Culturally Competent Behaviors at Workplace: An Intergroup Perspective for Workplace Diversity

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With focus on cultural identities like ethnicity, race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, etc., this study views cultural competence from the lenses of intergroup theory and workplace diversity. This paper has two highlights. First, the major focus is on using qualitative inquiry to offer a framework for culturally competent behaviors of organization and its personnel. This framework offers themes and categories on what behaviors of individuals and organization help them in dealing with cross-cultural situations effectively at workplace. Second, the findings also suggest how culturally competent behaviors of members and leaders of the organization groups affect the intergroup relations (group boundaries, power differences, affective patterns and cognitive formations including 'distortions') that involve identity groups and organization groups. Directions for future research are also discussed.

Key Words: Cultural Competence, Workplace Diversity, Intergroup Theory, Qualitative, India

INTRODUCTION

Intergroup theory views social groups as units embedded in a larger social context. These units are connected to its surroundings through its members and through its activities with other groups (Alderfer and Smith, 1982; and Berg and Smith, 1990). When this social context is the organization itself, Intergroup perspective offers due importance to identity groups as well as organization groups. Identity group members are those who share a common identity in terms of either or all these three: (a) biological characteristic (such as sex or race); (b) participation in equivalent historical experience(s); and (c) certain social forces, and a result share similar world views (Alderfer, 1986). Most commonly recognized identity groups are those based on gender, family, ethnicity, and age (Alderfer and Smith, 1982). On the other hand, organization groups are those where members share common organization positions based on the principles of division of labor and hierarchy of authority. In these groups, members...
have common work experiences and hence, have similar organizational views. Thus, the identity of people in an organization is a function of both their identity group membership and their organization group membership. Alderfer and Smith (1982) use the term “embedded intergroup relations” for intergroup relations involving the interaction between identity groups, organizational groups and the suprasystem in which they are embedded. For example, because the upper management positions in the western countries are usually occupied by White older males, this identity group can be seen as embedded with the organization group of upper management positions in those countries (Clegg et al., 2006, p. 525).

Alderfer and Smith (1982, p. 39), taking inputs from variety of intergroup perspectives explain five characteristics of intergroup relations. The first characteristic is ‘group boundary’ that defines group membership and has certain degree of permeability to facilitate and regulate intergroup transactions. The second is intergroup ‘power difference’ in terms of access to resources. The dimensions of power differences and discrepancy among groups also affect the boundary permeability between groups. Third, ‘affective patterns’ determine the “degree to which group members associate mainly positive feelings with their own group and mainly negative feelings with other groups”. And finally, cognitive formations, including ‘distortions’ – a function of these three characteristics are the common languages (elements, social categories) which identity groups develop amongst themselves, and ‘condition their members’ perceptions of objective and subjective phenomena, and transmit sets of propositions—including theories and ideologies—to explain the nature of experiences encountered by members and to influence relations with other groups’. The fifth characteristic ‘behaviors’ of leaders and representatives of groups reflect these four characteristics and serve as both cause and effect of the total pattern of intergroup relations.

This study views identity groups from the diversity perspective. Hence, these could be various cultural identity groups based on race, ethnicity, gender, social class, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, etc. (Ely and Thomas, 2001). From the intergroup perspective, this study explores the role of cultural competence as behaviors of leaders and representatives of organizations towards other identity groups within the large microcosm group(s) in the context of managing cross-cultural situations in organizations.

**INTERGROUP THEORY AND CULTURALLY COMPETENT BEHAVIORS**

The identity group members share their workspace with various other identity groups as well as organization groups. Members of several identity and organization groups form ‘organizationally based groups’ called microcosm groups ‘in which representatives of the salient groups are present’. Identity group members in such groups are often characterized by ‘individual differences’ based on variables such as age, sex, race, ethnicity, family, etc., which are, in fact, identity group differences (Alderfer and Smith, 1982). Berg and Smith (1990) make four central observations in regards to group members in microcosm organization groups:
(1) as a result of groups existing in a world populated by other groups, they tend to be forever banging into each other, each struggling for its own space and its own identity; (2) each group, to maintain that identity, makes attributions about other groups and encourages them to act in ways that support this particular self-definition; (3) the very notion of multiple groups in the same context means there are multiple interests that may not overlap, creating the potential for conflict among the groups; and (4) how groups regulate their interactions creates a system that each group comes to depend on for its ongoing viability (p. 119).

Cultural competence offers ways towards managing intergroup dynamics in the organization. A frequently cited definition of cultural competence (e.g., Giachello, 1995; Barrera and Kramer, 1997; and Hains et al., 2000), which according to Johnson et al. (2006) encompasses workplace diversity, is offered by Cross et al. (1989). They define cultural competence as:

A set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enable that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. The word ‘culture’ is used because it implies the integrated pattern of human behavior that includes thoughts, communications, actions, customs, beliefs, values, and institutions of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group. The word competence is used because it implies having the capacity to function effectively. (Cross et al., 1989, p. 13)

