

Intercultural communication and identity construction

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ABSTRACT

This article is mainly talked intercultural communication and identity construction by using the research methods – ethnography and case study. There are two research separately used ethnography and case study to analyze what we can see from the two research and their advantages and drawbacks.

KEYWORDS

Intercultural communication; Identity construction; Research methods; Ethnography; Case study

1 Introduction

According to Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009, 3), intercultural means between cultures, so intercultural communication means communication between different cultures. Collier (1998, 131) mentioned that cultural identities emerge in everyday discourse and in social practices, rituals, norms, and myths that are handed down to new members. Therefore, intercultural communication and identity construction are crucial in intercultural study. The two studies I want to explore are “Women’s Empowerment through Intercultural Communication and Identity Development in South Africa” and “Professional Identity, Curriculum, and Teaching Intercultural Communication: An Indonesian Case Study”. Intercultural communication is a complex field that requires nuanced research methodologies to unravel its intricacies. The essay aims to critically evaluate each research paper’s aims, methodologies, and conclusions, and engage in a broader discussion about the benefits and drawbacks of the employed research methods, considering alternative approaches for future research.

2 Summary

The first research is about South African women’s empowerment through intercultural communication and their identity development. This research is qualitative and uses a social constructivist research paradigm with some interviews and participant observation. Through these methods, the researchers aim to capture the living experiences of South African women in their daily lives. In conclusion, intercultural communication plays an indispensable role in the identity construction and empowerment of South African women. The research gives women a choice to speak out their stories and enables readers to understand and recognize the women in South Africa.

The second research aims to explore the challenges faced by a teacher Nancy who is teaching at an Indonesian university. The case study focuses on the tensions between stated curriculum objectives and the practical challenges of teaching that Nancy has experienced in abroad. The case study design uses interviews and classroom observations to get in touch with Nancy’s experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and teaching practices. The study emphasizes the complexities of applying personal beliefs with institutional demands and the impact of institutional influences on teachers’ autonomy and professional identity.

The first research is ethnography which uses deep interviews to get women’s narratives on empowerment through intercultural communication. However, the second employs a case study design with a focus on a teacher’s experiences through interview transcripts, classroom observation, and curriculum and policy documents.

3 Critical evaluation

The first research is culturally sensitive, recognizing the importance of context in understanding women’s empowerment through intercultural communication. Three women from South Africa are becoming increasingly aware of their identity when they contact with people from other races and cultures. Qualitative interviews allow for a deep exploration of women’s narratives, providing a nuanced perspective on empowerment. It enables the readers to learn about their experiences and to better understand their stories. However, depending solely on interviews may introduce bias, as participants might share socially desirable narratives rather than their genuine experiences. As the authors mentioned, “using only subjective individual experiences as their point of reference, focusing on women, and thereby

carrying a gender bias" and "it only gives specific insights into the voices presented which are not generalizable" (Chetty et al. 2023, 55). The absence of quantitative data restricts the ability to generalize findings to a larger population. All in all, the research gives an overview of how women in South Africa get empowered and realize their identity.

The second research case study provides rich insights into the challenges faced by teacher Nancy, offering a nuanced understanding of the interplay between personal beliefs and institutional requirements that are imposed on Nancy. The use of interviews and classroom observations allows for an in-depth exploration of the teacher's experiences. The findings may not be easily generalizable to other contexts due to the specific nature of the case study in Indonesia. The researchers do not discuss potential biases or limitations in their perspectives as researchers, which could impact the interpretation of the data and results. Besides, the research does not provide a close analysis of the language used by the teacher in classroom interactions, which could have provided valuable insights into the construction of perspectives on intercultural communication. This research gives a hint that intercultural communication may be hindered by local culture, society, and customs and should provide more details of language.

Both studies exhibit cultural sensitivity, recognizing the impact of cultural contexts. This aligns with the call for more culturally informed research in intercultural communication.

