Intercultural conflict often starts off with different expectations concerning appropriate or inappropriate behavior in an interaction episode. Violations of expectation, in turn, often influence the effectiveness of how members of two cultures negotiate their interests or goals in the interaction. If inappropriate or ineffective negotiation behavior continues, the miscommunication can very easily spiral into a complex, polarized conflict. The following dialogue between two intercultural strangers trying to get acquainted in the Los Angeles International Airport lobby illustrates this type of conflict.

Example 1

Mr. Gass (a young, enthusiastic Euro-American businessman, shaking hands with Mr. Lim vigorously): Welcome to L.A., Mr. Lim. Nice meeting you, finally. My name is William Gass. Just call me Bill. Here is my business card. [Bill forwards the card with his right hand.]

Mr. Lim (an elderly Korean businessman): Nice meeting you, Mr. Gass. I’m Peter Pyong Gap Lim. Here is my business card. [Mr. Lim forwards his card with both hands.]

Mr. Gass: Please, call me Bill. I hope we’ll be doing a lot of business together here in L.A.

Mr. Lim: Yes, I hope so too.

Mr. Gass (glancing quickly at Mr. Lim’s card): Pyong Gap, I’ll give you a call tomorrow after you get some rest in your hotel. Maybe we can have lunch together.

Mr. Lim (with a polite smile): Yes, maybe, Mr. Gass. Please call me tomorrow. I will await your phone call.

When members of different cultures greet one another in an initial encounter, they often draw on their own cultural scripts to guide their behavior. In Example 1, Mr. Gass is very pleased with the initial encounter with Mr. Lim. He is especially pleased that he called Mr. Lim “Pyong Gap”—his client’s Korean name rather than his American name. Mr. Gass feels that he has succeeded in building an informal, symmetrical relationship with Mr. Lim by addressing him on a first-name basis and paying attention to his Korean ethnicity. Mr. Gass believes that they will be able to work well together, since Mr. Lim departed with a smile and a firm handshake.

Mr. Lim, on the other hand, is very uncertain about the initial meeting with Mr. Gass. First, Mr. Lim feels uncomfortable that Mr. Gass forwarded his business card using only one hand. In the Korean culture, a business card represents the face; or public self-image, of an individual. It should always be treated with proper respect and dignity. Mr. Gass should have forwarded his card with both hands and received Mr. Lim’s business card with both hands. Second, Mr. Gass should have taken the time to read and admire Mr. Lim’s card carefully before putting it away in his wallet. Third, Mr. Lim was uncomfortable and insulted when Mr. Gass addressed him by his Korean name. He would have preferred that Mr. Gass address him more formally as “Mr. Lim”; after all, Mr. Lim is the client and is much older than Mr. Gass.

As an older Korean businessman, Mr. Lim would like to see more asymmetrical deference and respect from Mr. Gass. If Mr. Gass insists
on being informal, he should at least address Mr. Lim as "Peter" rather than "Pyong Gap," since Mr. Lim created his western name "Peter" just for the sake of informal interaction in American business transactions. Mr. Lim smiled because he was embarrassed by Mr. Gass's imposed intimacy. His smile was to cover his own embarrassment for the "face loss" incurred in the first few minutes of the initial encounter.

Both Mr. Gass and Mr. Lim have been conditioned by their own cultural norms or standards to behave in a certain way. While Mr. Lim is already anticipating difficulty in working with this "overbearing" American, Mr. Gass has no idea that he has offended his client in so many ways in the first few minutes of interaction. Although no explicit, interpersonal disagreement took place in Example 1, the seeds of potential disagreement or perceived incompatibility were sown. If similar miscommunication between Mr. Gass and Mr. Lim becomes a pattern in subsequent interactions, Mr. Gass may not be able to secure the business contracts he wants from Mr. Lim. Even though both Mr. Gass and Mr. Lim attempted to be sensitive to each other's cultural background, their effort created a cultural chasm.

Not all intercultural conflicts are caused by miscommunication or misunderstanding. Some intercultural conflicts arise because of deep-seated hatred, centuries of antagonism, and clear understanding. However, most everyday intercultural conflicts that we encounter can be traced to cultural miscommunication or ignorance. As cultural beings, we are socialized or "programmed" by the values and norms of our culture to think and behave in certain ways. Our family, peer groups, educational institutions, mass media system, political system, and religious institutions are some of the forces that shape and mold our cultural and personal values. Our learned values and norms are, in turn, expressed through the way we communicate.

The study of intercultural conflict in contemporary U.S. society is especially critical today for several reasons. First, in the United States, immigrants (many of whom are non-English speakers), members of minority groups, and women represent more than 50 percent of the present workforce. Second, by the year 2000, 85 percent of the entering workforce in the United States will be new immigrants, minority group members, and females (Loden & Rosener, 1991). Third, four out of every five new jobs in the United States at present are generated as a direct result of foreign trade (Lustig & Koester, 1993). As the global economy becomes an everyday reality in most societies, we will inevitably encounter people who are culturally different in diverse workplaces and social environments. Learning to manage such differences, especially in intercultural conflicts, may bring about alternative perspectives and multiple solutions to an existing problem.

Competence in intercultural conflict means managing cultural differences appropriately, effectively, and adaptively.

