

INDIVIDUALISM AND INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

--- A Case Study of My Son's Application for PhD Candidate in the American Universities

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Abstract:

China has become the world's largest source of overseas students including the number of applicants for PhD candidates in American universities. However, many Chinese university students do not know how applicants access and integrate particular uses of self-representation and intercultural communication into their application. Therefore, the author takes his son's application for PhD candidate in American universities as an example, briefly introduces individualism's fundamental meaningfulness and analyzes individualism's influence on the high education involving PhD education and discusses that individualism is core value of American culture. Meanwhile, application process of PhD candidate is a process of intercultural communication. Thus, it is very specially significant for Chinese students to know individualism and its influence on intercultural communication, especially including important function to apply for PhD candidate of American universities.

Keywords: individualism, intercultural communication, American university, American higher education, PhD candidate

1. INTRODUCTION

China has become the world's largest source of overseas students, accounting for 14 percent of global total, according to a report released by the Center for China and Globalization and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences on September 17, 2012. And, "the number of Chinese students studying in America grew so robustly that China beat India to become the biggest source of overseas students in America in 2010. More than 157,000 Chinese students studied in the United States in 2011, or 22 percent of total number of foreign students in the country (Wang, 2012).

Also, the number of applicants for PhD candidates in the American universities increased. However, application process for PhD program in American Universities is very complex. Many Chinese university students are not clear about the right way to go about applying and do not know how applicants access and integrate particular uses of self-representation and intercultural communication into their application. Thus, the Chinese students should learn some basic knowledge about intercultural communication, know the

differences between Chinese and American cultures and understand the core of the American cultural values – individualism and its great influence on the application process before they begin to apply for PhD programs in the American universities. In this way, the students will successfully get different fellowships, assistantships and other scholarships and pursue graduate education in the American universities.

Therefore, the author will discuss the real meaningfulness of American individualism and its influence on American daily life including application process for PhD programs of American universities, and how the Chinese students should show their abilities through his son's application for PhD program. Finally, we will find how important individualism is in American culture and how to understand individualism, so as to strengthen intercultural communication and smoothly realize their own desires and pursuit PhD across the borders.

2. MY SON'S APPLICATION STORY

By the end of 2007, my son was a senior student of Peking University, one of Chinese top universities, and passed the TOFLE and GRE exams. At that time, my son had a very strong desire that he would have a chance to go to the United States for his PhD. He was interested in Chemical Polymer very much, studied it well, and got good scores. Everything almost seemed to go well with his preparation and he was qualified for the requirements of PhD program in the some American universities. He wrote more than ten English application letters and fortunately received near ten confirmation letters with different fellowships and assistantships from these American universities.

However, my son did not feel happy because he did not receive the confirmation letter with fellowship from the best university in his heart. And then, my son wrote letters to one PhD tutor for many times by email, and did not receive any answer from the tutor. My son did not know how to further contact that tutor and feared rejection from that university. At that time, my son wondered why that tutor did not give him a reply and how to get further information from that university. One day, my son phoned me and told me about his trouble matters. I thought of them just for a little while, and told him something about the American cultural value, especially about individualism and its influence on American daily life. And I went on that you should testify you were a qualified person for PhD program in that university and could finish your study for PhD program under the guidance and teaching of that tutor. At the same time, I told my son that the tutor may receive many letters every day if you could not show out your academic talent and future potentials. Of course, the tutor could not give you reply. Later, I gave my son some suggestions about how to show his academic abilities and advantages.

According to my suggestion, my son read several papers published by that tutor and her students, and tried his best to find out some imperfect ideas or thoughts on the papers. And then my son wrote one letter to that tutor and discussed some questions about the papers. Fortunately, it was only two days or three days when my son sent his letter to that tutor by email. My son received the tutor's letter. The letter said like this: "Your remarks are insightful. I'll encourage you to apply for our department. I'll keep one eye on you....." It was imaginable how happy and encouraging my son was after he got the tutor's letter. Very soon, my son got interview announcement from the university graduate office. My son prepared the interview very well and easily got a good result. After three days passed away, my son received the confirmation letter and got fellowship each year for five years in April, 2008.

3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Individuals learn their values through the socialization process. Individuals's behavior is affected by cultural values and the individual values they hold. Cultural values provide broad guidelines about what are acceptable means for achieving end-states in different situations and influence cultural norms and rules. Individual values provide specific guidelines for behavior across situations (Feather, 1990).

To some extent, being aware of core values of one's culture and the existence of equally valid different values in other cultures can help us communicate and relate better across cultures. From the above vivid case, we may easily find that any person wants to communicate with another person from other culture when pursuing his or her desire for PhD program or something else. People need to understand the cultural values you transmit when you interact with someone from another culture, as well as understand the other person's cultural values. "Cultural values generally are normative in that they inform a member of a culture what is good and bad, right and wrong, true and false, positive and negative, and the like (Xu, 2012)."

Therefore, we should know that individualism is one of the core values of American culture and understand individualism's influence on the higher education including PhD education, especially could really adapt to an American culture and learn how to show one's academic talents and abilities during the application process, so as to reach one's own purpose of pursuing PhD program or other higher education in the American universities. Now, it is necessary for us to understand the American individualism's fundamental definition and its functions on the application for American PhD program, and the influence related with American higher education through the case's analysis and discussion.

