

# A Dynamic Perspective of Intercultural Difficulty Management

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**Abstract:** Traditional functionalistic perspective of intercultural difficulty studies failed to capture the dynamics in intercultural interactions due to its theoretical assumptions and prevalent methodology. This paper, therefore, adopts a dynamic perspective of intercultural communication to investigate how a Chinese overseas student managed her intercultural difficulties in Australia. Using repeated episodic interviews over six months, this study maps the development in her intercultural difficulty management processes and engagement in the new environment. This paper has both theoretical and methodological significance. Theoretically, it emphasizes the roles of context which has been underplayed in previous intercultural communication studies. Methodologically, the longitudinal, qualitative method of repeated episodic interviews over a period of time enables the researcher to capture the dynamic nature of intercultural interactions that is missing in studies using large-scale quantitative surveys.

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## Introduction

Previous studies in intercultural communication difficulty mainly focus on communication misunderstandings and how they can lead to a breakdown in interactions and possible conflict management. These studies have either recommended linguistic strategies such as repair, repetition, or rephrasing to compensate the communication breakdown (e.g., Bialystock, 1990; Faerch & Kasper, 1983; Poulisse, 1990; Selinker, 1972; Tarone, 1980) on a micro, linguistic level, or, on a macro level, they have identified different types of difficulties (e.g., Liu, 2000, 2001, 2002; Wan, 1999) and have suggested adapting to different communication and conflict management styles when communicating with people from different cultures (e.g., Ting-Toomey, 1988, 2005b; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Because of the problems in conducting extensive studies about interaction among a large number of people over an extended period of time, much of the research has tended to focus on cross sectional observation studies or reports from participants of their difficulties and misunderstandings. These studies tend to focus more on the content and sources of difficulty rather than interactive, dynamic elements over time. That is, difficulty studies in previous studies have treated intercultural difficulty as static. However, difficulty, which influences interactions before it gets resolved, is dynamic, including its background, history, a moment and outcomes (Howard Nicholas, 2009). Therefore, the concept of intercultural difficulty management offers a much wider and richer ground for research than static linguistic misunderstanding, cross-cultural miscommunication and conflict management.

This paper attempts to explore intercultural difficulty management from a dynamic perspective,

aiming to explore the dynamic aspect of intercultural difficulty management process. “Difficulty”, in its dictionary definition, refers to a problem or a state of being not easy, requiring efforts, strength, skill, or ability (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary). In this study, it refers to perceived relational problems especially face-threatening situations that occur in intercultural interactions.

One of the reasons why previous studies on intercultural difficulty mainly examined the static aspects may be due to their theoretical assumptions. For example, Byram (1997) claims in his critique of Gudykunst’s (1994, 2002) underplaying of language issues in intercultural communication:

The significance of linguistic competence is down-graded ... in the perspective taken by Gudykunst (1994), who argues that ‘the processes operating when we communicate interculturally are the same as when we communicate intraculturally’. (1994, x)

Byram is an example of a scholar who finds the emphasis on similarity unsatisfactory, and who argues that the process of intercultural communication actually differs from that of intra-cultural communication in “the subjective experience of interaction in a foreign language” (Byram, 1997, p. 41). Intercultural communication focuses on the communication among members from different cultures, whereas intra-cultural communication refers to communication among members sharing the same cultural background. Byram (1997) further explains that “the foreign speaker may experience a degree of powerlessness” when he/she is communicating with a native speaker and “may sense the constraints of insufficient knowledge and skill in linguistic competence to meet the specific requirements of the interaction” (p. 41).

The other reason is probably that the previous intercultural difficulty studies have mainly taken traditional functionalistic approach. This approach aims to identify variations in communication behaviors and assumptions from group to group (Martin & Nakayama, 2007). Cross-/intercultural communication research typically regards culture as a main variable and assumes that intercultural communication difficulties are likely to be caused by cultural differences. With this approach, researchers have identified, on a macro level, the content and sources of intercultural difficulties and have suggested that adapting to different communication styles when communicating with people from different cultures should reduce intercultural difficulties and enhance intercultural communication. However, people often bring to intercultural communication different cultural frames, values and personalities that make adaptation difficult. In many situations, it is not clear who should adapt, to what norms and styles, and for what purpose (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel & Roy, 2015).

For these reasons, I approach the intercultural difficulty from a dynamic perspective with a longitudinal and qualitative research method to explore the dynamic aspect of intercultural difficulty management.