This chapter examines some of the cultural background factors that influence face-to-face intercultural conflict. First, the cultural variability perspective of individualism/collectivism in conjunction with self-concept and low/high-context communication is presented; second, some underlying factors that contribute to intercultural conflict are identified; third, a competence-based approach to intercultural conflict management is discussed.

A Cultural Variability Perspective

Culture refers to a group-level construct that embodies a distinctive system of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, rituals, symbols, and meanings that is shared by a majority of interacting individuals in a community. Simply put, culture refers to a patterned way of living by a group of interacting individuals who share similar sets of beliefs, values, and behaviors. A complex frame of reference influences our thought patterns, our feelings, and our everyday functioning. In order to understand differences and similarities in the assumptions and behaviors in conflict across cultures, we need a perspective or framework to explain in depth why and how cultures are different or similar.

Although there are many potential dimensions in which cultures differ, one dimension that
receives consistent attention from intercultural researchers around the world is individualism/collectivism. Individualism/collectivism explains group-level differences between cultures. . . .

A value-based dimension such as individualism/collectivism, can provide us with a more in-depth understanding of why members of two contrasting cultures (for example, American and Korean cultures) approach conflict differently. In addition to this dimension are the dimensions of self-concept and low/high-context communication. The former explains individual-level approaches to conflict; the latter explains cultural differences in conflict style.

As a whole, a cultural variability perspective emphasizes the following three dimensions: individualism/collectivism, self-concept, and low/high-context communication. These three dimensions influence the values we hold in approaching or avoiding conflict, the way we attribute meanings to conflict events, and the way we communicate in specific conflict episodes.

**Individualism/Collectivism**

*Individualism* refers to the broad value tendencies of people in a culture to emphasize individual identity over group identity, individual rights over group obligations, and individual achievements over group concerns. In contrast, *collectivism* refers to the broad value tendencies of people in a culture to emphasize group identity over individual identity, group obligations over individual rights, and group-oriented concerns over individual wants and desires (Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Individualism is expressed in interpersonal conflict through the strong assertion of personal opinions, the revealing of personal emotions, and personal accountability for any conflict problem or mistake. Collectivism is manifested in interpersonal conflict through the representation of collective opinions or ideas, the restraint of personal emotional expressions, and group accountability, if possible, for the conflict problem.

. . . we can also find "both individualistic and collectivistic elements in all . . . countries, in different combinations" (Triandis, 1995, p. 2). In addition, considerable differences within cultures have been uncovered in many pluralistic societies. For example, within a pluralistic society such as Canada or the United States, different ethnic communities can display distinctive individualistic and group-oriented value tendencies. Cultural miscommunication and conflicts often arise because of our ignorance of different value priorities and modes of behavior in different cultures. Moving beyond the general discussion of culture-level differences, we can examine individual-level differences within and across cultures.

**Self-Concept**

An alternative way to understand individualism and collectivism focuses on how individuals within a culture conceptualize the sense of self . . . . Individuals with a strong sense of *independent self* tend to see themselves as autonomous, self-reliant, unencumbered agents of change, and as rational choice makers. Individuals with a strong sense of *interdependent self* tend to see themselves as group-bound, role-based, interconnected, obligatory agents, and as harmony seekers. Both types of self-concept exist within a culture. Overall, however, whereas independent concepts of self are more common in individualistic cultures, interdependent concepts of self are more common in collectivistic cultures.

. . .

Independent-self people tend to make sense of their environment through autonomous-self lenses; interdependent-self people tend to make sense of their surroundings through group-bound-self lenses. Independent-self individuals tend to worry about whether they present their individualistic self credibly and competently in front of others. Interdependent-self individuals tend to be more reflective of what others think of their projected face image in the context of in-group/out-group relations (which are discussed later in the section on Conflict Norms). Finally, while independent-self individuals tend to practice direct verbal communication, expressing their own thoughts and feelings, interdependent-self individuals tend to practice responsive communi-
cation, anticipating the thoughts and feelings of the other person. Direct verbal communication is a low-context way of communicating; responsive communication is a high-context way of communicating.

**Low/High-Context Communication**

According to Hall (1976), human interaction can be divided into low-context and high-context communication systems. Low-context communication emphasizes expressing intention or meaning through explicit verbal messages. High-context communication emphasizes conveying intention or meaning through the context (for example, social roles, positions) and the nonverbal channels (for example, pauses, silence, tone of voice) of the verbal message. In general, low-context communication refers to communication patterns of direct verbal mode, straight talk, nonverbal immediacy, and sender-oriented value. In low-context communication, the speaker is expected to construct a clear, persuasive message that the listener can decode easily. In contrast, high-context communication refers to communication patterns of indirect verbal mode, ambiguous talk, nonverbal subtleties, and interpreter-sensitive value.

In high-context communication, the listener or interpreter of the message is expected to read "between the lines," to infer accurately the implicit intent of the verbal message, and to observe the nonverbal nuances and subtleties that accompany the verbal message. High-context communication emphasizes the importance of multilayered contexts (for example, historical context, social norms, roles, situational and relational contexts) that frame the interaction.

