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You Think I am Stupid? Face Needs in Intercultural Conflicts

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Abstract

Embedded in intercultural conflicts are identity or face-based goal issues (Rothman, 1997), which, when not effectively managed, may lead to unresolved conflicts. This study examined actual email interactions over a period of five months between an American visiting professor and an International Office staff member at a University in China. It showed three patterns of interaction that failed to manage each other's face or identity needs and led to unresolved conflicts, hurt feelings, and ruined intercultural relationships. It suggested principles or lessons for effectively handling intercultural conflicts.

Keywords: face needs, intercultural conflict, individualism-collectivism, China, teaching abroad

Introduction

Face needs are universal and are generally of two major types, positive face and negative face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Positive face needs refer to our needs to be respected, honored, included, approved, liked, and considered competent and trustworthy. Negative face, on the other hand, encompasses our need for privacy, independence, autonomy, freedom, and right to make our own decisions. Our face needs, also known as identity needs, constitute one important source of intercultural conflicts (Ting-Toomey, 2005; Wilmot & Hocker, 1998). Such face or identity-based conflicts may happen on two levels—the emotional and the cognitive. We are likely to experience "a mixed package of identity-linked vulnerable emotions" when our face is threatened. At the same time, the degree of face threat or face disrespect is experienced when "how we think we should be treated does not match with the reality of how the other person is actually treating us" (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 73). According to Rothman (1997), face or identity-based goals are the major contributors to many unresolved intercultural conflicts.

Therefore, it is significant that we get to the heart of identity-based goal conflicts, to understand how they evolve or develop over time and to find out practical solutions to avoid or effectively handle such kinds of conflicts. This will provide useful insights into improving intercultural interactions and building and maintaining productive intercultural relationships. A focus on analyzing actual communication behaviors in light of communicators' respective face needs may be helpful in accomplishing such a goal.

This study investigates the interaction between an American visiting professor (heretofore referred to as G) and a staff member (heretofore referred to as Y) in the International Office at a university in China that ended sadly for both parties. My analysis will highlight the importance of understanding and meeting each other's face needs in intercultural interactions in order to build and maintain positive, pleasant, and productive relationships. I will first briefly review the literature on face and facework in intercultural communication. Then I will provide a background to the case under examination, and describe methods of data collection and analysis. After describing and analyzing patterns of interaction that contribute to identity or face-based goal conflicts, I will suggest some principles and lessons for effectively dealing with intercultural interactions so that face or identity-based goal conflicts can be more effectively managed.

The concepts of face and facework have received much attention in intercultural communication theory and research (see, for example, Cupach & Imahori, 1993; Imahori & Cupach, 2005; Ting-Toomey, 1994a, 1994b, 2005). Face is our "socially situated identity" (Tracy, 1990), which is constantly being constructed, challenged, enhanced, undermined, or negotiated through social interaction (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967). Facework, on the other hand, encompasses all the communicative devices (e.g., politeness strategies) that people use in order to maintain, protect, and repair each other's face.

Ting-Toomey (2005) identified three types of facework interaction strategies, namely, dominating (e.g., defending and aggressive behaviors), avoiding (e.g., giving in, seeking third-party help, and pretending), and integrating (e.g., apologizing, compromising, private discussion, and problem solving). While dominating strategies are mostly self-face oriented, avoiding and integrating strategies allow people to show more concern for the other's face or mutual face in interaction (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

People use communicative behaviors to help soften or prevent potential face loss and to repair damaged or lost face. The former is called preventive facework and the latter restorative facework (Brown, 1977; Ting-Toomey & Cole, 1990). To prevent face loss, people may use pre-statements to certify one's status or role before sending potential face-hurting comments (i.e., credentialing). Alternatively, they may directly ask the partner to suspend premature judgment (i.e., suspended judgment appeal). Other preventive facework strategies include pre-disclosure (i.e., relational solidarity statement to gain support and understanding), pre-apology (i.e., self-deprecating to lower expectations), disclaimer (i.e., statements to circumvent potential criticism), and so on.

To restore a lost face, people may be verbally aggressive or even use physical violence (i.e., direct aggression). Or they may try to explain away their responsibilities (i.e., excuses). Other restorative facework strategies include justifications (i.e., accounts or explanations to downplay the severity of the face loss behavior), humor, physical remediation (i.e., repairing physical damage), passive aggressiveness (e.g., denial, sarcasm, acting confused, etc.), and so on.

Face and facework are believed to be universal (Brown & Levinson, 1987). However, cultural communities vary in terms of the relative weight or value they attach to different domains of face needs, namely, autonomy face, inclusion face, status face, reliability face, competence face, and moral face (Bond, 1991; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1994a). For example, the autonomy face may be more valued and encouraged in individualistic cultures whereas the inclusion face is generally given more weight in collectivistic cultures (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

Not only do different cultures stress different domains of face, but they may "'frame' or interpret the situated meaning of face" and "enact facework" differently (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 73). For example, Ting-Toomey (2005) hypothesized that people in individualistic cultures may be more concerned about self-face needs and resort to dominating facework strategies while their collectivistic counterparts may be more concerned about the other's face needs or mutual face needs and, thus, use avoiding or integrating facework strategies.

Furthermore, face and facework are important for intercultural relationship development (Cupach & Imahori, 1993; Imahori & Cupach, 2005). According to Imahori and Cupach (2005), intercultural relationship involves a process of identity management, the success of which depends on communicators' effective handling of four face problematic. These face problematics are identity freezing (i.e., the tendency to see each other only as cultural members), stereotyping, self-other face dialectic (i.e., the dilemma of supporting one's own cultural identity versus the other's), and positive-negative face dialectic (i.e., the dilemma of supporting each other's positive or negative face).

Given this, Cupach and Imahori (1993, p. 118) defined intercultural communication competence as the ability of individuals "to successfully negotiate mutually acceptable identities in interaction". Similarly, Ting-Toomey (1994b, 2005) conceptualized intercultural communication as a process of face negotiation between communicators and competent communication was characterized with "the optimal integration of

knowledge, mindfulness, and communication skills in managing vulnerable identity-based conflict situations appropriately, effectively, and adaptively" (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 73).

