Conversing Across Cultural Ideologies: East-West Communication Styles in Work and Non-Work Contexts

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Abstract

American work attitudes have been strongly influenced by ascetic Protestant Ideology (API), which suggests that relational concerns should be minimized at work. Based on API's pervasive influence on American culture, we hypothesized that Americans would be less sensitive to indirect relational cues in work settings than in non-work settings, whereas these differences would not be evident among East Asians. Study 1 found that as predicted, Americans were less sensitive to indirect cues, or made more errors interpreting an indirect performance feedback message in work than non-work contexts. These differences were not evident among Chinese and Koreans. Study 2 administered an indirectness scale to American, Chinese, and Koreans similarly found that Americans were less indirect in work than non-work settings, but the reverse was true for Chinese and Koreans. Study 3 replicated these findings by priming culture among Thai-English bilinguals in two multinational firms. Participants primed with Western cues were less indirect in work than non-work settings, but the same trend was not apparent for workers primed with Eastern cues. These results suggest that cross-cultural differences in conversational indirectness are greater in work settings than in non-work settings. Implications for reducing cross-cultural miscommunication in organizations are discussed.

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Imagine you are asking a colleague for feedback on your paper. She looks down, nervously shuffling the papers in front of her, and says, "The theory really needs tightening, and the analysis is problematic. But otherwise, you seem to have some very interesting ideas." How would you interpret this feedback? Are you likely to take it at face value, concluding that although the paper needs revising, it is indeed interesting and provocative? Alternatively, are you likely to read between the lines of your colleague's comments, concluding that her equivocal comments suggest that the paper is of questionable merit and limited value?

Whether one interprets the comment at face value or reads between the lines depends in large part on assumptions about the importance of maintaining interpersonal harmony. In situations where it is important to preserve interpersonal harmony, people are expected to use relational cues, or cues that signal to concern for others. Conversational indirectness is an example of a relational cue—indirectness provides a way to communicate sensitive or negative information "politely," with minimal damage to the relationship or to the other person's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For example, the colleague's comment that the paper is "interesting" may be interpreted as an attempt to save face, rather than a sincere appraisal of the paper. Yet, in situations where preserving interpersonal harmony is understood to be less important, people are expected to use fewer relational cues, be more direct in the way they communicate, or "say it as it is" (Holtgraves, 1997). In these situations, we often expect, even prefer, others to be forthright, direct and to-the-point; indirectness may unnecessarily obfuscate the true meaning of the message.

To the extent that indirectness may be appropriate in some situations and not in others, people need to have similar expectations to avoid miscommunication. For example, if two people presume that interpersonal harmony is relatively unimportant they will both be direct in their conversation, focusing their attention on what is said rather than how it is said (Kimmel, 1994; Lindsley & Braithwaite, 1996). As a result, both people understand that there is little need to rely on indirect cues to convey and interpret messages. Similarly, when both people place a high emphasis on relational concerns, they will both use and attend to indirect cues (Lee, 1993). For example, the colleague intends the phrase "you have some very interesting ideas" as a polite way to say that the paper has little merit, and the author of the paper also interprets this phrase in the same way. However, if people differ in their assumptions about the relevance of relational concerns, they will differ in their attention to indirectness, resulting in miscommunication. The listener may fail to pick up information expressed indirectly; for example, the author believes that the paper is very interesting even though the colleague just said that to save face, and foregoes otherwise needed rethinking and revision. Or, the listener may mistakenly infer indirect meaning in an utterance intended by the speaker to be taken literally; for example, the colleague considers the paper to be truly interesting, but the author interprets the colleague's feedback as devastating criticism, and abandons the project altogether.

Maintaining shared beliefs about indirectness presents a challenge for organizations with a culturally diverse workforce. A growing body of research demonstrates that there are cross-cultural differences in beliefs about the importance of relational concerns in general, and particularly in the use of indirectness in interpersonal communication (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993; Smith & Bond, 1994; Triandis, Dunnette, & Hough, 1994 Hui & Luk, 1997). We suggest that Americans and East Asians differ in their assumptions about the

appropriateness of indirectness in work and non-work situations. This argument stems largely from historical and cultural differences in exposure to ascetic Protestant ideology (API), which suggests that relational concerns should be minimized in work contexts (Weber, 1904/1930, 1947; Fischer, 1989). We first review cross-cultural research related to attention to relational cues and conversational indirectness. Next, we argue that cultural variation in exposure to API would lead to cross cultural differences in conversational indirectness more in work settings than in non-work settings. Our hypothesis depart from much cross cultural literature which typically focus on "main effect" differences between cultures, rather than situational conditions which affect whether these differences emerge. We then present three studies that provide evidence supporting our arguments. Finally, we suggest strategies for reducing cross-cultural miscommunication and improving intercultural relations in organizations.

