

Why do they not talk? Towards an understanding of students' cross-cultural encounters from an individualism/collectivism perspective

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Many universities today are promoting cultural diversity to prepare students to be competent in intercultural communication and function effectively in an increasingly global world. The purpose of this study is to explore how and why students from different cultural backgrounds are motivated to communicate and interact with each other. It is based on the premise that a given culture prescribes how and why individuals are motivated to interact with others from different cultural backgrounds. In order to provide a holistic view that would account for the multi-faceted and subtle nuances of human behaviour in communication, a naturalistic inquiry approach was adopted to explore the communication patterns of groups of students from predominantly individualistic and collectivistic cultures. The findings indicate layers of differences in the way students relate across cultures in class as well as social environments. The implications for inter-cultural communication for educators are discussed using the individualism-collectivism dimension.

Cross-cultural encounters, communication competence, individualism and collectivism, cultural values, ethnography

INTRODUCTION

As the world becomes increasingly interconnected and culturally diverse, the internationalisation of education has become a major goal of many universities. Through the promotion of cultural diversity, universities endeavour to prepare individuals to become competent in intercultural communication and function effectively in a multicultural environment (Albert and Triandis 1985; Blight 1997; Nowak, Weiland and McKenna 1998). Indeed, the growth of cultural diversity on university campuses has resulted in a plethora of interest and research in the field of intercultural communication internationally. Interestingly, however, a review of the literature suggests that although universities continue to celebrate the cultural diversity of their student population, cross-cultural interaction among students remains alarmingly low (for example, Burke 1986; Schram and Lauver 1988; Volet and Pears 1994, 1995; Mullins, Quintrell and Hancock 1995; Nesdale, Simkin, Sang, Burke and Fraser 1995; Todd and Nesdale 1997; Volet and Ang 1998). As such, Bochner, Hutnik and Furnham (1986, p.5) assert that it would be naïve to assume that “close proximity would spontaneously result in individuals from different cultures interacting and forming long-lasting friendships”. Instead, several studies on the formation of academic or social networks, have found that students are constantly forming support groups, which are heavily

ethnic-based, with very little mixing of cultures (for example, Tanaka, Takai, Kohyama, Fujihara and Minami 1997; Nowak, Weiland and McKenna 1998).

The aim of this study is to explore how and why individuals are motivated to communicate inter-culturally. It is based on the premise that culture and the motivation to communicate are fundamentally and ineluctably linked. Samovar and Porter (1991: 47) argue that “people learn to think, feel, believe and strive for what their culture considers proper.” Indeed, the dominant cultural norms and rules have an effect on the attitudes and behaviours of individuals toward what is desirable (Albert 1970; D’Andrade 1992; Hall 1977; Schneider 1976; Vogt and Geertz 1973).

A communication encounter (i.e. both verbal and non-verbal) is understood here as being a context where two individuals meet and bring with them different perceptual positions regarding levels of communication and life experiences, which are in turn influenced by the individual’s cultural background (Westwood and Borgen 1988). To achieve intercultural communication competence, it would require the accurate transmission of the expectations and experiences of each individual to result in mutual understanding. In short, interaction not only involves the perception, selection, and interpretation of salient features of the rules used in actual communicative situations, but also the integration of these with the communicator’s motivation, cultural knowledge and skills (Porter and Samovar 1991).

HOW I INTERACT WITH OTHERS? THE INDIVIDUALISM VERSUS COLLECTIVISM DIVIDE

The individualism-collectivism construct has been widely researched as a cultural construct to investigate the nature of individuals, society as well as the relationship between them (for example, Rokeach 1968; Hall, 1977; Hofstede, 1980; Bond, Leung and Wan, 1982; Triandis 1995; Schwartz 1994; Schwartz and Sagiv 1995; Hofstede and McCrae 2004). Essentially, individualism and collectivism are two views of the self which affect how an individual relates to others. Broadly, individualists view themselves as agents of their existence and primary focus is placed on the needs of the individual. This view does not deny the existence of the society. Rather it holds that society is made up of a group of independent individuals, not something over and above them. Conversely, collectivists focus on the needs of the group and identify themselves as an extension of other individuals in that group (for example, family, community, society or nation). Rather than deny its existence, the individual’s identity is defined by its relationship with members of the group.

In their study, Markus and Kitayama (1991) were particularly interested in exploring how such different views of the self affected communication styles and the resulting consequences. Consistent with other researchers, Markus and Kitayama (1991) argue that individualism can be found in many Western cultures. This view of the self focuses on the internal attributes of the individual and views the individual as an autonomous, independent person. Thus, in interpersonal relationships, the independent self is more likely to seek to assert his or her inner characteristics (such as personality, desires, personal goals and emotions) in order to change the social situation. Other labels used to describe the independent or individualist self include, low-context, egocentric, separate, autonomous, idiocentric, self-contained, openness to change, and self-enhancement.