As a result, incompetent, ineffective, or inappropriate management of face or identity accounts for many unresolved intercultural conflicts (Rothman, 1997). Researchers have investigated how face and facework shape intercultural interactions (for example, Cai & Fink, 2002; Cocroft, & Ting-Toomey, 1994a, 1994b; Oetzel, 1998; Oetzel, Myers, Meares, & Lara, 2003; Oetzel, & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Masumoto, Yokochi, Pan, Takai, & Wilcox, 2001; Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Yokochi, Masumoto, & Takai, 2000).

These research studies provide valuable insights into the relationship between face and intercultural conflicts. However, since they have predominantly used quantitative research methods and data collected through subjects' self-reports, they shed little light on what actually happened during an intercultural conflict interaction, for example, what communicators said or did, how they interpreted each other's words or actions, and how they responded to each other. Only through a close examination of sequences of actual interactions can we understand how communicators manage or negotiate each other's face and how face negotiation shapes intercultural conflicts.

Thus, this study examines an actual intercultural interaction between an American visiting professor (G) and an International Office staff member (Y) at a university in China during AY 2007-2008 and explores patterns of interaction that led to their unresolved conflicts. My analysis will highlight three patterns of communication between G and Y that failed to recognize, understand, and adapt to each other's face needs and how they enabled G and Y to collaboratively create and nurture identity-based goal conflicts that resulted in unresolved intercultural conflicts and unproductive intercultural relationships.

An Intercultural Interaction Gone Terribly Wrong

G was an American college professor, probably in his late 50s or early 60s, when he went to teach in the English department at a university (heretofore referred to as B University) in China on a one-year contract during the AY 2007-2008. When he found that the apartment he was provided was still not ready to move into, two months after he got there, he emailed Y, a female staff member working in the International Office of the university. Y had recently graduated from the MA program in the English department where she also received her BA. During their email interactions over the following five months, things got more and more difficult due to many misunderstandings. Eventually, G and Y ended up personally attacking each other, and they stopped interactions with each other. Their conflicts were never resolved, and each continued to criticize and blame the other even months after the incident. Both felt hurt. G felt that he had been deceived throughout the interactions. He also concluded that Y and the International Office were liars whom he refused to trust any more. He was so hurt that he threatened to quit in the middle of his contract. Y, on the other hand, found G unreasonable, selfish, unappreciative, and dishonest. According to a follow-up interview with Y, she felt that G tried to manipulate both the American and Chinese cultural systems for his personal gains. Their interaction was apparently highly ineffective as it helped ruin a potentially great intercultural relationship. It was an intercultural interaction that went terribly wrong. But how? Who was responsible? My analysis below is going to demonstrate that both G and Y were responsible; they collaborated in creating and nurturing identity-based goal conflicts until these issues became too overwhelming for them to manage any more interactions.

Data and Data Analysis Methods

The data used for this study were collected by a Chinese professor, [1]W, teaching in the English Department at B university in China. During G's stay, she became a personal friend of G and his wife. She also taught Y when Y was completing her BA and MA programs in the English department. G kept her in the loop about his conflict with Y and the International Office. After G completed his teaching contract, W approached G and explained her interest in exploring the conflict. G had saved all the email exchanges between him and Y and gave W permission to use them for research purposes. Later, W approached Y who

confirmed the authenticity of those email exchanges, though she was surprised that G saved them as evidence, and she also gave permission for them to be used for research purposes.

A total of 25 email exchanges, among which 21 were between G and Y and 4 between G and his co-teacher, D, were obtained. These email exchanges occurred between November 4, 2007 and March 7, 2008, spanning two semesters with a winter break in between. [2]

Months later, after G returned to the U.S., W conducted a follow-up interview with him through email. She also had a follow-up interview with Y. Her purposes were mainly to clear up some of the mysteries involved in the case. These follow-up interviews will also be included in this analysis.

To analyze the data, I first read through all the email exchanges, which are about 20 pages long. I read these emails at least 5 times. Reading the emails multiple times provided me with an overall understanding of the entire process of their interaction, especially, how conflict issues were raised and developed over time. Then, I examined the different subjects and the time sequence in which these email exchanged happened. I was able to identify seven subjects. Using these subjects, I divided these email exchanges into seven episodes. [3]

I paid special attention to turn-takings of these episodes, namely, who initiated and who terminated each episode. The person who did not respond to an email, thus, bringing an end to the episode, was considered the terminator. The pattern of turn taking was created (see Chart One). After that, I started closely examining the email texts in each episode. Special attention was given to communicators' language use, communication style (e.g., dominant, aggressive, direct, indirect), how they responded to each other, their identity or face needs, and so on. On the basis of these, I tried to explore their patterns of interaction over time and how they constructed their own and the other's identities through interaction.

Chart One Seven Episodes of Interaction between G and Y

Episodes	Subject	Initiator-Terminator	Length of Interaction	Number of Exchanges
1	Apartment	G-Y	2 days	5
2	No heat or power	G-G	1 day	2
3	Compensation	G-G	5 days	4
4	Apartment rules	Y-G	1 day	1
5	Reimbursement	G-G	1 day	2
6	Key	G-G	1 day	2
7	Unclear (multiple)	G-G	5 days	6

Patterns of Communication between G and Y

My analysis shows that G and Y collaboratively created and nurtured identity-based goal conflicts between them through perpetuating and reinforcing patterns of interaction: a) Conflict-driven interactions; 2) insensitivity to each other's face needs; and 3) inflexible conflict communication styles. I am going to describe each pattern at a time and analyze how these patterns eventually led to unresolved intercultural conflicts.

Conflict-driven Interactions

A look at the seven episodes reveals that G or Y initiated contacts with the other only when there was a problem or issue that bothered them. That is to say, they contacted each other with problems and nothing else. In episode one, though the data collected started with Y, it was obvious that Y was responding to G's email in which he brought up the problem with the apartment. This episode consisted of four (should be five

including G's email that was not included in the data) email exchanges between them on November 4 and November 5, with Y terminating the exchange.