The above definition considers behaviors of personnel and organizations an important dimension of cultural competence that enables them to deal with cross-cultural situations effectively. Since intergroup theory places special emphasis on behaviors of the leaders and members of the organizational and identity groups, a study on culturally competent behaviors appears of significant interest when it is desired to view cultural competence from the lenses of intergroup theory. Though studies in other disciplines (say, in healthcare literature—Thom and Tirado, 2006; and Benkert et al., 2011) inform on what is meant by culturally competent behaviors, the scholarship on business management is largely silent on this question. Hence, the first aim of this study is to find out what constitutes culturally competent behaviors at workplace. Second, considering the personnel at workplace as various organization group leaders or representatives who also belong to various identity groups, managing cross-cultural situations by them can also be seen as managing the group boundary, power distance, affective patterns, and cognitive formations in the intergroup relations. Since the behaviors of leaders and representatives of these groups in the organization reflect upon the characteristics of intergroup relations (Alderfer and Smith, 1982), the second objective of this study is to find empirically whether culturally competent behaviors actually do so.
METHODS

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION

In order to find out what constitutes culturally competent behaviors, a grounded interpretative approach was used to understand the contextualized experiences of those involved in the cross-cultural situations, rather than imposing a particular framework upon them (Dacin *et al.*, 2010). To implement this approach, intensive interviewing (Charmaz, 2006, p. 25) using combination of telephonic and face-to-face mode was chosen as a method of collecting responses due to three reasons. First, intensive interviewing permits in-depth exploration of a particular topic with the person who had the relevant experiences (Charmaz, 2006). Second, interviews result in better interaction between the investigator and respondent allowing probing questions and seeking clarifications, which a mailed questionnaire may not provide. Third, telephonic interviews are resource effective in case respondents are located far off from the researcher (Babbie, 2006). The interview was started by giving general direction to the conversation on diversity in the workforce the respondent observed or experienced around them and pursuing specific topics raised by them. The interviews were designed to ask open-ended questions on how the respondents noted diversity at their workplace. When they narrated any critical incidents, probing questions were asked to find out whether diverse employees had any special requirements, whether or how the cases were resolved, and what were the learning and reflections. The interview conversations were digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis. All the respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their data.

SAMPLE

A combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling (Babbie, 2006) was used to recruit the respondents. To keep the sample heterogeneous, the respondents were targeted across various capacities ranging from line manager, Human Resource (HR) managers, consultants, and professors. Having sufficient managerial experience and representation from organizations all across India were primary criteria for recruiting. Initially, 25 respondents were contacted for the interview, 11 through purposive sampling, and the rest through snowball sampling. First, using the author’s own contacts, working individuals employed in several industries were contacted. These individuals were known to the author through the various programs they were part of at a business school based in India. The candidates were purposefully selected keeping in mind their quantity of work experience—an indicator of their knowledge of business environment, their affiliation, and the fact that the business school they attended carefully selects its participants to let only the most qualified individuals in. Informal talks with the author on prior occasions suggested they were receptive towards workplace diversity. In all, 17 respondents agreed to be interviewed who were interviewed by the author. As the coding patterns appeared well developed from 10th
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respondent, 15 interviews were included for the study. Out of these, 10 were selected through purposive sampling and the rest through snowball sampling. The profiles of these 15 respondents are presented in Table 1. The sample had all Indian nationals and it was purposively made as heterogeneous as possible in terms of gender, location, industry and number of years of work experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent Names (Fictitious)</th>
<th>Gender m/f</th>
<th>Industry</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Total Work Experience (Years)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Monika</td>
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<td>Publication</td>
<td>Senior Management</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renu</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>Beverages</td>
<td>HR Leader</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harsh</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>Telecom</td>
<td>HR Leader</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudeep</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>Print media</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sushmita</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>Telecommunication products and technologies</td>
<td>HR Leader</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhiraj</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>Print media</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>Jayant</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>Armed forces</td>
<td>Armed Forces Officer</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuldeep</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>Armed forces</td>
<td>Armed Forces Officer</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>m</td>
<td>FMCG</td>
<td>Middle Management</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ayesha</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>IT</td>
<td>IT Consultant</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jiten</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>Non banking financial company</td>
<td>Senior Management</td>
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<td>f</td>
<td>Consulting</td>
<td>HR leader</td>
<td>17</td>
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<td>m</td>
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<td>Saurav</td>
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<td>Publication</td>
<td>HR Leader</td>
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<td>Prof. Rai</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>Academia</td>
<td>Professor</td>
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</tbody>
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Note: 1 Earlier, HR leader of a large private sector firm.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis followed the prescriptions of Saldana (2006) and Charmaz (2006) based on the principles of naturalistic inquiry and grounded theory building (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; and Locke, 2001). As first step, the interview transcripts were coded using first cycle coding methods ‘to remain open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by reading the data’ (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). These codes were mostly line by line codes, process codes and in-vivo codes (Saldana, 2006) that explained the behaviors of individuals and organizations in dealing with cross-cultural situations.

As second step, the codes were collapsed into several categories. For this, keeping in mind that ‘Culturally Competent Behaviors’ is the overarching first order theme,
various behaviors were coded through which the respondents demonstrated handling cross-cultural situations effectively. The data was recoded through second cycle coding methods to form meta codes—the category labels to identify similarly coded data (Saldana, 2006, p. 150). ‘Focused coding’ and ‘axial coding’ approaches were used to evolve the codes to fit directly the agenda of the study. Using focused coding, the data was labeled with codes that made most sense in categorizing data incisively and completely. These codes were more frequent and distinct than the first cycle codes (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). Axial coding (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60) was used to interlink the various codes and to make the coding coherent to form first order categories or higher level nodes (Dacin et al., 2010). Thereafter, these codes were weaved, sometimes merged, at times disintegrated, and sometimes left out to see how ‘the puzzle pieces fitted together’ (Saldana, 2006, p. 187) to form ‘first order categories’.