4 Benefits

This part will talk more specifically about the two research methods. They are both qualitative, but the first focuses on the autoethnographic perspective and the second highlights the case study design.

4.1 Qualitative research

Norman and Yvonna (2018, 2) defined that "qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world, and consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible". Researchers can turn the world into presentations such as interviews and recordings. Qualitative allows for a deep exploration of the research, providing plenty of recognition of the research itself. At the same time, it helps researchers examine the context and modify it based on emerging findings. Qualitative captures the experiences and perspectives of participants because "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Norman and Yvonna 2018, 3).

4.2 Ethnography

According to Brewer (2009, 10), "ethnography is referred to as 'big' and 'little' ethnography, and the former equates it with qualitative research as a whole". This is what the first research adopted. It allows researchers to understand the social meanings and activities of women in South Africa and their world experiences. Therefore, the first research gives three narrations of women's experiences as well as their personal intercultural communication and identity development to help learn their backgrounds and to better explore what changes them. By using ethnography, readers can quickly to familiar with who they are and what they have gone through.

Coffey (2018, 16) believed that "ethnography is best suited to topics of exploration and discovery, rather than to questions of casualty or narrow policy evaluation". The study explores how women develop their identity and empower themselves which is very suitable to adopt ethnography. Ethnography is particularly effective for studying and understanding cultures, subcultures, and social practices within natural settings. As Coffey (2018, 16) said, ethnographic research provides an opportunity for understanding or exploring meaning. The aim of the first research conforms to the ethnography which helps researchers to make full use of the information.

"People may experience the stories they read in ways that jar with their implicitly held world views" (Turner et al. 2018, 111). This enables readers to experience a different world and life which to some extent, is also a kind of intercultural communication. Besides, although it may jar with readers' world views, it can help readers to understand other's identity. According to their narrations, when they were exposed to different cultures, languages, and relationships, they would gradually realize their identity, such as the first women in Kwa-Zulu Natal. After she got married, Kwa-Zulu and her husband lived in Vereeniging, she became more confident with individuals of other people. Before marriage, she only lived in Durban and hardly over to get contact with people from different cultural backgrounds and languages. This narration gives the readers a different view of the world Kwa-zulu was experiencing.

Ethnography focuses on people which means readers can pay more attention to who they are and what their identities are and why the environment has such a huge effect on them.

4.3 Case study design

Next is case study design which is also an important method in research. Thomas (2019, 2) mentioned that case study aims to understand people and events as phenomena with interconnected elements interplaying in a social environment. They provide a real-life context for understanding complex issues, allowing researchers to examine how theories and concepts play out in practical situations.

The case study design involves an in-depth analysis of teacher Nancy's experiences. The focus is on the uniqueness and richness of the case, providing insights that go beyond what can be captured through broader research methods. Through the case study, we can easily learn that for Nancy, many ideas were unable to be realized because she needed to follow the institutional instructions. She wanted to merge the Western practice into the classroom, but she often had to give way to institutional demands.

"Case study concerns an understanding of how and why something may have happened or why it might be the case" (Thomas 2019, 6). As the author pointed out, "her stay abroad had enriched her intercultural experiences, helping her gain a better understanding of the nature of human interaction" (Gandana and Parr 2013, 239). This is why Nancy preferred to incorporate what she called the paradigm of intercultural studies, and her experience of studying abroad broadened her repertoire of World English. What's more, we can learn that Nancy wanted to keep her distance from her students and be respected by them, although she argued that "western notions of an egalitarian teacher-student relationship do not sit well in Indonesian cultural traditions" (Gandana and Parr 2013, 237). Feeling respected by students constituted her professional identity because she had only been a teacher for a couple of years and Nancy needed to affirm her relationships with students.

The case study design enables researchers and readers to focus on Nancy. To some extent, we can know Nancy deeply to learn what constitutes her intercultural communication and identity construction.

