

Clueless About Culture and Indirect Confrontation of Conflict

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Thanks for the speakers was the subject line in an e-mail I received last spring from Krista Frysinger, one of my former MBA students. She was spending a quarter at our sister school, SASIN, in Bangkok, and wrote she had a negotiation story to contribute to my collection. (The story is shared with Krista's permission.) Krista wrote that she had bought speakers for her iPod at small shop in a big electronics mall in Bangkok, got them home, and discovered they didn't work. Her friends, Thai and American, told her

It's buyer beware in those shopping malls. You should have tested the speakers before you left the store. No way the seller is going to take them back, even if you can find him again.

Krista wrote,

I thought about my negotiation course. I figured I had nothing to lose in confronting the seller and asking for speakers that worked. At the same time, I remembered that tricky midterm exam question you gave us about direct and indirect confrontation. So, I took the speakers back to the seller, said I was having trouble understanding how to set them up. I asked if he could demonstrate using an iPod on display. He did. The speakers didn't work. Oh, he said, there is something wrong with the speakers, let's try with another set, which he then gave me in exchange.

Krista, in good MBA analytical fashion, concluded: "I think what I did that was right was let him figure out the problem himself, kind of like the bicycle story in your book, professor".

As scholars of culture, conflict, and negotiation, there are some areas of our field in which we have quite a lot of knowledge and other areas, like culture and indirect confrontation of conflict, in which we are pretty clueless. When I teach deal making in my global negotiation class, as my students negotiate their way through a series of simulations, they develop an understanding of heavily researched and well understood concepts like aspirations, best alternative to a negotiated agreement, and strategy and how they work across cultures. When I teach dispute resolution, I do something similar, except the culture piece is missing. As students negotiate their way through the dispute resolution simulations they come to understand the concepts of interests, rights, and power and to learn how to confront conflict strategically. To take conflict management across cultures, I tell stories to illustrate indirect confrontation and talk about face. As a teacher, I have to admit the stories are memorable—at least they were for Krista. But as a scholar, I find the stories inadequate. I can use the stories to

explain the difference between direct and indirect confrontation of conflict. And, thanks to Goffman (1967), and subsequent theorizing and research applying face theory in the context of negotiation, e.g., Ting-Toomey (1988), I can talk about face and explain how indirect confrontation works to resolve conflict. But, that's as far as I can go. The black hole in our knowledge about indirect confrontation is the lack of a model of indirect confrontation strategies—all I've got is a list. I don't know when to use which strategy. I don't know what it is about context that suggests one strategy will successfully resolve the conflict and another will not. I don't know when people in one culture will use an indirect strategy and when they will not. So, although we have a pretty good understanding of the endogenous (mediating and dependent variable) end of the direct versus indirect confrontation model, when it comes to the exogenous (independent variable) end of the model we are pretty clueless.

Direct and Indirect Confrontation of Conflict

The difference between direct and indirect confrontation of conflict is in the content of the claim. Krista had it right. By letting the shop keeper determine for himself that the speakers were not functioning and what to do, Krista was engaged in indirect confrontation of conflict. If Krista had told the shopkeeper that the speakers were not functioning and that she wanted replacement speakers, she would have been confronting directly. Krista's claim was indirect in two ways: she left it to the shopkeeper to determine for himself what the problem was with the speakers, and she also left it up to him to decide what to do about the problem. In general then, when the claimant specifies the claim and the expected response, confrontation is direct; when the claim and expected response is left unspecified—for the respondent to infer, confrontation is indirect.

This definition, though, is not quite as simple as it seems on the surface. Confrontation of conflict is a continuum between directness and indirectness, not a dichotomy. There are several factors contributing to the complexity of the construct. First, there are two elements of the claim—the claim itself and the response. Lying between a purely indirect and a purely direct confrontation, in which claim and response are similarly direct or indirect, are claims that are direct and responses that are indirect; or claims that are indirect and responses that are direct. Thus, claims are not direct or indirect; claims vary along a continuum of directness. Second, claims are not objectively direct or indirect, but subjectively so. A claim that is perceived by the claimant as rather indirect may be perceived by the respondent as rather direct or vice versa. This further complicates efforts to fill the black hole of knowledge about direct and indirect confrontation of conflict with a model of strategies—a point to which I shall return a little further along in the section on strategies. However, before we try to make sense of strategy from the perspective of direct versus indirect confrontation, we need to consider avoidance.

