

## **Chapter 9: Interpersonal Relationships in a Global Work Context**

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## Chapter 9: Interpersonal Relationships in a Global Work Context

First day back from vacation, Diego, a Mexican engineering specialist working for a large multinational corporation based in Germany, received his next project assignment. The automotive plant's assignments typically lasted 6 to 8 months and involved highly interdependent multifunctional teams that worked under intense deadlines. Diego glanced at the names of the other people assigned to the team. It was not usual that the members would be unfamiliar with one another, but Diego recognized the names of three new team members. He has heard that they were all highly regarded for their skills in their areas of expertise. However, from what he has heard about their previous assignments, he worried that their exclusive and impersonal focus to tasks and time schedules and, frankly, their unfriendliness, would not work well with the rest of the team. In previous assignments, Diego's teams have enjoyed a friendly atmosphere (they would go out to have beer together after work and invite each other to their homes) that, in Diego's opinion, made the team productive and successful. He worried that the new team would experience little harmony and much interpersonal conflict. With trepidation, Diego decides to ask for another assignment fearing the lack of interpersonal harmony will impede the team's ability to succeed on their core objectives. Upon hearing the request, Markus, the German project coordinator, was surprised to hear Diego's concern. For Markus, the issue was straightforward: the new people were excellent professionals who would help the team produce better outcomes with a shorter time schedule and therefore Diego's concern for the team's productivity was unfounded.

As demonstrated by this incident, people from different cultures often bring very different sets of assumptions about appropriate ways to coordinate and communicate in business relationships. Culture infuses meaning into the social situation. Whereas interpersonal harmony may be regarded as essential to task success in one society, such as in Mexico, it may be seen as less consequential in another, such as in Germany. As we will discuss in this chapter, one's perceptions, values, and behavior in such situations reflect deep-seated beliefs about the nature of interpersonal work relationships. To understand and manage these differences requires understanding the nature of cultural diversity and how it influences relational and communication styles.

There are different levels of cultural diversity as was described in chapter 5. Some levels are more obvious to the observer than others. The most salient level of diversity to workers and scholars alike are demographic differences such as gender, ethnicity or nationality. These categories are important to the extent that a person's identity and other's perceptions of them are influenced by these social categories. For example, ethnic preferences and prejudices can affect dynamics between a Japanese sales representative discussing logistics in Lima with a Peruvian distributor. The mere perception of differences in demographic category, such as "Japanese" and "Peruvian" can facilitate or sabotage business relations depending on one's beliefs (see chapter 6 for a discussion of social categorization's impact on inter-group and interpersonal relationships).

The other, more implicit, level of difference that people encounter in a global marketplace entails cultural variation in cognitive, communicative and relational styles. Although the markers of diversity at this level can be difficult to observe directly, they nonetheless exert a powerful influence on people's preferences and team dynamics, as illustrated in the opening example (Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett & Ybarra, 2000). Broadly, culture refers to shared understandings made manifest in act and artifact (Redfield, 1941; also see chapter 6 for an expanded discussion on culture). These shared understandings about proper relational styles found within cultures create particular challenges for intercultural business that have less to do with differences in ethnicity and much to do with deep-seated cultural variation between groups. This variation is revealed in how members of two cultures make sense of a situation, the appropriate way to convey bad news, and the extent to which one should or should not mix business and personal matters with colleagues and business partners. As a result, this level of cultural diversity can derail what might otherwise be a promising intercultural partnership.

This chapter begins by describing how culture shapes the relational schemas people use in different cultures to coordinate and communicate thought and action. We then discuss an organizing framework for these diverse cultural schemas. We describe how cultural schemas influence people's emotional involvement or detachment with coworkers and business partners and beliefs about the importance of interpersonal harmony and conflict. Finally, we discuss how this diversity shapes communication styles and the challenges this cultural variation presents to creating a worldwide inclusive workplace.

### **Cultural Styles and Relational Schemas**

There is no such thing as an interpersonal style that is culture neutral. As a result of a cognitive bias social psychologists refer to as *naïve realism* (Ross & Ward, 1996), we mistakenly assume that what is considered in our immediate environment to be appropriate and proper forms of behaving and communicating reflects the natural way things should be and are therefore universally correct. Even when we become aware of cultural differences, this bias often leads us to devalue other's relational work style as 'incorrect' and 'unprofessional.' Indeed, the particular cultural contexts in which people are raised and begin their careers create culturally unique relational schemas.