Cultural Variation in Attention to Relational Cues

Relational cues carry information about social emotions, and can include non-verbal behavior, verbal indirect meaning, and vocal emotion (Goffman, 1959; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Ambady, Koo, Lee, & Rosenthal, 1996). Using the example from the beginning of the paper, the colleague can convey criticisms of the paper using cues such as looking down and avoiding eye contact (nonverbal cues), offering faint praise (verbal indirect meaning), or delivering the message in a critical tone of voice (verbal emotion). Attention to these cues in both language expression and comprehension is indexed by the construct *indirectness* (Holtgraves, 1997).

There is extensive evidence showing that there is cross-cultural variation in indirectness. One line of research shows that individuals in collectivist cultures (cultures that value group connectedness) rely more on indirect communication cues than individuals in individualist

cultures (cultures that value individual autonomy) (Singelis & Brown, 1995; Triandis, 1995; S. Cohen & Bailey, 1997). Collectivists are more likely to make large relational investments in others, use language that maintains "face" for themselves and for others, and reaffirm interpersonal bonds (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Ting-Toomey et al., 1991). Similarly, collectivists are more likely to attend to others' emotional expressions, eye contact, and tone of voice than individualists (Diaz-Guerrero, 1967; Carroll, 1990; Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett, & Ybarra, 2000). In contrast, the communication style of European Americans, presumably individualists *par excellence*, is focused more on conveying information than attending to social emotional concerns. Holtgraves (1997) found that Americans, men and women alike, have more direct communication styles than Koreans. Americans value directness and accuracy in communication more than relational concerns such as harmony, face, or hierarchy (Hall, 1976; R. Cohen, 1987; Holtgraves & Yang, 1990, 1992; Ambady et al, 1996).

Research focused more specifically on cross-cultural differences in self-construals report similar differences in indirectness between Eastern and Western cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In cultures where an interdependent self is valued (e.g., Japan), people place greater importance on nurturing interpersonal bonds, focus more on the needs, desires, and goals of others, and place more emphasis on the interpersonal and emotional dimension of social interactions than do cultures where an independent self is valued (e.g., Western Europe, America) (Fiske et al., 1998). In contrast, independent self-construals have been associated with linguistic directness in communication, and preference for individual rather than interpersonal tasks and goals (Singelis, 1994).

Overall, indirectness appears to be an important and ubiquitous aspect of social interactions in collectivist or interdependent cultures (such as East Asian, Latin American, or

Middle Eastern cultures), but not in individualistic or independent cultures (such as the United States or Western Europe). While this stream of research has demonstrated broad cultural differences in communication styles, we suggest that contextual factors might influence when cultural differences in conversational indirectness are most salient. Particularly, based on Western culture's exposure to API, we suggest that cross-cultural differences in indirectness may be more substantial in work situations compared to non-work situations.

Ascetic Protestant Ideology and its Influence on American Culture

We propose that cross-cultural differences in indirectness are context-specific in a way that reflects differences in exposure to ascetic Protestant ideology (API). Calvinism, an early form of API, stressed the importance of limiting social-emotional and relational issues in the domain of work and other religious activities. In his development of this ideology, Calvin insisted that, "while fulfilling one's calling, individuals ought to maintain an unsentimental impersonality in one's conduct with one another" (Bendix, 1977: 71). Later observers of API in American culture such as Weber (1947) invoked the terms *gemeinschaft* (i.e., friendship, familial relationships) and *gesellschaft* (i.e., rational, pragmatic relationships) to refer to the distinction between work and non-work contexts. In cultures historically linked to API, attention to relational concerns was expected in the *gemeinschaft*, the non-work setting, but considered highly inappropriate in the *gesellschaft*, the world of work (Fischer, 1989; Daniels, 1995).