As Bemhund, in commenting on the communication style differences between Japanese and Americans, observes:

*Conflict is far less common in Japanese society for a number of reasons. First, the emphasis on the group instead of the individual reduces interpersonal friction. Second, an elaborate set of standards emphasizes "obligations" over "rights," what one owes to others rather than deserves for oneself. Third, the value attached to harmony cultivates skill in the use of ambiguous, circumlocution, euphemism, and silence in blunting incipient disputes. The ability to assimilate differences, to engineer consensus, is valued above a talent for argument. (1989, p. 39)*

Individualism and independent-self concept in the United States promote the need for verbal self-assertion, and verbal self-assertion often promotes individual differences and competitions. In contrast, collectivism and interdependent-self concept in Japan promotes the need for verbal circumspection, and verbal circumspection often promotes face preservation and relational harmony.

To summarize, while independent-self individuals engage in low-context styles of conflict management, interdependent-self collectivists engage in high-context styles of conflict negotiation. Overall, the cultural variability dimensions of individualism/collectivism, independent/interdependent-self concept, and low/high-context communication patterns help guide us toward a general understanding of conflict between members of individualistic and collectivistic cultures.

**Factors in Intercultural Conflict**

Drawing from the key ideas of a cultural variability perspective, this section identifies the underlying factors that create intercultural frictions and conflicts between individualists and collectivists. These factors include differences in conflict assumptions, conflict rhythms, conflict norms, conflict styles, and ethnocentric lenses.

**Conflict Assumptions**

The values of individualism versus collectivism, and how these values are linked to individual self-concepts and low/high-context communication patterns, affect our assumptions about conflict. Cultural assumptions about conflict color our attitudes, expectations, and behaviors in the conflict episode. Different cultural assumptions toward conflict are one factor contributing to intercultural miscommunication and conflict.

For individualists, the resolution of interpersonal conflict follows an outcome-oriented model.
For collectivists, however, the management of interpersonal conflict follows a process-oriented model. An outcome-oriented model emphasizes the importance of asserting individual interests in the conflict situation and moving rapidly toward the phase of reaching tangible outcomes or goals. A process-oriented model emphasizes the importance of managing mutual or group face interests in the conflict process before discussing tangible outcomes or goals. "Face," in this context, refers to upholding a claimed sense of positive public image in any social interaction (Ting-Toomey, 1994a). From the collectivistic perspective, face is not about what one thinks of oneself, but about what others think of one's worth, especially within the in-group/out-group context.

For individualists, effective conflict negotiation means settling the conflict problem openly and working out a set of functional conflict solutions jointly. Effective conflict resolution behavior (for example, emphasizing the importance of addressing incompatible goals or outcomes) is relatively more important than appropriate facework behavior. For collectivists, on the other hand, appropriate conflict management means the subtle negotiation of in-group/out-group face-related issues—pride, honor, dignity, insult, shame, disgrace, humility, trust, mistrust, respect, and prestige—in a given conflict episode. Appropriate facework moves and countermoves are critical before tangible conflict outcomes or goals can be addressed.

In commenting on face issues in collectivistic cultures, Cohen observes, "For the representatives of interdependent cultures the experience of international negotiation is fraught with considerations of face. The very structure of the situation, in which competing parties pit their wills against each other, is incongruent to societies that see social harmony, not confrontation, as the desired state of affairs" (1991, p. 132).

To summarize, independent-self individualists tend to operate from the following outcome-oriented conflict assumptions:

1. Conflict is perceived as being closely related to the goals or outcomes that are salient to the respective individual conflict parties in a given conflict situation.
2. Communication during conflict is viewed as dissatisfying when the conflict parties are not willing to deal with the conflict openly and honestly.
3. Communication during conflict is viewed as satisfying when the conflict parties are willing to confront the conflict issues openly and share their feelings honestly (that is, assertively but not aggressively).
4. Conflict is perceived as unproductive when no tangible outcome or plan of action is reached or developed.
5. Conflict is perceived as productive when tangible solutions are reached and objective criteria are met.
6. Effective and appropriate management of conflict means that individual goals are addressed and differences are dealt with openly, honestly, and properly in relation to timing and situational context.

Interdependent-self collectivists follow the conflict assumptions of a process-oriented model:

1. Conflict is weighed against the threat to face that is incurred in the conflict negotiation process and is interpreted in the webs of in-group/out-group relationships.
2. Communication during conflict is perceived as threatening when the conflict parties push for a discussion of substantive issues before properly managing face-related issues.
3. Communication during conflict is viewed as satisfying when the conflict parties engage in mutual face-saving and face-giving behavior and attend to both verbal and nonverbal signals.
4. Conflict processes and outcomes are perceived as unproductive when face issues are not addressed and relational or group feelings are not attended to properly.
5. Conflict processes and outcomes are defined as productive when both conflict parties can claim that they have "won" with respect to both face-related and substantive issues.
6. Appropriate and effective management of conflict means that the faces of both conflict
Conflict Rhythms

The consciousness of conflict management rhythms varies along the individualism/collectivism divide. Differences in conflict rhythms are the second factor, contributing to intercultural conflict between individualists and collectivists. Individualistic values tend to foster monochronic-time rhythms, and collectivistic value tendencies tend to cultivate polychroonic-time rhythms.

