# Conflict Management Between Japanese and Mexican Friendship

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## INTRODUCTION

As the globalization continues, encounters of people from various cultural backgrounds are no longer a rare phenomenon. When interactions increase, friendships prosper, conflicts emerge inevitably. Both parties' perceptions of conflict and the ways they handle it, in turn, affects the quality and the process of the relationship. Ineffective conflict management may trigger other respective conflicts, sometimes alter the direction of the relationship or even terminate it. In this study, based on a self-report interview, how conflict was perceived and dealt with between friends of a Mexican female and a Japanese female are analyzed and discussed. More specifically, by applying Ting-Toomey's Face-Negotiation Theory, face and facework are identified, and the strategies of conflict management are discussed.

### Conflict

Conflict, defined by Mortensen (1974), is "an expressed struggle over incompatible interests in the distribution of limited resources". Ting-Toomey (1994) further revises the concept as "the perceived and/or actual incompatibility of values, expectations, processes, or outcomes between two or more parties over substantive and/or relational issue". Intercultural conflict then, as Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001) explain, is "the experience of emotional frustration in conjunction with perceived incompatibility of values, norms, face orientations, goals, scare resources, processes, and/or outcomes between a minimum of two parties from two different cultural communities in an interactive situation."

No two parties share exactly the same cultural backgrounds, when their interdependency increases, conflicts arise. As conflict is prevalent, the more interdependent two parties become, the higher chance of conflicts occur. Cultural values, to some extent, shape people's perceptions of conflict and determine the strategies individuals employ in confrontational situations. Conflict management, in turn, affects the development of interpersonal and/or intercultural relationship. Canary et.al, (1995) examine the nature of conflict in close relationships, and indicate that "the management of conflict tests the character of relationships

perhaps more rigorously than do other types of interaction." They suggest "to understand people as social and relational participants, we need to understand conflict its causes, its communication, and its consequences."

Given the diverse cultural orientations of values, norms, and beliefs, the approaches of managing conflict vary. Ting-Toomey & Oetzel (2001) assert that "the more divergent the two cultural conflict approaches, the wider the misunderstanding and conflict gap between members of the two cultures".

## Face-Negotiation Theory

Ting-Toomey's face-negotiation theory is one framework to understand conflict (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). Face is, as Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) suggest, "the claimed sense of favorable social self-worth and the simultaneous assessment of other-worth in an interpersonal situation". Three face concerns are emphasized in face-negotiation theory: self-face, other-face, and mutual face. "Self-face" refers to the concern for one's own image, "other-face" is the concern for another's image, and "mutual-face" is concern for both parties' images, or the "image" of the relationship.

Face-negotiation theory claims face is a ubiquitous phenomenon as "people in all cultures try to maintain and negotiate face in all communication situations, and the concept of face becomes especially problematic in uncertainty situations such as conflict situations" (Oetzel, et al., 2003). Face can also be explained as "a cluster of identity- and relational-based issues that simmer and surface before, during, and after the conflict process" (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). The different ways individuals negotiate face, or communication strategies they use to maintain face, especially in situations of conflict, is "facework". Conflict is viewed as a face-negotiation process where both interdependent parties try to manage the conflict to negotiate their faces. Face and facework are regarded as universal phenomena and people of every culture are always negotiating face.

The concept of "face" is viewed as a symbolic resource that members in all cultures strive to maintain. However, while "face" is a transcultural concept that governs the active negotiation processes in all cultures, the nuances and subtleties that attach to different facets of facework may vary from one culture to another. "The hidden dimensions of intercultural conflict often stem, in part, from differences in cultural values that give rise to different ideals that determine how conflict should be managed. Two value frameworks have received consistent attention from intercultural researchers are individualism-collectivism and power distance." (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Hofstede, 1991; Ting-Toomey,

1999; Triandis, 1995a)

Individualistic cultures are concerned with self-face maintenance. They value autonomy, choices, and negative-face need. Negative face, as Brown and Levinson (1978) explained in their Politeness Theory, refers to a person's desire for autonomy and claim to territories. Positive face, on the contrary, is the desire for approval and to be appreciated and accepted by others. Individualism is found in most northern and western regions of Europe and in in North America. In contrast, collectivistic individuals show concern with both self-face and other-face maintenance. They value interdependence, reciprocal obligations, and positive-face need. Collectivism is common in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Central and South America, and the Pacific Islands (Hofstede, 1991; Triandis, 1995a).

