

# **TALKING ABOUT PRIVACY AWARENESS IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION – A CASE STUDY OF THE STORY “TOP SECRET”**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Different cultures have different cultural values. Different cultural values have their own core values. Privacy is one of the western cultural core values and democratic right of the western people. In intercultural communication, to respect others' privacy is the fundament and premise of the communication or daily intercourse with foreigners, especially with westerners. Thus, the author takes one story “top secret” as a case, firstly, introduces the various definitions of privacy and explains the fundamental meaning of privacy, and then analyzes the privacy influence in western daily life with a case, and more and more attention to privacy should be paid by Chinese people. Finally, the author focuses on the privacy awareness in intercultural communication and tries to promote personal awareness to privacy and better understanding about privacy in the western cultures, so as to keep good relationship and intercourse with people from different cultures.

**Keywords:** privacy, privacy awareness, intercultural communication, Chinese cultural value, western cultural value, cultural difference.

## INTRODUCTION:

Globalization enters a world in which people of different cultural backgrounds increasingly come to depend on one another. To understand and accept cultural differences becomes imperative to be effective in intercultural communication in global society. (Chen, 2010, p.34)

However, due to different cultural backgrounds and cultural values, it is not difficult to find that people have many barriers and obstacles in understanding one another and communicating with one another. People from different cultural backgrounds have their own different cultural conception and values which completely decide their own communicative way and expressive ways including daily greeting words.

Especially, different cultures have different cultural values. Different cultural values have their own different core values. Privacy is one of the western cultural core values and democratic right of the western people. It has its own unique historic origin and development. Also, privacy is the fundament and premise of the westerners' daily intercourse. Furthermore, westerners attach much more attention to privacy in intercultural communicating with one another. But, Chinese cultural value is great different from the western cultural value. Ordinary Chinese people including most of university students pay less attention to privacy. Many misunderstanding cases always occur thanks to the lack of privacy awareness.

At the same time, most of the westerners do not know and understand some basic knowledge about the Chinese culture and Chinese cultural values. Sometimes, it makes it difficult for people from the western countries and China to communicate with one another. Just as a British Professor Gillian Brown said, "Communication is a risky business", which means the process of communication is the process of complete interaction (Zhang, 2005, p.48). Yet, it is not an easy thing to fully communicate because of different cultural backgrounds, cultural values and social habits, so there exist all kinds of problems and difficulties in intercultural communication.

Needless to say, it is very important for us to discuss some things about privacy awareness in intercultural communication based on the analysis of the story "top secret" which the author experienced, so as to make Chinese people to keep an eye on privacy awareness and to enhance intercultural communication competence and in order to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding and promote further intercourse in intercultural communication.

## A STORY "TOP SECRET":

When my son was still a little boy at age of seven, I taught him some English daily greeting words such as "How are you?" "Where are you going?" "How old are you?" and et al. My son was very lively and full of ideas when he was childhood. Also, he liked to talk and communicate with any adults who were both Chinese and foreigners. One evening, my son and I were going for a walk on the campus, one foreign teacher who came from America and was familiar with me was passing through and we said hello to each other. After I finished a small talk with American teacher, my son began to ask the American teacher question in this way.

My son said: "How are you?"

The American teacher answered with a smile: "Fine, thank you."

My son continued: "Where are you from?"

The American teacher replied: "I'm from America."

My son went on: "How old are you?"

The American teacher was taken aback at it at first and hesitated to make a reply for quite a while. And then the American teacher thought for a short time, made a smile appear on her face at my son and slowly said: "I feel a little sorry. This is the top secret. I can't tell you. You may guess." And she said "Good-bye" to us and moved away. At that time, my son could speak only several English daily words and did not know the meaning of the American teacher's reply. Therefore, I interpreted what the American teacher answered into Chinese. My son felt very confused about the reply and had a puzzled look on his face. He kept asking the reason why the American teacher was not willing to tell her age. I knew that my son was too young to understand the reason, and it was unnecessary for me to further explain the reason to my son about the American cultural value and the meaning of privacy. I just gave my son one answer like this. "It is only American habit that they dislike other people to know their age." But, my son was not satisfied with what I answered and kept shaking his head in misunderstanding. Finally, I said to my son that you were quite young, naturally would know the reason why the American did not want other people to know their age when you grew up and went to university. Nowadays, my son has graduated from an American University as Ph. D. It is no doubt for him to know the real reason about the "top secret".

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION:

From the above case, people may easily find that there is a big gap about privacy between Chinese people and westerners. Thus, the confusion and conflict between two people from different cultural backgrounds may occur in intercultural

communication. It is necessary to know some fundamental knowledge and meaning about privacy and its influence on westerners' daily life and then discuss the important function of privacy awareness in intercultural communication.

### **DEFINITIONS OF PRIVACY:**

Generally speaking, different scholars discuss privacy from diverse perspective. Some examples are as following: Hornby, A.S. (2004) defines "privacy" as "the state of being alone and not watched or disturbed by other people" or "the state of being free from the attention of the public."

Gove, Philip Babcock (1976) thought about "privacy": "the quality or state of being apart from the company or observation of others" and "isolation, seclusion, or freedom from unauthorized oversight or observation."