#### **A Dynamic Perspective on Intercultural Difficulty Management**

Dynamics or Change is regarded as a fundamental principle of the universe in the Chinese philosophy, and it guides Chinese beliefs and behaviors (Chen, 2009). According to the *Book of Changes* or *I Ching*, an ancient Chinese writing, change itself is the only constant phenomenon of the universe. A dynamic perspective enables the researcher to follow the changing context and analyze the dynamic process of intercultural difficulty management. To analyze the moment-to-moment intercultural interactions, the poststructuralist approach is also useful in this study.

Rather than taking culture as the main variable, poststructuralist approach starts from individuals and treats culture in terms of individual's own interpretations. Within this approach, Jensen (2004) develops a model of intercultural communication in complex, multiethnic societies. From her model, an analytical tool of "positions of experiences" is useful for this study. "Positions of experiences" refers to "the fact that all interpretations are bounded in individual experiences, but although the experiences are subjective, they are related to the social position of a person" (ibid, p. 6). In other words, people's understanding of the world is based on their own experiences, but their experiences are limited by the social positions they are located in the society. This approach distinguishes from traditional functionalist

approach to intercultural communication models in that it focuses on individual differences so that actors' different experiences are not only related to their cultures but also to their social positions in society.

As Jensen (2004) suggests, using positions of experience as an analytical tool has the following advantages:

1. Awareness of the importance of different positions in interpreting communication;
2. Persons in intercultural communication always have different opportunities to give different positions of themselves.
3. It focuses on individual differences, but is interconnected with structural differences.

In other words, starting from individuals, the concept of positions of experience in subjectivity allows to connect individual differences with structural differences, and to capture the dynamics of individual's difficulty management process both within an interactive episode and over time.

#### **Identity Negotiation Theory and Subjectivity**

Identity and subjectivity are related by their attempts to understand the role of the person in communicative interactions, but they focus on different aspects of the self.

The most widely employed theory of the self in recent intercultural communication research is Ting-Toomey's identity negotiation theory (1999, 2005a). This theory is useful for comparing cultural influences on the presentation of the self in daily interactions. It is an integrated theory that draws on important work of the social identity theory (e.g., Brewer & Miller, 1996), symbolic interactionism (e.g., McCall & Simmons, 1978), identity negotiation (Ting-Toomey, 1993) and relational dialectics (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The identity negotiation theory views identity as the central explanatory mechanism in the process of the intercultural communication. Identity is defined in this theory as "reflective self-images constructed, experienced, and communicated by the individuals within a culture in a particular interaction situation" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, p. 39). "Negotiation" here means "a transactional interaction process whereby individuals in an intercultural situation attempt to assert, define, modify, challenge, and/or support their own and others' desired self-images" (ibid, p. 40).

The core assumptions of the identity negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 1999, 2005a) are that the individuals of all cultures have the basic needs for identity security, trust, inclusion, connection, predictability and stability on personal and social identity level. When they are experiencing a culturally familiar environment and their personal or social identities are positively endorsed, they tend to have identity security, inclusion, predictability and stability.

In contrast, when they are situated in a culturally unfamiliar, hostile and unpredictable environment, they tend to experience identity emotional vulnerability. Therefore, effective intercultural communication involves discovering salient identity issues that individuals desire and affirming, respecting their positively desirable identities in the intercultural encounters.

Although identity negotiation theory posits a dynamic and mutual communication situation, this mutual communication is idealized to some extent. In reality, ethnocentrism widely exists and it is not uncommon that one interlocutor of an intercultural encounter is not always cooperative and willing to understand the other interlocutor's culture value. This problem, according to Jensen (2004), is caused by the missing factor of power in traditional functionalist approach to intercultural communication studies. It can be argued that power is discussed in intercultural communication (e.g., Hofstede's power difference dimension), however this power issue is discussed in terms of cross-cultural comparison and contrast though not mentioned in intercultural communication studies. Moreover, although identity in the functionalist approach to intercultural communication studies is regarded as multifaceted and fluid, it tends in much of the research to be treated in practice as a stable category based on "culture" and reflecting the core value of this culture reproduced as one's social identity in one's intercultural interactions (Oetzel, 2009). The possibility of more flexible approaches can be found by incorporating the notion of "subjectivity" into these analyses.