Power distance was also introduced as another dimension. Hofstede (1991) defines power distance as the extent to which the less powerful member of institutions accept that power is distributed unequally. Power refers to the extent of influence and the degree of compliance between two or more interactants in negotiating their differences. In small power distance cultures (e.g. Austria, New Zealand) people tend to value equal power distributions, equal rights, symmetrical relations and equitable rewards and costs based on personal performance. Their defending and asserting one's personal rights are reflective of self-face esteeming behaviors. Individuals are concerned with horizontal facework interaction. In large power distance cultures (e.g. Malaysia, Arab countries) people tend to accept unequal power distributions, hierarchical roles, asymmetrical relations and rewards and sanctions based on rank, role, status, age and perhaps even gender identity. Paying one's role optimally and carrying out one's ascribed duties responsibly and asymmetrically, constitute appropriate facework interaction. Individuals are concerned with vertical facework interaction. A third-party mediator is usually involved to manage the conflict.

Self-construal, a key individual factor, also serves as a mediator that has direct and/or indirect effect on facework behaviors. Self-construal is, as Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001) suggest, "a better predictor of conflict styles than ethnic/cultural background." Ting-Toomey and Oetzel assert that the relationship between culture-level analysis and conflict behavior is mediated by individual-level factors. One such factor is self-construal or the distinction between independent and interdependent self-construal. Independent self-construal tends to be more self-face oriented than other-face oriented. It has been linked to behaviors such as competing/dominating conflict style. Interdependent self-construal values other-face and mutual-face concerns. It has been linked to behaviors such as avoiding conflict styles. The notion of self-construal brings broad cultural

variability dimensions to the individual level of analysis. Self-construal allows a more precise explanation in individual differences.

As Oetzel and Ting-Toomey suggest (2013), future studies "could focus on the salience of conflict situations, the importance of issues, and the overall emotion during conflict." This study has situated the focus on the micro-level of contextual conflicts and tried to avoid large-scale generalizations. In particular, it tries to examine the process in which conflict occurred and the role of conflict management in the development of the relationship.

Compared to parent-child and children's friendship conflicts, conflict in adult friendships has not been extensively examined. Of the "scattered" existing studies, interaction research focuses on self-disclosure and social support, with few studies specifically addressing conflict and friendship (Blieszner & Adams, 1992).

Therefore, by applying face-negotiation theory, the purpose of this study is to examine, on the micro-level, perceptions of conflict, conflict strategies employed and effects of facework on the development of an intercultural friendship between a Mexican and Japanese. Specifically, the following questions are asked and investigated.

1. What was the cause of conflict, as the participant perceived?
2. What facework was employed in managing conflict?
3. How did conflict management strategies in turn affect the relationship development?

## METHOD

### Participant

The participant, female, at the time of the interview, was 42 years old. She is from Mexico and came to Japan because her husband was an expatriate of a world known company. Her two daughters, 8 and 10, were commuting to an international school where she met one Japanese mother who has two daughters that are of the same age as hers. Because of this, they had more time to see each other. Meanwhile, since they met, the Japanese mother frequently provided some help such as translating Japanese of daily necessities into English or drove her daughters back home on special occasions. All of this brought them closer, and within a year, they became very close to each other. They also became close friends with another two mothers, one Korean and one Australian.

The conflict was felt and recognized by the participant at this stage of the relationship when she and her Japanese counterpart had known each other for about a year. The participant stayed in Japan for another year before the whole

family moved to somewhere else due to the husband's job change. During this one year, the researcher, who is also a parent, was able to observe some of the changes of the relationship. With her permission, the participant was interviewed and talked about what happened between her and her Japanese counterpart, and how she dealt with it.

## Procedure

A self-report interview was scheduled at a restaurant upon the participant's request a couple of weeks before she left Japan. The interview began with the incident that caused damage to the relationship. During the interview, she was encouraged to explain what happened, how she felt about it and what she did, how her Japanese counterpart responded and reacted. When necessary, the researcher would interrupt to clarify by asking specific questions.

The interview lasted for about one and a half hours. It was recorded and then transcribed. After that, the data was analyzed together with the researcher's observation. In each stage, the way both parties managed the conflicts and deal with their "face" was analyzed and discussed.