As Hall and Hall explain: "In monochronic cultures, time is experienced and used in a linear way—comparable to a road. . . . M-time [monochronic time] is divided quite naturally into segments; it is scheduled and compartmentalized, making it possible for a person to concentrate on one thing at a time. In a monochronic system, the schedule may take on priority above all else and be treated as sacred and unalterable" (1987, p. 16). Hall and Hall identified Germany, Scandinavia, Switzerland, and the United States as prime M-time examples. In contrast, they note: "Polychroonic (P-time) systems are the antithesis of M-time systems. P-time is characterized by the simultaneous occurrence of many things and by a great involvement with people. There is also more emphasis on completing human transactions than on holding schedules. . . . P-time is experienced as much less tangible than M-time, and can better be compared to a single point than to a road" (Hall & Hall, 1987, pp. 17-18). Many African, Asian, Latin American, Eastern European, Caribbean, and Mediterranean cultures are prime examples of P-time systems.

M-time people prefer to deal with conflict using a linear approach; P-time people prefer to handle conflict from a spiral viewpoint. For M-time individuals, conflict management time should be filled with problem-solving or decision-making activities. For P-time individuals, time is a "being" idea governed by the smooth implicit rhythms in the interactions between people. When two P-time individuals come into conflict, they are more concerned with restoring the disjunctive rhythms in the interaction than with dealing head-on with substantive issues.

M-time people tend to emphasize agenda setting, objective criteria, and clear time schedules to accomplish certain conflict goals. P-time people, in contrast, tend to work on the relational atmosphere and the contextual setting that frame the conflict episode. For M-time individuals, effective conflict negotiation means reaching and implementing tangible conflict outcomes within a clearly established timetable. For P-time individuals, the arbitrary division of clock time or calendar time holds little meaning if the relational rhythms between people are out of sync. For M-time people, a signed contract or written agreement signals joint explicit agreement to the solution of the conflict problem. For P-time people, however, once the appropriate level of relational rhythm or rapport is established, their words can mean more than a signed contract. Likewise, if they perceive that the relational rhythms are disjunctive, renewed face-related negotiation is needed to restore that delicate, face-honoring point. M-time people tend to define conflict using a short-term time line; P-time people tend to view time from a long-term, historical process. For P-time members, "deadline" is always subject to renegotiation, and human deadlines should be dealt with flexibly and patiently.

People move with different rhythms in conflict negotiation. Intercultural conflict between individualists and collectivists is magnified when the implicit rhythm of time plays a decisive role in the encounter. M-time individuals want to move faster to address substantive problems and resolve the conflict. P-time individuals prefer to deal with relational and contextual issues before concrete, substantive negotiation. M-time persons want to establish a clear timetable to achieve specific conflict goals and objectives. P-time people want to spend more time building trust and commitment between the conflict par-
ties. Different rhythms of monochronic time and polychronic time thus can further polarize the individualists and the collectivists in the intercultural misattribution process.

Conflict Norms

Differences in norms of conflict interaction are the third factor compounding intercultural conflict. Norms are standards or guidelines for behavior. They are reflected in our expectations of what constitutes proper or improper behavior in a given setting.

... The equity norm emphasizes the importance of individual reward and cost calculations, and of obtaining equitable rewards in resolving the problematic issue. The communal norm stresses the importance of taking in-group expectations into account in the calculation, and of satisfying the face needs of the in-group members that are involved in the conflict.

While the equity norm reflects the individualistic, outcome-oriented model in conflict, the communal norm reflects the collectivistic, process-oriented model. In addition, in collectivistic cultures different norms govern conflict interaction with in-group and out-group members. According to Triandis, in-groups are groups of individuals "about whose welfare a person is concerned, with whom that person is willing to cooperate without demanding equitable returns, and separation from whom leads to anxiety" (1995, p. 9). In-groups usually consist of people who perceive a "common fate" or shared attributes. Out-groups are groups of individuals "with which one has something to divide, perhaps unequally, or are harmful in some way, groups that disagree on valued attributes" (Triandis, 1995, p. 9). For very important conflicts, collectivists (similar to the individualists) prefer to use the equity norm when competing with out-group members (for example, people from another company) for needed resources (Leung & Iwawaki, 1988). However, for less important conflicts, collectivists prefer to use the communal, smoothing norm with either in-group or out-group members. Each culture also has different rules and meanings for proper or improper conflict behavior in dealing with in-group or out-group members in different situations.

By the norms of emotional expression, conflict is an emotionally distressing experience. In two extensive, detailed reviews of culture and emotions (Mesquita & Frijda, 1992; Russell, 1991), clear cross-cultural differences in emotional expression and interpretation are uncovered. On the basis of these reviews, we can conclude that there are cultural norms that regulate displays of aggressive or negative emotional reactions in conflict interaction such as anger, fear, shame, frustration, resentment, and hostility. For example, in many individualistic western cultures, open expressions of emotions in conflict are viewed as honest, engaging signals. In many collectivistic Asian cultures, however, restrained emotions are viewed as self-disciplined, mature signals in handling conflict. Thus, while basic emotions such as anxiety, shame, and fear can be viewed as pan-cultural conflict emotions, cultural display rules of when to express which nonverbal emotions (to whom and in what context) differ from one cultural community to the next. For example, for collectivists, the masking of negative emotions is critical to maintain a harmonious front during conflict. When collectivists feel embarrassed or perceive face threat in conflict, they may sometimes smile to cover up their embarrassment or shame.