Relational schemas are the mental models that structure our perceptions and the way we communicate and relate to others. Bartlett (1932, 1958) is credited with first proposing the concept of schema. He arrived at the concept from studies of memory he conducted in which participants recalled details of stories that were not actually there. He suggested that memory takes the form of schemas which provide a mental framework for encoding, understanding and remembering information. Later studies (e.g., Nisbett et al, 2001; Quinn & Holland, 1987) have demonstrated the importance of schemas in understanding culturally related variation in

cognition. Relational schemas refer specifically to cognitions about interpersonal relationships in specific situations (Baldwin, 1992). Cultural schemas allow people to coordinate thought and action by creating shared expectations about how a social interaction should unfold, what behaviors are appropriate, and which elements of an interaction are important to notice (Baldwin, 1992; Fiske, & Haslan, 1996). In many Latin American societies, for example, it is inappropriate to abruptly end one business meeting in order to avoid being late to another appointment. The relational schema used in Latin cultures places priority on the relationship in the present moment. This can be contrasted with the relational schema found in European-American or Swiss cultures where proper social interactions involve strict adherence to punctuality and schedules. (For an illustration of attempts to alter relational schemas for punctuality norms see Box 8-1). Within each society, relational schemas facilitate interpersonal harmony by providing shared expectations about, for example, when to end one meeting and begin the next. Problems arise, however, during intercultural encounters where people are guided by different relational schemas. For example, the Mexican is likely to interpret his European-American colleague's abrupt ending of the meeting according to the minute hand on the clock as 'rude' and impersonal. Likewise, the European-American will perceive his Mexican colleague's lack of respect for punctuality as 'unprofessional.' Both are interested in successful business relationships, however, the relational schemas they bring to the table influence their specific approach toward achieving this goal.

**Box 8-1****RELATIONAL SCHEMAS ABOUT TIME IN ECUADOR**

The Ecuadorian national government recently launched a campaign to eliminate the social practice of arriving 15 to 30 minutes late to business meetings and social events (jokingly referred to as running on "Ecuadorian time"). Citing the financial costs of tardiness, which is estimated at \$724 million a year, the campaign began with a national 'clock synchronization ceremony.' Hundreds of officials gathered in the heart of Quito's downtown to mark a ceremonious start to the drive. The population was urged by President Lucio Gutierrez to be on time 'for the sake of God, the country, our people, and our consciences.'

Source: Ecuador Punctuality, Reuters, October 2, 2003

Researchers have documented relational schemas that are unique to a particular culture and schemas that reflect broad cultural dimensions. In China, there is a culture-specific schema based on *Quanxi* (Tsui & Farh, 1997) in which one is expected to attend carefully to the interconnections among business colleagues and partners. In Korea, a schema reflecting *Chabeol* (Kim, 1988) or company familialism structures business relationships to reflect both work and personal features. Mexican business relationships reflect a *Simpatia* schema (Triandis, Marin et al., 1984; Diaz-Guerrero, 1967; Sanchez-Burks, 2002), which places importance on proactively creating rapport and personal connections. In contrast, the influence of *Protestant Relational Ideology* in European-American culture (Sanchez-Burks, 2002) maintains a sharp distinction between the relational schemas used at work versus outside work. (For an example of how differences in European-American and Mexican relational schemas lead to different memories of 'what just happened' in a team meeting, see Box 8-2).

**Box 8-2****WHAT JUST HAPPENED IN THAT MEETING?**

In a series of field studies on workgroups, Mexican, Mexican-American and European-Americans were asked to view recordings of team meetings and later report what they could remember about what happened in the meeting. While there were no cultural differences in their ability to recall task-related information such as progress on the agenda or questions raised, there was significant difference in their memory for interpersonal dynamics. European-Americans were far less likely than either the Mexicans or Mexican-Americans to recall interpersonal and social emotional dynamics such as one person being rude or friendly to another or one person being interrupted by another (Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett, & Ybarra, 2000).

Relational schemas characterized as broad cultural dimensions include independence-interdependence, high/low context and individualism-collectivism (Hofstede, 1997; Triandis, 1996). The distinction between independent and interdependent self-construals, for example, focuses on a relational schema in which perceptions, emotions and behavior are focused on the individual in the situation, compared to a schema in which the focus is the connection relationships within the group. Both culture specific and these more broad level schemas serve as the foundation for how people from different cultures interpret, communicate, and approach interpersonal relationships.

The influence of relational schemas is revealed in numerous interpersonal dynamics of business relationships. At the micro level, for example, relational schemas influence the degree of nonverbal coordination between two people interacting. People attentive to relational concerns tend to non-consciously mirror the gestures and posture of their counterparts in a social interaction, and as a consequence increase interpersonal rapport (Chartrand et al, 1999; Sanchez-Burks, 2000; Van Swol, 2003). For example, if one of the parties to a conversation is speaking softly and not using hand gestures, after a while, the attentive observer is likely to do the same which will increase the first person's sense of comfort and create more harmony in the relationship. When people are 'out-of-sync' in their nonverbal gestures as a result of diversity in relational schemas, it can increase levels of anxiety and can actually reduce one's performance in the situation. This was demonstrated in a study conducted in a Fortune 500 company in which a European-American interviewed a pool of European-Americans and Latinos under instructions to subtly mirror the nonverbal gestures of half of the applicants (e.g., lean forward when the applicant leaned forward) and not mirror the gestures of the other half. Videotaped recordings of

the interviews were shown to experts who evaluated the performance of the applicants under these two conditions. The study found that interview performance was contingent on level of nonverbal coordination for the Latinos applicants but significantly less so for the European-American men and women (Sanchez-Burks & Blount, 2004). Thus subtle cultural differences in relational schemas between interviewer and applicant can sabotage the success of intercultural workplace interactions. Such findings illustrate how important understanding cultural diversity in relational schemas can be for individuals and the organization. For organizations to sustain effective recruiting and selection efforts, and thus an important competitive advantage in the marketplace, they must manage such implicit cultural diversity.