# RESULTS

The conflict occurred when the participant perceived a gap of recognition between her and her counterpart. To specify the conflict, there is a need to explain the whole story.

## Conflict and conflict management

*Stage one: What triggered the conflict?*

As mentioned above, the group of four parents including A. the participant (Mexican), B. the Japanese mom, C. the Korean mom, D. the Australian mom became friends because their children happened to be in the same classes, which meant they also met each other frequently not only on a daily base but also when the children had playdates.

The incident that triggered the perceived conflict took place on a day before golden week holiday when the kids and some other schoolmates were playing in a nearby park. What happened was, as the participant A described, B's younger daughter said to another boy who was one the school teacher's sons that he was disgusting because of his skin allergy on his face. Her comment hurt the boy's feelings and he became very distressed. When A, the participant was trying to find out what really happened by requesting that "we have to be honest and tell the

truth", although all evidence proved that B's younger daughter was the suspect, the daughter refused to admit it and the mother B did nothing to it.

So the incident ended like this because the four families went to Korea for a trip soon in the following vacation. On the way back from the airport, the participant A and her counterpart B had the following short conversation.

B: "I hope everything is forgotten, right?"

A: "Forgotten what?"

B: "The incident."

A: "Oh, yes, they are kids."

*Stage two: Confrontation*

The incompatibility the participant felt toward her counterpart escalated on the following Monday. The elementary school head reminded the students in class that people should be kind to each other, and the girls of the four families were suspected. The conflict became apparent and visible when the boy's father who was also a teacher in this school came to the four mothers after school. As A explained, the father/teacher came to them, and said, "well, ladies, this is not teacher-parent meeting, I am talking to you as a father. Because of this incident, my son was crying. He is here because I am working here, first I felt this is too aggressive, but I talked to my son and he is okay now. But this is too rude." Hearing this A replied by saying "my daughters didn't do this, I know them well." At this moment, B started crying, and kept asking, "Is he okay? Is he okay?" But she didn't say sorry.

Watching this, A was not feeling happy, as she said, "As a parent, you have to say I am sorry." So she conversed with B as follows.

A: You are not honest.

B: But all the girls did it.

A: Are you sure?

B: ......

After this, A just left. Later that day she told her daughter that "we have to be honest".

*Stage three: Cooling off*

Because of what had happened, the participant A said, "I stopped talking to her completely". In response to this, B never talked to her again although the four mothers went out for lunch several times. In the meantime, B started to look for more friends and she started to become very close to D who is Australian.

*Stage four: Turning point*

Although the conflict occurred between both parties, on the surface, they still met often because of their children's playdates. A few months after the conflict,

when A saw B one day, she said hi to B, but B completely ignored her. The elementary school head happened to be there as well, and B said hi to him. Seeing this, A said to B like this, "if you don't want to talk to me, you don't have to." Hearing this, B started talking to her right away and it seemed that nothing had happened.

When being asked about the reason why A greeted B, she said, "I don't why I said hello to her, I have to say hello." Although after the incident, A was very upset and told her daughters that they should stay away from B's daughters, but her husband said no, kids should play with their friends. So A apologized to her daughters although she made it clear that B is no longer her friend.

To explain the relationship at this stage, A explained like this. "She is like convenient to me, because I am convenient to her. Because she has a purpose: to find somewhere in the future that she can get the girls to go to America or somewhere."

## Perceptions
### Familial influence
According to A, B is critical at her daughters' friends. B told her daughters "you don't have to talk with (a few girls' names), you have to talk with Gaijin (foreigners) because you have to practice English." It seems that B was not very happy that her daughters were interacting with non-native speakers based on nationalities. Talking about B's close relationship with D-a White Australian, A commented, "I am not a native speaker, but I don't feel close to her, I don't know why, they (B and D) are very very close." Although D's daughters were not very close, B told her daughters that D's daughters "have to be your friends".

Another element that A mentioned was the influence B's family had on the children which indirectly had a negative effect on her daughters. When talking about her younger daughter, she complained that if her daughter was with B's younger one, she also acted in an annoying way. What was more, although B's husband worked hard as the breadwinner, the children had very disrespectful comments toward the father due to the parents' bad relationship and the mother's negative attitude. To conclude, she said, "B is very rude, and she has no education, education from the house. No good manners, you know. She is the mirror of her daughters".