"Supreme Court Justice Louise Brandeis described in 1890 as 'the right to be left alone.'" The right of privacy is a legal concept in both the law of torts and U.S. constitutional law. In torts law, privacy is a right not to be disturbed emotionally by conduct designed to subject the victim to great tensions by baring his intimate life and affairs to public view or by humiliating and annoying invasions of his solitude. (The New Encyclopedia Britannica, 2005)

In spite of the variety defined by those scholars, some common features of privacy can be found. First, the influence of the western cultural value on individual behavior is strongly signified in the definitions. Second, the importance and necessity of recognition of individual independence in the western society is highlighted. Third, the attention to the invasion of individual privacy is paid very much. To sum up, a definition of privacy can be: it is the notion of the control of personal information and having autonomous space to act as moral beings.

### **PRIVACY INFLUENCE IN WESTERN DAILY LIFE:**

"Meantime, the westerners attach more attention to individual privacy in their daily life. Nowadays, western world has much progress in many elements of "privacy" of mankind because of the development of society. The fundament of western countries and systems still bases on 'the nature of mankind's privacy'. (Humanism, 2008) In daily life, most westerners feel that the individual's right to privacy is very important, so any social institutes and organization including governments at all levels should not be allowed to keep detailed files of personal information about people – even though such files might benefit the group or the public by making it easier to solve crimes. "In fact, westerners often feel that the best way to ensure the well-being of the group is to protect the rights of individuals. In contrast, people in collectivist cultures are generally more willing to accept the idea that individuals should sacrifice for the benefit of the group. (Yang and Tao, 2012)

Therefore, it is regarded as impolite in western culture to ask a person his or her age. This is particularly true of woman when she is over thirty. So a direct question like "How old are you?" should be avoided. At the same time, many westerners regard this topic about age as private matter, especially when asking such a question to a woman. Because the western societies exist fierce competition and need more young people, the old people imply that they should withdraw from the competitive societies, and be ready to retired. Especially for the western women, oldness indicates that the woman lost her beauty and charm. Needless to say, westerners including men and women are not willing to admit that they are old. Thus, age is regarded as "top secret" and not told to the other people in the public. To some extend, age occupies first important position in the westerners' privacy. Furthermore, in the process of intercultural communication, westerners do not like such question that other ask about age. Maybe, this is first taboo in the reason why privacy is such an important moral good in the western societies.

### **PRIVACY AWARENESS IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION:**

Intercultural communication occurs when a member of one culture produces a message for consumption by a member of another culture. To put it simple, intercultural communication means the communication between people from different cultural backgrounds. (Zhai, 2008)

Therefore, in intercultural communication, contacts and intercourses with people from different cultural backgrounds inevitably involve miscommunication, and even serious conflicts. People should have privacy awareness, especially when communicating with westerners. Otherwise, people can not intercourse or exchange with westerners without any knowledge or any awareness about privacy. In fact, the privacy awareness of Chinese people is quite weak. Under the influence of Chinese traditional cultural values, people always think that every person should do everything to the collective, every one should be united and keep good relationship, and every person should take care of each other and help each other. Meanwhile, Chinese people like to know the other people's private matters and the others also want to tell them about their own things. In this way, it shows person's concerning for other people, and the Chinese people do not think that they have interfered with the other people's private matters. It is no doubt that it easily causes a big conflict between Chinese and western in intercultural

communication if Chinese people do not know the western cultures and its values including privacy concept. On the contrary, western people pay much more attention to the personal privacy, they want to have their own person space and dislike to tell the other people about their own things such as age, marriage, family, profession and even their income. At the same time, the western people think that privacy is very holy and can not be violated by any person, any organization or even any government. The western people do not want the other people concern about these personal things, they believe these personal things will violate others' privacy.

Generally speaking, privacy awareness is the cognitive aspect of intercultural communication competence that refers to the understanding of cultural values that affect how people from one culture communicate with people from another culture and intercourse with one another. At the present time, the importance of privacy awareness in intercultural communication should be reflected in the increasing demands of intercultural training programs which will help people acquire the ability of intercultural communication including understanding different cultures, cultural values and privacy concept. People with privacy awareness will have a better understanding of cultural difference and various cultural values from both the west and the east. in privacy concept or other different cultural thought pattern. If not, as indicated by the previous story, some problems may arise in intercourse with people from the western cultural background. And there will be many conflicts on privacy between Chinese people and western people. To some extent, "only with mastery of intercultural communication competence can persons from different cultures communicate effectively and appropriately in the upcoming global society." (Chen, 2010, p.2)

## CONCLUSION:

In intercultural communication, people should know that different cultures have different cultural values. Different cultural values have their own different core values. Privacy is one of the western cultural core values and democratic right of the western people. Maybe, to respect others' privacy is the fundament and premise of the westerners' daily intercourse. Therefore, with rapid development and further width of intercultural communication and intercourse between the westerners and Chinese people, the Chinese people not only learn some basic knowledge of the western culture, but also have privacy awareness to deal with any problems which will be brought about in daily intercultural communication.

Especially from above the case analysis, it is very easily for people to find that there will exit a big gap in intercultural communication if one person just like the author's son communicated with any foreigners particularly from the western countries. Thus, people should be required to have intercultural communication competence including understanding different cultures and cultural values, in particular to have privacy awareness. In this way, people with privacy awareness will have a good communication with foreigner, especially persons from the western countries. Also, people will really know different cultures, understand different cultural values and tolerate different cultural concepts, so as to keep good relationship with people from different cultures.

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