In the third step, the first order categories were clustered together to form the ‘first order themes’. To what extent these categories would be helpful to offer a framework for explaining cultural competent behaviors at work was the question in focus. This approach made it easy to find the broad patterns or first order themes in this step. Instead of moving linearly, an iterative and recursive approach was used to reach the first order themes from the first order categories (Eisenhardt, 1989). Some categories were disentangled and their codes were allocated to other categories to make them more meaningful and crisp in terms of power and purpose and to align them in certain patterns. Finally, six first order themes emerged from the data—communication, fitting diversity with business needs, going beyond set expectations, proactive managerial efforts, innovative practices, and offering competent and workable solutions. The overall framework of first order categories that constituted the first order themes and finally, the overarching ‘aggregate theoretical dimension’ of culturally competent behaviors is shown in Figure 1.

FINDINGS

The findings of this study are focused on Indian managers. The data on how they dealt with cross-cultural situations or what observations they had about dealing with cross-cultural situations involving cultural identities like gender, religion, region, language, caste, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, etc., was of interest. These findings are largely based on first party accounts, but at times third party accounts have also been considered whenever they were observed closely and explained well.

Due to constraints in space, it was not possible to explain all the themes and categories shown in Figure 1. Hence, four first order themes are explained—communications, going beyond set expectations, fitting diversity with business needs, and innovative practices—as culturally competent behaviors in detail. In order to abide by the confidentiality promise to all the respondents, they are identified by fictitious names as per Table 1.
Figure 1: The Framework for Culturally Competent Behaviors at Workplace

- **First Order Categories**
  - Tailor-made communication
  - Connecting with people
  - Hearing cost of diversity to an extent
  - Using technology to bridge deficiency considering the larger needs
  - Experimenting
  - Molding with change
  - Doing beyond legal mandate
  - Going beyond conventional understanding
  - Enlarging one's own space to accommodate other cultures
  - Complimenting each other

- **First Order Themes**
  - Communication
  - Fitting Diversity with business needs

- **Aggregate Theoretical Dimension**
  - Going beyond set expectations

- **Proactive Managerial Efforts**

- **Innovative Practices**

- **Offering competent and workable solutions**

**Using available resources**
- Manpower
- Infrastructure

**Disengaging**
- Creating win-win situations
- Countermeasures
- Employing natural ways
- Using tested measures
- Making broad guidelines
- Using problem-specific approach
COMMUNICATION

Tailor-Made Communication

Communication in cross-cultural situations may involve culture specific tailor-made approaches. Saurav believes that communicating long-serving aged employees to take Voluntary Retirement Scheme (VRS) is tricky because it may “hurt their sentiments”. In performance appraisals, these can be at most hinted but not explicitly mentioned because business leaders tend to respect age and seniority. Hence, the HR managers or line supervisors cannot directly ask them to take VRS and resign, and even the senior management has to think what approach they should take in communicating to this section of employees. A tailor-made approach that has worked for his company is to include the VRS employee himself in this campaign to market this scheme to his other aged peers, instead of the HR directly making this communication on behalf of the Managing Director, since the aged employee who has taken VRS at the same level of age and seniority to talk to them.

Connecting with People

Cross-cultural communication also brings into its ambit the need for connecting with people at personal and professional level. Recounting his experience with a senior female colleague who was perceived as selfish and unhelpful in sharing information and skills by her peers, Neeraj believes that such situation can happen with a male colleague too. But dealing with a male versus female colleague in such situations could be different because female colleagues do not easily open up. In his experience, a male colleague can be very directly asked about the reason and to explain his story, but for a female colleague, “you have to build a bond, you have to build trust. You have to make sure that you are considered empathetic and not judging them, and then able to understand them better and make better decisions (sic)”. Neeraj extends this behavior to other cross-cultural situations too. Being a ‘happy go lucky’ person with jovial mood, he never hesitated to play humorous jokes on his peers, mostly based on their cultural identities. He developed this attitude since he himself was target of such jokes on his community during his childhood and college years. So, he never used to mind doing this to his office peers, and most of his peers also took them lightly. But a team member did not take such jokes sportingly that were bantered on him. Being an introvert, he never expressed his displeasure, but Neeraj sensed something strange in his cold behavior towards him. He explains the process of connecting with him as follows:

So, initially after discussing what all is this, how do you see your role now, what’s the next job, what are your career options, what is your feedback on the three months you’ve spend, whatever we do to grow.. All these stuffs, how do you feel you could contribute more to the team? Because I know you’re capable and I’ve seen your past work, you’re really capable guy. And I know you are
motivated, because you have already demonstrated your motivation through some strong things. So is there anything that I could do to help you contribute more to the team? So he said, “yeah, really, I don’t think I am a part of the team”. “Why do you feel so?” “No, you three or four guys, you just kind of joke around, this and that... I am really not that kind of person. “Yeah, we do that but at the end of the day we are all, when we are doing all this, we don’t bring all that... we are talking those stuff, but we really don’t do that, where you feel left out?” after asking all these questions, lot of time, eventually, you know what, he said, “in a way, you are not sensitive about my religion, you are not sensitive about my feelings in a way”. I am not able to recall what he said exactly, but this is what he meant. So I said, “okay, can you please throw light on that and what circumstances?” “Yeah, you joke around with [those] stuff”. That’s it. So, it took half an hour to get to the point (laughs), right?