5 Drawbacks

Qualitative methods, as seen in both studies, provide rich, contextual insights. However, they may lack generalizability. Combining qualitative and quantitative approaches could offer a more comprehensive understanding. According to Watson (2014, 44), "quantitative research sets out to gather data using measurement, to analyze this data for trends and relationships to verify the measurements made". Therefore, combining the two approaches can better use the results in future studies and wider field. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods can provide a more comprehensive understanding, addressing the limitations of each approach.

5.1 Ethnography

For the first research, the study is limited by its autobiographical nature, relying on subjective individual experiences as the references. The study primarily focuses on individual empowerment and does not explore other levels such as organizational and social empowerment. The authors recommend future research to include a wider range of individuals with different intersectionalities to gain more substance and understanding. The three women came from South Africa representing the culture of South Africa and their situations cannot be placed to other women in the world. Therefore, in the future study, more individuals can be research participants.

As the authors mentioned in the article, the limitation of this research is only focusing on women which may carry a gender bias. This study does not discuss male identity construction and only gives specific insights into the voices of three women in South Africa. More men participants can be interviewed as a care of the whole gender.

Besides, ethnography relies on a part of researchers' interpretation, and it may be influenced by researchers' understanding and cultural backgrounds. Different researchers may interpret the same cultural phenomenon in different ways. With the participation of researchers, the participants' narratives and behavior may be affected. Building trust and gaining access to a group of people can be challenging. Some communities may be hesitant to allow researchers to observe and record their practices, leading to potential limitations in data collection.

Ethnographic studies typically require a significant amount of time for data collection and immersion in the field. This can be a big challenge for researchers with time constraints. Maybe questionnaires can be adopted as a part of the research method.

5.2 Case study

The second research focuses on Nancy's teaching experience in Indonesia. However, "a case study cannot provide reliable information about the broader class" (Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner 1984, 34). The first research focuses on a specific cultural group or community limiting the generalizability of findings to other populations. It may not capture the

full diversity of human experiences, but only be useful to teachers who have a similar experience to Nancy.

The uniqueness of each case makes it challenging for other researchers to replicate the study, which is a crucial aspect of scientific research for validating findings. In some cases, researchers may face ethical dilemmas when conducting case studies, especially if the research involves sensitive or personal information about individuals. Researchers need to protect their privacy and get authority from the participants.

The paper does not provide a close analysis of the language used by the teacher in classroom interactions, which could have provided valuable insights into the construction of perspectives on intercultural communication. We can only see the experience of Nancy studying abroad and how she feels when doing the teaching, but we cannot see a picture of the interaction between Nancy and her students.

The researchers do not discuss potential biases or limitations in their perspectives as researchers, which could impact the interpretation of the data. As researchers, they may bring their own perspectives and ideas into the research and their past experiences may also influence their judgments. Therefore, researchers should point out if there is any biases or limitations exist.

5.3 Future research

In future research, will technology influence intercultural communication and identity construction? Through the internet, people are more easily than before to contact people from all over the world and get access to different cultures and languages. How can education enhance intercultural communication skills and empower individuals? Education gives people to learn the cultures and to explore the deep conventions. With the deepening and popularization of education, people are able to realize their own identity and the impact of cross-cultural communication in daily life.

6 Conclusion

All in all, the two research give readers a deeper understanding of intercultural communication and identity construction. For the different two approaches, we can find that ethnography helps us to learn the participants' experiences and cultures and the case study design enables readers to think of the case in a condition that shapes and influences the participant. Both research methods have some limitations, but they also have some benefits. People can combine different approaches to make up for the disadvantages and make the research more comprehensive.

Besides, as a student, when we are doing research, we should point out the limitations and ethical problems and combine different methods in order to make a better study. Intercultural communication and identity construction are very important in today's world. Globalization helps people to get together and communicate with each other, therefore, people should learn their identity and be brave enough to communicate.

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