Episode two was again initiated by G. The issue was not having heat and electricity in his apartment. This episode was terminated by G after Y's response on December 28, almost two months after the first episode of their interaction.

Episode three was initiated by G again. Though the subject was "thanks," its main purpose was to bring up the issue of monetary compensation for his not being able to live in his apartment for the first semester. This episode involved four exchanges between them over two days' time (January 6 and 7), less than two weeks after the second episode, and was terminated by G.

Episode four was initiated by Y two weeks later with the issue of G's inappropriate use of his apartment. G made no response to Y's email, thus terminating the episode.

Episode five was initiated by G, just two days later, with the issue of compensation that he brought up in episode three. However, in addition to this issue, G mentioned four other issues in this one letter—a) when the workmen [*sic*] would be finished in the apartment building, b) whether he could get reimbursement for his coming ticket to China, c) whether the university would offer any travel money during the holiday, and d) whether his compensation would be delayed since the accounting office might be closed for the holiday. After Y's brief response, G did not reply, which terminated the episode. These exchanges happened on January 22.

Episode six was initiated by G on January 29, one week after episode five, with the issue of his not being able to get into his apartment building, and asking whether he needed a new key. In addition, he checked on the issue of reimbursement and the issue of his return ticket home at the end of the semester. Y replied on the same day. Then G terminated the episode by not responding to Y's email.

The final and seventh episode was initiated by G on March 7, almost six weeks after the previous contact, with the issue of reimbursement. Y replied on the same day. However, G, apparently got enraged by Y's response, emailed back three days later, on March 10, but copied the email to three other people with the subject of "promises, promises". Numerous issues were brought up in his letter, recounting in a chronological order what had happened during the past several months and his interpretations of it all. Y replied immediately also copying it to the three other people. Then G replied again the next day, and Y replied again on the same day. G did not reply any more, terminating the final interaction with Y.

This pattern of interaction shows that G and Y's contacts were conflict-driven. Each time they started interacting with each other, it was about something negative, thus, defining their interaction by its negative emotional tone. They did not ever contact each other due to anything exciting or happy, but only things that caused tension, worry, frustration, impatience, or anger. As a result, they were likely to associate each other with "problems," "headaches," or "troubles." They probably even did not want to get emails from each other because every time the experience was unpleasant. The negative emotional context probably hindered their interaction. As communication scholars pointed out, emotions shape social interaction (Adler, Rosenfeld, & Proctor, 2004). Negative emotions tend to be debilitating; that is to say, they prevent communicators from communicating competently, appropriately, or effectively. On the contrary, social interactions are likely to be improved when communicators are influenced by positive or facilitative emotions such as calmness, happiness, content, joy, and peacefulness.

What is more, when we associate our partner only with problems or troubles, we tend not to like them. When we do not like them, they lose reference power or credibility in our eyes. As a result, we are reluctant to listen to them or be influenced by them, as persuasion research has indicated (Gass & Seiter, 2007).

Such a conflict-driven pattern also helped create and nurture identity-based goal conflicts. For example, Y might want to be liked, approved by, and appreciated for her helpfulness to G. Yet, she was contacted for problems rather than to express thanks. G, on the other hand, might want to feel cared about as a foreign

teacher living and working abroad. However, Y contacted him only to criticize him for inappropriate use of apartment rather than to demonstrate care or concern for his work and life. Thus, this pattern of interaction caused unmet identity goals for both parties.

In sum, G and Y who brought up only problems or issues in their emails to each other helped put each other and their interactions in a debilitating emotional context, which might have functioned as a deterrent to future positive and productive interactions. Further, this pattern of interaction helped create dislike or even animosity in their relationships, which hindered their attempts to effectively get the other to listen to them and be persuaded by what s/he said. This pattern did not help to build trust between G and Y. Finally, instead of helping them handle the content (Wilmot & Hocker, 1998) or object (Hall, 2005) conflicts (i.e., apartment, compensation, reimbursement, etc.), their interactions helped create and nurture identity conflicts, and, in the end, these identity conflicts were at the heart of their unresolved conflicts.

Insensitivity to Face Needs

A second pattern that characterized the email interactions between G and Y was a lack of sensitivity to each other's face needs. Both G and Y demonstrated their face needs during their email exchanges in the very first episode. For G, his needs for autonomy and status were salient. Let us take a look at his email message on November 5, 2007:

Excerpt 1. I hope you do not think I am complaining, but I was re-reading my teaching contract with B University and the number 3 point – the responsibility of B University – reads: "Party A shall provide Party B necessary **working and living conditions**." (emphasis in original)

I think I have kept my responsibility of the contract as a conscientious and hard-working teacher.

This is now November, however, almost half way through the semester, and I still do not have suitable living conditions. We had wanted to move in to our BU apartment before the holiday last week but we still lack a number of necessary items: ...

First, G corrected Y's perception that he was complaining. Later in this letter, he corrected Y one more time that he was not complaining. He corrected her a third time in his second email to Y on the same day that he was not unhappy. It seemed that it was important to him that Y not think that he was complaining. Why was it so important? As a native English language professor, he probably had a deeper understanding of words and their usages. Complaining probably implies some unreasonableness on the part of the complainer, and it is normally an act from a lower status person to a higher status person. For example, a student complains to a teacher or a child complains to a parent. This may reveal his concern for his status face[4], which was further demonstrated by his self-disclosure towards the end of this letter:

Excerpt 2. As a senior faculty member in America with 35 years of university teaching experience (I, not one of the unqualified and inexperienced foreign "experts" who fill many Chinese universities), I am a little surprised that B University has been so slow to uphold its contractual obligation. I only ask to be given what the other foreign teachers at B University have been given.