In contrast, many non-Western cultures, such as the Chinese and Japanese, tend to view the self as an extension of significant others including family members, friends and co-workers. This view of the self maintains that individuals are interconnected, and depend on each other for self-definition (Shweder and Bourne 1984; Chu 1985; Hsu 1985, King and Bond 1985; Gao 1998). Thus, an interdependent individual sees the self as less differentiated from others and is more likely to find ways to fit in with others. In other words, interdependent individuals would seek to form

obligations, and become part of various interpersonal relationships. As such, the interdependent self is also more likely to attempt to alter or control his or her inner attributes (i.e. behave in a modest, self-effacing, or other-enhancing way) to suit the context and avoid disrupting harmony in the relationship (Yang 1992). This is due to the belief that in abasing oneself or actively enhancing the position of others, one would in effect enhance the self (Markus and Kitayama 1991). Modest behaviour is not viewed as a sign of weakness or a failure to express oneself; rather, it reflects tolerance, self-control, flexibility and maturity. The interdependent or collectivist view of the self is variously referred to as sociocentric, holistic, allocentric, ensembled, constitutive, contextualist, high-context, connected and relational, conservatist, self-transcendent.

Generally, South-East Asian societies like Singapore and Malaysia are associated with collectivist orientation while Western societies, like Australia, are associated with individualism (Triandis 1995). In reality the two extreme cultures do not exist in their pure form as represented. However, such a dichotomy allows researchers to categorise and explain cross-cultural similarities and differences in a more explicit and easily comprehensible way (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck 1961; Das 1972; Triandis 1995). Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) used the concept of whether the relationship between individuals and groups places the individual or group as the focus to formulate their *linear* (for example, submission to elders), **collateral** (for example, agreement with group norms), and **individualistic** (for example, doing what self-conceptions dictate) orientations. Similarly, it is Schwartz (1994)'s cultural dimensions of **Self-Enhancement/Openness-to-Change** (in other words, Individualism) versus **Self-Transcendence/Conservation** (that is, Collectivism) form a continuum of related motivations rather than distinct ones. This continuum gives rise to a circular structure where the definition of value types represents conceptually driven decisions about where one hazy set ends and another begins (Schwartz and Sagiv 1995, p.94). Therefore, it is not surprising if individuals in all cultures hold both individualistic and collectivistic views at the same time, albeit of varying strengths (Ho 1988).

METHOD OF INQUIRY

A naturalistic inquiry approach was employed in order to provide a holistic view that would account for the many facets of human behaviour in communication (Munro 1997). In particular, significant focus was placed on the interactants' perspectives in order to reveal the particularistic and subtle nuances of interpersonal relationships across cultures. This revelation is important because part of the process of attaining competence in intercultural communication is in being able to understand and appreciate the different indigenous culture contexts and to take that into account in interacting with others.

The chosen field site was a university in Australia with an international student population on campus of about 1200, or 8.5 per cent of the student population. Of this group, 42 per cent were from Singapore, 28 per cent from Malaysia, and 18 per cent from other parts of Asia. The majority of these students were of ethnic Chinese background. In total, over a year was spent in conducting fieldwork at the university.

During fieldwork, both participant and non-participant observations were employed. In addition, the researchers spent between 2 to 4 hours interviewing each of the respondents. These semi-structured and informal sessions were used as a way to affirm the expressive power of language and allow the researchers to appreciate the cultural connotations and denotative meaning of what the respondents say (Fetterman 1989). Students were asked to relate specific intercultural communication experiences that were particularly memorable (that is, both satisfying and dissatisfying). Asking students to recount experiences that were of significance was essential it allowed them an opportunity to talk at length, volunteer information, and pursue and elaborate on issues that were of importance to them (Eggerton and Langness 1974). In addition, these questions

helped refine and expand knowledge of the cultural groups and their perceptions of communication competence.

Sampling Plan

In total, 104 students were interviewed in this study. Of this group 49 were Singaporean, 15 Malaysian and 40 Australians. The characteristics of this sample which were taken into consideration were similar ethnic identification, age group, the course they were enrolled in and their level of intercultural communication experience. Most of the students were aged between 17 and 25 years old. These students were evenly distributed across the Arts and Social Sciences, Commerce, Engineering and Science faculties. For the international student group, the period of time they spent in Australia was also taken into consideration. This was because studies have shown that student's cultural orientation could change within the duration of less than six months in a foreign country (Volet and Renshaw 1993; Volet, Renshaw and Tietzel 1994).

Cultural Groups and Labels for the Groups in this Study

In order to generate valid and appropriate descriptions, the researchers employed ethnic labels that the respondents understood and preferred (Mirande and Tanno 1993). In order to achieve both contextual and representative validity, researchers focused on labels and identities commonly acknowledged by group members, as well as those ascribed to them by outsiders, specifically in intercultural communication contexts (Collier and Thomas 1988; Hecht, Collier and Ribeau 1993). For the international student groups, students from Malaysia and Singapore were considered. These students referred to themselves variously as Malaysians, Singaporeans, Asians and Chinese. It should be noted that although the majority of them acknowledge similar ethnic backgrounds that can be traced back to China, some Singaporean and Malaysian Chinese students consider themselves as quite distinct from each other. They indicate differences in outlook on life (including work and leisure) perceived rate of modernisation, as well as language differences, as distinguishing factors. Therefore, while it would be valid to assume that the Chinese in general hold largely similar cultural values, that is Confucian heritage values (see Bond 1996), it would be interesting to explore the ways in which they might differ. With reference to the Australian group, the majority of the students considered were of Anglo-Celtic background. Many of the students (both international and local Australian), however, acknowledged the fact that the Australian student population was not homogeneous and that many Australians were from Asian or non-Anglo-Celtic background. The following quotes from two Australian respondents illustrate the point,

The Asian population who are here as international students and those who have been born here and grew up here and who are Australians, there is a huge difference, these two populations. (Australian female, No. 11)

Like my friend Tong, he's Asian and he's brought up here. Like a lot of Asian students take more effort, care in their presentation, cars and clothes, brands. But you have Tong on the other hand, okay, drinking, casual clothes, pony tail, laid back, relaxed. (Australian male, No. 03)

Those who were not of Anglo-Celtic background (one student had a Singaporean Chinese mother and Irish father, another had Croatian parents, and the parents of another student were from Zimbabwe of Indian background), nevertheless, identified themselves more with the Australian Anglo-Celtic students. They attributed this to being second- or third- generation Australians and having gone through the Australian educational process. Below is a quote from the girl with Chinese and Irish parents,

Well, I grew up here and everything, attended school here. I see myself as definitely Australian. Neither of them (mum or dad) have really pushed anything on me. They brought me up the stereotypic Aussie way. Definitely not Chinese and not Irish. (Australian female, No. 38)

FINDINGS

The results presented in Table 1 indicate that differences exist in the ways the groups of students view competent communication. For example, the majority of students from all three groups agreed that **Sense of Affiliation** was a criterion for successful encounters. However, to the Chinese students, this sense of affiliation was very much motivated by a need for security resulting from group identification. In contrast, the Australian students tended to place great value on their individuality.

Table 1. Key characteristics for intercultural communication competence

Values	Characteristics	Cultural Groups					
		Australian (N = 40)		Singaporean (N=49)		Malaysian (N=15)	
		No.*	% **	No.*	% **	No.*	% **
Individualism/ Independent Self	Sense of Affiliation	31	77 %	43	88 %	14	90 %
	Abasement	0	0	24	49	10	67
	Cultural Similarity	26	65	31	63	14	90
	Handling Cultural Taboos	4	10	4	8	5	33
	Friendliness/Sociability	16	40	15	31	14	90
	Empathy	16	40	22	45	8	53
	Self-Effacement	0	0	30	61	14	90
	Honesty	26	65	0	0	0	0
	Individuality	38	95	1	2	0	0
	versus	Initiative	20	50	24	49	12
Collectivism/ Interdependent Self	Spoken Language	31	78	38	78	15	100
	Loyalty	4	10	0	0	0	0
	Negotiation Styles	0	0	24	49	12	80
	Non-Judgmental	4	10	0	0	0	0
	Having Own Opinions	26	65	4	8	2	13
	Reciprocity	3	8	24	49	14	90
	Reliability	11	28	24	49	9	60
	Role Responsibility	0	0	47	96	15	100
	Security	7	18	43	88	15	100
	Sincerity	0	0	36	74	11	73
Trust	0	0	24	49	11	73	
Upbringing	18	45	24	49	12	80	

NB: * Codings of number of responses

** Percentage of respondents

From the ethnographic data, it is evident that the students' sense of self affected their communication styles. The Chinese students tended to view the self as closely associated with and affected by other individuals who were considered significant to them. As a result, their communication styles involved strong consideration for the feelings and reactions of others, in particular the maintenance of self-face, other-face and mutual-face. The Australian students also acknowledged the value of group identification. In fact, 77 per cent of Australians, 90 per cent of Malaysians and 88 per cent of Singaporeans agreed that a **Sense of Affiliation** was important for successful communication. However, the Australian students were more likely to place importance on having a sense of **Individuality**, which dominated their communication styles (95% of Australians; 0% of Singaporeans; 2% of Malaysians).