Indirect confrontation is not avoidance in the sense that avoidance is used in the dual concern model (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Rahim, 1983; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). The dual concern model uses two constructs “concern for

own outcomes and concern for others outcomes to generate five conflict management styles” integrate (high concern for both), compromise (moderate concern for both), avoid (low concern for both), dominating (high self, low other), obliging (low self, high other). Avoid in the dual concern model really means ignoring the conflict, doing nothing, lumping it in Ury, Brett, and Goldberg (1993). In the dual concern model avoid is operationalized: “I tried to ignore the conflict and behaved as if nothing had happened; I tried to pretend that the conflict didn’t happen; I pretended as if the conflict didn’t exist” (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). There is substantial research showing that people from Asian cultures endorse the conflict style of avoidance in dual concern model studies at a much higher rate than people from western cultures. (See Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003 both for a review and empirical data.) This finding is undeniable. It does suggest that total avoidance is more socially normative in Asia than the West. However, the finding does not mean that there is no conflict in Asia. Nor does it mean that walking away from conflict is the only strategy Asians use. I expect that Asians like Westerners use a panoply of strategies to confront conflict more or less directly. This is the black hole of our theorizing about direct and indirect strategy. However, we are getting ahead of ourselves. Understanding the psychology underlying the effectiveness of direct and indirect strategies for confronting conflict should help us generate structure for the jumble of strategies that make up the black hole in our knowledge.

Face Theory

Krista thought (and I do to) that her strategy worked because she left it up to the shopkeeper to figure out both problem and solution. Theory labels Krista’s actions as giving face (Goffman, 1967). Face is an individual’s sense of social worth. Giving face signals respect for the other party. Attacking face signals disrespect (Goffman, 1967). The success of Krista’s indirect strategy can be tied to her giving face to the shopkeeper, rather than attacking face. To fully understand this, we need to look a bit more deeply at face theory. Face theory (Goffman, 1967; Brown & Levinson, 1987) argues that people are motivated to maintain positive face in social interactions, and that face is particularly important in situations like conflicts, where people’s social identities are engaged. The confrontation over the malfunctioning speakers brought both Krista and the shopkeeper’s social identities into play. Krista’s face was engaged in discovering she had bought malfunctioning speakers. She lost face in front of her friends, who told her she should have known to try the speakers out in the store, and in her own eyes—I should have tried them out in the store, and my friends think less of me for not having done so. Had Krista confronted the shopkeeper directly by claiming that he sold her malfunctioning speakers and needed to replace them, she would have attacked the shopkeeper’s face in two ways. First, her direct claim would have pointed to an action—selling functioning speakers—that the shopkeeper was already socially obligated to perform, and had not. Second, her direct claim communicates that she expects the shopkeeper to make restitution. In contrast, by confronting indirectly, Krista gave face, signaling

that she respected the shopkeeper's expertise with electronic products and trusted his integrity to make restitution.

Empirical research on face negotiation theory (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998) and negotiated outcomes suggests Krista's success with face giving in Bangkok was not a cultural fluke. Face giving, but not face attacks, is generally effective in resolving conflicts in both China and the United States. Giving face in negotiation by signaling trust, providing causal accounts or other information cues reciprocity leading to problem solving and agreements. Face attacks in negotiations, such as claims, threats and other aggressive strategies generate retaliation, counter threats, deception, and impasses (see articles reviewed in Tjosvold & Sun, 2000; empirical studies of Friedman et al., 2004; Brett et al., 2007). This research suggests that despite the possibility that people in some cultures may be more concerned with face than people in other cultures, e.g., intercept differences, the direction of the relationships, e.g., slope differences, between face giving, face attacks, and conflict resolution are similar across cultures.

These research studies provide good evidence for face theory as an explanation for why conflicts confronted indirectly have a better chance of being negotiated to agreement and conflicts confronted directly have a greater chance of impasse, regardless of culture. It is the exogenous (independent variable) end of the model that is the black hole in our knowledge about direct versus indirect confrontation. Not only do we lack a way of organizing direct versus indirect confrontation strategies we know little about what cues direct versus indirect strategy.

Organizing Indirect Confrontation Strategies

I really don't like lists. I don't know what to do with lists. Where do I start? What if where I start doesn't work? Where do I go next? I like models. With the dual concern model of conflict management styles (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Rahim, 1983; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974) we have concern for own and concern for other's outcome converging in a 2×2 to generate five conflict management styles. Exogenous factors, the dual concerns, account for style preferences. With the interests, rights, power model of dispute resolution (Ury et al., 1993), I know how the three approaches interrelate: interests are embedded within a framework of rights, which in turn are embedded in a framework of power. I know that I'm trying to drive the negotiation to focus on interests because I'll get a better agreement there. I know how to move among the three approaches. Models provide direction and theoretical explanation.