On asking how he would make his other colleagues understand this, Neeraj believes this approach is not same for everyone. He applies the tailor-made approach of communicating here. For communicating “take it easy now, we have to understand other’s feeling before we do such stuff (sic)” to his peers, he adopts two different approaches. A straight forward approach was, ‘cut it off. We need to be sensitive about ..(sic)’. On the other hand, a more careful approach could be taken towards persons like the lady or the man whom he mentioned in his narratives, “Let’s look from other person’s standpoint. How he might perceive it. And then see when you’re in the same situation whether you’d appreciate that comment or sequence (sic)”. Individuals may need to communicate and connect personally in professional cross-cultural environment if that is the only choice they feel they are left with. Ayesha failed to explain to her male team member the importance of his willingness to act as a back-up for the part load of a female team member who was falling sick sometimes during her maternity. After all rational arguments failed, she persuaded her team member citing his own personal benefit.

At that point of time that activity could be handled only by these two people. I really didn’t have additional hand to deliver it to somebody else. ... First of all, I told this guy what is that additional work you have taken up which is making you uncomfortable? He was not able to answer it because he had really not taken up any [additional] work. He was talking in futuristic terms, that “no madam, when she again falls sick, I’d have to take up this job”. I said, “she has been, and this is something has been planned, whatever leave she has taken, baring couple of them, which were for hospital appointment, other were planned leave, even the once which were unplanned she was trying to cover her job. So what gives you a feeler that she won’t be able to do in future? She is already been trying to prove herself. She’s not trying to overload you with job. If that had been the case the person is misusing the flexibility being provided, I could
have understood it. But what makes you think the person won't be able to
deliver, time and again she has proved herself”. You won't be able to answer
that, but at times, you can't change people’s perspective. So, no matter whatever
the logic and argument you use in front of them, they might come back with
same argument every time. So ultimately I told him, “if god forbid, you need a
personal space, you need these kinds of flexibilities, and you have to fall back
on, it's life ultimately, you don't know what happens next, and if you have to fall
back on this lady, she needs to support you, and that time she comes back and
says the same thing, because this guy didn't support me when I needed it, why
should I support him? What your answer would be?” So, I know I had been very
harsh at that point of time by saying this, but then that was a reaction to the
situation, the things in life, you never expect to go smoothly every time and
everyday......Yes [finally I was able to get the kind of job I wanted from him],
and ultimately when I put this logic in front of him that you might need her
help at some point of time, may not be in terms of working as a back-up, but on
technical terms when you have to work on a fresh assignment you might need
some technical hand to help you out, even in those cases she'd be helpful and
collaborative. I think that's where it impacted.

FITTING DIVERSITY WITH BUSINESS NEEDS

Bearing Cost of Diversity to an Extent

Many organizations do not mind bearing the costs associated with having diverse
employees if they perceive that the output and productivity of those employees and
the organization’s ability to retain them outweighs those costs. In Prof. Rai’s words, it
is many times a ‘trade off’ to achieve the optimal results. One such challenge is the
costs associated with the needs of diverse employees. A range of instances were found
when business leaders tolerate the costs of having diverse employees when they perceive
those costs as lower compared to the increase in employee loyalty and productivity.

Niti says that an organization is finally a business unit, and so it can’t have infinitely
flexible standards. But her organization accommodates some requests that do not cost
too much on their balance sheet. It is because these leverages keep the employees
productive.

We are doing balanced business, so what we do is if someone places request
that I want to work part time, we do accommodate such requests. We have
quite a few—when I say quite a few I mean 5-6 colleagues who have come back
after maternity and they work only 50% or max[imum] 75% of their time. So,
we do accommodate those requests. For us ideally, it would be 100% time, but
this is critical for us and more than 50% of our workforce is women, so that's
something we definitely do.... And I see that by doing that, people actually
come fast. I don't see any productivity drop or anything like that. So, as I said,
we accommodate requests, many people say, we’ll work half time, or like that. So, we accommodate requests and the period they work for I find them very focused and productive.

Saurav and Monika observe that going beyond the policy of 3 month paid leave for maternity, their organization considers extending maternity leave for another 2-3 months. The organization does not mind bearing this cost for retaining the employee if they have been loyal and performing for around 5-6 years or more. Saurav believes that the perceived employee loyalty, satisfaction, and the output in productivity could outweigh this cost.

**Using Technology to Bridge Deficiency**

An extension to bearing the cost, at times installing low cost technologies can fit differently-abled individuals in jobs which they might be normally considered unfit for. Jiten was able to receive tremendous output from a differently-abled man in his organization whom he described as “highly intelligent”. One of his physical disabilities like trembling fingers while working with a roller mouse, which used to stuck in between due to finger movements, was overcome by a simple and cost effective solution of offering a far more efficient optical mouse.

Sudeep observes that a popular coffee chain in India realized that with high technology dependency of the self-service format which they are using, the order taking process has become fairly simple—with the menu on a mini board and a cabinet displaying the order and prices. This has mitigated the differences between abled and differently-abled speech and hearing impaired individuals in the customer facing roles to a big extent. They took this opportunity to recruit speech and hearing impaired individuals in these roles and with soft skills training, they have proved to be as efficient as the abled employees. The organization is also able to garner public respect as a result of this corporate social responsibility initiative.

Even if the technology has some costs of purchasing and training involved, organizations are willing to accommodate such requirements to enhance its public image as a diversity friendly organization. Sudeep offers an example from his own organization.