G volunteered the personal information that he had had 35 years of college teaching experience, emphasizing his seniority as a college professor. He further marked himself off from those unqualified foreign "experts" who fill many Chinese universities, showing that he was an authentic foreign expert. He was using credentialing, a preventive facework strategy (Brown, 1977), to help prevent any potential face loss. Finally, he asserted his right to equal treatment. Apparently, G was concerned about being fairly treated as an individual. The emotional issue of personal justice was what he was dealing with (Ting-Toomey,

2005). Therefore, he emphasized the language in the teaching contract, specifying the rights and responsibilities of each party.

G's need for autonomy was also revealed by his writing style in the very first episode as well. He repeatedly used "I" and "my" that highlighted his concern for personal interests, needs, and rights. Even when he used "we," it referred to the unity of him and his wife, thus, still personal in relation to the university. Throughout his letter, he never showed any concern for the other party's needs, difficulties, or interests, showing that they were irrelevant to his thinking. He stuck closely to what is written down in the contract and demanded fair treatment:

Excerpt 3. Again, I am not complaining (although L is a little unhappy), but every B University foreign teacher I have spoken with has been given a suitable apartment and has been living on one of the campuses since August or September.

Given his strong sense of personal rights, G felt justified to demand a liveable apartment. By not getting one in time, he felt he was being unfairly treated by the university, thus, he felt he had a legitimate right to criticize the university. From G's perspective, he was doing the right thing—i.e., to fight for equal rights.

In contrast with G's concern for status and autonomy, Y was mostly concerned about her inclusion face, reliable face, and competence face[5]. She made prompt responses to G's emails and she showed G her readiness to help, detailing things she had done for him. She tried to present herself as helpful, pleasant, agreeable, reliable, and competent. Just as G, Y made her face needs known through her written communication in the very first episode. For example, she wrote to G on November 4, 2007:

Excerpt 4. Even you and L are complaining and unhappy, I can fully understand. Just when I received your mail, I rushed into the Director's room again and he said we will try to fix and move the necessary facilities at this moment and later soon we will equip your apartment with all new furniture and facilities even though the university has not agreed to give the money. He will go to talk with the President immediately. The University considers things from a large side. They don't see the recent problems. I don't think we are on purpose.

Y's use of "just when," "rushed into...again," "we will...," "even though..." showed her desire to convince G that she prioritized his needs over others including her own, and she was working really hard to satisfy his needs. In this email text, Y also invoked an important cultural value—the whole is more important than its part—when she said that "the University considers things from a large side. They don't see the recent problems." The University as a whole should override any individual parts when there were scarce resources. G's apartment was merely one small part of the large system, so it was less important than the overall planning of the entire university. This collectivistic logic ran directly against G's individualistic one.

In sum, through their emails in the first episode, G and Y each communicated their face needs. That is, G was concerned about his individual rights, equal or fair treatment, personal justice, and his being respected for his status (i.e., a senior, experienced, true foreign expert). Y was concerned about being appreciated for her hard working, being considered competent and reliable, and being recognized for her helpfulness. If they both had been able to communicate in ways to satisfy or take care of each other's face needs in their later interactions, i.e., engaging in effective facework (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Ting-Toomey, 2005), they should have been able to create more satisfying relationships with each other. Unfortunately, neither was able to protect or save the other's face. Worse, they offended each other repeatedly until they found themselves crushed and unable to resolve any of their conflicts.

G failed to read Y's face needs behind her writing in Excerpt 4 above. In his responses (see Excerpts 1, 2, & 3), he focused on expressing his own feelings and needs. He failed to respond to Y's face needs. For example, he did not show any appreciation for what Y said she was doing in her letter. The only relevant response he made to Y's letter was correcting Y's characterizing his behavior as complaining or unhappy.

This might have made Y feel unappreciated and not understood, which might explain the lack of enthusiasm in Y's reply to G's letter on November 5, in contrast with the more passionate tone conveyed in Excerpt 4:

Excerpt 5. I think we do have a key to your apartment, you don't need to wait for us then. The cooking gas will be moved into your apartment as well tomorrow. My colleague will teach you how to use it. But I still remind you to be careful with the safety of using the gas and electricity.

I hope everything will be fine soon.

As a matter of fact, Y never wrote an email with the kind of enthusiasm as demonstrated in Excerpt 4 in her future emails to G. Apparently, once she felt unappreciated and her readiness to help was not complimented or acknowledged, her positive face (approval, competence, inclusion) was compromised, which affected her future interaction with G. Even though at one moment, on January 7, G actually complimented Y by saying that "I greatly appreciate all your help – you have always been helpful and quick to respond to our needs," Y did not even bother to reply. In the follow-up interview months after her conflict with G was over, Y described G as self-centered, greedy, and unappreciative. Showing appreciation for her at the right moment seemed important for Y.

At the same time that G ignored Y's face needs, Y repeatedly offended G by infringing upon his autonomy and status face needs. To someone who cared about his personal rights, privacy, independence, and freedom, it might be especially important to ask for his permission before volunteering to do something or actually taking some action. Y, however, did exactly the opposite. Let us now examine Excerpt 4 above, an email Y sent to G on November 5.

Instead of asking for permission to enter G's apartment, Y assumed that it was all right. By stating that "we do have a key to your apartment, you don't need to wait for us then," Y deprived G the right to his own apartment. This act of Y might be offensive because it might be perceived by G as an invasion of his privacy or territory. Then, again, instead of asking, Y told G that he would need to be taught how to use the cooking gas. Further, she warned him of the dangers of using gas and electricity in his apartment, treating G as ignorant and incompetent, though Y probably was trying to show some good will or be helpful. Thus, both G's positive face (i.e., competence, status) and negative face (i.e., autonomy) were offended.

It may be true, though, that such an offense was not done knowingly or intentionally. Y probably was working within the Chinese system of thinking which believed that the apartment was still the university's property rather than G's. G, on the other hand, might claim the apartment as his personal territory during the contractual period. However, they failed to negotiate their understandings of this earlier in their interaction so that it remained a source of misunderstanding for the rest of their interaction. Related to this issue, Y offended G at least three more times later.

