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Teaching Communication to Students in East Germany: About Perceived Differences and Whether They Really Exist

I don't know how they recognize it. I don't talk about it. They don't ask. And still, most of the time I know what they are thinking: She's from the West. Right. I am from the West and work in the East. As a journalist in Brandenburg. And when I am on tour between Ziesar and Schwedt and talk to the people in the villages, we talk about everything, but not about where we come from. Not necessary. I rarely ask, because anyone living in Ziesar, Kuhhorst or Senftenberg lived here long before reunification. Mayors, managers and high-level officials are the only exception. And they don't ask either: the Television-woman is from the West [...]

After the television-woman is taken for a Wessi:
 "You thought that I come from the West?" "Oh, no no, not at all, for heaven's sake", he answered [...]. "For sure you are not a 'Wessi'. You are talking German." He had to laugh at my puzzled expression. Then he added: "Recently I went to a meeting. One of the speakers asked, before starting: 'Is there a lawyer among us? Nobody raised his hand... Is there a Wessi among us? Nobody answered. Okay, then we can talk German.'" (Wätjen in Simon et al., 2000, 51)

I have been teaching communication in the East of Germany, at the University of Applied Sciences in Erfurt, Thuringia for four years now. More than 90 percent of my students are from the East, and I am among the 90 percent of the professors from the West. So one could assume that one of the topics of discussion in classes would be communicative differences between East and West Germans. For the most part, it does not come up. Sometimes I ask. Even then they do not talk about it. How come?

Research questions often have a background that remain hidden due to a certain understanding of “objectivity.” In this case, it might be helpful to make it explicit. My question is fuelled not only by my current job, but also by my biographical background. For my students, I am one of 17 professors from West Germany. This is correct insofar as I grew up in West Germany. Yet, I was born in East Germany; my parents left East Germany in 1961 when I was a one-year-old, taking with them their “refugees-from-the-East” identity. Reading about the specific differences I will refer to later on, I realized that my parents preserved quite a lot of their East German cultural identity over 41 years; did I grow up with this identity concept without being aware of it?

My first experiences in Erfurt were centered around the feeling that “they don’t talk to me in my communication classes, making me first helpless, then angry.” Another experience: *Some* students behave “normally”: ask questions, make ironic comments, start a conversation outside of class. My prejudices proved unpleasantly accurate: Most of them turned out to be ‘Wessis’. Could it really be that extreme?

Yet, I realized that I might be oversimplifying: I taught in West Germany about ten years ago. I was a Ph.D.-student then, now I am a professor: there is a greater gap in status. I was thirty then, students twenty-five and older, now I am forty-two and they are twenty. Some of their parents might be around my age. Then, I was teaching psychology, education, and communication students. Now I teach business students – the fact that they *have to take* my class does not necessarily increase their motivation. So, the differences I perceived might be due to other factors.

In order to find out the other perspective, I asked my students. The main reaction was: “This ‘Wessi-Ossi’ applies to our parents, our teachers and so on. I was ten years old when the reunification came, I can’t remember very well happened before 89. And I’m fed up with that topic. – Don’t ask!”

Other answers were: “For sure there are differences, but they are difficult to grasp, I can’t tell you what exactly they are.”

Having taught for four years, I realize that classes now work better. Yet, I cannot really tell what has changed: I have become familiar with the culture, I guess. Yet, I would like to know what has changed. Furthermore, there are other indicators that differences exist:

I perceived students’ uneasiness with making their own decisions and felt pressured by a call for authority: “You should decide who is leading the group” – something I never experienced in West Germany.

A lack of interest in politics in general and of student participation in bodies in particular is also evident: it is rather difficult to find 3 out of 700 students who are willing to represent the students in the faculty meetings.

Thuringia currently has an unemployment rate of 16%. So, willingly or not, most of the students will have to move to West Germany to find jobs after they graduate. Students are aware of the lower socio-cultural prestige of their dialect: many of them want to get rid of their Thuringian dialect.

For most of my colleagues, possible “cultural differences” are not a relevant topic. Instead, they see the problem of too many untalented and disinterested students. The dropout rate over eight semesters is about 50%.