Thus, different norms and rules govern the way individualists and collectivists deal with specific conflict issues. When an individualist prefers to use the equity norm to deal with a conflict issue and a collectivist prefers to use the communal norm, the hidden factor of normative expectations further splinters intercultural communication. In addition, the nonverbal/verbal dimension of emotional expression in conflict can vary along the individualism and collectivism schism, creating further tensions and gaps.

Conflict Styles

... Differences in conflict styles are the fourth factor in intercultural conflict negotiation. Cultural differences in conflict style generate intergroup attribution errors and biases. For example, the following dialogue between Ms. Gurb (an African-American supervisor) and Mr. Lee (a recent Chinese immigrant) in a U.S.-China joint-venture
firm illustrates differences in conflict styles and attribution processes.

Example 2

Ms. Gumb (in the main office): Lee, where is your project report? You said you'd get it done soon. I need your part of the report so that I can finish my final report by the end of this week. When do you think you can get it done? [Attribution: Lee is very irresponsible. I should never have trusted him. I thought I was giving him a break by putting him in charge of this report.]

Mr. Lee (hesitantly): Well, Ms. Gumb... I didn't realize the deadline was so soon. I will try my best to get it done as soon as possible. It's just that there are lots of details I need to cross-check. I'm really not sure. [Attribution: Ms. Gumb is sure a tough lady. Anyway, she is the supervisor, why didn't she tell me the exact deadline early on? Just last week, she told me to take my time on the report. I'm really confused. In China, the supervisor always tells the workers what to do.]

Ms. Gumb (frustrated): Lee, how soon is soon? I really need to know your plan of action right now. You cannot be so vague in answering my questions all the time. I believe I've given you plenty of time to work on this report already. [Attribution: Lee is trying to be sneaky. He does not answer my questions directly at all. I wonder if all Chinese are that sneaky? Or maybe he is not comfortable working for a black female? Anyway, I have to press him to be more efficient and responsible. He is in America; he has to learn the American way.]

Mr. Lee: [a long pause]. Well, I'm really not sure, Ms. Gumb. I really don't want to do a bad job on the report and disappoint you. I'll try my best to finish it as soon as possible. Maybe I can finish the report next week. [Attribution: Ms. Gumb is sure a pushy boss. She doesn't seem to like me and she is causing me to lose face in front of all my peers. Her voice sounds so harsh and blunt. I have heard American people are hard to work with, but she is especially rude and overbearing. I better start looking for a new job tomorrow.]

In Example 2, while Ms. Gumb is assertive and direct in dealing with the problem, Mr. Lee is hesitant and indirect in answering her questions. Ms. Gumb has a “straight-talk,” low-context approach to dealing with the work problem; Mr. Lee has a “face-talk,” high-context approach. If both understand concepts such as low-context and high-context communication styles, they may arrive at a better understanding of each other’s behavior.

Conflict style differences between cultural or ethnic group members profoundly influence the meanings we attach to each other’s behavior. We typically use our own habitual scripts and interaction styles as a baseline to judge and evaluate others’ behavior. While Mr. Lee is using his high-context scripts to evaluate Ms. Gumb’s behavior as rude and overbearing, Ms. Gumb is using her low-context attribution (for example, “Lee is trying to be sneaky”) and historical script (for example, “maybe he is not comfortable working for a black female”) to make sense of Mr. Lee’s high-context approach. If Ms. Gumb and Mr. Lee understand the cultural and historical conditioning of their own and the other’s behavior, they may learn to be more culturally sensitive in their attribution process. They may learn to respect each other’s stylistic scripts and work more adaptively in achieving a common ground in their interaction.

Ms. Gumb may learn to talk privately to Mr. Lee rather than to engage in such direct face-threatening behavior in public. Mr. Lee may learn to be more direct and open in answering his supervisor’s questions and to pause and hedge less in their interaction. On the strategy level, individualists in conflict appear to prefer direct verbal assertions, direct verbal questioning, direct requests, and direct clarifications and answers in conflict. In contrast, collectivists prefer qualifiers (for example, “perhaps we should meet this deadline together”), tag questions (for example, “don’t you think you’ll feel better if you finish it and get it out of the way?”), disclaimers (for example, “maybe I don’t understand what’s going on here”), and indirect requests (for example, “if it’s not too much trouble, let’s try to finish this report together”) to convey a softened approach to working out differences.

... Silence is a critical strategy in dealing with both in-group and out-group conflicts in collectivist cultures. Silence may signal approval or disapproval in collectivist conflict interaction.
In silence, the conflict parties incur no obligations. Silence may also be interpreted as an ambiguous "yes" or "no" response. On the other hand, silence may be viewed as an admission of guilt or incompetence in an individualistic culture.

Finally, several researchers indicate that collectivists tend to prefer an informal third-party conflict mediation procedure (such as seeking help from relatives or from wise teachers or gurus) more so than individualists (Cohen, 1991; Leung, 1987, 1988; Ting-Toomey, 1985, 1988). In mediated conflicts individualists prefer objective advice and facilitation from an impartial, formal third-party mediator . . . , and collectivists prefer to seek help from someone who already is informed about the conflict and whom they can trust and respect.

Different cross-cultural conflict styles create different attribution biases and tensions. In attributing meanings to collectivistic, indirect conflict styles, individualists tend to view collectivists in the conflict as trying to sidestep genuine issue discussions. Conversely, collectivists tend to perceive individualists as pushy, rude, and overbearing because of their confrontational conflict style.

