practice-based Approach

Lave and Wenger (1991) proposed an alternative view of learning that emphasizes learning by doing. Gherardi (2006, p.2) offered the following definition of practice-based knowledge:

> "People and groups create knowledge by negotiating the meaning of words, actions, situations, and material artifacts… To know is to be capable of participating with the requisite competence in the complex web of relationships among people, material artifacts and activities (Gherardi, 2001b)".

The practice-based approach to knowledge represents an epistemological departure from traditional approaches. Ford and Ogilvie (1996) categorize the former as functionalist view and the latter as interpretivist view. While traditional approaches see knowledge as objective and learnable, SLT sees knowledge as ambiguous and subject to interpretation (Huzzard, 2004). To put in Huzzard's original term, "The former views learning as uncertainty reduction whereby understanding leads to action, whereas the latter views learning as meaning creation whereby action leads to understanding" (p. 352).

Lave's (1989) view of knowing in practice sees mind, culture, history, and the social world as interrelated processes that constitute each other, therefore intentionally blurring functionalists' dichotomies of mind-body, thought-action, and individual-organization (Gherardi, 2006). While a unified social theory of practice does not exist, because of diverse ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying existing traditions of research, my goal is to delineate one ongoing conversation on learning and knowing that can shed light on the investigation of intercultural interaction.

Applying SLT to Intercultural Interaction

In the circumstance of intercultural interaction, we are unlikely to "hear" or infer the historically shaped, situated knowledge that the other party bring to the dialogue, the silent logic that others are using to make sense of what appears to be common, public topics of discussion, as meaning is embedded in "a rich matrix of human activity" (Flower, 2003, p. 55). A European manager once complained about the difficulty of negotiating with Chinese in the sense that "even when we are using the same words we are not conveying the same meaning" (Kumar & Worm, 2003, p. 273). It precisely reflects the difficulty of transforming situated meanings across cultural contexts.

One way to understand what happens in intercultural interaction is to acknowledge that the situated knowledge, rooted in each person's cultural, social, and material history, guides interpretation of a topic. But both this mode of knowing and the interpretation of it remain tacit and uncommunicated. "Like silent movies giving sense to our words, these private showings

play before the mind's eye as we speak but remain unarticulated to our interlocutor" (Flower, 2003, p. 55).

Given that intercultural interaction is a social, cultural activity shaped by a variety of forces (e.g. history, material reality, ideology, and cognition) that give rise to diverse assumptions, goals, and practices (Flower, 2003), such interaction is riddled with what activity theorists call "contradictions" (Engestrom, 1993) – points at which these competing operating plans collide (Flower, 2003). To hear these contradictory "voices" we need to expand our focus from behavior to "the analysis of social, political, cultural events where the unit of analysis is a purposeful human activity" (Flower, 2003; also see Chaiklin & Lave, 1993), operating within larger social, historical contexts of the activity.

Coming from this angle, Lave and Wenger's (1991) work is truly important because it locates meaning production squarely in the processes of face-to-face interaction, or what they refer to as "coparticipation", rather than in the heads of individuals (Wenger, 1998). Practice connotes doing and involves awareness and application of both explicit (language, tools, concepts, roles, procedures) and tacit (rules of thumb, embodied capabilities, shared worldviews) elements (Wenger, 1998). A practice-based approach (Bourdieu, 1977; Brown and Duguid, 1991) emphasizes the collective, situated and provisional nature of knowledge, in contrast to a rational-cognitive view of knowledge. Central to the practice perspective is the acknowledgement of the social, historical and structural contexts in which actions take place (Wenger, 1998).

Founded upon the notion of situated learning, this practice perspective puts its focus on the relationship between learning and the social situations in which it occurs. Rather than defining learning as the acquisition of propositional knowledge, Lave and Wenger (1991) situate learning in certain forms of social coparticipation. Instead of asking what kinds of cognitive processes and conceptual structures are involved, they ask what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place. In this sense, meaning, understanding, and learning are all defined relative to actional contexts, not to self-contained structures.

Reconceptualizing Intercultural Negotiation from an SLT Perspective

The idea of situated practice, which recently has been applied to the research on multicultural project teams, can shed light on the analysis of international negotiation as well. Such kind of negotiation can be considered a temporary grouping of individuals with highly dispersed skills and value systems, most of whom have not met before, who have to engage in "swift cooperation" in solving a pre-specified conflict. Those characteristics of international negotiation teams share many similarities with multicultural project teams.

Lindkvist (2005) proposed a "collectivity-of-practice" conceptualization of temporary project teams. According to him, the project members have to coordinate their activities on a minimalist basis of shared knowledge and understandings. They achieve such coordination primarily by cutting down on socializing and quickly engaging in "cool" cooperation based on "swift trust" (Meyerson, Weick, & Kramer, 1996). Although project teams will not be well-developed groups in the traditional sense, members may still be well-connected because they embrace a collective goal and have good representations of what each other knows. They may

develop a pattern of interaction and the collective competence needed. They may constitute a collectivity of practice. Such collectivities operate on highly dispersed and individualized knowledge, a predetermined project goal, and a network memory of who knows what that enables members to engage in goal-directed, self-organizing interaction. When there is a disruption or a sudden change of circumstances, great reliance is placed on agency within limits of problem solving and trial-and-error knowledge processes.