I think it’s fair to say that companies should invest a little bit in sort of getting over the practical issues. So for instance if you have a visually disabled person, the company should offer the option to give Jaws, immediate, you know giving training in jaws, its fairly simple....like issue because you know the software really doesn’t cost much and in Bombay at least there are organizations that are offering training on jaws. In [my company] there is a senior person who for a long time is visually disabled and long before softwares like jaws were available. But he has the gadgets that he needs to write stories. He is a brail reader and he functions normally. I mean perfectly.
Considering the Larger Needs

Sometimes, fitting diversity may require not costs, but appropriate indications from managers leading a diverse team. Monika believes that in a scenario, where the team is linguistically diverse, it is appropriate to demand an ‘egalitarian respect’ towards each other, including her. In a team with majority Bengalis, when she sees them talking to each other in Bangla, she is candid enough to stop them from doing so. She considers the need of feeling equal larger than the personal need of being cohesive. Neeraj has a similar view on religious diversity. He expects his Muslim team members to balance their religious and official priorities. He believes it is inappropriate to break in between important calls and meetings even if it is the namaz time of the employee. In such cases, the diversity needs and business needs have to accommodate each other. If the employee wants to respect his religious priorities, they should not schedule important calls during namaz time, and ask their colleagues to assist during such times. It is also fair for the organization to have certain expectations from its employees. Organizations, at the end of the day, function as business units. The question is not just about accommodating a specific employee—a cost that might be bearable—but the larger picture is that the managers must be careful enough to ensure no case becomes a bad precedent for the organization. Saurav shares his consideration in recruiting an employee at the second stage, with a special focus on maternity leave, after they have cleared the first round of appearing in various tests.

Whenever we recruit anyone for a position, there are certain pre-givens that we require from the employee for satisfactory output. For example, if we are hiring an editor, we assume that the next two year is very critical for the position. We don’t want any employee to go for a long leave during this period. We have a manpower planning and that is totally based on the projects available with the company. If we are working with a client on a project and expect it to finish in next one and a half year, we don’t expect anybody to plan a long leave during that one and a half year.

GOING BEYOND SET EXPECTATIONS

Culturally competent behaviors may at times demonstrate ‘out of the box’ ways of doing things. Human beings, organizations or even the government may not be so diversity friendly to understand all the needs of employees. Not only the laws, policies, norms, rules and procedures may need broad interpretation in ‘spirit’, the individual ways of behaving and job roles may also need to be evaluated in the light of set expectations from organization and its people.

Experimenting

One way of ‘going beyond set expectations’ at individual level is by experimenting with new careers, new ways and new things in the professional life to derive the best out of the cross-cultural settings one encounters.
In terms of experimenting in choosing career in cross-cultural settings, Sushmita believes that in a male dominant workplace, women ought to try new careers and roles. Stereotypes that men do better in certain fields like logistics and sales may create some sort of diffidence in women. But Sushmita says, no women must go and ask for those roles. And it is not that their superiors are averse to offering them those jobs. Men are far more accommodating now. So, women must follow their heart and experiment with their careers by switching over from traditionally ‘feminine’ roles like HR if they feel they are made for those target careers. Narrating the case of a female employee who voluntarily took up a sales job, Sushmita says,

I think she did that by experimenting, being clear on what she wants, going out and getting it. So went with the long cycle…. I knew that there were more women who were offered sales role fairly quick. Which is why, I am saying not only men need to give you roles, but you really need to go and ask. So, there has to be a mindset change on both the sides, not only one. …The more onus is on women, to go out and get experimenting on work, stretching, proving themselves and becoming their own people. Don’t ape or become masculine in the process. Do it as you want it, and go and experiment. And don’t be a cry baby. There’s no point. I know women who have made a rocking career. Easier said than done, but some women would need help, some wouldn’t need help. I think getting that out of the mind and going on for extra work.

Experimenting could also be in being open towards exploring new ways and trying them out, especially when the situation encountered is first of its kind. Dhiraj, in dealing with a newly joined female team member, explains that he had to think of new ways to help her to overcome the problem of getting jittery whenever a deadline was set, or when she was made to work under pressure. ‘That’s how the sales function works (sic)’, explains Dhiraj. Targets and deadlines are essential parts of this job. Therefore, it is natural for a boss to consistently remind these targets and deadlines to their team members. The lady was already labeled as ‘non performer’, and continuing like this in the team would have led to the termination of her employment. Going beyond the traditional expectation of setting targets and deadlines, Dhiraj offered some leverage, and the effort was not futile. It brought results, as Dhiraj says,

So I tried playing around with these kinds of work pressure we could handle out to her. We tried to extend the timeline. We tried, kind of getting the scare out of her…. You know, so when I realized this [that she gets jittery under pressure], I tried experimenting saying, ok, do you think ye ho sakta hai? (it is possible?) This is the kind of vertical I am looking this month. To aap kuch, kya lagta hai, kya kar sakte hai? (can you, what do you think, what can be done?) And I would tell ok, you don’t reply to me right now, don’t reply now because I am busy, aap ek kaam karo (do one thing). Think on it for two days and when you come with
an answer then tell me. So that is how, you know, I tried slightly experimenting with her, and I found that surely she was responding.

Dhiraj observes that the employee could overcome her anxiety and nervousness to a large extent in one month and he could reduce the target of six weeks that he had initially set for her deliverables to around three or four weeks.