Some students directly address value conflicts: “I grew up with the maxim: be cooperative. For the past ten years I have been told: look out for your own benefit, ignore the others. I am not stupid; if this is the game, I can play by the rules.”

For four years, I have been confronted with two contradictory assumptions. One is: East and West Germans are biographically influenced by different “cultures” and so there are differences in communication as well. In consequence, one should try to find out what they are.

The other is: Differences are mainly due to the past and with the growing together of two German states, and within a time span of one generation, they will gradually disappear.

Since I am deeply embedded in that problem and do not feel very “objective” in my viewpoint, and since neither my (West German) colleagues nor my (East German) students were very informative on the topic, I tried to find out what others have written about it, and compare it to my experiences. In the following discussion, three kinds of major sources are referred to:

- Narrative biographical texts of East and West Germans between the ages of twenty-five and thirty (Simon et al. 2000);
- Data collected in polls (Wagner 1999);
- Psychological explanations (Klein 2001).

Biographical Texts

“The book of differences: Why the unity is no unity” (Simon et al.) was published in 2000 by a group of people around thirty years of age, half from the West, half from the East, mainly journalists, but also students, a lawyer, a politician, sharing their experiences concerning German unity. In largely narrative texts, the 23 authors report many experiences of struggling with identity: Ossi feeling like Wessi, doing everything to eradicate their denied Ossi-identity and behaving like a Wessi. Wessi who feel they are in a foreign culture, as depicted in the following text:

“I already knew this strange state of mind, this being a foreigner from my time in Italy. There I had to learn the language to realize what the most important topics in the life of an Italian are – eating, love, and most important, la mamma. Only then could I communicate, became part of the

group. At this party, I understood the language, but not much more. [...] If it is true that in every group there are secret rules according to which everyone behaves knowingly or not, then I didn't understand them at all there" (Andrasch 2000, 67).

The overall tendencies of the collected texts are

The process of German reunification is closely linked to the biography and identity of those people who are between 25 and 30 now. Ongoing cultural and political change influenced them at an age that is more crucial for social identity than the age bracket of forty to fifty. Also, they encountered the change more consciously than my current students, who were five to ten years old in 1989.

Both "Ossis" and "Wessis" feel they are seen less as a person than as an example of a category by members of the other group. This depiction by others enhances their own reflection on mechanisms that create "personal" and "group" identity. ("The East Germans are a category of West German paternalism." Dieckmann 2003)

Over the decade from 1989 to 1999, differences have decreased in terms of different vocabulary, dialects, outer appearance; others say: differences have become less visible, are far subtler – but they have not disappeared. Other differences, including economic issues, have decreased less than people had been promised.

Wolf Wagner: Culture Shock Germany

Wagner (1999) sees the reunification as a "culture shock" phenomenon and tries to interpret differences found in polls. Aside from the still existing

economic differences, he cites cultural differences between East and West Germany. Out of eight examples (career patterns, attitudes towards work, self-presentation, conflict styles, politics and truth, gender differences), I want to focus on two areas that are directly involved in communication, *shaking hands* and *everyday conversation*.

Handshakes	
East Germans	West Germans
First encounter of the day and saying good-bye	Only on formal occasions
Advantage: informal, gaining time	Advantage: closeness, personal encounter
Perceive themselves as friendly, polite, informal	Perceive themselves as friendly, polite, correct
Call the West Germans arrogant, distanced, impolite	Call the East Germans stiff, old fashioned, stuffy

(Wagner 1999, 129)

Wagner reports his experience as a new (West German) professor in the East. Going to the university library, he greeted the library staff with a friendly “hello” and walked by – not knowing that according to East German “rules” they would expect a handshake. For the library staff, he was behaving in a distanz, arrogant, overbearing way, and the next time they would behave the same way – so he was astonished and later angry because of the distant, unfriendly way they answered his requests for books. This “fit” into the general prejudice that East Germans are unfriendly, lazy, and not service-oriented at all.