Ethnocentric Lenses

Although we often rely on the knowledge of our own cultural approach, rhythms, norms, and styles to explain the behavior of other people from our culture, the same criteria may not be applicable to another culture. Being unfamiliar with the other party's cultural norms creates problems that can exacerbate an already tense intercultural conflict episode. An examination of such problems is a natural extension of the discussion on differences in conflict styles.

Ethnocentrism is defined as "the view of things in which one's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it" (Sumner, 1940, p. 13). When members of different cultures believe that their own approaches are the correct or natural ways to handle conflict, they tend to view the conflict behaviors of other cultures as deviant from the standard . . .

Individualists with strong ethnocentric tendencies tend to view the outcome-oriented model as superior and more efficient in conflict resolution than the process-oriented model. Conversely, collectivists with strong ethnocentric lenses tend to view the process-oriented model as more desirable and personable than the mechanistic outcome-oriented model. Ethnocentrism reflects our comfort with familiar cultural habits and practices. Individuals are often unaware of their own ethnocentric behaviors and evaluations. They have internalized the standards and norms of their culture as the "proper" and "right" ways of behaving.

Individualists and collectivists also may engage in different attribution processes during interpersonal conflict. Overall, individualists tend to use more dispositional attributions than do collectivists to explain the conflict problem. Individualists might explain conflict by making negative personality statements such as "She's late because she's lazy" or "He's just too dumb to get it." Collectivists, on the other hand, tend to use more situational attributions than do individualists to explain problems. For example, they make statements such as "Maybe she's late because the traffic is really bad" or "Maybe he's confused because the manager did not explain the project clearly." Individualists tend to hold the person accountable for the conflict; collectivists tend to emphasize the context that contributes to the conflict.

Individualists and collectivists sometimes use similar attributions in making sense of conflict. Stewart and Bennett, in commenting on how ethnocentrism leads to more intensified intercultural miscommunication, observe: "When communicators engage in mutual negative evaluation, the recriminatory interaction may be enough to block communication. If the communicators then attempt to overcome the difficulty through ethnocentric procedures, the communication event may deteriorate even further. . . . With each turn of this regressive spiral, negative evaluations are intensified" (1991, p. 165). The lack of specific information about each other's conflict assumptions or styles often creates negative interaction spirals that deepen the cultural schism. The lack of communication skills to handle such problematic intercultural episodes appropriately and effectively also compounds the miscommunication chasm.

Our ethnocentric lenses push us to judge the behavior of another culture evaluatively and negatively. Ethnocentrism creates biased attributions and expectations in intercultural conflict. Thus,
cultural differences in conflict assumptions, conflict rhythms, conflict norms, conflict styles, and ethnocentric lenses act as invisible barriers that widen the gap of intercultural conflict. Individualists and collectivists typically collide over their use of an outcome-oriented model or process-oriented model in dealing with conflict. They also collide over the rhythms, the norms, and the styles of how to approach conflict appropriately and effectively. Ethnocentric lenses creep into our attribution process and create further evaluative biases and binary mind-sets (that is, my way is the right way and your way is wrong).

Competence in Intercultural Conflict

... Knowledge is the cognitive or experiential understanding that helps one communicate effectively and appropriately in a given situation. Motivation is the cognitive or affective readiness, or mind-set, to communicate effectively and appropriately with others. Skill is the ability to perform behaviors that are considered effective and appropriate in a given situation. This section examines the effectiveness and appropriateness criteria of competence in intercultural conflict and concludes with some recommendations for enhancing our knowledge, motivation, and skill in managing intercultural conflicts competently.

Knowledge, Motivation, and Skill in Intercultural Conflict

To act effectively and appropriately in interactive conflict, individuals have to enhance their cultural knowledge and motivation in applying adaptive interaction skills. Of all the dimensions of managing intercultural conflict, knowledge is the most important and underscores the other dimensions of competence.

Without culture-sensitive knowledge, parties cannot learn to uncover the implicit ethnocentric "lenses," or assumptions, they use to interpret and evaluate events in different intercultural conflict situations. "Knowledge" here refers to in-depth understanding of certain phenomena via a range of information gained through conscious learning and personal experiences and observations.

In addition to individualistic and collectivistic value tendencies, individual differences within cultures, such as independent-self versus interdependent-self concept, contribute to the interpretation of intercultural conflict. To manage intercultural conflict competently, we must take other people's cultural perspectives and personality factors into consideration. If others are interdependent-self collectivists, we may want to pay extra attention to their process-oriented assumptions about conflict. If others are independent-self individualists, we may want to be sensitive to their outcome-oriented assumptions about conflict. Although this chapter provides general knowledge for understanding individualistic and collectivistic cultures, knowledge concerning cultural and ethnic conflict assumptions and styles should also be pursued. This chapter emphasizes intercultural conflict differences rather than ethnic differences (for example, African-American versus Mexican-American interaction style in the United States) in conflict. However, the general concepts (that is, differences in conflict models, rhythms, norms, styles, and ethnocentric lenses) should serve as a good working basis in managing any kind of group-based difference in conflict. Both general and specific knowledge of other cultures and ethnic groups can increase our motivation and skill in dealing with people who are culturally and ethnically different.