One was on December 28. G emailed Y concerning the heat and electricity in his apartment:

Excerpt 6. I had gone several times this week to our apartment on the X campus to do some work, but apparently all week there has been no electricity or heat in our apartment – I don't know if the entire building is without heat and power.

Notice that G sounded objective and calm in this letter. His inquiry of whether this was true of the entire building showed his concern for his personal rights again. It seemed that as long as the entire building was without power and heat, he could accept it peacefully. Unfortunately, that was not the case, as Y told him,

Excerpt 7. We turned off the power and heat in your apartment because there is no one living there. Before you move into the apartment, please tell me and we will help you to move and also turn on all the powers.

A (piece of) good news, we have got the money from the university, and we are in the process of buying the furniture and electrical items.

The fact that Y used a light, matter-of-fact, and unapologetic tone indicated that it was a normal and proper thing to turn off the heat and electricity in an apartment when it was not used by anyone. She even brought up a piece of good news, showing that to her everything was all right. Her rationale might be, again, as discussed above, the apartment did not belong to G, but the university, thus, the university, not G, claimed the right to its management. Yet, G apparently treated the apartment as an extension of who he was (i.e., his territory) and he desired that his autonomy and privacy be respected. Thus, having the heat and electricity turned off by someone else without even informing him was an insult and humiliation to him. To add to this insult, Y asked G to tell her when he would move in so that she could help him move and turn on the power and electricity. What this statement may have implied to G was that he had no right to his apartment. G must have been too offended to even care about the piece of good news that Y inserted there. His anger was apparent in his letter to his co-teacher, D, in which he attached Y's letter, on the same day he received Y's email:

Excerpt 8. So now – *with no one informing me about the decision to turn off heat and power* – I find out, as S says, "we are in the process..." – still an ongoing process of now almost six months since we arrived in C [the city]. We are at the end of the fall semester, nearly January of 2008, half a year gone and the apartment promised in our contract still uninhabitable.

...

I am not greedy, *but I do feel disrespected* – not by my colleagues in the English department, nor by my students – but by whichever department is supposed to take care of and meet the material needs of its foreign teachers.

...

But *I would like to see within the next week or so:*

1. The power and heat turned back on;
2. The building, especially the stairways cleaned of all the industrial dust (emphasis in original)

G emphasized the reason that might have offended him the most, "with no one informing me about the decision to turn off heat and power." He wanted to be involved in any decisions about the apartment. He stated explicitly that he felt disrespected. Then he expressed his command in the form of a desire, maybe as a way to show respect for his co-teacher, who was a young male Chinese professor who also taught in the English department. It was also not hard to see his purpose of using this third person help to regain his autonomy and status. Instead of replying to Y directly and telling her that he would like the heat and power be turned back on (which would show his submission or weakness), he chose to assert his requests and rights by issuing an order through a third party, who he was sure would relay it to Y.

A second time Y offended G was on January 20, 2008. Y emailed G. After greeting him and wishing L, G's wife, a quick recovery from her back injury, she informed G that all electrical items would be moved into his apartment soon. Her real purpose of sending the email, though, was to bring to G's attention some apartment rules:

Excerpt 9. My colleague told me one of the students of E University [another university in the same city] is living in your apartment now. I think it is absolutely not permitted from the university side. You and L can use the apartment without any problem but not other people, even your son comes, please let us know beforehand. Please understand this from the rules of our university. We will take care of the equipment and your belongings in the apartment during your leave.

Here again, G was told that he did not have the freedom to do just anything with the apartment, not even allowing his son to live in. Rather, he needed to get permission first. His independence, autonomy, and freedom were, thus, infringed upon, though again it might be due to different cultural understandings of who had the right to the apartment. This time, G, once again, showed his anger and defiance through silence—he did not bother to reply to Y's email.

A third time G was offended was on January 29, 2008. He emailed Y because he could not get into his apartment building with his key. In response, Y wrote,

Excerpt 10. I asked my colleague to know they indeed changed a new door. They put two keys on your table. My colleague will go to your apartment after 10:30 this morning. Maybe you could meet her, or you could ask your Korean neighbor 302 to open the door for you and you could get your keys in your room.

The same pattern repeated. Without informing G, the university changed the door to his apartment building. What is more, G was not provided a new key until he found out that his old key could not work. In Y's email, she used again that light, matter-of-fact, and unapologetic tone as if nothing were wrong. The several options she gave G all required G to take some extra effort or time, which threatened his negative face (i.e., not being infringed upon or imposed upon, or freedom of action) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Also by asking G to take the time or trouble to obtain the key, Y also put G in a lower position whose time seemed less valuable, which hurt his positive face (i.e., respect, importance, status).

As a sign of defiance, G did not reply. He tried to use silence to regain his sense of dignity and autonomy.

As G got offended again and again, his message to Y also became more and more business-like and impersonal. He did not show any gratitude or appreciation for what Y did for him. For example, on March 7, 2008, G wrote to Y:

Excerpt 11. This is the end of the second week of classes. I wanted to check with you about the reimbursement – either for my plane flight over or the problem with no apartment the first term – that your director approved and promised to me. I brought you my plane ticket receipts the first week of January. This is now the first week of March.
Please let me know how soon I can expect to receive this money.

Within this business-like, indifferent, and even a little hostile relational context, any more tiny spark of dissatisfaction was likely to explode into a big fire that would consume both participants and their relationships. That was exactly what happened in G and Y's relationship. After Y told G that she had difficulty getting him the compensation money in March, G's patience seemed to have reached its limit. He exploded. So did Y. They were bent on proving the other wrong and proving themselves as honest, competent, righteous, and honorable by attacking the other. This is how G described Y and the International Office in his email that copied to three other people on March 10, 2008:

Excerpt 12. Your last email tells me that your office thinks I am stupid and that your office will continue to make empty promises that will never be kept.

...

When I brought to you January 7, at your request, my airline invoice, airline tickets and boarding pass for my flight here – which you indicated your office would reimburse me for not having a suitable apartment – I thought your office would keep its promise and was an honorable department.