Ascetic Protestant ideology has maintained a strong influence on contemporary American culture, as noted by many scholars (Weber, 1904/1930; McNeill, 1954; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; McGrath, 1993; Bellah et al., 1996). Indeed, Weber suggests that Calvinism and ascetic Protestant beliefs are the fundamental values that differentiate American culture from other cultures. Although originally a religious ideology API imperatives calling for differentiation

between work and non-work relationships were gradually secularized and incorporated into the general work ethos of American culture. This led to differences in beliefs about the proper role of relational concerns in work and non-work contexts in contemporary America—a distinction that may be foreign to cultures not historically affected by API. Relevant to the concerns of the present research, we suggest that Americans will be less likely to rely on relational cues, or be indirect in their communication in work settings than in non-work settings, whereas East Asians will equally indirect in both settings.

The Present Research

We predict that in cultures historically grounded in API (e.g., European-American culture), there will be lower levels of indirectness in work settings than in non-work settings. However, this difference will not be apparent in cultures that have no historical link to API (e.g., East Asians such as Chinese, Koreans, and Thais). This hypothesized culture by context interaction was examined in three studies. In Study 1, American and East Asian participants read an indirect message either in a work or non-work context, and made estimates about the intended meaning of the message. Because we predict less sensitivity to indirect cues among Americans in work settings, we predict more errors in message interpretation in work than non-work settings only among Americans, but not among East Asians. Study 2 compared responses from American, Chinese, and Korean participants on a survey that measures differences in conversational indirectness (Holtgraves, 1997). Participants were instructed to answer the items with respect to a specific coworker or non-work acquaintance. We predict lower levels of indirectness when the target is a coworker rather than an acquaintance among Americans, but not among East Asians. Study 3 used the same indirectness survey as in Study 2, but experimentally manipulated culture by priming participants with American or Asian cultural cues. Again, we

expect lower levels of indirectness for coworkers than acquaintances when participants are primed with American cues, but not when participants are primed with Asian cues.

STUDY 1

Study 1 examined how Americans and East Asians interpret indirect messages in work and non-work contexts. If Americans attend less to indirect relational cues particularly at work, as suggested by the API hypothesis, it should follow that they will be more likely to misinterpret the meaning of an indirect message in work settings than in non-work settings. However, given that API principles are less prominent in East Asian cultures, we do not expect them to show differences in interpretation between work and non-work settings. In short, we predict that Americans, but not East Asians, will make more errors in work than non-work settings.

Method

American, Chinese, and Korean MBA students were presented with an indirect message conveying the results of a personal evaluation. The message was produced by a prior study examining indirect speech (Lee, 1993). Participants in Study 1 were asked to reproduce the original ratings from which the message was generated. Half of the participants were told that the message conveyed the results of an employee's performance evaluation (work condition), while half were told that it conveyed the results of a personality test from a magazine (non-work condition). We then compared participants' ratings to the original ratings from which the indirect message was based. Higher discrepancy between the two ratings was indicative of more errors in interpretation, or less sensitivity to indirect relational cues.

Participants

Participants were 55 European-Americans (37 men, 18 women, mean age = 28.9), 59 Chinese (41 men, 18 women, mean age = 27.4), and 47 South Koreans (44 men, 3 women, mean

age = 35.2). The American participants were drawn from two large business schools, one from

the Midwestern United States and one on the West Coast of the United States. Korean

participants were from a business school in Seoul, Korea. The Chinese participants were drawn

from an international business school in Nanjing, China. Participants were recruited through

Masters of Business Administration (MBA) courses. Participants had a minimum of 4 years

working experience.

<u>Procedure and Materials</u>

All participants were tested in their native language. Participants were randomly assigned

to either a work or non-work condition. In the work condition, participants were asked to

imagine that they were working for a large company, and were in charge of compiling and

organizing information from recently completed employee performance evaluations. Participants

were told that the original evaluation form for one employee was lost. All that remained was the

transcript of the meeting between the reviewer and the employee in which the evaluation was

discussed.

The transcript was taken from a previous study in which American participants were

given poor performance ratings and asked to provide written notes to the target of the evaluation

to communicate the content of the evaluation (Lee, 1993). In Lee's study, the rating form had

fourteen performance dimensions such as "organization skills" or "communication skills," each

rated on a 9-point Likert scale (1-very poor, 5-average, 9-very good). All the scores were

extremely low, and the average across all items was 3.14. In Lee's study, the notes which

participants wrote communicating the content of these ratings were coded for indirectness. We

identified a note that scored in the ninety-fifth percentile of indirectness from Lee's study, and

used it as the stimulus in the present study. Specifically, the note said: "This is your interim

evaluation summary: Overall the evaluation indicates that your strengths are in communication skills, anticipating events and creativity. The other areas are not as strong as these—some are poor, but frankly it's difficult to evaluate those areas. Good job!" These notes were translated and back-translated to create Chinese and Korean versions. Participants in the present study received this note along with a blank copy of the original evaluation form. Participants were told that their task was to reproduce the original evaluation ratings as best they could from the note.