In addition, while individualists and collectivists have different frames of reference in conflict negotiation, it is important to remember that most conflicts involve some common interests. Rather than harping on positional differences in conflict, parties to intercultural conflict should learn to uncover or cultivate common interests that bind them in the conflict (Fisher & Ury, 1981). Learning about cultural differences and moving toward mutual interest-based negotiation (for example, we both want the computer project to be on time, even though we have different ways of approaching this problem) can serve as the first step toward competent intercultural conflict management. If conflict parties do not develop in-depth knowledge of the implicit theories or scripts that drive intercultural conflict, the root causes of the intercultural conflict may remain unresolved.
“Motivation” in intercultural conflict competence refers to our cognitive and affective predispositions with regard to communicating with people who are different from us. Motivation is a conflict mind-set issue. To have an open mind-set in working with people who are different, we need (1) to suspend judgment of unfamiliar behavior, (2) to develop a mindful attitude in conflict, and (3) to engage in ODIE (observe, describe, interpret, evaluate) analysis.

Suspended evaluative judgment in intercultural conflict requires us to accept the fact that we engage in ethnocentric evaluations of culturally unfamiliar behavior. Ethnocentrism colors our attitudes and behavior in any intergroup conflict. To act competently in intercultural conflict, we must first acknowledge the ethnocentric lenses we put on in interpreting and judging unfamiliar behavior. As Stewart and Bennett comment:

Participants in a cross-cultural situation need to consider first the possibility that a negative evaluation might be based on unrecognized cultural difference rather than the result of an act of cross-cultural analysis. Each person needs to be aware that he or she is evaluating the other; often on similar ethnocentric grounds, and seek to suspend these kinds of evaluations until the potential spiraling effects of the action have been considered. . . . Swift evaluation is likely to be ethnocentric and detrimental to effective intercultural communication. (1991, p. 167)

Acknowledging our own ethnocentric biases and suspending our reactive evaluations are critical aspects of managing intercultural miscommunication. By withholding our gut-level negative judgments about unfamiliar behavior, we are giving ourselves and others a chance to understand the cultural nuances that exist in a problematic situation.

Mindfulness is a motivational concept in managing intercultural conflict competently. Langer’s (1989) concept of mindfulness encourages individuals to tune in consciously to their habituated mental scripts and expectations. According to Langer, if mindfulness is the rigid reliance on old categories, mindfulness means the continual creation of new ones. Categorization and recategorization, labeling and relabeling as one

ters the world are processes natural to children” (1989, p. 63). To engage in a mindfulness state, an individual needs to learn (1) to be open to new information, (2) to create new categories, and (3) to be aware that multiple perspectives typically exist in viewing a basic phenomenon (Langer, 1989, p. 62).

To acquire new information in conflict interaction, conflict parties must listen responsively to each other even when they are disagreeing. In intercultural conflict, disagreeing parties have to learn to listen attentively to the cultural perspectives and assumptions expressed in the interaction. They have to listen to interpretively, or ting ("倾听", the Chinese character for “listening” means listening with our “ears, eyes, and a focused heart”) to the sounds, tones, gestures, movements, nonverbal nuances, pauses, and silence in the conflict situation. They must mindfully notice the verbal, nonverbal, and meta-nonverbal contexts that are being conveyed in conflict negotiation. Creating new categories means learning to create or apply culturally sensitive concepts such as low/high-context communication styles in making sense of variations in conflict behavior. Finally, being aware that there are multiple perspectives means that individuals can apply different frameworks (for example, both individualistic and collectivistic perspectives) in analyzing and interpreting conflict and can come up with a creative, synergistic solution.

The third aspect of motivation is ODIE analysis (observe, describe, interpret, and then evaluate). Rather than making snapshot, evaluative attributions, we should first learn to observe attentively the verbal and nonverbal signals that are being exchanged in the conflict process. We should then try to describe mentally and in behaviorally specific terms what is going on in the conflict situation (for example, “she is not maintaining eye contact when speaking to me”). We should then generate multiple interpretations (for example, “maybe from her cultural angle, eye contact avoidance during conflict is a proper behavior; from my cultural angle, this is considered an improper signal”) to make sense of the behavior we are observing and describing. Finally, we may decide to accept or respect the differences as
genuine cultural differences and to adapt ourselves by integrating the differences or by evaluating them (for example, "I understand that eye contact avoidance can be either a cultural or a personal habit, but I still don’t like it, because I feel invalidated by the person’s lack of eye contact"). The idea of the sequence observe-describe-interpret is to allow ourselves a more open-ended evaluation or judgment of unfamiliar behavior. We may realize that the discomfort we experience in the conflict negotiation process is based, in part, on communication style differences. We may want to sample a wide range of people (in a wide variety of contexts) from this cultural group to determine whether eye contact avoidance is a cultural or individual habit. Or we may decide to approach the person (with the low/high-context styles in mind) directly or indirectly to talk about such differences.

Interaction skills, abilities that help us communicate effectively and appropriately in a given situation, are useful in promoting competence in intercultural conflict. The three skills that appear to be most pertinent are face management skills, trust-building skills, and communicative adaptability.

Parties to intercultural conflict should learn to cultivate face management skills in order to deal competently with intergroup conflicts. Face management skills address the fundamental issue of social self-esteem. Most human beings like to be respected and affirmed in their daily interaction with colleagues and loved ones. However, the behaviors that reveal the need for self-respect and that show respect and dignity to others differ from one culture to the next.