### Privacy
One perception on conversational topics revealed that A considered B to be over curious about her private life. As she demonstrated about B, "she always interviews me, why, how? And my husband said no more anymore." "One day she

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said you are rich, but we are not rich. My husband works very hard to be an expatriate. When we go back to Mexico, we won't be able to live this life."

*Values*

Although A appreciated B's help along the way, however, once "she trespasses the line in a bad way, everything is gonna change". The line, as she put it, refers to honesty. To her, being honest is one of the most important qualities. Since B was not able to be honest and face what had happened, A decided that "she is not honest. But it's her problem, not mine", and "she is not my friend, she's using me, and I am gonna use her". Since they couldn't avoid meeting each other often because of the children, A said, "but now I know how to manage the situation. I know when I don't want to talk more in front of her, you know, I just finish. Turn around or whatever."

## Follow-up

About half a year later after A left Japan, I asked two follow-up questions. 1. What does A think is/are the reason(s) that B or B's daughter didn't apologize for the incident? 2. What are the reasons that A still has B on the friend list of Facebook?

To answer the first question, A explains, "I think because of the tatemae, for them (Japanese) it's a value! I think is the culture and the education in Japan. Japanese people believe they are like pure race. In particular, she thinks her kids can do everything. So they have two faces!" "You know, she's very tatemae. Although you are not blonde, but if you are helpful in something, she's gonna be your friend." Another possible reason perceived is "I was a foreigner!" which means the perceptions of value may be different.

Regarding the second question, A says that she really doesn't know why she still has her on her friend list, "maybe for my kids or because it was benri (convenient) for all." In the end, A stressed, "I forgive her! In fact we (A, B, and C and all their children) are trying to meet in New York next summer".

# DISCUSSION

This study examines the conflict perceived between two friends of Mexican and Japanese as well as the strategies employed by both parties while managing the conflict. The cause that triggered the conflict is listed, the perception of conflict is explained, and the ways both parties managed the conflict are summarized. At the same time, effect of their conflict management to the relationship is discussed.

In Stage one where an incompatibility of values was perceived, B didn't response when the incident happened. Instead, after a few days when the trip finished, she gave B very ambiguous and indirect hint to test the feelings of B's. A first challenged B's self-face by trying to find out who was the cause, and this act in turn, led B remain silent for the sake of protecting her self-face and possibly other-face as well. Ho (1976) has argued that "face behavior takes on a defensive quality when the individual appears to be excessively concerned with protecting his face-relative to the objective requirements of the situation in his cultural context. This is more likely to occur when at some level he senses danger signals (which may be exaggerated) that his face is being threatened and that he does not have the resources to protect its integrity." "Since social expectations are reciprocal in nature, potential conflicts arise when there is a discrepancy between what a person expects or claims from others and what others extend to him. The possibility of losing face can arise not only from the individual's failure to meet his obligations but also from the failure of others to act in accordance with his expectation of them." Since B realized the danger signals (incompatibility), she was trying to manage her face and facework by mentioning it in an indirect way. In the meantime, she was also trying to measure the other party's attitude by asking the question.

In stage two when all four mothers A, B, C and D had to face the boy's father who was also a teacher at that school, and once again B didn't apologize directly as A had expected, the conflict revealed itself on the surface. Since A values honesty, and B obviously crossed her bottom line, A decided to put an end to this relationship. A's self-face concern became more important than other-face and mutual-face and chose to confront at this moment, consequently B, trying to save her self-face, chose to withdraw instead of facing it. Both parties' reactions led to the next stage.

Stage three was the duration when both parties intentionally avoided communicating with each other. To react to A's termination of the relationship, B chose avoidance and ignorance, meanwhile tried to shift her attention to new relationships with others.

In stage four which was a few months after the confrontation, A and B started to talk again but the conversations were constrained on a very shallow level. For A, although at the time of the conflict, she confronted B directly when maintaining self-face appeared more important than saving other's face, in this stage, compared to her daughters' happiness, self-face seemed less important to her. By keeping the conversations on the surface, both self-face and other-face are maintained. During the entire process, B had been avoiding and ignoring A until A challenged her self-

face directly in front of the elementary school head-an important third person, that was when B altered the strategy from avoiding and ignoring to compromising in order to save self-face. As Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001) assert, the reason the conflict parties stay together in a conflict situation "because each person has something that the other person wants or desires; otherwise, the conflict parties would go their separate ways".