**Complementing Each Other**

One way of inducing cohesion between culturally diverse employees, Jayant believes, is to involve them in activities that require reciprocal interdependence. That is, where the whole activity is done by team together and not done on part basis in sequential or pooled way. During his stint in an armed forces organization, he observed that regional divisions in the troop were quite visible in their personal or leisure settings. But this was not so during operations or exercises when they had to work in heterogeneous teams. The teams would comprise of regionally diverse members—two to three signal men, around same number of JCOs (non-officer ranks), and the rest soldiers. The task interdependence between these members from different regional settings provided conducive atmosphere to accommodate cross-cultural differences, if any.

Ayesha observes that technocrats as service providers may not be good in understanding business or commercial expectations. On the other hand, business clients may not understand practical constraints in technology involved in producing software applications. Therefore, the product can be satisfactorily delivered only when both work together. Looking back on her 10 year journey in the IT industry, she feels that with the complementary way of working now, business clients can speak and understand the technical language and understand such technology lot better, and a technical supplier too is familiar with business requirements from the product and can ask relevant questions for appropriate ‘value adds’ in the product. This is quite unlike the situation Ayesha usually encountered in her initial phase of career when technical and business people usually understood and spoke their own domain language. Therefore, diversity is important, because this gives opportunity not only to learn from each other, but also to make a team complete with diverse skills. This voice is opined by Sushmita too, who believes that the skills possessed by men and women, when put together forms a complete mix.

The very fact that it is important needs to be, why is it important? Women think differently, they’re on different skills, women have different skills, men have different skills, so putting together...It’s interesting, they think women can do well, men think men can do great job, synonymously come together to produce something else...women can learn a lot on say sales jobs and men can learn many different skills if both put together.
Molding with Change

As a visitor in a new country, one may restrict themselves to the familiar ways of living and retain ‘idiosyncratic habits’. One may either keep searching around for ghee (butter oil – Indian cooking grease that is considered pure and sacred) and spices locally to retain their familiar food habits, or alternately, try those salads which are readily available with some modification to suit the taste. There are people who do not mind treading those new and unchartered paths which can bring more compatibility with the environment. During her expat assignment in the UK, she realized that she would start rubbing people in wrong ways had she retained her old style of working. So from simple things like getting used to calendar invites and listening to everybody in the meetings, she took those leaps by learning facilitation skills which were unique for her at that point. She took some time to adopt her style, but she was there for long enough to pick those cues. She did not mind starting her journey from ‘unconscious incompetence’ which was before she was given the feedback that she was not listening to others but only to the leader and asking everyone to move ahead, and therefore perceived as being aggressive. She moved on to ‘conscious incompetence’, when she internalized this feedback, and finally to ‘conscious competence’ when she learned those skills and behaviors. Another consciousness was around her attire. She accommodated wearing grey or black western suits in global headquarters at London, though the more familiar and comfortable was the Indian way of dressing, especially Salwar Kameez which she continued wearing in the UK office too. But again, taking advice from relatives, she did not mind changing that habit too during the post 9/11 expat assignment in North America when the ‘sensitivities’, according to her, were higher.

Going Beyond Conventional Understanding

Moving onto a different culture, experiencing a ‘cultural shock’ and then reacting to it is putting the frog in boiling water. But when the frog is gradually heated with water, he doesn’t mind eventually boiling with it. These are the conventional understandings people get used to ‘boiling with’. But Sushmita, in her attempt to champion the cause of bringing gender diversity in the senior management roles, attempted to go beyond one such convention of promoting as per the seniority. In an internal recruitment process, she advocated for the double promotion of female manager, who was competent, capable and willing.

It was an internal job movement, right? The company launched an initiative wherein anyone can apply for any role. So when she applied, ignoring that she was junior this and that, and my view was give her a chance. Don’t outright reject a candidate thinking that the job is of a director and she’s just a deputy general manager. So don’t look at the title, look her at the years of experience and the passion she brings. So making sure that the process of interview is a
fairly objective one, because sometimes we get rejected right at the start. So I was one part of the challenge.

The male colleagues may have valid reasons to question such understandings. Rising up the corporate ladder and slogging hard for years together, a corporate citizen has many expectations. And one may feel that in the garb of ‘diversity’, the rightful share is denied. While the validity of this argument cannot be negated, an approach could be to look into the other side of the coin that when 13 people are reporting to the CEO, and 12 are male (according to Sushmita), there is reason for the Organization Development and Diversity Manager to champion the cause for diversity which is a global mandate for her company too. And when the selection is done based on the job competence and two of the three candidates are male, all three being competent, the bias towards female candidate may appear rational. This is different from the “experimenting” theme because experimenting involves risks and has chances of failure. In this section, the study highlights that after controlling for competence and performance, business leaders do have a rationale for being “pro-diversity”.

Diversity could sometimes go beyond the conventional understanding of religion, region, gender, etc. Ayesha believes ‘single parent’ identity can have its own unique challenges, and the team leaders can be benevolent to accommodate personal issues at work. Ayesha, after understanding the challenges her single parent male team member was facing in bringing up his three year old child, offered flexitime benefits which normally is understood to be requirement of female employees.

**Doing Beyond Legal Mandate**

Prof. Sen believes that being “pro-diversity” is a positive bias that ‘cleanses the soul of the organization’. Why only government should have the responsibility towards disprivileged sections of the society, is the argument he puts forth. During his managerial role in a leading manufacturing organization of India, he observed that social responsibility towards employees and society at large was the basic philosophy that ran his organization. Owning responsibility, this organization created the first of its kind example by implementing affirmative action for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes in the private sector. They have set up an ‘affirmative action group within the company and they are trying to voluntarily do pretty much the same thing before government imposes on other companies (sic)’. He adds that before they started doing community work, they set up things for their own employees. Even before compensations and benefits like provident fund, maternity leave and injury at work were legally mandated in India, they included those in the policies and practices along with other welfare systems, housing, health services, education, etc., which, according to him, together comprised of around 17 or 18 ‘firsts in the world’ at that time.