Wagner finds another difference in the function of complaining in everyday conversation. Wagner explains this with different functions: complaining about the weather, increasing prices, unemployment, for example. Complaining enables communication that is free of competition

or fear. It gives no cause for envy, nobody is showing off. Everybody is equal. In a situation where differences were growing, an atmosphere of equality and solidarity could be maintained. (Wagner 1999, 135ff.)

Complaining in Everyday Conversation	
East Germans	West Germans
Prefer to talk about problems and grievances	Prefer to talk about soft topics, small talk
Advantage: closeness and solidarity	Advantage: positive atmosphere
Perceive themselves as open, talkative	Perceive themselves as diplomatic, witty
Call the West Germans: distant, shallow	Call the East Germans: complaining, whiny, insatiable

(Wagner 1999, 139)

“Wessis” on the other hand – I quote Wagner – are influenced by the US-American rule of positive thinking: talking about success is part of presenting yourself in public. From that point of view, talking about failures is embarrassing: it is misunderstood as a call for help and attention. If the “Wessi” reacts to this call, the failure will become even more “official” and more embarrassing. If he/she ignores the topic, they may appear selfish and disinterested. So it is better to change the topic.

Addressing communication patterns might create a similar kind of embarrassment: Students are aware of their lower social prestige (dialect, income, “taste” in clothing) – an “authority” (they see a professor as far more distant than I perceive myself), and what is more a “Wessi,” addressing this “deficit” makes this topic even more embarrassing. This fits in with my experience: They talk about these topics, but stop doing so as soon as I am around.

In order to overcome the reluctance of students to discuss such controversial topics, I used a videotape of the “Harald Schmidt Show” (A rather sarcastic comedy show. Schmidt is well known for his jokes about all kinds of minorities, ridiculing rules of political correctness.). In this five-minute take, an actor is playing an East German TELEVISION anchorman (with long hair, a batik t-shirt, and speaking in Saxonian dialect). After his first sentence, he gets hit in the face, accompanied by a comment from the production manager “Hey Ossi, do that once more and you get a slap in the face.” He replies: “Nee, also, das hab ich nun wirklich nisch verdient” (“hey that’s not fair, I didn’t mess it up”). A couple of sentences later, he gets another slap and complains, asking the producer for a reason. The producer: “I don’t know either, Ossi, my team is working independently.” Later a “documentary” is shown of nagging, bad-tempered visitors at a congress called the “Ninth Internöl” (a congress dedicated to moodiness and nagging), making fun of bad-tempered East Germans.

To provoke the students, I took up the topic of the humiliation and embarrassment of East Germans; I expected that the students would be provoked and would take a critical viewpoint towards this kind of comedy. To my surprise, many of them argued that “Ossis” really behaved like that and deserved this kind of “mirror.” Freud called this “identification with the aggressor.”

Communication Cultures: “You Just Can’t Understand”

Klein (2001) states that there are two different communication cultures with differences that provide opportunity for ongoing misunderstandings. As a coach for work teams, he describes typical communication (and

perception, interpretive, value) differences that occurred in his work with East and West German clients. Klein groups his observations in the categories of extra-verbal expressions like eye contact, distance, hand shakes; conversational routines like pausing or questioning; and issues of context and meaning, for example, self-presentation or public and personal space.

The differences in extra-verbal expressions are barely perceived, but probably the easiest to describe. West Germans “use” shorter eye contact than East Germans. Intensive eye contact is interpreted as intimate, too close or aggressive. For the East German on the other hand, eye contact is a means of getting in contact and more important than clothing or other outer appearance (Klein 2001, 33f.). Furthermore, West Germans maintain a greater distance than East Germans. Klein (2001, 36ff.) states that he observed a difference in perceived adequate distance ranging from ten to thirty centimeters – a phenomenon that is widely known from intercultural studies. West Germans tend to “occupy space” by loudness, gestures, moving around; East Germans leave space for the other and wait to be offered space (39f.). In a brief depiction like this, it seems impossible to preserve the cautious way Klein describes these differences: as patterns, as subtle tendencies embedded in communicative actions – not as stereotypes that inhibit understanding instead of enhancing it.