The Chopstick Culture: “Sticking with people of the same kind”

The ethnographic data revealed that both the Australian and Chinese students had a tendency to mix with peers from similar cultural backgrounds, whether it was at work or in their social life, because of a sense of affiliation to each other. However, while the Australian students tended to focus more on common interests, the Chinese students cited feeling a sense of *security* as an important reason for them to stick with peers from the same cultural (Chinese or Asian) background. All the Malaysians and 88 per cent of Singaporeans brought up *Security* as a key communication characteristic as compared to only 18 per cent of Australians,

I mix around with more Asians because you feel some kind of security. To me I feel comfortable because like home, like a group of people I know of [sic]. (Malaysian male, No. 10)

If that person is an Asian, that already makes you more comfortable talking. Roughly you know what to say. It's just how you feel. You can't pinpoint... just feel comfortable. (Singaporean male, No. 07)

Some of the Chinese students acknowledged that this strong group bonding among the Asian student community, which fostered the notion of an in-group and out-group, inhibited communication with the Australian students,

We are very groupish and it is very difficult to breakaway from established norms. If someone from our group tries too hard to associate with the Aussies, he would be ostracised. It is like a reverse form of racism. (Singaporean female, No. 49)

“What talk you? - You don't speak my language”

From Table 1, 78 per cent of Australians, 100 per cent of Malaysians and 78 per cent of Singaporeans identified the ability to speak a common **Language** as one of the reasons for successful communication. Many of the informants expected that speaking a common language would allow individuals to relate to and identify with each other,

I guess language is one of the main barriers that prevent us [the Australian and Asian students] from communicating with one another. (Australian male, No. 14)

I know of Australian friends who are successful in breaking into our Asian friendship circles. Like this friend of mine can speak Indonesian and other Asian language as well. It really helps. (Singaporean female, No. 12)

Clearly, speaking a language requires more than just grasping its grammar. It involves a proper way of speaking, including the accent, slang and the jargon used. This applied especially to the Chinese students from Singapore and Malaysia. Many of these students were able to speak in languages other than English (such as, Mandarin, other Chinese dialects and Malay), and often combined these languages to form a unique Singaporean Creole (that is, *Singlish*),

Although they [the Australians] speak English, their English is like more Australian slang. So I find it difficult to catch. (Malaysian male, No. 15)

In addition, even though most of the Chinese students spoke English fluently, many of them often slipped into their own languages. The reason given by some was that they did not feel as competent in English as the Australian students. Others suggested that speaking in the Australian way (or not speaking *Singlish*) was unnatural, and would set the person apart from other Asian students,

Specially when speaking up in class they [the Australian students] have the upper hand because they are better equipped than us in English and grammar. (Malaysian female, No. 04)

We can't stand Chinese that come here and they adopt the Australian slang, 'buay tah han' [Cannot stand]. ABCs [Australian Born Chinese], cannot blame them, they grew up here. But not those who just come here to study. (Singaporean male, No. 03)

In particular, speaking in *Singlish* was seen as a form of cultural identification and affiliation for many of the Chinese students and communication often took on a more informal mood when they did. However, many of the Australian informants felt that speaking in a foreign language (or a language that they did not understand) was an act of exclusion. They commented that people who chose to go to a foreign country should at least attempt to speak the local language, albeit poorly. As such, since the Asian students made a choice to come to an English-speaking country such as Australia, they should take the initiative to speak in English,

I feel that the Asian students make a big mistake by talking in their own language. It immediately sets them apart. (Australian male, No. 28)

I do find it quite offensive sometimes because we are in as such an English-speaking country and they should try to include everyone. Like if someone came into my group of friends, I'd try to include them, you know. (Australian female, No. 30)

***Guanxi* – “A Network of Friends”**

The data revealed that the Australian and Chinese students had many similarities in their views on friends. Both groups agreed that friends were people whom they could trust and rely on in times of trouble. Friends were also people with whom they shared activities, such as going to the movies, shopping, parties, restaurants for meals, pubs (mainly for the Australian students), and talking and confiding in each other. However, there were some subtle yet significant differences in how these students conceptualised friendship. For instance, many of the Chinese students tended to view friendship as a form of 'transaction.' They acknowledged the possibility that the relationship would allow the receiving and returning of obligations before they would enter it. In fact, 90 per cent of Malaysians and 49 per cent of Singaporeans compared to only 8 per cent of Australians brought up **Reciprocity** as a key characteristic for successful communication. Thus, a relationship that did not allow for interdependence and mutual benefit would not be highly pursued,

Somehow, I get the feeling that they [the Australians] are not willing to get to know us beyond a superficial level. It's like beyond that, they are not comfortable. They are like if you go drinking with them, there's just superficial talk. Becoming friends and all, somehow I feel it's something resisting on their part. With friends, you call each other up regularly and you really talk serious stuff and you are willing to open up. (Malaysian female, No. 12)

Getting to know Australians is not on my agenda. Only if I have to work here then I'll be interested, because if I have to work here, I have to know and understand Australians. (Singaporean male, No. 41)

However, once friendship was established among the Chinese students, it was observed that it would be highly personal, and both parties would continue anticipating the receiving and returning of favours. Very often it was noticed Chinese friends conscientiously trying to outdo each other in terms of favour-giving, something which they said was expected of friends but not strangers. These need not be big or expensive but may include small gestures like buying food for each other, helping each other out in their work, and the sharing of lecture notes. The important thing

was that the obligation they put on each other would foster and sustain the relationship. Interestingly, this 'obligation' did not connote a negative meaning, in that a person was being forced to do something for another. Rather, it was a desired and willing attempt at reciprocating favours or gifts,

Reciprocity is the key. For example, supper with a friend. If I pay this time, the friend should '*zi dong*' [observe proper behaviour of reciprocation] pay next time. If I keep paying, there is no reciprocity. People shouldn't take advantage of us who try to pay first. So far I've not had problems. But with Aussies, yes. Like if you insist on paying, they'll actually let you, even though you have paid many times. Not '*kek-ki*' [to stand on ceremony] *lah!* (Singaporean male, No. 33)

To some of these Chinese students, the Australian practice of splitting or sharing the bill seemed quaint, especially when it came to big occasions like birthdays and other celebrations, where the Chinese host was expected to pay. In addition, to the Chinese students, mutual obligations extended beyond the two individuals, to include a social network of relationships with other in-group members. This network or *guanxi* acted like a support system from which one could seek help (for example, getting a job) or enhance one's own status (for example, making friends with one's tutor or lecturer):

Networking is very important. A lot of the things you do need to depend on '*guanxi*', lor. Like getting a job or getting things done. That kind of thing. (Singaporean female, No. 42)

Like whenever I consider helping someone, I will think '*wo gen ni you shen me guanxi?*' [whether I have some sort of "*guanxi*" with you], then I will help you. (Singaporean male, No. 10)

The Chinese students' style of interaction, where highly involved communication was only reserved for their in-group or people whom they had known for some time, may be the reason why many of them found the Australian show of outward affection, even to strangers, puzzling, pretentious, superficial and insincere. Perhaps this was why 73 per cent of Malaysians, 74 per cent of Singaporeans, but no Australians cited **Sincerity** as an important characteristic for successful communication. For many of the Chinese informants, one should have limited or at most, an aloof style of interaction with strangers. In addition, there seemed to be the implication that one should not trust strangers. This was indicated by 73 per cent of Malaysians and 49 per cent of Singaporeans bringing up *Trust* as a key determinant of successful communication, but no Australians did so.

They [the Australians] are more easy going. For us, we take a long time to trust and make friends. (Singaporean male, No. 30)

In Singapore, people on the streets do not smile at you or even sales people in the shops. But like my friend said, when people here ask you how you are, it's like very superficial. (Singaporean female, No.17)

Managing Conflicts and Negotiating

From Table 1, 80 per cent of Malaysians and 49 per cent of Singaporeans cited **Negotiation Styles** as critical for successful encounters while no Australians did so. These students' negotiation styles during conflict situations involved largely the consideration and management of own-face, other-face and mutual-face. Many of the Chinese informants tended to avoid using direct and aggressive methods of conflict resolution. Instead, maintaining harmony seemed to be more important than **honesty** in revealing one's emotions.

[On disagreeing with an assignment group mate] Usually, I'll withhold my thoughts. I can't say anything. I mean I can say, I can do something, but I did not want to do it. And I don't know how to put it. And I don't know if I do something, or say something, it might affect the relationship. So I kept my thoughts. (Malaysian male, No. 02)

The Chinese students displayed unwillingness to confront and argue with others in public. This was evident when some of them were reluctant to confront their Australian neighbours for making noise and disturbing them,

Better not say anything ... They might take revenge on us. (Malaysian male, No. 08)

However, when one of the Chinese groups had a weekend evening gathering session, their Australian neighbours went over at around 11.30pm and told them to quiet down. The Chinese students complied but commented that since "the Aussies don't give us face," they would do the same next time (that is, when the Australian neighbours had a party, they would go over to tell them to keep the noise down). Nevertheless, they never did on the several occasions when opportunity presented itself.

It's All in the Upbringing

The style of **upbringing** (45% of Australians; 80% of Malaysians; 49% of Singaporeans) was also highlighted as a factor for the students' preferred communication styles. Many of the Australian students, even though they recognised their bond with and dependence on their parents, stressed that they were brought up mainly to be their 'own person'. They were taught to think independently and, if needed, to defend their own views. Not surprisingly, 60 per cent of Australians cited **Having Own Opinions** as a key factor of successful communication compared to only 13 per cent of Malaysians and 8 per cent of Singaporeans. This showed through in their open and unreserved communication with their parents,

There is also not so much fear to disappoint your parents. You are your own person, you don't have to live up too much to their expectations. No doubt you want them to be proud, but not so much an emphasis on academic things. (Australian female, No. 23)

In contrast, the communication behaviour of the Chinese informants with their parents tended to be affected more by their roles (as children) rather than as individuals. All the Malaysians, 96 per cent of Singaporeans but no Australians cited **Role Responsibility** as a criterion for successful communication. Strict guidelines or norms attached to these roles, such as respect for elders and obeying the wishes of elders, in turn accentuate their close association with their parents,

The way we treat our elders is different. Like for them, if they are filial (toward) their parents, they do it because they want to. But for us we might go like "Oh, shit! I've got to look after my mum." Of course I won't say that out. But we do it because we have to. (Malaysian female, No. 07)

Some of them, like they treat their parents like friends. They can argue with their parents, like nothing wrong. (Singaporean female, No. 06)

I know that we look at our parents differently. I know that a lot of people that I've talked to from Asian background, it is very important what their parents think. (Australian male, No. 21)

"I am afraid what I say might be wrong"

The Chinese students' collectivistic view of the self was also evident in the way they performed in class. During the tutorials, the authors observed that these students were quite reluctant to participate in class discussion. When this observation was brought up during the interviews, the

authors found that it was because they expected to get the answer wrong or that other students were better than them (whether at verbal fluency, or at getting the answer right). This problem was further exacerbated by the expectation that they should provide the correct answer. As a result of such self-effacing (0% of Australians, 90% of Malaysians and 61% of Singaporeans) or abasing outlook (0% of Australians, 67% of Malaysians and 49% of Singaporeans), many of them preferred an environment that allowed them to present structured answers, such as in a presentation of a specific topic, rather than engage in open discussion where they might have to voice their opinions,

I don't know what I am saying, whether it'll be correct or is it wrong. I will keep my thoughts to myself if I am not very sure about it... In a way, presentation is good because then you are really, really prepared for that topic. It is fair because you will be the one speaking and everyone will have their turn to speak, you don't have to argue it out in class. (Singaporean female, No. 22)

When I speak up, I am afraid what I say might be wrong. But the Australians don't really think, they just say. (Malaysian male, No. 10)

We are made more to accept than to have our own views. When I was in school, I was told, 'Don't raise your hand unless you have a question' or 'Don't talk unless you are spoken to.' Yeah, they tell you to be critical but according to their rules and form. (Singaporean female, 09)

Unity is power – “More brains are better than one”

The Chinese students' approach to work also encompassed a need for group unity, consensus and interdependence. Applied to group assignments, many of them preferred to work on the whole project collectively rather than assign a section to each member. The assumption was that working together as a group would lessen the likelihood of getting the answer wrong. In addition, no one would be able to malingering. The Australian students, on the other hand, took on a more individualistic and independent approach where each group member was responsible for a topic or section. Some of the Chinese students agreed that the “Aussie way” was more efficient, but more risky as well (in getting it wrong),

It is quite different from my other group projects. Because all along, we will get together and discuss and sometimes if the whole thing stretches for hours, you just go on till everyone is tired. Whereas this one [with Australian students] just go, “You do this part”. With my Singaporean mates, we plough through it together. More brains are better than one. By coming together, everybody has to do his or her fair share. If you separate out and allocate work, what do you do if that person doesn't come back with that work. If you do it collectively, no matter what, you still got to participate in the work or meeting. But I do think that the Aussie way seems more efficient, not that time wasting. But the fact that you are discussing it as a group, chances of you getting it wrong is actually much lower. Because you are actually reasoning until everybody sees the logic. Everyone agrees. But if you divide the work up and I work my part from home, it would seem logical only to me. (Singaporean male, No. 40)

We usually assign a section to each person and let the person go and take charge of that section, chapter, topic. Each person will get to pick what he or she wanted to do. (Australian female, No. 38)

I worked with an Australian last year and this year and I find they generally have very different work ethic. They are more relaxed. Not like us... ‘*kiasu*’ [Being afraid to lose]. We really do things a month ahead. Generally they are very flexible. They can

think of things you never thought of. For us, we think in a straight, narrow way. Follow the text, the structure. Very structured, this way means this way. For them they can think lateral, horizontal, and any kind of way. That is good because it promotes variety. They explore a lot of opportunities we don't see. But it is very risky as well. Especially, we are very marks oriented. (Malaysian male, 21)

We try to meet on a weekly basis. And set out tasks to be done for that week. And then review it, meet for an hour or two. But if someone needs to go somewhere, we'll generally say that's as much as we can do. (Australian female, No. 36)

Safer to get Asian friends. *Ang mo* [referring to Caucasians] do assignments very funny one. You do your part, I do my part. Later combine, right? I don't read your part, you also don't read my part. Then submit. But Asian, we have to see that there is consistency everything. *Ang mo* don't care. You simply do your part. Up to you, *lor!* (Malaysian male, 11)

I am lucky to have mostly Asians in my class. So group work no problem. Unity is power. (Singaporean female, No. 01)

DISCUSSION

Consistent with the views of Markus and Kitayama (1991), the communication tactics of the Australian students in this study reflected a more independent self, while the Chinese students tended to reflect an interdependent one. Table 2 provides a summary of the important communication outcomes and methods the students subscribe to.

Table 2. A comparison of the students' key communication outcomes and methods

VALUES	CHINESE STUDENTS		AUSTRALIAN STUDENTS	
	Important communication outcomes	Preferred communication method	Important communication outcomes	Preferred communication method
Individualism/ Independent self versus Collectivism/ Interdependent self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preservation of group harmony • Maintaining sensitivity to situational context • Anticipating relevant others' needs and feelings • Observing in-group/out-group distinction • Regarding self as extension of others in in-group • Maintenance of self-, other- and mutual-face 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider other people's feelings before one acts (e.g. avoid conflict or gain approval by fitting in with others; self-effacing behavior) • Read others' mind • Expect those in the in-group (e.g. friends, family) to share a sense of unity and interdependence • Treat in-group members differently than out-group members (e.g. networking of friends) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect for individual rights to speech and thought • Advocating independent thoughts and actions • Differentiating the self from others • Realizing and exhibiting individual internal characteristics. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assert and express individual opinions • Say what's on your mind • Be frank • Show limited concern for what others think of you (e.g. offering friends honest but constructive criticism)

For instance, individuality seemed to be positively valued and there seemed to be a stronger desire among the Australian students to assert their individuality when communicating with others, including parents and friends, as well as in class situations. Although these students also saw the need to affiliate with others, it was more a result of common interests. More often than not, the emphasis in these relationships was on the individual and his or her distinct and unique inner qualities (for example, outgoing, fun loving). Based on the student-interviews and observations, individuality can be achieved through the person's possession, as well as expression of his or her

own views. This was especially so when they were passionate about the issues. In addition, their behaviours seemed to be guided more by their individual personalities rather than by their roles (for example, as children or students). A good example was the Australian students' apparent nonchalant attitude during assignment and examination times. Whereas the Chinese students hinted that such behaviour was unbecoming of a model student, the Australian students did not seem too affected by others' opinions of them. In addition, although they wanted their parents to be proud of them, they believed that essentially they were their 'own person.'

In contrast, a high degree of self-monitoring seemed to apply to the communication styles of the Chinese students. These students had a tendency to be very sensitive to the feelings of others and showed a high inclination to act and react according to others' anticipated perceptions of their behaviour. This was apparent in their reluctance or feeling '*pai-seh*' [feeling shy] to voice their opinions, especially in class or in a group, for fear of imposing their views on others. Some researchers further argued that the Chinese attention to and consideration for others may actually use up precious cognitive space which otherwise might be devoted to individual and creative expression, thus resulting in their lack of verbal fluency (Liu and Hsu 1974; Liu 1986). In addition, the Chinese students were more likely to put themselves down or downplay their abilities (abasement) in relation to others. These findings are not surprising since recent studies have shown that there is a tendency for Chinese people, even in the most rapidly modernising parts of the world, to act in accordance with the anticipated expectations of others instead of with internal wishes or personal characteristics (for example, Yang 1981; Bond 1986). In fact, Bond et al. (1982) found that in Hong Kong college students providing self-effacing or humble attributions following success were liked better by their mates. Indeed, individuals with interdependent selves will generally not assert that they are better than others, will not express satisfaction at being superior to others and truly may not enjoy it. As one of the informants put it,

As long as I know I am good, enough already. We were not brought up to brag about ourselves. (Singaporean male, No. 05)

The interdependent selves of the Chinese students were also revealed through the importance placed on achieving a sense of security by affiliating with a group through similar language or cultural background, as well as their intense need to work collectively as a group and co-operatively. However, it should be noted that an interdependent self does not indicate the absence of the self, including individual judgments, opinions and abilities, or that the self is fused with others (Markus and Kitayama 1991, p.228). Neither does it imply a lack of self-agency. Ironically, it can be seen from the Chinese students' behaviour and responses that it requires a great sense of self-awareness and agency in order to adapt and accommodate oneself to various interpersonal situations.

***Renqing* and *Guanxi*: The Art of Reciprocity**

Two important Chinese concepts, which characterise the relatedness of the interdependent self with others and were brought up by the Chinese students, are *guanxi* and *renqing*. *Guanxi* refers to the status and intensity of an on-going relationship between two individuals that extends to involve others who are part of the social networks of the two individuals (Kirkbride, Tang and Westwood 1991, p.370). *Renqing* essentially refers to the Chinese belief that the reciprocity of conducts and emotions, including favour and hatred, reward and punishment, between human beings, should be as absolute as cause-and-effect. Thus when a Chinese individual acts, a response or return is usually expected (Yang 1957). *Renqing* is attractive in Chinese relationships first because it indicates of the social rules that one has to follow in order to interact successfully with other individuals. Second, it acts as a resource through which a person can present to another a gift, for instance the giving of favours (Hwang 1987; Cheng 1988). In general, there are two social situations where the *renqing* rule may apply: First in daily situations where contact with

individuals within one's social network or *guanxi* should be kept through regular greetings, visitations and the exchange of gifts. Second, in times of trouble, when an individual in one's network faces problems, such as needing to get a job, sympathy, help and *renqing* should be offered to that person, which ideally should be returned as soon as possible (Hwang 1987; Cheng 1988).