The influence of relational schemas on attention can also affect managers' perceptions of what motivates their subordinates. DeVoe and Iyengar (2004) report in a study on employees of a multinational retail bank that the intrinsic motivation of subordinates (e.g., a desire to work hard because of one's personal interest in the project rather than for financial rewards or threats of punishment) is more likely to be noticed by Japanese and Mexican managers than European-American managers, presumably because the latter are guided by relational schemas that are less sensitive to such personal information.

In sum, experience and socialization within different cultural contexts create culturally unique relational schemas. In turn, these relational schemas provide specific templates that guide our perceptions, communication and behavior in social situations. In organizations, these relational schemas shape a variety of dynamics, including what people notice and take away from business meeting, the degree to which they coordinate their non-verbal behaviors and are affected by the overall level of coordination. These schemas also influence managers' perceptions of what motivates their subordinates and their accuracy vis-à-vis subordinates actual



interests and motivations. Together, the notion of culturally grounded relational schemas provides a foundation for understanding what people from different societies ‘bring to the table’ in diverse organizations and international business ventures. In the next section we discuss specific organizing frameworks for understanding cultural diversity in relational schemas. These frameworks provide a way to understand how cultural schemas produce variation in beliefs about notions of professionalism, proper networking strategies and beliefs about harmony and conflict.

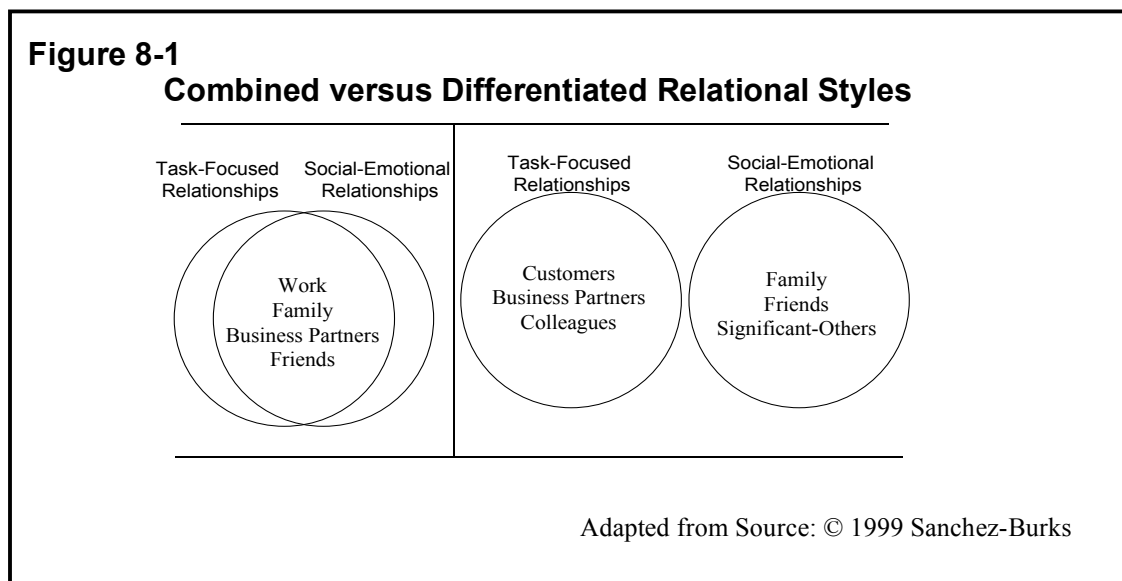
## **Diversity in Interpersonal Relationships**

### **Emotional Detachment vs. Emotional Involvement**

Cultural divides that challenge intercultural relationships often stem from the way individuals integrate or differentiate two types of relational schemas: task-focused schemas and social-emotional schemas. When people are guided solely by a task-focused schema, they focus exclusively on elements of the situation directly related to the task such as whether progress on the agenda is being made, steps are being taken to meet upcoming deadlines, and other issues related more to the job than the people involved. In contrast, people guided solely by social-emotional schemas will focus their attention and effort on emotional and interpersonal concerns.