...

But now, March 10, you tell me you may or may not be able to compensate me, and somehow the amount for my plane ticket has been reduced from the actual amount of 10,000 RMB to 3,000 RMB – with no guarantee I will ever receive anything.

At this time I am concerned you will not even pay my return plane ticket home. You have not fulfilled your contract, definitely not in a timely manner. You have not kept your promises of adequate compensation. I think your office will continue to make excuses and blame the Accounting Office or some other office.

...

I have fulfilled my contract and kept my promises. Your office has not. This is how we treat foreign professors in the United States.

...

I don't want to hear any more vague promises or flowery words of flattery. Unless your office can fulfill its obligations to me as soon as possible, I am prepared to quit. This is what I require: 1) 10,000 RMB compensation for not having a suitable apartment, payable immediately, 2) some reliable guarantee you will compensate me for my return ticket before I leave at the end of this term.

G was literally calling Y and the International Office liars who could not be trusted, who were irresponsible and unreliable. To Y, who was so much concerned about her face—to be considered likeable, competent, hard working, helpful—such open criticism of her behavior (the email was cc'ed to three people—her former teachers and department chair) made her feel a loss of *lian* (the Chinese moral face) (Hu, 1944). It must have triggered the feeling of shame (Ting-Toomey, 2005) in her, which drove her to an immediate response to G's email in which she attacked back:

Excerpt 13.1) When you come to B University, we gave you several choices about where to live, and you chose the new foreign expert apartment on F campus. We all know it would take time to make everything ready, though we didn't know how long it would take. We had made the apartment liveable since last November but you thought it was not liveable. In fact, it is already better than the average living conditions at BU. Your neighbor, the Korean professor and his families had lived there since October.

Through this passage, Y constructed G as someone who was unreasonable, selfish, and hard to please. By citing G's neighbor, she was implying that G was picky in the sense that if other people could live in the building, then G should also be able to. So she was neglecting G's cultural meaning system in her logic: G focused on personal feelings and personal rights (i.e., individuality) while Y focused on community and conformity.

Then Y described in detail what she did in response to G's requests, trying to convince G that she was honest, reliable, and hard working. Later in her letter, she threw out her bomb that might have caused the terrible ending to their interaction:

Excerpt 14. 5) I got to know from English department that you are teaching 8 hours but not 14-16 hours per week as the contract said, and you asked to reduce your teaching hours. I think before you came to the BU, you had discussed with our colleagues at English department and you knew clearly what you would teach at BU. We are not giving you more work now. Do you think you should make up the hours or we should reduce your salary accordingly?

G, I didn't intend to offend you. I think work is just work. It is not a personal problem. Trust and respect are important. If you take my ideas, we could continue and try to make everything better. If you insist on quitting from BU, we feel sorry but we also accept. Please consider it, and I hope we could talk again, maybe face to face.

In this excerpt, Y pointed out that G was teaching fewer hours than specified in the contract. Her tone was direct and harsh. More than that, she was implying that G was being dishonest, exactly opposite to what G had been trying to construct of himself—respectable, dignified, and honorable. In the second paragraph, she assumed a righteous tone and taught G that honesty and respect were important for a person who should be

responsible for his job. Then she asked G to think about it and have a face-to-face talk with her. With that, she constructed herself as G's leader, or at least someone with authority over G (Tracy, 2002).

As G held his status and autonomy face in high regard, Y's criticism of him and her preaching tone insulted and enraged him. As Ting-Toomey (2005) rightly pointed out, "the more severe the face transgression in particular face domains, the more defensive we become in our desire to save or protect the vulnerable spots in those valued assets" (p. 82). Driven by the need to regain his sense of dignity, G dealt another blow back at Y, continuing to convince her how devious she and her office had been in their interaction with him. He particularly pointed out Y's mentioning of his teaching hours. He wrote:

Excerpt 15. As to the teaching this term, you state: "Do you think you should make up the hours or should we reduce your salary accordingly?"
I cannot believe you would say something so insulting.
If you knew half of how much I have given to B University over the above the classroom hours. I constantly meet with faculty and students outside the classroom in a variety of additional capacities.
[... Then he explained why he was teaching fewer hours.]
I had hoped your response would be more conciliatory in trying to reassure me your office will still, in fact, do what it promised.
Instead you revise the past to suit your purposes; you tell me my bringing the airline tickets to your office meant nothing; you make one promise after another you do not keep. Then you imply I should teach more or have my salary deducted. Unbelievable.
I will continue to teach out of loyalty to my students.
But I am going to purchase my return ticket as soon as possible – within the next week or so. And when I do – when I bring my airline invoice and ticket to you – I will expect to be reimbursed up to the 10,000 RMB the contract states. And if I am not within a timely matter – no more excuses about this or that office or delays – then we can consider your part of the contract broken (again), thus null and void. If I am not reimbursed at that time, my teaching for B University will immediately end.

In this letter, G tried to reconstruct his positive face (i.e., honest, honorable, royal, dignified) and maintain his negative face (i.e., autonomy, independence, self-sustenance, free choice, control). At the same time, he argued that Y and the International Office were dishonorable, unreliable, dishonest, and untrustworthy. By using threats, he tried to lift himself up to a higher position over Y, conveying the sense that he was in control here, not Y.

Y, in turn, also tried hard to regain her face in her response to G on March 11, 2008. She reassured G again that they would "definitely" pay for his return ticket, but if he resigned early, "there will be problem," maintaining her dominant position. She repeated that the apartment was liveable in November. To redress and correct G's perception of her being a liar or being dishonest, she described one more time what actually happened. She accused G of finding excuses for not teaching enough hours. In the end, she tried to show sympathy for L and G, indicating her desire to be able to solve the problem in a reasonable way.