Individualists may want to learn to “give face” to the collectivists in the conflict negotiation process. Giving face means not humiliating or embarrassing the collectivists in public, and acknowledging collectivists’ in-group concerns and obligations. Collectivists, on the other hand, may want to reorient face maintenance concerns and learn to pay more attention to the substantive (or task-relevant) issues. Collectivists may also want to recognize that individualists often separate substantive issues from socio-emotional issues in conflict. Conversely, individualists may want to pay more attention to the link between substantive issues and facework or relational issues when negotiating disagreements with collectivists. Thus, although the concern for face maintenance is universal, how we manage face issues is culture-specific.

Critical to competent management of intercultural conflict are trust-building skills. If parties in conflict do not trust each other, they tend to move away (cognitively, affectively, and physically) from each other rather than struggle side by side. According to Fisher and Brown (1988), trust is often viewed as the “single most important element of a good working relationship” (1988, p. 107). When we do not trust someone’s words or actions, we tend automatically to turn off our listening devices in conflict. We may hear the words, but we are not listening. Trust building is both a mind-set and a communication skill. Especially in intercultural conflict situations, when we are experiencing high anxieties with unfamiliar behavior (for example, accents, nonverbal gestures), we may automatically withhold our trust. Well-founded trust is critical in any effective and appropriate management of intercultural conflicts.

In emphasizing the importance of developing a good working relationship as a base for conflict management, Fisher and Brown (1988) recommend that we learn to be “trustworthy” but not necessarily “wholly trusting.” We should also learn to carefully analyze the risk of trust in an intercultural conflict situation. To be trustworthy means we should make our behavior more reliable so that others can depend on our words or actions over time. To avoid wholly trusting someone, we should be neither more nor less trusting than the risks dictate. Well-founded trust is based on a mindful analysis of risk. For individualists, such analysis probably is based on the conflict situation at hand. For collectivists, such analysis is often based on a long-term, contextual view of the layers that enwrap the conflict situation. Well-founded trust, in short, is a mind-set, an attitude. It is also a behavior that is developed via consistent, competent communication skills of managing differences.

Communicative adaptability is one of the key interaction skills in the negotiation of intercultural conflict. Communicative adaptability is
the ability to change conflict goals and behaviors to meet the specific needs of the situation (Duran, 1985). It signals our mindful awareness of the other person's perspectives, interests, and/or goals, as well as our willingness to modify our own interests or goals to adapt to the conflict situation. Communicative adaptability can also imply behavioral flexibility. By mindfully observing what is going on in the intercultural conflict situation, both parties may modify their nonverbal and/or verbal behavior to achieve more synchronized interaction.

Summary

Competence in intercultural conflict requires that we communicate effectively and appropriately in different intercultural conflict negotiation situations, and effective, appropriate communication requires adaptation. To manage conflict competently, we must understand and respect different worldviews and ways of dealing with conflict. We must be sensitive to the differences and similarities between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. We must also be aware of our ethnocentric biases and culture-based attributions in making snapshot evaluations of other conflict management approaches.

Competent conflict negotiation promotes flexible, adaptive behaviors in attuning to both the process and the outcome of an intercultural conflict episode. Although intercultural conflict is complex, understanding conflict along the individualism-collectivism continuum is the first step toward understanding cultural variations on conflict.

SELECTED REFERENCES


Ting-Toomey, S. (1988). Intercultural conflict styles:

**KEY TERMS**
- conflict
- self-construal
- individualism
- ethnocentrism
- collectivism
- conflict style
- high context
- conflict competence
- low context

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**
1. Individualism and collectivism promote two rather different orientations to conflict. How are these differences reconciled in an intercultural conflict? One person could completely adapt (conform) to the other person's orientation. For example, a collectivist could take on an individualist orientation during conflict with an individualist. Would this approach be communicatively competent? Why or why not? What are some alternative ways for reconciling differences in values so that conflict can be managed successfully?
2. Think of a difficult conflict you've had with a relative stranger (possibly someone from another culture). Can you explain any of the difficulty in the conflict as being due to the fact that you and the other person had (1) different conflict assumptions, (2) different conflict rhythms, (3) different conflict styles, or (4) different ethnocentric lenses? What happened that leads you to infer any of these differences?
3. Among the dimensions that facilitate communicative competence, knowledge is the most important for managing intercultural conflict. What is meant by knowledge? Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not? Can knowledge about another's culture ever lead you to be incompetent? If so, how? (Hint: If you met a Chinese man and presumed he possesses collectivistic values and treat him accordingly, do you run the risk of unduly stereotyping him?)
4. The desire to maintain face seems to be culturally universal, even though face issues are managed differently in different cultures. Does this universality suggest any general guidelines that would help communicators seek common ground when managing intercultural conflict?
5. How might power differentials come into play in cross-cultural conflicts?

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**NEGOTIATING WITH THE SWAZIS**
*Peter Ogom Nwosu*

I feel like a man sitting in my house facing a poisoned snake. I am trying to be very calm and avoid sudden movement. Meanwhile, my friends outside the door are throwing rocks at the snake. I am the one endangered, not they.
—Late King Sobhuza of Swaziland

**Negotiation**

Negotiation or bargaining has been defined as a process in which two or more players with different needs, different interests and perspectives attempt to settle what each shall give and take, or