In the non-work condition, participants were told to imagine overhearing two friends talking about the results of a personality test. The friends agreed to score each other's test and then tell each other how they did on the test. Participants were given a transcript ostensibly of what one friend told another friend, and then asked to reproduce the exact ratings on the personality test. The transcript and the rating form were identical to those used in the work condition.

Participant's ratings for the 14-items were averaged to create an overall estimation score. The reliability (Cronbach's alpha) across the14-items was .75. Given that the indirect transcript was generally positive even though the actual ratings were poor, participants who were less sensitive to indirect relational cues overestimated the actual ratings. Thus, the higher the average scores produced by the participant, the higher the level of interpretation errors.

<div align="center">Results</div>

A 2 (context: work vs. non-work) x 3 (culture: American, Chinese, Korean) analysis of variance was conducted using estimation scores as the dependent variable. As predicted, planned contrasts indicated that Americans overestimated the actual evaluation ratings more in the work setting ($\underline{M}$ = 6.24) compared to the non-work setting ($\underline{M}$ = 5.86), $\underline{t}$(156) = 2.33, $\underline{p}$ = .03.[1] This difference was not significant for Chinese ($\underline{M}$ = 6.44 work vs. $\underline{M}$ = 6.38 non-work) and Koreans

($\underline{M}$ = 6.0 work vs. $\underline{M}$ = 6.26 non-work), both $\underline{t}$'s < 1. There were no significant main effects for

context or culture, $\underline{p}$ > .70. The context by culture interaction was marginally significant,

$F(2,156)$ = 1.95, $\underline{p}$ = .14. Overall, Americans were less accurate, or less sensitive to indirect cues,

when interpreting indirect feedback in work settings compared to non-work settings. In contrast,

Chinese and Koreans were equally accurate in work and non-work settings.

Discussion

In Study 1, we examined people's accuracy in interpreting an indirect feedback message.

Given this highly indirect note, inferring "speaker meaning" directly from "sentence meaning"

without paying attention to relational cues would result in more errors. Consistent with our

predictions, the results showed that Americans made more errors in interpreting indirect

messages in work than non-work settings. Neither Chinese nor Koreans exhibited this pattern of

reduced indirectness in the context of work.

However, there are questions about the present methodology. First, the indirect message

that participants were asked to interpret was originally generated by an American, which may

bias estimations in favor of the American sample. Indeed, the American sample was slightly

(though not significantly) more accurate than the Chinese and Korean samples. It is not clear

whether this is due to actual cross-cultural differences in indirectness, or whether it is because

the message was originally written by an American. In addition, the message contained

American idioms and colloquialisms (e.g., "frankly," "good job"), and these terms may be

somewhat distorted through the translation process. To avoid these problems, we utilized a

cross-culturally validated survey to measure conversational indirectness in Study 2.

STUDY 2

Study 2 consisted of a 3 (Culture: American, Chinese, or Korean) x 2 (Context: non-work or work) between-subjects design. American, Korean, and Chinese participants filled out a modified Indirectness scale (Holtgraves, 1997) either in a work or non-work context.

Method

Participants

Thirty-five European-Americans (29 men, 6 women; mean age = 30.11), 58 South Koreans (50 men, 8 women; mean age = 31.92), and 59 Chinese (35 men, 23 women; mean age = 27.43) MBA students participated in the study. As in Study 1, the American participants were drawn from a business school in the Midwest and a business school on the West Coast of the United States. Korean participants were drawn from two sources: some were MBA students in a business school in Seoul, Korea, and some were enrolled in a global MBA program where they took some courses in the United States. We compared the two Korean samples on indirectness and found no statistical differences between them. Thus, the two samples were combined in all future analysis. The Chinese participants were drawn from an international business school in Nanjing, China. Participants were recruited through MBA courses and email groups, and had a minimum of 4 years working experience.