The poststructuralist approach to intercultural communication goes a step further. As mentioned above, this approach starts from individuals, and the concept of positions of experience in subjectivity relates individual differences to structural differences. It also contends that an individual's identity is diverse, contradictory, dynamic and changing over historical time and social space. It conceives subjectivity as multiple and decentered rather than unitary and centered (Weedon, 1997).

### Methodology

One of reasons for prevalence in much intercultural communication research (especially in North America) of functionalist approaches and quantitative research methods is a lack of emphasis on the interaction between culture, context and linguistic competence in intercultural communication. In contrast, this paper used an interpretive approach, and a qualitative data collection method.

The participants in this study were international students who used English as their second language in Australia. Since I am Chinese, it was convenient and

advantageous for me to identify participants from China so that I could talk to them in both English and Chinese and better understand their cultural interpretations of experiences. So I narrowed down the potential participants to Chinese overseas students who were born and received primary and secondary education in Mandarin-speaking schools in People's Republic of China. These students were transferring from a learning-English-as-a-foreign-language environment to an English-speaking environment and thus were most likely to have interactional difficulties in English.

Participants were approached via advertising by e-newsletters and flyers in Australian universities at the end of the second semester in 2008, as this was a good time for many students to reflect on their life and study after one year's study. During a period of six months in 2009, five participants were interviewed several times about their experiences and reflections over time. The interviews I used were multiple episodic interviews. They included two dimensions: episodic interviews and repeated follow-up interviews. An episodic interview is defined by Flick (2009, pp. 185-186) as the following:

The episodic interview yields context-related presentations in the form of a narrative, because these are closer to experiences and their generative context than other presentational forms. They make the processes of constructing realities more readily accessible than approaches which aim at abstract concepts and answers in a strict sense. ... it starts from episodic—situational forms of experiential knowledge. Special attention is paid to in the interview to situations or episodes in which the interviewee has had experiences that seems to be relevant to the question of the study.

In other words, episodic interviews have the advantages of both the narrative interview and the semi-structured interview. On the one hand, interviewees are allowed to unfold their views with the least interruption from interviewers. On the other hand, by asking different types of relevant questions after interviewees' narrations, interviewers can make more explicit their interviewees' knowledge, assumptions, and position in a dialogical form. In this way, interviewers have "more options to intervene and direct the interview with a series of key questions concerning a subject recounting and defining situations" (Flick, 2006, pp. 185-186). Therefore, the episodic interview is not a one-sided situation as it is in the case of narrative interviews, but rather an open dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee. In this way, narratives and question-answer sequences in the episodic interview compose two different forms of data.

I also conducted repeated follow-up interviews to capture my participants' reflections on their experiences over time. These interviews thus made it possible to analyze events or processes in terms of their meaning

for individuals retrospectively (Flick, 2009), because the action itself might not be very meaningful to them at the time of its performance or it may have different meanings to them over time (Anderson, 1987).

The data were firstly separated into the storytelling section, the question-answer section and the participants' reflections on their stories at different times. Then open coding was performed, line by line (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), in order to identify different categories. For example, words like "shocked" and "annoyed" were categorized as "feelings", and "I said nothing" or "I complained" as "strategies". However, this open coding was just the first step. These categories could not present each participant's profile and their experiences as a whole. So I decided to write up the narrative of each participant as a whole text.

Following the open coding, separate files were created for each participant. Within each file, the participant's data were organized in three sections: the narrative section, the question-answer section and the reflection section. The reflection section was arranged into "time one", "time two", and "time three", according to the participant's reflections on the same story at different times. Each story was analyzed in terms of its topic, setting, participants, message content, act sequence, rules for interaction and norms of interpretation (Saville-Troike, 2003). Analyzing stories with this ethnographic approach helped identify the problematic points and influential factors within each story. Analyzing the question-answer section and the reflection section helped identify the participants' perceptions and reactions at different times as well as helping me to trace the change on their perceptions.

The interpretation of the data was based on participants' perceptions. Whether the sources of their difficulties came from the language or culture or other factors, participants' difficulties are mainly expressed as perceptions at a certain point of time and in a specific context. In everyday communication, people bring in interpretive frames. Sometimes these frames can be understood from the nature of conversations, and sometimes they cannot. Only when crises occur, decisions have to be made, or some boundary lines need to be drawn do people realize what their frames are. In most of the interactions I am discussing, the framing was clear and overt, and this framing guided my interpretation. But sometimes I was uncertain about the framing. In this sense, there might be some ambiguity in certain contexts about language or cultural issues. To make a consistent interpretation, I had to check and look back systematically at my participant's previous behavior in various interactions.