The HR managers must take up the responsibility of advocating to the senior management on designing and implementing policies sensitized by the social and legal
environment within which the organization operates, argues Sudeep. As pointed by Sushmita, the corporate laws on diversity in India are very weak. Therefore, she thinks that appropriate sensitizations from the external environment must reflect on the organizational policies and practices beyond the legal mandate laid down by the state. Sudeep believes, in this context, the Supreme Court Guidelines on the Vishakha case must be followed as seriously as any corporate legislation on sexual harassment. And it is the responsibility of HR managers to get a sexual harassment policy endorsed by the top management and constituting a sexual harassment committee that is empowered to hear such cases and take decisions.

**Enlarging One’s Own Space to Accommodate Other Cultures**

Each individual is unique and has own learning and ways of behaving. While some of that is dispositional, a lot of these qualities develop through cultural influences. One way of looking at things is to remain cocooned in the shell of one’s own set comforts, expectations and sometimes norms and even idiosyncrasies that arise from such influences. However, people may go out of their usual ways to accommodate others in cross-cultural situations. Niti recounts from her expat experiences at UK a rendezvous with a British lady who took a leap to bridge the cultural gap with her Indian friend.

Yeah, so that’s what I said, I had few people who were amazing. I don’t think you find them in the whole country. For example there was a [British] girl whom I am still in touch with. And I remember whenever for work I came in London, she stayed in London, I was in Birmingham. She always offered that I stay at night with her and also go for sight-seeing, which was so fascinating because this is not something that’s generally done. It’s very rare. In India probably we may, but I know them and I value that offer far more than in India, because I know someone was really genuine about it and making it out of way to happen. I remember she invited me for Halloween, so that I could see Halloween with her children. So, I really found some really great friends out there.

On a social note, Indian organizations may be seen as benevolent in offering more than what law prescribes because of their ‘family run’ nature which considers all its employees as extended kins, observes Sudeep. Therefore, ‘pretty benevolent relationship with their employees and so adjusting to diversity issues’ is part of their cultural ingredient. So adjusting to new diversities and making policies inclusive may not be an issue for them. On similar wavelength, Saurav believes that his “considerate” organization may come up with paternity benefits for employees who are in need.

**INNOVATIVE PRACTICES**

If the organization has the intent to value diverse backgrounds and to enhance employee satisfaction and loyalty as a result, it may find innovative practices to do so. Kuldeep shares that his host organization in the 'armed forces' category abroad cared towards the regional expressions of all expats coming from various geographic locations by
conducting Sunday prayer meetings. One can make its parallel with the Sunday mass of Catholics at the first instance. However, it used to be a monthly meeting where members of all four religions—Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims and Christians would have 20 minutes each to offer prayers. Within the armed forces personnel, there used to be priests of all four religions, and some of them also carried religious scriptures and book. It was compulsory for everyone to attend, so the practice was taken seriously by everyone and hence continued.

Organizations may also follow certain practices that demonstrate their cross-cultural considerations. These could be minor, even subtle if practiced for long. Kuldeep shares that in armed forces all over the world, there is a strong tradition of respecting ladies. If any ‘non officer’ lady enters a room, all men in the room would rise up as mark of respect towards her. Similarly, no officer picks up his plate before a lady’s dinner. One may argue to what extent these universal practices on gender differentiation hold good in various contexts, but these practices do reflect the philosophies of those organizations. Saurav shares that in his organization, if an employee is going for four month maternity leave, they would hire a backup for two another months. The contract employee thus gets one month to take charge of the process, and the employee upon returning from maternity can take the charge from contract employee during their last month. Though the process may not necessarily require one month handing over the charge, this prepares the organization for any unforeseen exigency.

Organizational leaders may also involve various tools and techniques to help employees deal with cross-cultural situations effectively. Renu shares that her organization, a multinational beverages firm, uses various simulation exercises such as live cases for its HR managers, wherein they are asked to breakdown the issue in terms of situations, like how they would react when a male supervisor walks up to them to know about the flexitime policy and its implementation during maternity.

DISCUSSION

The first objective of this study was to find the various culturally competent behaviors in dealing with cross-cultural situations effectively at workplace. The framework obtained from the qualitative data analysis illustrated various such behaviors under the first order categories that constituted six first order themes. Within the constraints of space, the previous section illustrated some of those themes. The second intriguing question that led this research was whether these behaviors affect the four characteristics of intergroup relations in organization as spelt by Alderfer and Smith (1982), namely, group boundaries, power differences, affective patterns, and cognitive formations (including distortions). This study finds several instances when such behaviors affected these characteristics. The themes or categories that define such behaviors are within quotes.
Group Boundaries
Culturally competent behaviors influence the permeability of boundaries of organization groups dominated by an identity group to involve more non-identity group individuals. “Going beyond conventional understanding”, Sushmita, in her role as a diversity leader, campaigned for the candidature of a female candidate for a senior management role which was multiple levels higher than her current position. By advocating for making the board diverse, she was able to make the group boundary of the senior management group—an all-male microcosm group—permeable. Prof. Sen observed that by “going beyond legal mandate”, his organization had implemented affirmative action policy to include scheduled caste and scheduled tribe employees in its various departments and functions dominated by privileged section of the society. Sudeep observed that by “using technology to overcome deficiencies” of specially-abled individuals, a coffee chain in Mumbai was able to recruit them in customer facing jobs that are usually retained by abled employees. Similar sensitivity was shown by Jiten towards recruiting an employee in his firm who had physical handicaps. By adjusting to his needs by simpler ways and sensitizing his peers, his organization helped him getting inducted in his workgroup.