However, the damage was already done. No matter how much G or Y explained or argued, and no matter how hard they tried to convince each other, their trust could not be rebuilt. Neither one would listen to the other; it became an endless yet unwinnable war for both of them. G chose to first withdraw. He never replied to Y, not any more ever since then, thus permanently terminating their months' long interaction, and relationship. In a letter to his co-teacher on that same day, G wrote,

Excerpt 16. I am really surprised that someone in Y's position – in the United States – essentially a secretary, could be so insulting to a professor. This is my 37th year of teaching. I don't need to defend my teaching to anyone, especially to

someone who has no idea of what I do.

She does not have the slightest idea of how many hours I work with my students, how many hours of service I give – she obviously does not know much about academics.

I do not even know where to begin. If she had wanted to drive an honorable teacher away from this university – and everything I have done for B University has been with honor and dignity – then she has succeeded. In my opinion, this is a woman who does not deserve her position and is doing great harm to the university.

Apparently, G was still trying to salvage his sense of honor and dignity. He talked negatively of Y, actually showing his prejudice against her, describing her as someone who had little knowledge about academics and who was highly incompetent. It was likely that, during the previous episodes when G used silence as a response to Y's offensive letters to her, he was also using silence to convey his contempt for Y.

My analysis above shows that both G and Y interacted in a way that failed to address, redress, or acknowledge each other's face needs, which, in turn, helped contribute to their dislike for each other and the final loss of trust in their relationship. Their insensitivity to each other's face needs created identity or face-based goal conflicts, which were first embedded in their interactions. However, later, these embedded identity issues surfaced and became the predominant conflict that overrode the actual content conflicts (i.e., apartment, compensation, etc.). As a result, their conflicts could not and were never resolved.

Inflexible Conflict Communication Styles

A third pattern of interaction between G and Y was the lack of flexibility in their communication styles. G was assertive, categorical, specific, and meticulous in his style. For example, in excerpt 1 above, he cited the contract language and pointed out that he had fulfilled the contractual responsibilities, but the office had not. In that letter, he listed eight items that needed to be fixed, showing how detail-oriented he was. In addition, he adopted and maintained an uncompromising approach to conflict from the beginning to the end. He refused to negotiate. For instance, he maintained that as long as the apartment was not liveable, according to his standards, he would not move in. What is more, he stuck to his personal definition of "liveable" condition. So even when Y thought the apartment was already above the average condition, he refused to budge.

G also refused to consider the situation from Y's perspective. Throughout their interaction, he focused on his personal problems, needs, interests, and rights. He never asked whether it would be difficult for Y or the office to satisfy his needs/requests. He did not take into consideration Y's logic, for example, when Y brought up several times the point that "the university was a big machine..." and "the university considers things from large side...". When Y described to him, albeit in an indirect and ambiguous manner, the troubles she was faced with in trying to meet his requests, G did not show any understanding, but continued to push for his needs and requests.

Whenever G was offended by Y's messages, he chose to withdraw; he did not want to work with Y on misunderstandings or issues. Rather, he believed that the problems were Y's and she should handle them by herself. Thus, he took an isolation rather than an integration approach to conflict issues (Rothwell, 2007). Towards the end of their interaction, he exploded and let out all his pent-up feelings at once, using the direct aggression facework strategy (Ting-Toomey, 2005). That of course, did not help with the conflict resolution.

Similarly, Y stuck to her communication style throughout her interaction with G. From the very beginning, driven by her needs for approval, recognition of competence, helpfulness, and liking, Y adopted an accommodating style of interaction. No matter what requests G made, Y tried her best to accommodate. Even when it was beyond her ability to meet G's needs, for example, the reimbursement or compensation issue, she did not tell G outright that it was impossible for her to help him; rather, she chose to equivocate. For example, she repeatedly told G that it was hard or difficult, but she needed to find a "proper" or "good" way to solve the problem. The first time when G mentioned compensation, Y actually avoided responding to it. However, G persisted in his request. He brought it up for the second time and went further by asking

whether Y would like him to drop off in her office his coming air ticket invoice and boarding passes. Instead of giving G a clear answer, for example, "no, you don't need to. When I need them, I'll let you know," she made an ambiguous response, "If you have time to come to the old campus, please give me the tickets and other things. I will try to get the money for you soon."

Though Y later explained that she asked for the documents because she thought she might be able to get some reimbursement for G, but she was not sure. However, G took it as a promise from Y, and thus, he questioned Y again and again about it later in his emails. Eventually when Y told him that she had difficulty in getting him the money, he blew up, believing Y was dishonest. When her face was hurt, she suddenly changed her style and became direct and aggressive.

In sum, during their interactions, G maintained a dominant, uncompromising, and self-focused approach, whereas Y maintained an accommodating and other-focused approach to conflicts. Mutually influenced, reinforced by each other, and driven by their respective face needs (G's autonomy and status face needs versus Y's approval, inclusion, and competence face needs), G became increasingly more dominant and steadfast in his requests and needs, while Y became more and more worried and helpless in trying to accommodate to G. As a result, they both felt frustrated and impatient with each other and found it impossible to handle the conflicts between them anymore.

Handling Intercultural Conflicts: Principles and Lessons

So far, I have analyzed three patterns of interaction between G and Y over several months time: 1) conflict-driven interactions, 2) insensitivity to each other's face needs, and 3) inflexible conflict communication styles. My analysis demonstrates that G and Y communicated in ways that neglected or threatened each other's face needs, thus, creating identity or face conflicts along the way. These embedded identity conflict issues were further nurtured by their patterns of interaction. Eventually, the identity conflicts overrode the actual content conflicts they were trying to deal with and resulted in hurt feelings and hostile intercultural relationships; their relationship was never able to go beyond the trial stage (Imahori & Cupach, 2005).

My analysis suggests some principles or lessons that may be helpful for dealing with intercultural conflicts. As shown above, it seems crucial that identity-based goal conflicts be properly and effectively managed. So, first, intercultural communicators must be aware of identity or face issues during their interaction. To do this, communicators should be able to recognize each other's face needs. As our face needs are communicated through verbal and nonverbal cues, we should pay close attention to what our partner says or does and try to understand their face needs. For example, in my analysis of G and Y's email texts during the first episode of their interaction, G communicated his strong needs for status and autonomy while Y demonstrated her desire to be liked, appreciated, and considered competent and helpful.