All I've got for indirect confrontation is a list and a messy list at that. My list of indirect strategies doesn't correspond very well to direct strategies. One reason may be that indirect strategies may be non verbal, and may look like direct strategies, for example involve a third party, but be differentially motivated. Nevertheless, here is what I've got, pathetic theoretically as it is.

	Indirect confrontation	Direct confrontation
Verbal	Ask a question Tell a story	Make a claim; threaten Elaborate the claim, explain why you are claiming; threaten
	Share an experience	Elaborate the claim, explain why you are claiming; threaten
Non verbal	Pout, glare, fist shaking Signal—anything from putting up posters to hiring a plane to circle with a tail message	Act to hurt the other party—anything ranging from punch them out to withdraw funds from a joint bank account
	Withdraw/avoid*	
Third party	Involve a third party to make a decision so that you are no longer responsible for the conflict	Involve a third party to make a decision favoring you; or to get the conflict resolved

*Note avoid as used in the table is a strong form of pout. The claimant withdraws from the presence of the respondent, which presumably the respondent notices, and processes, and which ultimately leads to a resolution. This avoid is differentially motivated than avoid as conceptualized in the dual concern model. The difficulty is in knowing the motivation underlying the “avoid”. Friedman, Chi, and Liu (2006) make a similar point about cultural differences in motivation generating similar outcomes for different reasons. Tjosvold and Sun (2000) also address these motivational differences in the avoid strategy. They call avoidance motivated by a desire not to hurt one’s interests, outflanking, or working behind the scenes to get what you want. Whereas, avoidance motivated by a desire to maintain harmony, will take the form of conforming—ignoring the conflict, doing nothing, lumping it.

Giving Structure to the Black Hole

What cues people to use an indirect versus a direct confrontation strategy? Krista had recently taken a negotiation course, where we had told stories illustrating indirect confrontation of conflict in Asia. Krista was also in Bangkok. Dynamic constructivist theory (Morris & Gelfand, 2004) both accounts for Krista’s use of indirect confrontation and provides structure for our black hole. This theory predicts that people’s actions depend on the availability, accessibility, and activation of knowledge structures. Krista had an available indirect confrontation knowledge structure from class. It was also accessible since it was recently acquired and stored—recall the midterm exam question. The context—conflict with a Bangkok shopkeeper—activated Krista’s use of indirect confrontation. Dynamic constructivist theory accounts nicely for Krista’s choice of an indirect confrontation strategy. However, to use dynamic constructivist theory to provide a structure for our black hole is going to require a bit of elaboration of the theory. This is because dynamic constructivist theory is really an intra-individual cognitive model. Conflict, is inter-individual. This means that choice of confrontation requires not just availability, accessibility, and activation of the claimant’s knowledge structures, but also the claimant’s assessment of the availability, accessibility, and activation of the respondent’s knowledge structures. In short, if I don’t think the other party is going to “get” my confrontation strategy and have available and accessible a response knowledge

structure that will be activated by my claim, I'm likely to try a different confrontation strategy.

Availability

Knowledge of indirect confrontation strategies is probably available to claimants regardless of culture. Children pout, adults glare, and drivers shake their fists at each other across cultures. So, too, do people throughout the world engage in signaling—note the plane with the tail message circling the Masters Golf Tournament when Tiger Woods returned to the links in the spring of 2010. The research on giving and attacking face and dispute resolution (e.g., Brett et al., 2007) suggests that direct confrontation strategies that have the same face saving attributes as indirect confrontation are used successfully to resolve disputes.

Accessibility

Accessibility refers to what strategy comes to mind first. Here, culture and context may play a large role in determining a claimant's choices. Culture influences the chronic accessibility of a knowledge structure via socialization by inducing, if not requiring, cultural members to use the knowledge structure repeatedly in social interactions within family, at school, at work, and in public (Morris & Gelfand, 2004). Context influences the temporary accessibility of a knowledge structure by cueing associations. Krista associated her problem with the rattling bicycles that we had discussed in class—an indirect confrontation story in *Negotiating Globally* (Brett, 2007).