Power Differences
Culturally competent behaviors broaden the access of resources by different groups. Monika, Renu and Ayesha would extend the flexitime benefits, traditionally associated with female employees mainly during maternity, to its male employees as well. “Going beyond the conventional understanding” that only females could be the disadvantaged group when family comes to picture, Renu would incorporate a male employee also within the ambit of maternity policy if he has to take care of his wife and kid back home. Similarly, Ayesha extended flexi-timings to his team member, who was a single father, to take care of his child back home. Monika offered this benefit to an aged employee who worked from home.

Affective Patterns
The degree to which members associate mainly positive feelings with their own group and mainly negative feelings with other groups creates affective patterns (Alderfer and Smith, 1982). Culturally competent behaviors do help alternating those feeling to some extent, if not completely changing them. When a male team member came to Ayesha and expressed his hesitation to be a backup for the lady who was going for maternity, Ayesha, through her “communication” and “connecting with him”, helped him understand the personal and professional benefits of extending such help. She explained to him that in other projects he could ask her similar favors if he helped her now. This was understood and accepted by him and Ayesha, thus, could utilize him as required. Through the same approach, Neeraj also changed the affective patterns of his team members towards a colleague to stop them from bantering him with jokes.
targeting his community. Depending on the target’s nature, using either a straightforward and blunt approach or a subtle and polite way, he communicated that one must be considerate towards ethnic identities of individual and should not crack jokes on their perceived ‘idiosyncrasies’.

**Cognitive Formations (and distortions).** Alderfer & Smith (1982) observe that every group has a worldview to explain the nature of its interaction with the out-group members and the associated success or failures. They further posit that the behaviors of leaders and representatives of the group reflect these cognitive formations and alter them. This study finds that some of the participants have interpreted their cross-cultural encounters to define the ‘cognitive formations’ of their identity group. For example, Sudeep, an openly gay man, had developed romantic attraction towards his male superior whom he reported to during his younger days. Unable to manage the complexity of the situation, he had to get himself transferred to a new role ultimately. Today he does not view this episode as a gay issue. He thinks that romantic attraction between peers can have either heterosexual or homosexual connotation. Trying to create a worldview that de-stigmatizes homosexuality and same-sex relationships, he does not differentiate his case from that of any other male employee who would feel similar attraction towards their female superior.

**DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study suggests two directions for future research. Following similar qualitative approach, cross-national research teams can find culturally competent behaviors in different nations. It would be interesting to find out how the cultural dimensions of a nation determine culturally competent behaviors in that country. After developing several culturally competent behaviors as measurable constructs, this work can be carried out as a multi-level quantitative study by identifying the culturally competent behaviors as individual level variables and cultural dimensions as country level variables. This country-wise clustered data can then be used to predict cultural competence at workplace. Though there exist several instruments on cultural competence, many of them are either based on the expert-subject relationships such as those for the healthcare sector (e.g., CCAL-Kelly and Meyers, 1997; IAPCC-R-Campinha-Bacote, 2002; CCA-Schim et al., 2003) or capture only the transnational/global identities at workplace (e.g., BASIC-Ruben and Kealey, 1979; Global Competency and Intercultural Sensitivity Index (ISI)- Olson and Kroeger, 2001). For measuring cultural competence at workplace from a diversity perspective, it is recommended to use Intercultural Behavioral Assessment Indices (IBAI) (Byram, 2000) and Intercultural Competence Assessment Tool (INCA- Byram, 2000 and colleagues cf. Sinicrope et al., 2007) that take into account overall diversity. IBAI has already been used to measure the intercultural competence of managers (e.g., Repeêkienë et al., 2011).

The second research question stemming up from this study’s findings is: to what extent are individuals ‘identity specific culturally competent’, and how/when cultural
competence cuts across diverse cultural identities? In other words, does cultural competence towards one or more identities makes individuals culturally competent towards other identities also? This study suggests several instances when respondents showed sensitivity and responsible behaviors towards some identities, but did not do so in case of others. Kuldeep responded sensitively when he was subjected to a racial discrimination in a foreign country. However, back home, in author’s view, he did not show appropriate gender sensitivity while dealing with a sexual harassment case at his workplace. Similarly, Monika was sensitive towards gender and age, but showed somewhat indifference towards linguistic and regional identities at her workplace. Hence, one may wonder whether individuals understand ‘vulnerability’ identity specific or diversity specific, and whether cultural competence is really an aggregate measure as defined by Cross et al. (1989). Studies show that individuals have different levels of sensitivity towards different identities such as age, gender, physical ability, sexual orientation etc. (e.g., Repeèkienë et al, 2011). Hence the consensus is yet to be arrived on whether cultural competence should be measured in general or ‘identity specific’.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

It was desired to triangulate the data by recruiting individuals who were mentioned in the interviews as actors in the respondents’ cross-cultural encounters. It was also intended to recruit business leaders that worked closely with the respondents. But that was not possible due to practical issues. This could be seen as a limitation for this study because it hindered from getting more reliable and stronger data. However, the data was obtained from a diverse sample and all the themes emerged from more than one source, hence, it can be considered as a minor limitation.

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