3.1 What is Individualism?

Gould and Kolb defined individualism as 'belief that the individual is an end in himself (or herself), and as such ought to realize his /or her/ "self" and cultivate his /or her/own judgment, notwithstanding the weight of pervasive social pressures in the direction of conformity.' (Du and Tian, 2010)

Individualism indicates the extent to which a society is a loosely knit social framework in which people are supposed to take care of only of themselves and their immediate families. There is more emphasis on "I" than on "we". According to Hofstede's study of IBM, the U.S. Ranked number1 in individualism worldwide, followed by Australia, Great Britain, Canada, and the Netherlands. Countries that ranked lowest on individualism included Colombia, Venezuela, Panama, Ecuador, and Guatemala (Tou, 2011).

From the above definition, we may know that individualism emphasizes personal freedom and achievement and therefore individual culture awards social status to personal accomplishments such as important discovery innovations, or great artistic achievements. Furthermore, individualism regards every man as an independent, sovereign entity who possesses an inalienable right to his own life, a right derived from his nature as a rational being. Individualism holds that a civilized society, or any form of association, cooperation or peaceful coexistence among men, can be achieved only on the basis of the recognition of individual rights -- and that a group, as such, has no rights other than the individual rights of its members. Thus, we should really understand the meaning and its content of individualism.

But in China, individualism often equals with selfishness, so that some of Chinese people misunderstand the exact meanings and real contents of the American individualism. Especially, they do not know that the individualism influence on every field including daily life in the American culture and society.

Therefore, the purpose of this exploratory study is to examine how individualism influences higher education and applicants' overall attitude towards PhD program's applicant process.

3.2 Individualism and American Higher Education

Nowadays, American higher education is known for its quality and reputation. Higher education in the United States began with the founding of Harvard College in 1636. In the past 371 years, it has developed into a large enterprise with a very complex system. The higher education comprises four categories of institutions: a) the university; b) the four-year undergraduate institution, the college; and c) the technical training institution; and d) the two-year community college. (Xie, 2007)

Meanwhile, American universities offer three main categories of graduate degrees. In most fields of specialization, a master's degree can be earned by one or two academic years of study beyond the bachelor's degree. A Ph.D. degree (doctor of philosophy) usually takes at least three years beyond the master's. To earn a Ph.D. In almost any field, the student most generally pass oral and written examinations in his specialty, produce a long research paper which makes an original contribution to his field of study, and pass reading examinations in one or two foreign languages. There are also graduate professional schools in medicine, dentistry, and law, among other fields. (Zhu, 2001)

In the U.S. Educational system, by contrast, education is viewed more as a productive activity. It is a process of acquiring and interpreting information about and a better understanding of things no one completely knows or understands.

Since Americans view higher education as a productive activity, they expect university students, especially graduate students to produce their own ideas. This approach is usually unfamiliar to Chinese students, whose tradition requires them more to learn what others who are older and wiser say about a topic, and not to presume they can add something new themselves.

Particularly at the graduate level, students are expected to produce "original thinking" in their areas of specialization. U.S. Professors often say that learning how to approach studies independently, to analyze and synthesize material, and to develop their own approaches and ideas are the most difficult intellectual challenges. U.S. Higher education reflects the society's general faith in the "scientific methods" for determining the "facts". Facts are considered much more central to academic work than are opinions, impressions, or emotions. Facts are "objective", as the Americans see the world. Facts are determined when trained people use appropriate equipment or methods to count whatever it is they are trying to understand. Americans are more likely than Chinese to believe that things can be studied in isolation, apart from their background or context. They are taught to assume the existence of an "objective" universe that can be better understood through proper methods.

The general American emphasis on individualism and individual achievement is reflected in conceptions of the ownership of knowledge. Even though a scholar's ideas may be spoken in public or printed in publications that are widely available, the ideas are considered to be the property of the person who developed them. The ideas or methods do not belong to the public.

3.3 Individualism and Successful Application

Understanding American culture is legitimate concern of American higher education more, it is

essential. Any applicants who make their efforts to understand American cultural core value and to gain precious knowledge about how to behave in American culture.

First of all, any applicants for PhD programs in American universities do not misunderstand individualism as a core cultural value in American culture and correctly know that the American people admire individualism, especially they admire successor who get success through hard working. However, “success” means “the fact that you have achieved some thing that you want and have been trying to do or get.” “the fact of becoming rich or famous or of getting a high social position.” Another is “ a person or thing that has achieved a good result and been successful.” (Oxford Dictionary)

Also, when a person uses ideas and achievements of others to create something new, something above and beyond what already exists, the creation is the person’s own individual accomplishment, a result of his or her own initiative, effort, ingenuity and reason -- not that of his or her predecessors. (Western Culture Global, 2013)

The individual with his her power of reason, can gain knowledge, competency, self-reliance and self-respect through his or her own effort and self-development. Therefore, any applicant should have some fundamental knowledge about American individualism during their application process, actively overcome some traditional thinking and show their own academic talents and advantages according to the university requirements which involved into American cultural core values.

4. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis and discussion, we may know that individualism has rooted in American higher education system and permeated in the whole higher education including the educational goal, content, method and result. Every applicant, therefore, is aware of the individualistic culture in the American higher education.

Also, every applicant should understand the American cultural values when applying for PhD program and interacting with some professors from American culture, as well as understand the American professors’ cultural values.

To some extent, foreign applicants for American PhD programs in the universities, they know some fundamental knowledge about American culture, especially American cultural values and its core value - individualism. It will be benefit for foreign applicants to apply for PhD programs and communicate with some desired professors they really want in their application process. At the same time, application process of PhD candidate is also a process of intercultural communication.

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