Then I recreated a sequential narrative of the participants' experiences in terms of what happened, what caused the problem or difficult situation, why the participant felt unhappy, annoyed, angry or frustrated,

what they did to deal with the problem and why, how they reflected on their stories, what, if any, were the changes in their perceptions. With this narrative, the participants' images and personalities were vividly presented and their development was also depicted.

After that, I compared the experiences of these five participants and it showed that all their difficulty experiences fitted into two categories—information exchange difficulties and social relational difficulties. So I arranged their stories in the order of these two categories. Thus cross-case comparisons became possible.

Then I compared the participants' reactions and strategies within the same kind of difficulties. For example, how they dealt with information exchange difficulties, such as when they did not know how to respond in English to a challenge or face-threatening behavior. Cross-case comparison was also conducted under the sub-themes of each kind of difficulty. For example, within social relational difficulties, I compared how they dealt with issues of face, sociality rights and obligations and interactional goals. With such comparisons, participants' diversity of dealing with the same kind of difficulties was presented.

This paper focuses on one participant's one case of social relational difficulty to demonstrate the intercultural difficulty management process (for more cases, please see Hou, Simkin & Nicholas, 2012).

### Case Study Data

The following case study of one Chinese international student called Fay is used here to illustrate the development of intercultural difficulty management process from a dynamic perspective. Among the five participants, Fay's case was selected in this paper because Fay had rich life experience and diverse intercultural interactions, and her story chosen here is a typical one to show that a dynamic perspective can capture the development of the intercultural difficulty management both moment-to-moment and over time.

#### Fay

Fay was a 29-year old PhD student in a Law program at an Australian University during the period of data collection. Before coming to Australia, Fay had worked as a lecturer at a Chinese university as well as a part-time lawyer for a couple of years. In other words, Fay had rich experience in English use, both general English and legal English.

Shortly after her arrival in Australia, to improve her English and enrich her vocabulary, Fay took a part time job as a shop assistant in a local market where she had more contacts with local Australian people and more opportunities to speak English. But she had some problems with her boss, a lady called Mary. The

following story shows how a small problem between Fay and Mary escalated into a conflict.

### **A Quarrel with Mary**

At the market where Fay worked, Friday evenings and Saturdays were the busiest time of the week. To take as many customers as possible, most shop owners did not give their employees supper break and lunch break during these two days, but some employees would buy some finger food if they were starving and finished quickly while serving customers. Fay's quarrel with her boss happened on one Saturday.

One Saturday, I told her (Mary) I would go to the toilet. On the way back, I bought some food as my lunch. I thought it more convenient to buy my lunch on my way back so that I wouldn't have to waste time by making a second trip. But when she (Mary) saw the food, she was unhappy and told me, "If you want to buy some food, you should let me know first." But I felt that it's my right, you know, it's lunch time. I just wanted to save time. So I explained to her that I felt hungry and I bought something on my way back so that I didn't have to waste time to make a second trip. You know, usually on Saturdays, we didn't have time to have lunch because it's too busy. So usually we bought chips or something easy to carry and eat. After hearing the explanation, she was still unhappy and I was angry and accused her of being inhumane, because we were human beings and we needed to have lunch, but she didn't give us time. After our argument, she changed and gave us some time for lunch on Saturdays. (Fay's first interview)

### **Moment-to-moment Dynamic Development**

From the dynamic perspective, an individual comes to a new culture with previous experiences stored in his/her communication repertoires. These repertoires affected his/her interpretations of intercultural encounters and at the same time were enriched and drawn on in the process of difficulty management process (Jensen, 2004). In relation to this example, Fay at first tried to be assertive to her boss Mary and explained that as a considerate employee, her behavior was for the interest of Mary's business, but when this integrative strategy did not work, Fay had to shift to a dominating strategy for fairness. Reframing her relationship with Mary from an employee-employer one to a human-human and a lawyer-defendant one, she strategically changed the power difference and solved the difficulty effectively.

### **Participant's Reflections on the Event over Time**

In Fay's first interview, she felt that Mary was too concerned about her business and wanted to get as much as possible from her employee. In the event, Fay even

accused her of "inhuman". But in the second interview that took place one month later, Fay said she had a better understanding of Mary.

She later explained to me that it's the rule of the shop that we should let her know whatever we want to do. If we do not come back from the toilet after 15 minutes, she would begin to worry about the safety of her employees. After these explanations we could understand each other. I don't think she is bad, (she is) just too concerned about her business, because all her family's life relies on this shop. (Fay's second interview)

Two months later, Fay quit her part time job at the market and took an office job at her university. On reflection, Fay said in her third interview that she felt really uncomfortable at the market where she worked because bosses there were in "lower social economic status" and "trying to exploit as much as possible from their employees", but she felt much better at her office work and said her new colleagues were "more friendly", "caring", "well-educated" and she was given "more freedom and autonomy".

### **Discussion**

The findings of the study demonstrated that when located in a new environment, having to communicate in a second language, Fay had to negotiate her identities in the new environment. As Ting-Toomey (1999, 2005a) argues, individuals in all cultures have the basic motivation needs for identity security, inclusion and predictability and they tend to experience identity emotional security in a culturally familiar environment and experience identity emotional vulnerability in a culturally unfamiliar environment. Fay felt uncomfortable when she was working in the market but much happier at her new workplace in an office because her identity in the latter environment was similar to her previous ones in China working as a university lecturer and lawyer who was recognized as well-educated with higher social status.

The concept of multiple subjectivity (Weedon, 1997) could also help explain the selection and outcomes of strategies. When Fay came to Australia and engaged in interactions with her Australian interactions, she brought in different social and symbolic resources. Drawing on her symbolic resources in difficulty management, she reframed their identity and relationships with her interlocutors and thus influenced the selection and outcomes of strategy use. In relation to Fay's quarrel with Mary, in Fay's repertoire of identities, she was a teacher, a lawyer, an international student, an employee, a wife, a Chinese, so she had these symbolic resources available to draw on. When Fay had an argument with her boss Mary over her buying lunch without letting Mary know beforehand, Fay first tried an integrative strategy to explain the reason, but it didn't

work. Then she drew on her symbolic resource as a lawyer and “accused” her boss of depriving her of having lunch, a basic human right, strategically changing a concrete behavior to “human” moral principles and thus reversed the power difference between her and Mary. The outcome was that Mary gave in and gave her employees lunch break after this event.

### Implications of a Dynamic Perspective for Intercultural Difficulty Management

A dynamic perspective enables the researcher to account for the complexity and the dynamics of the identity issues in intercultural difficulty management process. This perspective takes the point of departure in the participant rather than in the culture. It emphasizes the participant’s experience and contends that a person’s interpretations of the world are bounded in their experiences which are subjective however related to their social position (Jensen, 2004). In relation to this paper, Fay came into Australia with previous experiences stored in her communication repertoires. Her repertoires affected her interpretations of intercultural difficulties and at the same time were enriched and drawn upon in the process of difficulty management process.

Methodologically, the repeated episodic interviews at different points of time have allowed the researcher to capture the dynamics over time. The participant’s reflections on the perceptions of her experiences over time have allowed the researcher to probe into participants’ developing ideas, and to capture and account for her perception change that happened during her stay in Australia. As Fay’s case shows, her understanding of Mary and Australian culture gradually developed over time. At first she thought Mary was “not very friendly”, then after some time working with Mary and upon learning more about her, she “did not think Mary is bad”, and began to understand her situation (“all her family relies on this shop”). Fay also realized that in Australia there were different sub-cultures. The culture where Mary belonged to reflected “the life of people with lower social economic status” where “bosses there are trying to exploit as much as possible from their employees”. As a result, Fay quit her job at the market and shifted to another sub-culture she felt more comfortable with. In other words, the dynamic perspective enables this study to capture Fay’s development of intercultural engagement.

### Conclusions

Traditional functionalistic perspective of intercultural difficulty management usually explains the intercultural difficulty by comparing different cultures. It has failed to capture the dynamics of intercultural difficulty management process due to the prevalence of

quantitative research methods. This paper reveals that a dynamic perspective, combining Chinese philosophical idea of change and poststructuralist approach, enables the researcher to capture the complex process of intercultural difficulty management and intercultural engagement. It also shows that a person’s choice of difficulty management strategies and a way of intercultural engagement is related to his or her previous experiences, positions and resource repertoire.

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