As shown in Figure 8-1, the level of integration of these two schemas varies along a continuum. In cultures where these concerns are combined, people maintain a dual focus on task and interpersonal concerns. Dual attention does not necessarily mean equal attention at all times. That is, emphasis on relational concerns relative to task concerns and vice versa can vary from one culture to the next and between individuals in the same culture. It does mean, however, that there is no sharp distinction between the two areas and that they are intertwined. For example, a manager will coordinate her group’s efforts to be productive while closely managing interpersonal harmony. Workers in these societies are more likely to mingle work and personal

issues, go out with their coworkers on the weekend and have a preference to work with their family and friends (Morris et al, 2000). At the other end of the continuum are societies with more differentiated relational styles. Here, managers work hard to maintain a sharp divide between one's work and personal life. At work, people operate with an implicit understanding to put personal matters aside, to avoid emotions and other concerns believed to harm one's image of the polite but impersonal professional (Heaphy, Sanchez-Burks, & Ashford, 2004). Smooth team dynamics are managed by maintaining a strict focus on the task at hand. As one manager with a strong differentiated style reported in an interview on the meaning of professionalism, "it is a death wish to talk about personal matters or get emotional at work."



There is tremendous cultural variation in the form and content of social-emotional schemas. In East Asian societies, workers preserve harmony passively by not 'rocking the boat,' whereas in Latin societies, people proactively create harmony through open displays of warmth and graciousness, even to strangers. Despite disparate ways of fostering social-emotional ties, interdependent styles are common in much of the world, including East Asian, Latin, and Middle

Eastern societies (Ayman & Chemers, 1983; Earley & Erez, 1997; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These differences can be complex, blurring the lines between culture and nationality. For example, immigrants and members of ethnic groups whose culture of origin used the interdependent cultural schema are highly likely to use it even when living in a differentiated cultural context (e.g., the U.S.). Research has provided evidence that Latinos (both Mexican and Mexican-Americans) are guided by a concern with socio-emotional aspects of workforce relations to a far greater degree than are Anglo-Americans and the relationship holds true even when the Latinos reside in a differentiated culture such as the U.S. (Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett and Ybarra, 2000).

There can also be gender differences in interpersonal style. For example, women have been found to be more attentive than men to social-emotional aspects of work relationships and therefore more likely to use the interdependent relational style, even in cultural contexts where the differentiated style is more prevalent, such as in North America (Reardon, 1995). However, in contrast to cultural differences, research suggests that gender differences can be quite inconsistent, emerging in some studies but not others (Holtgraves, 1997; Sanchez-Burks et al, 2003; Tannen, 1990). At this point it appears that differences in relational styles that may exist between men and women are exhibited within a particular culture, appearing to be smaller in magnitude relative to differences between cultures. For example, although American women may have more interdependent self-construals than American men, they are less interdependent than Japanese men and more independent than Japanese women (Kashima et al, 1995).

An exception in this general tendency toward interdependent relational styles is the United States, particularly European-Americans. Here, acting professional means suppressing authentic displays of social emotionality, maintaining a divide between one's work and personal

life, and not letting interpersonal issues stand in the way - the “emotional overcoat” theory (Mann, 1999). In fact, professional emotionality is prescribed in these cultures where, employees are expected to be courteous in a friendly way and not display strong emotions, either positive or negative in the workplace. Bringing authentic emotionality to the workplace (e.g., being sad, depressed or overly happy) is frowned upon and considered unprofessional behavior. Employees may be expected to display “scripted” emotions such as the “Have A Nice Day” script for many jobs in the service sector where workers are required to be cheerful and helpful to customers at all time to encourage a positive experience and repeat service (e.g., training programs for telemarketers teach them how to speak on the phone with a smile in their voice so the smile will be obvious to the person on the other end of the phone line). Other organizational positions having less customer contact, as well as jobs such as lawyers, physicians and nurses are expected to be cool and emotionally detached in order to project professional competence (Mann, 1999). In either of these cases, the prescribed job-related emotional script typical in the differentiated cultural context requires workers to put effort into acting out emotions they do not feel or to suppress emotions they do feel in order to meet the emotional script of their jobs.

Variation in how social and task concerns are structured appears also at the social network level. Morris and his colleagues (2000) investigated the overlap between work and social ties among Citibank employees in Spain, China, Germany and the United States. They asked bank branch employees how much they interact with coworkers during their time off, for example on the weekend. Whereas the Spaniards and Japanese indicated it was quite common to interact with the same people inside and outside the work (see Combined Style), Americans were significantly less likely to show such overlap (see Differentiated Style). Mor Barak and her colleagues (2003) compared the support network structure between employees of high-tech

companies in Israel and in the United States. They found a striking difference - in the U.S. the support network structure was very distinct and segregated by type of provider (three clear factors emerged – supervisor, co-workers, and family/friends), while in Israel the network structure was highly interconnected (no factors emerged in the confirmatory factor analysis). Israelis, like the Japanese and the Spaniards in the previous study, utilize a Combined Style and are more likely to interact with their co-workers after work. As a result, they made no distinction between support provided by their supervisor and co-workers and their family and friends. The Americans, by contrast, hold a differentiated style and make a clear distinction between support provided by people from their work context and those from outside the work context (Mor Barak, Findler, and Wind, 2003).

Previous studies point to the fact that cultures of interdependence promote well-being in contrast to cultures of independence that tend to foster psychological distress (Bellah et al, 1985). Cultures of interdependence are composed of social structures that promote the good of the collective and the group's responsibility for taking care of its own. Social institutions in independent cultures, in contrast, support individual autonomy and personal fulfillment with the expectation that the individual will take care of his or her own needs. The result is a more fragmented support network with less communication between its various parts and gaps in support that reduce its positive impact on well-being.

In sum, understanding the degree to which an individual's relational schemas reflect a combined versus differentiated style provide a basis for anticipating the challenges that will arise when people from cultures using these two styles attempt to work together. These challenges include coordinating differences in the beliefs about the importance of social emotional elements

of work relations, their role in defining appropriate and professional behavior, and expectations about blending or differentiated work and non-work social worlds.

### **Conflict and Harmony**

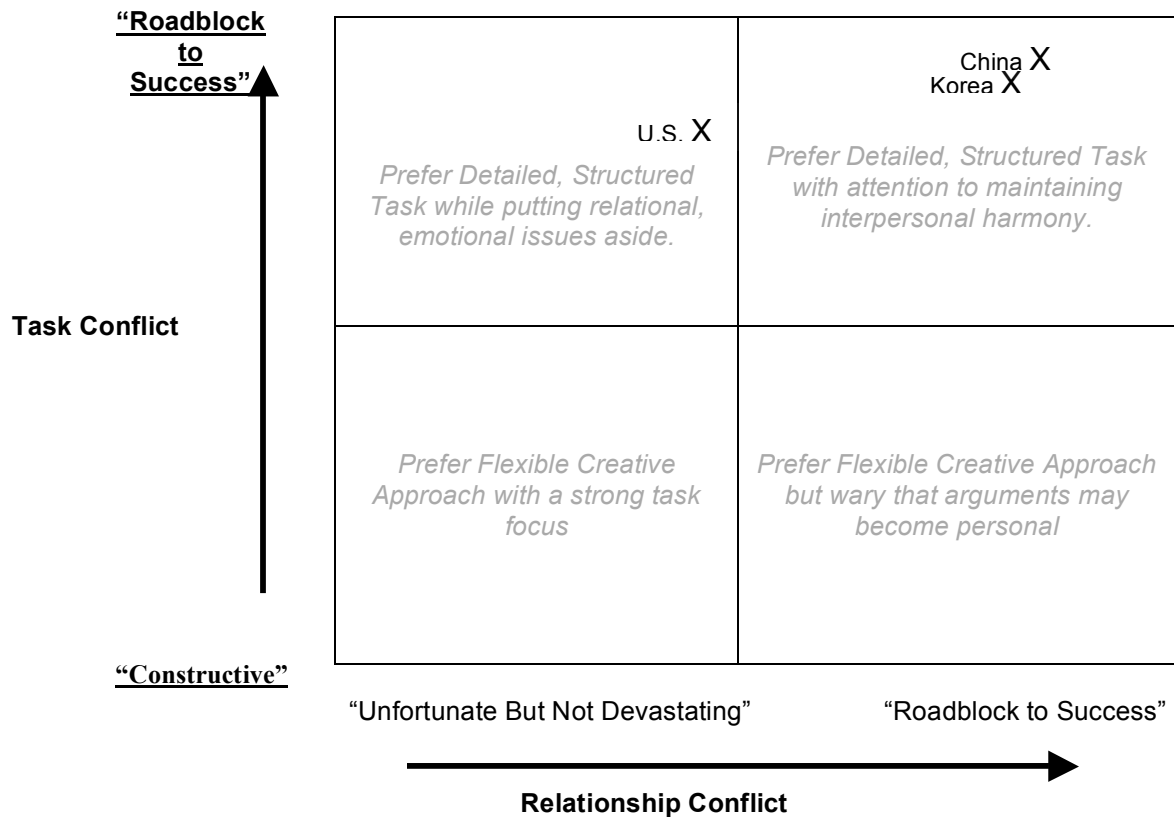
Relational styles influence one's beliefs about conflict and its consequences, for example whether relationship conflict in a team is a threat to task success. The more that social emotional elements are removed from one's workplace relational schema—see differentiated style—the less vulnerable the team is perceived to be to social emotional disruptions. According to Neuman, Sanchez-Burks, Goh & Ybarra (2004), managers in combined style cultures interpret conflict as an inherent barrier to success: a team, collaboration, partnership without interpersonal harmony can rarely be productive (see Diego's alarm at the team's composition in the case vignette at the beginning of this chapter). On the other hand, managers in differentiated cultures, while not enjoying interpersonal discord, do not perceive it necessarily to be a limiting factor for a team's success (Markus' attitude to the team's composition in the case vignette demonstrates this approach). In a survey conducted in the U.S., China and Korea, Newman and his colleagues (2004) asked managers and business students how much task and relationship conflict were a roadblock to success if at all (see Figure 8-2). Virtually all of the managers believed that task related conflict was a barrier to success—surprising only in that research demonstrates that under certain circumstances it may provide a source of synergy and remedy to groupthink (for reviews see Jehn & Bendersky, 2004). However, only the European-Americans, particularly men, had a different belief about the effects of relationship conflict—as one manager stated, “it [relationship conflict] is unfortunate but not devastating.”

The implication of these different beliefs about relationship conflict is that when conflict does arise in cross-cultural relationships—as it often does whenever people must work closely in

interdependent tasks—people’s reactions will differ likewise and these different reactions may trigger a spiral downward in dynamics that extend far beyond the initial conflict. For example, a Korean manager may become anxious that the team’s ability to succeed may be limited because of the interpersonal conflict and hence try to exit the team or work hard to restore interpersonal harmony. In contrast, the American is less likely to ruminate over the issue and prefer to ‘let bygones be bygones’ rather than continue to focus on interpersonal issues over task-specific issues. Thus, beliefs about relationship conflict rather than actual effects of relationship conflict may pose the more serious threat to cross-cultural working relationships. Decisions about which teams to join, who to invite, if and when to attempt an exit from the team will all reflect these beliefs about how much interpersonal harmony and relationship conflict affect a team’s ability to succeed in their mission.

**Figure 8-2**

**BELIEFS ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF TASK AND RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT**



Source: Neuman, et al., 2003<sup>1</sup>

**Interpersonal Relationships and Cross-cultural communication**

Successful cross-cultural communication relies on many shared understandings about emotional displays, indirect cues, and face<sup>2</sup>, to name a few. In every culture, people's internalized cultural norms and values inform the way they communicate with other people and may explain some difficulties in cross-cultural communication that cannot be explained by the use of different languages alone. For example, consider the following conversation between an American plant manager (Patrick) and his Mexican supervisor (Francisco):

(Patrick): It looks like we're going to have to keep the production line running on



Saturday.  
(Francisco): I see.  
(Patrick): Can you make it on Saturday  
(Francisco): Oh, Yes...Patrick did I tell you that my son's birthday is this  
Saturday. My family is going to have a big party for him.  
(Patrick): Oh, how nice. I hope that everyone has a wonderful time.  
(Francisco): Thank you, I knew that you would understand.  
(Patrick): Ok, so see you on Saturday.

Will Francisco show up on Saturday? Would Patrick be justified in being upset if his supervisor does not show up? Culture and context rather than language *per se* are necessary to explain the likely miscommunication between Patrick and Francisco. In the following sections, we describe how culture shapes one's communication style and the implications of this diversity for cross-cultural communication in a global marketplace. We begin by discussing communication patterns that reflect different points along the cultural continuums of high/low context and individualism-collectivism. Next, we describe how these cultural continuums create communication contexts that differ in their orientation toward face and relational concerns versus instrumental concerns and preferences for direct versus indirect communication.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Interpersonal Cross-cultural Communication**

All business transactions, whether within the same culture or across different cultures, involve communication. Business related communication includes activities such as exchanging information and ideas, decision-making, motivating, and negotiating (Adler, 1991). An important theoretical construct used to differentiate among cultural communication styles involves the continuum of *low-context to high-context* cultures (Hall, 1959). Members of high-context cultures, such as Japan, China, Mexico and Chile, exchange information using a communication style in which the content and meaning of the information is derived from contextual cues in the setting, with only minimal information explicitly derived from a literal interpretation of the transmitted message itself. In such communications, the words convey only a small part of the

message and the receiver needs to fill in the gaps based on understanding of the context and of the speaker. In contrast, members of low-context cultures, such as the U.S., Australia and Germany exchange information through transactions that are the opposite – most of the information is conveyed within the transmitted message itself, the actual words rather than the context contain the intended meaning (Hall, 1976). Thus, high and low context cultures differ in the degree to which one must attend to interpersonal and contextual cues in the situation in order to understand what is taking place and what is being communicated. These cues are essential for understanding in high context cultures and substantially less important in low context cultures.

A second theoretical distinction between cultures that is relevant to communication is the continuum of *collectivist to individualist* cultures. These terms are part of a broad theoretical formulation to differentiate cultures across the globe (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1996) and will be discussed further in the next chapter. At this point, suffice it to say that individualist cultures are those that value autonomy and independence, while collectivist cultures are those that value reciprocal obligations and interdependence. In collectivist societies, such as many Latin American countries, countries in Africa, as well as Arab-speaking countries, people are born into extended families or other groups that are structured to remain highly interdependent and loyal to one another in all spheres of life.

In Guinean culture for example, as is the case in most of Africa, the deep sense of commitment to the extended family intertwines in subtle and complex ways with the working life. It is not uncommon, therefore, to see employees leaving work to settle family matters and to be absent for a couple of days to mourn relatives in remote villages (Auclair, 1992). In societies steeped in individualism, such as the U.S., Australia, Great Britain and Canada, people are expected to act according to their self-interests rather than those of the collective, and are not

viewed as an inextricable part of a larger social group (Bellah, et al, 1985; Javidan and House, 2001). In collectivist societies, the group is primary and the individual is derived from their social relationships and group memberships. In individualist societies, it is the individual that is primary and social affiliations are proprieties of the individual—each person having their unique collection of memberships and relationships (Wagner, 2002).

Cultures often cluster along the cultural continuums described thus far. Research reveals links between the cultural context continuum of low to high context with the cultural value continuum of individualism and collectivism. That is, cultures that have a collectivist value system (with an emphasis on “we” rather than “I”) also tend to have a high-context orientation, while individualist cultures (with an emphasis on “I” rather than “we”) are often more low context in nature (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, and Chua, 1988). Moreover, the cultural patterns described earlier as having differentiated versus combined relational styles also tend to covary with these dimensions. High-context, collectivists tend to exhibit a combined relational style (blending task and social emotional ties) whereas low-context, individualist more often show a differentiated relational style (Sanchez-Burks, et al. 2002).

How does the cultural context affect communication styles? We examine this question according to three interrelated dimensions: (a) face and harmony orientation; (b) relationship vs. task orientation; and (c) direct vs. indirect communication (see Table 8-1 below):

<b>Table 8-1</b> <b>CULTURAL CONTEXT AND COMMUNICATION ORIENTATION<sup>3</sup></b>		
<b>Communication Orientation</b>	<b>Cultural context</b>	
	<b>High-context Collectivist</b>	<b>Low-context, Individualist</b>
<b>Face Orientation</b>	Other-face concern	Self-face concern
<b>Relationship vs. Task</b>	Relationship-oriented	Task-oriented
<b>Direct vs. Indirect</b>	Indirect communication	Direct communication

**(a) Face and harmony orientation.** The concept of “face” refers to “the public self-image that every member of a society wants to claim for him/herself” (Brown and Levinson, 1978, p.199). Earley (1997) defines it more broadly: “Face refers to both internal and external presentations of oneself, and it is based on both morality defined in a social structure as well as a socially constructed representation by others” (Early, 1997, p.14). Although the concept of face may manifest itself differently in various cultures and has been mistakenly attributed as primarily an Asian culture preoccupation, everyone has a concept of face that influences his or her behavior and action. In collectivist high-context cultures, such as in Indonesia for example, it would be inappropriate for a manager to praise individuals too highly in front of their peers. Instead, the group as a whole should be praised when things go well (Foster, 1998). Harmony, which too has been mistakenly attributed only to Asian cultures, is the process through which face is regulated in a particular cultural context (Early, 1997). As described earlier, the Mexican value placed on *Simpatia* similarly emphasizes the importance of interpersonal and group harmony (Diaz-Guerrero, 1967; Triandis et al, 1984). In their communication with others, members of low-context individualist cultures are more likely to be concerned with self-face and have a preference for congruence between their private self-image (“authentic self”) and their public self-image (“social self”). In contrast, members of high-context collectivist cultures are more likely to be concerned with other-face in their interpersonal communication and negotiations (Ting-Toomey, 1988). The roots of this focus on the other-face in the Asian cultures can be found in the Confucian principle where one needs to continually deepen and broaden one’s awareness of the presences of the other in one’s self cultivation (Tu, 1985).

**(b) Relationship vs. Task Orientation.** As indicated earlier in the chapter, different cultures use relational schemas that emphasize by varying degree either instrumental goals or

relational goals. Here we discuss the impact of these relational schemas on cross-cultural communication. Communication in the combined task/relationship schema or the differentiated schema focus on either achieving a task or the relationship as it relates to the task (see Box 8-3).

An example that demonstrates the discrepancy between the Western differentiated task-orientation and the Eastern combined relationship/task-orientation is the following incident. An American professor was invited to give a series of lectures in several universities in China. Her hosts exhibited the very warm hospitality that the Chinese people are known for by lavishly wining and dining her. On the morning of the last day of the visit, with her flight scheduled for noon, her hosts insisted on showing her a traditional tea ceremony. While she appreciated their gracious hospitality and the great effort they had made to find a teahouse that would agree to perform the tea ceremony in the morning rather than the typical afternoon/evening time, she was anxious about the risk of missing her flight. Unbeknownst to her, during the tea ceremony, arrangements were made by one of the hosts for a car that would take her to the airport on time for her flight. Relaxing on the plane (that she did not miss after all), she reflected that a typical American host would have been more concerned with getting her to her plane on time (differentiated task-orientation) than spending additional time in developing the relationship in a social atmosphere (interdependent relationship/task-orientation).

**Box 8-3**

**COMMUNICATING THROUGH THE EXCHANGE OF BUSINESS CARD:  
TASK-ORIENTED VS. RELATIONSHIP/TASK-ORIENTED CULTURES**

Exchanging business cards is a decades old tradition within the business community, a tradition that originated in the United States and Europe. The reason for this custom was straightforward – to provide the very basic information about the bearer of the card so that the other person would remember the card owner's name, job title, company affiliation and contact information for perusing future business opportunities. Developed within the western cultural context, it was clearly task oriented.

Business people in Asian countries such as China, and Korea have adopted this custom, but with a cultural twist. While Western business people pay no attention *to the way* they

hand their cards, Chinese people take great care about the process of giving and receiving a business card: they hold the card with *both* hands and with a bow present the card with the print facing the recipient of the card. Coming from a relationship-oriented cultural schema, the method of presenting the card is aimed to convey respect and establish trust. Presenting the card with both hands symbolically indicates that the presenter of the card is honest, has nothing to hide and is not holding back.

An American businessman who was coached ahead of time about this custom, found himself in an awkward situation in meeting a Chinese colleague. The two of them were handing their cards to one another at the very same time. Holding their cards in both hands neither one had a free hand to take the other's card, let alone accept it with both hands as is customary. Finally, the Chinese man graciously put his card on the table and took the American's card and then picked his card from the table and handed it to his American colleague, thus completing their "cultural dance".

**(b) Direct vs. Indirect Communication.** The most universal communication strategy used to preserve face and harmony, particularly when conveying bad news, is to use indirectness (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Indirect communication refers to the difference between the literal meaning of what one says (the semantic meaning) and the intended meaning (See Figure 8-3 for an example of public displays of indirectness). For example, when a coworker proposes an alternative marketing approach that you do not think is particularly well thought out, you might say "it sounds interesting" (indirect communication) in order to avoid saying what you really think - "it is a half-baked idea" (direct communication) to not hurt your friend's feeling and allow them to save face.

**Figure 8-3**

**"KEEP OFF GRASS," STATED INDIRECTLY (CHINA) AND DIRECTLY (U.S.)**



Photograph © 1999 Sanchez-Burks



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Indirectness is an important communicative strategy that varies according to cultural context, individualism-collectivism and relational styles. In cultures where face and harmony are important, people use face saving communication strategies such as indirectness to avoid conflict, preserve status structures, etc. Members of collectivist, low-context cultures exchange information primarily on the basis of direct, explicit communication that is focused on precise, straightforward words. In contrast, members of individualist, high-context cultures exchange information primarily on the basis of implicit, indirect communication that is focused on shared experiences developed over time (context) utilizing indirect and non-verbal meaning.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

People hold assumptions and beliefs about the nature of interpersonal work relationships that are rooted in their cultural context. In this chapter, we focused on a continuum of relational schemas that help explain different types of relationships and communication patterns in different cultures. At one end of the spectrum is the *differentiated relational schema* where there is a clear division between *task-focused* relationships in the business environment and the *social-emotional* relationships with family, friends and significant others. At the other end of the spectrum is the *combined relational schema* where both *task-focused* and *social-emotional* relationships are intertwined in both the work and the family arenas. We then examined cross-cultural communication in *low context* vs. *high context* cultures (where information is received primarily in the message itself as compared to other sources such as the settings and the relationships) and in *collectivist* vs. *individualist* cultures (where emphasis is placed on reciprocal obligations and interdependence within the extended family and community as compared to an emphasis on autonomy, independence and self interest). We presented an organizing theoretical model that utilizes the concepts of *other-face* vs. *self-face*, *relationship* vs.

*task*, and *indirect* vs. *direct* communication in conjunction with high/low and collectivist/individualist cultures. Finally, we examined communication patterns and the impact of communication styles on cross-cultural interactions in the global workplace. In conclusion, even under the best of conditions, when the parties communicating share a language and belong to the same culture, misunderstandings are not uncommon. Add to that the layers of cultural expectations and beliefs, gender relations, and national loyalties, the possibilities for misunderstanding and conflict dramatically increase. As we will explore further in the next chapter, central to developing intercultural competence is acquiring knowledge of other cultures and languages, improving communication skills, flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity.



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## Note

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<sup>1</sup> Authors' note: Sanchez-Burks is a co-author on this article, no need for copyright clearance.

<sup>3</sup> The concept of face refers to “self-definition in the context of social observers”, or “self definition in one’s social system” (Early, 1997, p. 3-4). Face includes all aspects concerning how we present ourselves, how other’s perceive us and, at the same time, serves as a basis for self-evaluation. We expand on this concept later in the chapter.

<sup>3</sup> Author’s note: Original table based on conceptual discussions, no need for copyright clearance.