Materials and Procedure

Study 2 used a modified version of Holtgraves (1997) indirectness scale to measure participants' self-reported levels of conversational indirectness. This scale included items such as "I try to consider all interpretations of others' remarks before deciding what they really meant," or "Most of what I say can be taken at face value, and there is no need to look for deeper meaning" (reverse scored). Higher scores are indicative of more indirectness. Two versions of

Holtgraves' (1997) indirectness survey were created—the work version and the non-work version. In the work version, participants were asked to think of "a specific person with whom they interact at work." In the non-work version, participants were asked to think of "a specific person with whom they interact only outside of work." Participants were asked to respond to all the survey items with this target person in mind. The original scale items were modified by inserting the phrase "When interacting with X at work (or outside work)…" before each item, where "X" refers to the target person. A sample item is "When interacting with X at work, I try to consider all interpretations of X's remarks before deciding what he or she really meant." All items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = agree completely, 7 = disagree completely).

Bilingual native speakers of Korean and Chinese translated the survey from English into Korean and Chinese respectively. Separate bilinguals performed back-translations into English to ensure conceptual equivalence. Since Holtgraves' (1997) measure was developed and validated in English and Korean, our Korean translators focused on modifications and additions to the original measure. No major discrepancies were found between the original and back-translated versions.

All participants were randomly given the work or non-work survey, and all participants completed the survey in their native language. After reverse scoring negatively worded items, a single indirectness index was formed by averaging across all items on the scale (Cronbach's α = .87; Americans, α = .84, Koreans, α = .91, Chinese, α = .83), with higher scores indicating higher levels of conversational indirectness.

<center>Results</center>

A culture x context ANOVA was performed on mean indirectness scores. The main effect of culture was not significant (p > .20) nor was the main effect of context (p > .60). The

culture x context interaction was significant, $\underline{F}(2,146) = 4.84$, $\underline{p} = .009$. Results were consistent with our predictions (see Figure 1). Americans were significantly less indirect in work compared to non-work contexts, $\underline{t}(146) = 2.09$, $\underline{p} = .039$. In contrast, Koreans and Chinese were more indirect within work than non-work settings. The effect was significant for Koreans $\underline{t}(146) = 2.16$, $\underline{p} = .032$, but only marginally significant for Chinese, $\underline{t}(146) = 1.52$, $\underline{p} = .13$).

The results also showed that cultural differences were more apparent in work than non-work settings. Within work settings, Americans were significantly less indirect than Koreans ($\underline{t}(146) = 3.25$, p = .001) and Chinese ($\underline{t}(146) = 2.90$, p = .004), whereas within the non-work settings there were no East-West differences (both $\underline{p}$'s > .60). There were also no differences between the Chinese and Korean samples (all comparisons between Chinese and Koreans yielded $\underline{p}$'s > .65).

Discussion

The results of Study 2 showed that, as predicted, indirectness was lower for Americans in work than non-work relationships, but this pattern was not evident for East Asians. In addition, in contrast to past research that suggests that Americans are generally less attuned to indirect cues than East Asians (Hall, 1976; Ting-Toomey et al, 1991; Holtgraves, 1992), our results suggest that cultural differences in indirectness are context-specific. Westerners, and presumably other people from individualistic cultures, are not always less attuned to indirect cues compared to Easterners. Rather, differences in indirectness between Easterners and Westerners were observed only in work contexts. In non-work contexts, it appears that Westerners can be just as attentive to indirect cues as their Eastern counterparts, if not more so. This pattern of results supports our conceptualization of Western culture as being linked to API.

Although we did not anticipate any differences in indirectness between work and non-work contexts for Easterners, we found that Koreans and Chinese tended to be more indirect in work than non-work settings. One possible explanation is that in Asian cultures, there are higher stakes involved in work than non-work relationships. For example, in many Asian cultures, one's employer not only controls work-related resources such as salaries and benefits, but often dictates availability of non-work related resources such as medical care, education for children, housing, and even one's social circle (Hughes, 1988; Trompenaars, 1993; Chan & Qui, 1999). Given the over-arching influence of work in one's general well-being and life style, being insensitive to relational cues at work can exact a particularly heavy toll on all aspects of one's life. However, it should be noted that this effect among East Asians is equivocal from the present results—the difference in indirectness between work and non-work settings was significant for Koreans but not for Chinese. Beyond this paper, further research is needed to examine possible explanations for this pattern and whether this trend can be replicated.