Culture and context may also provide insight into whether or not the claimant judges that the respondent has the capability of interpreting the indirect confrontation strategy. If the claimant knows that indirect confrontation is normative in a culture, then the claimant can bet with reasonable probability that the respondent is familiar indirect confrontation. And further, if the respondent is familiar with indirect confrontation, the respondent should know what his role is in receiving such a claim. Gender—*Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (Gray, 1992)—may also play a role in the claimant's choice of confrontation strategy cuing a stereotypical assessment of whether or not the respondent has the capability of interpreting the indirect confrontation strategy.

Activation

Activation refers to whether an available, accessible knowledge structure is actually used in social interaction. Activation depends on the particular circumstances of the conflict situation, including but not limited to the social relationship between the parties, the status and role relationship of the parties, the nature of the claim, social monitoring, and importantly expectations about whether the respondent will “get it”.

Social Relationship Between the Parties

The social relationship between the parties is important to our theorizing because indirect confrontation strategies with their focus on giving face protect the other party's identity and preserve relationships. In contrast, direct confrontation strategies imply that the other party is untrustworthy and indicate that the claimant is willing to risk loss of the relationship (Putnam & Wilson, 1990).

Negotiation research is just beginning to study the full gamut of possible relationships between negotiators. There is, of course, a great deal of research on conflict and conflict management in intimate family relationships, and some on friends, but there is an array of social relationships that extends beyond friends and is more nuanced than the in-group versus out-group distinction. Delineating the structure of relationships in negotiation goes beyond the scope of this article. Suffice to say that the nature of the relationship between claimant and respondent on a continuum from close to distant—which I'm intentionally leaving undefined—may impact on choice of indirect versus direct confrontation. Furthermore, the nature of that impact may vary with elements of accessibility—culture—what is normative, and context—stereotypes, an assessment of whether or not the respondent will “get it”, and the other elements of activation.

The Status and Role Relationship of the Parties

The status and role relationship of the parties is important to our theorizing because indirect and direct confrontation strategies convey information about the relative status of the parties in conflict (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Giving face in an indirect confrontation acknowledges the other party's social status. For example, face giving tactics like ingratiation and pleas for sympathy not only acknowledge the other party's higher status but also cue a sense of obligation to the claimant that palliates the influence attempt (Drake & Moberg, 1986). In contrast, face attacks remind the other party of his/her role in society and the social obligations that he/she has flouted in the conflict (Brett et al., 2007).

Status relationship between the parties: claimant high versus respondent low, claimant low versus respondent high, claimant and respondent equal may have an impact on choice of an indirect versus a direct negotiation strategy. Furthermore, the nature of that impact may vary with elements of accessibility—culture—what is normative and context—stereotypes, an assessment of whether or not the respondent will “get it”, and the other elements of activation. For example, effects may be different in cultures in which people are particularly sensitive to status differences.

The Nature of the Claim

The nature of the claim refers to how serious the “hurt” was. This “hurt” could be in financial or social terms. Interestingly, the amount of money involved does not seem to have much of an effect on whether or not disputes are resolved (Brett, Barsness, & Goldberg, 1996; Brett et al., 2007), but it is always possible that that financial or

especially social “hurt” affects directly or interacts with other factors in determining whether people confront directly or indirectly.

Social Monitoring

Social monitoring refers to whether the direct versus indirect confrontation of conflict occurs in a social context with others present versus simply between claimant and respondent. Research suggests that social monitoring and accountability act as a norm enforcement mechanism, exacerbating the effect of whatever norms are cultivated in a particular cultural context (Gelfand & Realo, 1999). Thus, we can expect that when the confrontation is socially monitored, that chronically accessible normative knowledge structures are likely to be activated, perhaps overwhelming other activation factors.

Conclusion

Face theory provides a strong theoretical rationale for why indirect and direct confrontation works to resolve conflict. Dynamic constructivist theory (Morris & Gelfand, 2004) provides some structure for the black hole of exogenous factors leading to indirect versus direct confrontation of conflict. Theory and research suggest that both direct and indirect confrontation strategies are available to parties in conflict. What claimants choose to use, the theory suggests, depends on the accessibility of strategies and the particularities of the current conflict that serve as immediate stimuli. Working our way through an application of dynamic constructivist theory to indirect versus direct confrontation of conflict identified culture as a major factor highly likely to affect accessibility of indirect versus direct confrontation strategy. The factors closely associated with the conflict likely to activate indirect versus direct confrontation seem to be the social relationship between the parties, the status and role relationship between the parties, perhaps the nature of the conflict, and certainly whether the confrontation will or will not be socially monitored. Cutting across all of these influences is the important assessment of the claimant that the respondent will “get it”. “Getting it” means that the respondent’s knowledge structure leading to conflict resolution is available, accessible, and activated.

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