With regard to the conflict perceived and facework employed, the following variables are taken into consideration: familial influence, privacy issues, and values. "During intercultural conflict, parties use conflict styles that are consistent with their cultural values" (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). The participant's perceptions of the above variables are reflected in her facework strategies.

In follow-up, the participant A reviewed the interaction with B during her stay in Japan, and concluded the reasons from both cultural and individual perspectives. Culturally, as she explained, "Japanese people have *tatemae* and *honne*, they have two faces, and she's very *tatemae*, and it's a value." From what she said, it can be assumed that B values *tatemae*, and by using *tatemae* self-face gets protected and maintained. On an individual level, A explained, "she has no education from the house." A conclude that B's daughter's behavior reflected B's education which in turn became a mirror for her daughters.

Based on Sillars and Wilmot's (1994) two continua of conflict management behaviors, Canary et al. (1995) suggest that conflict interaction can be classified according to positivity versus negativity of conflict behaviors and direct versus indirect discussion of the issue. Furthermore, indirect methods may reflect positive or negative forms. As some research studies show, to prevent a destructive escalation or to escape responsibility for one's action, one might engage in avoidance (Comstock & Buller, 1991), avoidance of confrontation (Rosenthal et al., 1989), distraction (Vuchinich et al. 1988), and withdrawal (Whittaker & Bry, 1991). Congruent with the results of the study, the participant's counterpart B has been employing negative forms of behaviors by not talking about what happened directly, avoidance of confrontation as well avoidance and ignorance of A. In contrast, A first withdrew, but when conflict emerged on the surface, she chose to confront her counterpart directly which in turn, led her to decide to terminate the relationship.

Resonate with Ting-Toomey et al.'s (1991a) research result with subjects from Japan, China, South Korea, Taiwan, and the United States, the Japanese used self-face maintenance strategies to a greater extent than did the U. S. respondents. The result of this study is also consistent with Cocroft & Ting-Toomey's (1994) study on facework in Japan and the United States. Japanese respondents report to

use more indirect facework than North Americans. The result shows that B utilized more indirect strategies than her Mexican counterpart who was equally categorized as being collectivistic. This echoes Wiseman et al.'s (1995) assertion that "the Japanese sometimes act in a fashion consistent with individualistic behavior and sometimes behave consistent with collectivistic norms." Although independent self-construal has been linked to behaviors such as competing/ dominating conflict style due to the self-face orientation, and interdependent self-construal has been linked to behaviors such as avoiding conflict styles and values other-face and mutual-face concerns, both the participant and her Japanese counterpart revealed independent self-construal, and self-face orientation can be observed.

Another way to explain this inconsistency is the Japanese terminology "*amaeru*" (Doi, 1956). "*Amaeru*", as Doi explained, is "to depend and presume upon another's love". Doi (1973) suggests that "*amaeru* has its primary locus in childhood, but it can be applied to any interpersonal relationship between adults" and "the visibility or accessibility of such a basic desire as *amae* might be the very factor that distinguishes Japanese people from other nations." "What is most important for Japanese is to reassure themselves on every occasion of a mutuality based upon *amae*."

Speaking of A and B's current relationship, A voiced "I forgive her". The reason for this can be found in Rawlins's (1994) study. Rawlins observed that time and distance often separate adult friends. He asserted that conflict is "an issue of the past" and no longer emerges as a part of present interactions between adult friends. Since A and B don't share the same time and space anymore, the conflict that was once a problem is no longer a damage and sticking to it does not carry much importance any more.

To summarize, this study testified perceptions of conflict in intercultural friendship between a Mexican and Japanese, and examined the conflict management strategies or facework both parties employed as well as the effects facework strategies have on the process of the relationship. This research study supports Face-Negotiation Theory in that both cultural and individual variables have impact on the perceptions of conflict and conflict management strategies employed. Although this study cannot provide a cultural generalization, it does provide a reference for further exploration of intercultural friendship, and gives more insight to effect communication through conflict management in intercultural encounters.

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