Studies 1 and 2 relied on cross-national comparisons between American, Korean, and Chinese MBA students, assuming that individuals in each group represent a singular cultural perspective representative of their native country. However, such an assumption may be out of place. For example, MBA students are highly knowledgeable about global markets, and have considerable exposure to other cultures. It would not be surprising if many individuals in our sample have spent considerable time working overseas. Rather than being monoculturally American, Chinese or Korean, it is reasonable to assume that our sample, particularly the East Asians, are probably highly familiar with both Eastern and Western cultures. This characteristic is not restricted to MBA or college students. In today's world, it is common for individuals to travel overseas extensively, to have lived in more than one country, or to live in ethnically

diverse environments. For example, the 2000 U.S. Census reports that 26.4 million people in the

United States (roughly 10% of the total population) were born overseas (http://www.census.gov).

This percentage is considerably higher in other countries, such as Canada, Switzerland, and

Australia (Simon, 1995).

As such, simply comparing cross-cultural samples may not give us a clear test of cultural

effects. Rather than considering culture as a monolithic, static characteristic of an individual, we

adopted a more dynamic-constructivist approach to culture in Study 3. Taking the assumption

that people often have multiple cultural schemas, we conducted a stronger test of cultural effects

on indirectness by experimentally manipulating culture.

STUDY 3

In study 3 we examined indirectness in work and non-work settings with bicultural

individuals experienced with both East Asian and American cultures (LaFromboise, Coleman, &

Gerton, 1993; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997). According to recent conceptualizations of

culture, individuals can have access to multiple cultural identities that can be activated by

cultural cues in the environment (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000). There is

evidence that biculturals—individuals who are familiar with more than one culture—can be

primed to exhibit culture-specific behaviors. For example, there is evidence that Chinese-

American biculturals primed with American pictures (e.g., Mickey Mouse) behaved in more

characteristically Western ways (e.g., making more internal attributions, rating the self as more

independent) than when primed with Chinese pictures (e.g., the Great Wall) (Hong, Chiu, &

Kung, 1997).

Using this dynamic-constructivist approach to culture, Study 3 manipulated culture

through language primes: East-West biculturals were randomly given the indirectness survey in

English or in an Eastern language. We hypothesized that participants who received the English survey would behave more like Westerners, and exhibit equal indirectness in work than non-work relationships. In contrast, participants who received the Eastern language survey would behave more like Easterners, and exhibit equivalent levels of indirectness in work and non-work relationships. We further hypothesized that the cultural priming effect—or differences in indirectness between Western and Eastern conditions—would be greater in work than non-work settings.

Participants

Participants were 151 (101 female, 48 male; average age = 31.2) Thai-English bilinguals, recruited from two large multinational corporations in Thailand. Both corporations were Fortune 500 companies headquartered in the United States. One company was a bank, and the other a food manufacturing company. All participants indicated that they were equally fluent in both Thai and English languages. Participation was voluntary.

Materials and procedure

As in Study 2, we first translated Holtgraves (1997) indirectness survey into Thai, and then checked the validity of the translation with back-translation . One version of the survey focused on work relationships, and one version focused on non-work relationships. Overall, four versions of the survey were created: English/Work, English/Non-work, Thai/Work, Thai/Non-work.

Surveys were distributed to employees in the two companies who self-reported as fluent in both English and Thai. Participants were randomly given one of the four versions of the indirectness survey. Overall, 225 surveys were distributed. A cover letter describing the general topic of the study was included with the survey, as well as a return envelope. Of the 225 surveys

distributed, 151 were returned, yielding a total response rate of 67%. Of the 151 surveys

returned, 33 were in the English/Non-work condition, 32 were in the English/Work condition, 42

were in the Thai/Non-work condition, and 44 were in the Thai/Work condition.

Results

Indirectness scores were calculated using the same method as in Study 2. A 2 (culture

prime: English or Thai) x 2 (context: work or non-work context) ANOVA was conducted on the

mean indirectness scores. Participants who received the Thai survey were marginally more

indirect (M = 3.57) than participants who received the English survey (M = 3.19), $\underline{F}$(1,147) =

2.77, $\underline{p}$ = .10. The main effect of context was not significant. The culture by context interaction

was significant, $\underline{F}$(1,147) = 3.97, $\underline{p}$ = .05. Consistent with our predictions, participants who

received the English survey reported less indirectness in work than non-work conditions, $\underline{t}$(147)

= 2.36, $\underline{p}$ = .01, whereas participants who received the Thai survey reported equal levels of

indirectness in work and non-work conditions, $\underline{t}$(147)= .11, $\underline{p}$ = .46 (see Figure 2). In addition,

the cultural priming manipulation was stronger in work than non-work settings—participants

who received the English work survey reported lower levels of indirectness than participants

who received the Thai work survey, $\underline{t}$(1,147) = 3.06, $\underline{p}$ = .001, but there were no differences

between cultural conditions in the non-work surveys, $\underline{t}$(1,147) = .76, $\underline{p}$ = .22.