In this study, the importance placed on observing *renqing* and *guanxi* by the Chinese students was recurrent in the way they viewed the formation of friendship. Many of these students would only form relationships with those with whom they saw the likelihood of interdependency, where material or emotional favours could be exchanged in order to form some kind of emotional obligation (Pye 1982). In addition, before offering a favour or *renqing* to someone, the Chinese students were more likely to consider the level of *guanxi* they had with that person. Yum (1988) refers to this type of interaction as anticipatory communication because both parties expect some kind of mutual benefit (material or emotional) from the relationship. Such anticipatory communication requires a high degree of social sensitivity because there is an implicit expectation for individuals to anticipate others' needs or to know their feelings without asking or being told, and vice versa; to do otherwise would indicate poor social skills or character deficit (Yum 1988).

Although the concept of reciprocity was also prevalent in the Australian students' friendships, it did not connote the intensity of obligation in the Chinese relationships. Instead, the word 'obligation' may carry a negative connotation with regards to friendship in a Western context. Wierzbicka (1997, p.211) uses the example of the practice of 'shouting a treat' (that is, paying for a treat) to illustrate the Australian sense of reciprocity. She argues that the emphasis on reciprocity in the Australian sense is not strictly equivalent to the repayment of a debt. Instead, the obligation is for the recipient to join in the merriment and share in the companionship. In addition, according to Willcoxson (1992), although Australians can be very group orientated in that they believe that it is appropriate and essential to be responsible and loyal towards one's relevant others such as friends, family and neighbours, individuality and distinctiveness were equally, if not more, valued. Group orientation, if forcibly imposed, will usually be rejected.

The In-group versus Outgroup

Although communication behaviour among Chinese may be very group-oriented, it does not apply to every individual they come into contact with. Instead, a differentiation is often made between those individuals who belong to one's in-group (*zijiren*) and those who are outsiders (*wairen*); attention is only devoted to the needs, desires and goals of *zijiren* (Ho 1988). Indeed, recent studies have found that individuals in collectivistic cultures tend to behave in extremely individualistic ways when dealing with members outside their social network (for example, Furnham and Stringfield 1993; Gabrenya and Hwang 1996). Examples in this study included the Chinese students' outward aloofness and extreme politeness toward people outside their social circle, and their profound need to work with people within their social network.

Previous studies have also found that Chinese individuals revealed more about themselves to those in their in-group than did their Western counterparts (Gudykunst, Gao, Schmidt, Nishida, Bond, Leung, Wang and Barraclough 1992; Goodwin and Tang 1996). Such rigid communication styles not only place people into various relational realms, but also prescribe specific rules for human interactions (Wiemann, Chen and Giles 1986). As a result, many Chinese feel inept at dealing with strangers, and although they will become highly involved in conversations with someone they know, they would rarely speak to strangers (Gao, Ting-Toomey and Gudykunst 1996). This in-group/out-group distinction was apparent in this study through the Chinese students' views that high degrees of warmth and graciousness should only be afforded to friends. Thus, they were puzzled by Australian's general outward display of friendliness toward other people, even strangers. In social relationships, it is common for Chinese individuals to initially

exhibit attitudes which indicate distrust towards others, in particular to people who are considered out-group members (Kau and Yang 1991). This is because the Chinese people are constantly assessing other peoples' *cheng ken* (or sincerity) and *xing yong* (or trustworthiness). These values are considered important in any *guanxi* or interpersonal relationships with in-group members. As such, treating strangers or acquaintances in a congenial way would be viewed as devaluing friendship (Yum 1988).

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In the world of today, the international success of many countries relies heavily on the ability to create and sustain excellent cross-cultural relationships. However, it would be difficult to achieve this without good communication. Hence, shortcomings notwithstanding, the results of this study should serve as an impetus for countries, educational institutions, instructors as well as the students themselves to employ different strategies to improve intercultural communication competency and hence intercultural encounters. More importantly, the findings should provide a reference point for understanding cultural differences and cultivating awareness of their nuances and requirements as a basis for communicating.

At the national level, in order to respond to and compete in a globalised world market, understanding and communicating with foreign cultures will be inevitable. In the same vein, many industries are dealing with a multi-cultural work force. In order to work and live harmoniously, these culturally different individuals will need to learn to appreciate and relate with each other. At the school level, the consideration of communication strategies may be helpful in facilitating and increasing participation in existing counselling programs. At the instructor's level, the results of this study advise the rethinking of various instructional methods in the classrooms.

Finally, the understanding, management and accommodation of cultural differences by the students themselves will definitely improve the probability and quality of their intercultural interaction experiences. For instance, the Australian students in this study need to understand that the formal and distant disposition of the Chinese students may not be an indication of aloofness or unfriendliness, but a lack of knowledge in dealing with strangers as a result of the strict rules of communication regarding in-group and out-group members. On the other hand, the Chinese students should appreciate that verbosity, verbal fluency and the ability to express oneself are signs of confidence, not arrogance or cockiness, which are generally esteemed by Australians. Indeed, the impact of international students on their host countries cannot be underestimated. These individuals have the potential to influence the political and economical decision-processes of their home countries. Hence, good relationships between host and international students can translate to better relationships between their countries.

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