Both conceptions of community-of-practice and collectivity-of-practice take root in the situated perspective of social practices. They represent notions of group-level epistemologies. However, an international negotiation team cannot be naturally viewed as a community or collectivity of practice. After all, community or collectivity by definition entails affect-laden relations among its members and requires a commitment to a shared culture, i.e. a set of shared values, norms and meanings, and a shared history and identity (Etzioni, 1996). Because negotiations often involve unequal power relations and minimal trust between participants, the notion of "community" or "collectivity" does not easily apply to such contexts.

Huzzard (2004) developed a theoretical framework for conceptualizing temporary organizing by combining key aspects of SLT with Weick's (1995) sensemaking model. The framework allows for assessing the relationships between learning, sensemaking, and power relations in non-routine organizational practices, such as organizational change. I am extending his approach by locating sensemaking, learning and power processes in a model of international negotiation. Such a move contributes to SLT in at least two aspects: First, by shifting focus from expert-novice learning to negotiation-based learning, I recognize other sources of power beyond expert-based power in routine organizational processes. Second, by taking into consideration non-routine types of organizational practice, such as international negotiation that usually does not involve any kind of task expertise, I put more emphasis on learning from exploration, instead of from exploitation in routine activities - a critique that has been repeatedly raised against SLT in recent theorizing works (March, 1991; Blackler & MacDonald, 2000; Roberts, 2006).

Learning, Sensemaking and Power Processes in International Negotiation

Weick's model of sensemaking is primarily concerned with the ways individuals create reality and structure the unknown. Weick (1995) stated that "the process of sensemaking includes the construction and bracketing of cues that are interpreted, as well as the revision of those interpretations based on action and its consequences" (p. 8). Such activities are most apparent in situations of novelty and discontinuity, where existing scripts and routines prove inadequate. It is argued here that international negotiation is precisely such an occasion for sensemaking in that it produces equivocality and ambiguity as participants face a confusing array of varied interpretations as they strive to make sense of what is strange and unfamiliar.

It has been predicted that in an equivocal situation, intersubjective processes are liable to prevail, which means people will express different and sometimes divergent viewpoints. They will be confronted with "too many meanings" rather than "too few" (Weick, 1995). In order to reach an agreement in such situations, people will require values, priorities and clarity about preferences rather than more information. "Clarity on values clarifies what is important in elapsed experience, which finally gives some sense of what that elapsed experience means"

(Weick, 1995, p.28). The question is: Who is to assume primary responsibility of clarifying the situation for the rest of the actors? In other words, whose interpretations may lead to or offer directions to actions in a non-routine situation?

Previous theorizing tells us that sensemaking is undertaken by leaders whose creation of meaning and defining of the situation guide the entire mean-making process (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Arguing along this line, Huzzard (2004) called chief negotiators "sensegivers" and their subordinates "sensetakers". In his framework, chief negotiators are considered key sensemakers and new meanings created by them are then disseminated to subordinates to define and shape subsequent actions. In real-world international negotiations, however, such a unidimensional power analysis may not be adequate for investigating more complex power dynamics. The complexity is likely to arise from two circumstances: First, within a negotiation team, different actors represent different institutional bodies whose fundamental interests often do not overlap. When an internal conflict of interest occurs, some kind of "policy coordination" is inevitable in order that the team as a whole can speak in a single voice to its counterpart(s). An international negotiation team thus has to sacrifice not only efficiency but also flexibility, since with limited authority they cannot agree or disagree with anything their counterparts propose if it differs from what they have been advised from home (Liang, 2002). On the other hand, power dynamics between negotiation teams reflect variations of alignment of interest between nations. Sometimes a powerful nation's team can totally subsume its weak counterpart in ways that the latter has to make unfair concessions from their standpoint. As a result, more and more small nations choose to form strategic alliances across issues and negotiate arenas to strengthen their position and safeguard their interests (Lewis, 2005). Indeed, building new coalitions and breaking old coalitions have been widely used as one of the most effective negotiation strategies in today's international negotiations (Liang, 2002). Accordingly, sensemaking in international negotiations is imbued with power and politics of various dimensions.

Researchers increasingly see sensemaking and learning as created and situated in micro-level practices of interactions, conversations, and coordinated actions between people (Allard-Poesi, 2005). In international negotiations, learning occurs in a cycle wherein sensemaking generates new understandings that prompt non-routine actions, which then get reflected upon and feed into new rounds of sensemaking.

Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to initiate a constructive discussion with regard to the question: How can people understand each other when they do not share a common cultural experience? I proposed a new perspective that treats such knowledge as the result of learning situated in intercultural interaction practices, not as a pre-given "something" that can be "transmitted" or "internalized". The usefulness of this perspective lies in its broad conceptualization of learning in social, relational terms, in its exploration of the nature of the learner, of the world, and of their relations. Not taking the individual as the taken-for-granted unit of analysis, such a perspective contributes to the intercultural interaction literature with a transformed conception of learning and knowing, as well as the opportunity to investigate power dynamics underlying the learning processes. While I have reconceptualized international negotiation using this new theoretical approach, the analysis here does not, however, touch on the broad issues of learning and power

embedded in other contexts of intercultural interaction. Analysis of such contexts must await further research.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR