Relationships and Attentiveness to ‘Face‘: Differences and Similarities across Cultures

Grace Chew Chye Lay

Objectives

(* State your own)
Cultural similarities / differences in notions (understanding) about relationships

- The differences across cultures are related to independence/dependence and individualism/collectivism.

*Reflect:

- Cultures differ in conceptualizing the notions of relationship in words
- Different people in different societies organize themselves, form bonds, orientate themselves to others

For example, in China, a collectivist society:

Relationships (including friendships) are less spontaneous, and less individual oriented.

Cultivating close relationships in China – is filled with obligations and open to *quanxi* (relational network).

Complex indigenous conceptualizations of facets of relationships such as Chinese ‘face’:

- Ai mianzi (face-loving)
- Po lianpi (thin-faced); Hou lianpi (thick-skinned)
- Hsu-mianzi (virtual face)
- Chern mianzi (maintaining face)
- Zuo mianzi (making face)
- Yao mianzi (wishing for face)
- Zheng mianzi (compete for face)

Some Similarities & Differences in Relationship Building & Maintenance Rules to Which We Attend

- Japanese subjects endorse more rules for hierarchical work and formal relations than intimate relationships (opposite from 3 cultures). RESTRAINT.
- Role-specific task behavior – no major differences
- Repayment of debts, favors, compliments – no major differences
- Respect for other’s views:
- Adolescents → Parents: Non-significant cultural differences

Generally people of different cultures are guided by certain common principles in maintaining relationships. Degree of applicability differs in situations. We need to be attentive.

In ‘Confucian’ cultures, the emotional ‘mechanisms’:

*Gan qing* 感情 *tinh cam*
Positive sense of interdependence and involvement with others; warmth

*Ren Qing and Bao* 人情 (*ninjo; interpersonal sentiment*)/ 报
Somewhat the same as Western notions of ‘favor,’ but functions more as a mechanism regulating personal relationships.

*Renqing*
Can be owed and can be returned (*bao*). Not returning it will be considered ‘heartless’. Reciprocation.

Competencies: Relationships

Relationships: Welcoming of strangers

Interested in people with different experiences and backgrounds

Pro-active in approaching and meeting new people

Builds a wide and diverse network of friends and acquaintances

Rapport building

Shows warmth and friendliness in building relationships

Builds connections on a personal as well as professional basis

Sensitivity to social/ professional/context

Pays attention to hierarchy and power relations, and how they may influence behaviour in different contexts

Understands how given role relationships operate in different contexts, and the rights and obligations associated with them

Understands how decisions are made in given contexts

Interpersonal attentiveness

Pays attention to people’s personal sensitivities and avoids making them ‘lose face’

Summary

- Conceptualisations of relationships
- Attentiveness to ‘face’ in maintaining and building relationships
- Salient east-west differences
- The sensitivity and attentiveness to ‘face’ increase depending on formality of the situation
- Different requirements
- Acquirable competencies

Reflections, Queries & Future Research

(1) How are the intercultural relationships in these cases different from intracultural relationships?

(2) Traditional core of Chinese concept of ‘face’ remains relevant (Zhai & Qu 2004), but risk of reification exists.

(3) Under what circumstances are ‘face’ not attended to in Asian and western cultures?

(4) What more important aspects of relationship attentiveness across cultures?
Nonverbal correlates; emotion expressions; trustful personalities, etc.

References