After recognizing each other's face needs, we need to engage in effective facework (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Ting-Toomey, 2005) to protect, restore, maintain, honor, uphold, or acknowledge each other's face needs. "The more we understand our own face needs and the face needs (plus the underlying face meanings) of the other conflict parties, the more we can validate and honor those valued face domains and the more competent we are as facework negotiators" (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 82). For example, given G's strong desire for autonomy and status, Y could have avoided volunteering to help him all the time; rather, she could have first asked for permission. She should also have avoided imposing decisions onto G or infringing upon his privacy and freedom by turning off the heat and electricity in his apartment without informing him ahead of time, or changing the door to his building without his knowledge. Similarly, G should have noticed Y's strong need for appreciation for her helpfulness, hard work, and competence, and tried to acknowledge her good efforts or readiness to help, even when those efforts were not successful. By satisfying each other's face needs, G and Y could have expected to like each other more and, thus, be more willing to consider each other's feelings and situations.

Second, intercultural communicators should avoid conflict-driven interactions. They should not contact each other only when problems or troubles occur. They should contact each other on happy occasions as well. It is true that the relationship between G and Y was mainly need or problem-based in that Y was supposed to

help G whenever G had such a need. However, in order to get problems or issues effectively addressed, it is important that G and Y establish a more personal relationship so that they could build liking and trust, which is the foundation for healthy interactions. For example, G might send a surprise email thanking Y for helping him do something, which would allow him to take care of Y's need for approval and appreciation. Y could from time to time send G a message inquiring how his life was going, etc., which would allow her to show Y that she cared about his well-being. This way they would not have associated each other just with problems and headaches, and they actually could develop a friendship-type of relationship, which is particularly helpful in the Chinese culture to get anything done (see, for example, Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Ho, 1998). The business-like style of communication that G maintained could not carry him far in the Chinese culture. That brings up my third point.

Third, intercultural communicators should be flexible in interaction and vary their conflict communication styles to adapt to the relationship and the situation. For example, G could have switched his dominant and uncompromising approach to a more compromising one when he realized the difficult circumstances. That way, he might have impressed Y with his consideration and kindness. Y, on the other hand, could have modified her accommodating style by adopting a more assertive style when needed. That way, she could have stopped encouraging G's dominant style and, at the same time, made herself clearer, thus, avoiding unnecessary misunderstanding. That might also have helped her win some respect from G by asserting herself. Of course, this flexibility in communication styles entails a certain degree of cultural adaptation, which leads to my last point.

Fourth and lastly, intercultural communicators should be willing to adapt their partner's cultural meaning systems. We cannot maintain our home cultural identity (Berry, 1998; Kim, 1997, 2002) and expect to be able to interact productively with the host cultural members. This, of course, requires communicators to be able to manage what Imahori and Cupach (2005) called the self-other face dialectic. Intercultural communicators should be willing to set aside temporarily their own cultural beliefs, values, and norms and accommodate to their partner's. Part of the adaptation involves listening to and trying to understand the other's ways of interpreting and doing things. For example, G could have listened carefully to what Y was trying to tell him about the relationship between the whole and its parts, and could have tried to understand the collective logic. Y could also have tried to understand G's individualistic logic. By truly listening, respecting, and understanding different worldviews, values, and norms, G and Y could have better empathized with each other.

In sum, intercultural interaction takes an extra measure of effort, patience, understanding, and mutual adaptation on both parties. In particular, intercultural communicators should pay special attention to the potentially embedded identity or face issues in dealing with conflict issues. It is especially helpful for intercultural communicators to be sensitive to each other's face needs and to communicate in ways to protect, acknowledge, and honor those needs in order to avoid and effectively manage identity issues, which is essential to conflict resolution. Through mutually honoring each other's face needs, intercultural communicators can expect to interact productively and build and maintain rewarding intercultural relationships.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although this study offers insights into intercultural conflicts, it has some limitations. It used email-correspondence as evidence for communication in general. However, email communication is one type of communication that has its unique features. For instance, it relies almost exclusively on text or written language whereas, for example, face to face interaction involves multiple channels such as language, gestures, appearance, eye contact, touch, distance, and so on. Thus, what was found out in this study about intercultural conflicts which was based on email communication may not apply to all forms of communication (e.g., face to face). The data for this study also do not allow me to make any claims about whether similar conflicts could have happened to a professor from, say, Chicago moving to Austin and finding that he had nowhere to stay. Future research may explore how forms of communication—e.g., email versus face to face—and layers of context—e.g., inter-national cultures versus inter-regional cultures—may shape intercultural conflicts.

Notes

¹ I would like to express my thanks to the Chinese professor for providing me the data for analysis. For reasons of confidentiality, the professor will remain anonymous.

² Winter vacation time in China is determined by the Spring Festival each year, so it is not fixed. Generally speaking, schools start winter break a couple of weeks prior to the Spring Festival (January 1 according to the Chinese Lunar Calendar), mostly in Mid or Late January or early February.

³ I used the word episode with a purpose. An episode is one part of a longer or larger story. If we consider the interaction between two related individuals as a story, then this story is composed of many episodes. Each episode here consists of back-forth email correspondences between G and Y. There is a significant period of pause or suspension between two episodes. Also each episode is indicated by an emerging issue or problem.

⁴ Ting-Toomey (2005) defined status face as "our need for others to admire our tangible or intangible assets or resources such as appearance, social attractiveness, reputation, position, power, and material worth" (p. 81).

⁵ Inclusion face is concerned with "our need for others to recognize that we are worthy companions, likeable, agreeable, pleasant, friendly, and cooperative". Reliability face is concerned with "our need for others to realize that we are trustworthy, dependable, reliable, loyal, and consistent in our words and actions." Competent face is concerned with "our need for others to recognize our qualities or social abilities such as intelligence, skills, expertise, ...and problem-solving skills" (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 81).

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