A second group of differences are described as communicative strategies and their underlying meanings. West Germans tend to establish an image of being individualistic and successful and consequently start conversations with something positive (in a way, they behave in a very “American” way at this point). The East German, on the other hand, tries to establish community and equality, denying differences; this is easier by beginning with “negative” points (this was mentioned already by Wagner as “complaining”). Both try to start a conversation with small talk, but the

other is not likely to answer the (expected) routine (49f.). Related to this are differences in self presentation: Westerners tend to overemphasize their skills and experience, they are perceived as showing off, exaggerating; the Easterner on the other hand understates his abilities, shows weak points. Klein describes the “Western” pattern as “present yourself in a positive way – the other will deduct half of it, and then he/she has an adequate picture” – and vice versa.

Further on, Klein finds differences in saying *yes* or *no*. West Germans easily say “no” if they do not agree. The Easterner tries to avoid dissent or distinction and therefore avoids a “no” if possible. (This is probably similar to differences between US-Americans and Japanese.). In Klein’s example, a West German even asks whether there are any objections – none of the East Germans replies. Yet, they did not agree; in their understanding, there were no specific objections, but still they did not accept the plan; if they had agreed, they would have said “yes” to the proposal. (91ff.) Further, dealing with dissent, the Westerner is seen as aggressive and as tending to escalate conflicts, while the Easterner does not voice his/her arguments, stays reserved and feels easily personally offended. Again, this difference is explained with diverse underlying meanings. In the Western pattern, escalating a position makes it explicit, so it is easier to negotiate. This is seen as a kind of a sport. In the Eastern pattern, escalation is avoided in order not to insult or offend the other; once the other is offended, there is an interpersonal breakdown that will inhibit negotiating about facts. (Klein 2001, 102ff.)

Klein describes many more discrepancies in communicative styles. Partly, his findings overlap with those of Wagner (whom he refers to) and to patterns described by Tannen (1993). His book title *You Just Can’t Understand us* is an obvious allusion to Tannen.

Conclusion

Most authors conclude that the “clash of cultures” that was obvious in the first years of reunification has for the most part disappeared. Yet, differences in cultural identity have become stable, Wolfgang Engler (2000) compares them to the cultural identity between Anglo- and Franco-American Canadians that have lasted over two centuries.

Writing about these differences remains tricky in several ways. In this article, I have tried to make sense of communicative patterns in which I am interwoven myself – there is no distanced ethnographer’s view. The literature as well is dominated by personal experiences; the stories depicted often describe impressive breakdowns (Agar 1980), but often it remains unclear what is representative. Here Wagner (1999) provided some helpful statistics I could not refer to. Cultural differences also overlap with economic differences, local mentalities, gender issues, age, profession and so on. The public discussion on these issues is still often very emotional. The television show I referred to is one example.

For my work in Erfurt, I conclude that knowing about different communicative patterns – like shaking hands – is helpful in everyday interaction; at least, I was surprised (and somewhat amused) that my use of handshakes increased after reading Wagner and Klein. Even more important seems the “silent” background of my students, including a capitalist worldview with its “business logic,” high competition, and the knowledge to be among that part of the population that benefits from reunification. Professors are role models for people “who have made it.”

Public speaking, in combination with video feedback, is a lesson in self-presentation, and by extension differentiation. A typical problem that occurs in feedback sessions is that many students will not participate or

only say things like “this was fine.” Up to now, I have attributed this behavior partly to shyness, partly to unwillingness to participate in the course. From this socio-cultural point of view, this might be an attempt to avoid embarrassment as well as competition, and to practice solidarity.

In the context of the whole situation of the students – having chosen a subject that is closely linked to capitalism – there might be a reaction that could be phrased as “We are willing to learn “your” rules of bookkeeping, controlling, tax laws etc. We are not willing to learn your patterns of communication on top of that – this would threaten our cultural identity.”

I do not think I *really* know how to deal with communicative styles in my courses now. But I was surprised how many interesting articles and books exist on the topic and I have ended up writing an article about what I do not know. So maybe, the actor Peter Sodann (quoted in Witzel 2002, 44) is right when he says: “The Ossi does not always say everything he knows. In contrast, the Wessi often says more than he knows.”¹

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