Discussion

The results of Study 3 supported our predictions. When biculturals familiar with Thai and

American culture were primed with a Western stimulus (an English survey), they behaved like

the Americans in Study 2, reporting significantly less indirectness in work than non-work

settings. In contrast, participants reported equal levels of indirectness in work and non-work

situations when primed with an Eastern stimulus (a Thai survey).

Study 3 replicated the pattern found in Study 2 and provided a stronger test of our hypotheses. Traditionally, cross-cultural research compares attitudes and behaviors between individuals from different cultural or ethnic groups. These cross-cultural samples often differ on a variety of dimensions besides cultural background, such as life experiences, knowledge, and personalities, just to name a few. This makes it difficult to know which one of these factors cause observed cultural differences. The design of Study 3 controlled for these alternative explanations by sampling from a single population and experimentally manipulating culture via language primes. Our findings lend further support to the dynamic constructivist perspective on culture, suggesting that multiple cultural meaning systems can be mentally represented and integrated by an individual, and that these meaning systems are dynamic, flexible, and responsive to situational cues. Providing that participants have developed both Eastern and Western cultural schemas, cultural priming may be a useful methodology for examining cultural differences (Hong et al., 2000).

Several trends in the results deserve attention. First, response rates were slightly different for Thai and English surveys (83% and 54% respectively). Even though all participants initially approached for the study reported being equally fluent in English and Thai, it may be the case that some respondents were less comfortable with English, and thus less likely to fill out the English survey. Despite guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality, participants might have exaggerated their fluency with English because they worked in an American corporation. Second, unlike the Korean and Chinese MBA students in Study 2 who were more indirect in work than non-work settings, we found no differences in indirectness between work and non-work settings for participants who received the Thai survey.

General Discussion

The three studies used very different methodologies to examine our hypothesis. Studies 2 and 3 used self-report measures of indirectness, while Study 1 measured participants' accuracy in interpreting indirect messages. Studies 1 and 2 compared the responses of cross-cultural samples, whereas Study 3 experimentally manipulated culture using language primes. Studies 1 and 2 used MBA students, whereas Study 3 used employees in a large corporation. Different East Asian groups were examined across the three studies; Studies 1 and 2 examined Chinese and Koreans, and Study 3 examined Thais.

Across these different methodologies and samples, we found the same trends. Taken together, all three studies showed that Americans were less attentive to indirect cues in work than non-work settings, but this difference was not evident for East Asians. We argued that these findings reflected differences in exposure to API, which advocated the inappropriateness of attending to relational and social emotional concerns at work. In this way, we not only identified cross cultural differences in indirectness, but proposed a theory of <u>why</u> such differences exist, and further demonstrated that, consistent with the theory, the cross cultural differences were context-specific.

Overall, despite the widely acknowledged influence of API in shaping contemporary American culture, there is little empirical research work on beliefs about the role of relational cues at work. The present studies fill this gap. Yet several issues remain to be addressed by future research. One shortcoming of the present studies is the absence of individual difference measures that directly tap beliefs about API. For example, we would expect Americans, but not East Asians, to endorse the belief that relational information and social-emotional expression at work is counterproductive and should be restricted. We would further expect these measures to

mediate the relationship between culture and sensitivity to relational cues. Recent efforts to develop and validate such an individual measure indicate that beliefs about the importance of relational concerns in work versus non-work contexts can successfully be measured through self-reports, and that these beliefs are distinct from other measures such as individualism-collectivism or independence-interdependence (Sanchez-Burks, 2000).

Although existing literatures have shown general East-West differences in indirectness, our studies demonstrate that these differences are apparent only in the context of work. This finding underscores the challenge of successful cross-cultural communication in organizations. Whereas European Americans and East Asians show little difference in their attention to indirect cues outside of work, they bring significantly different levels of indirectness into the workplace. In a diverse workplace with individuals from different cultures and ethnic groups, this can be fertile ground for miscommunication and misunderstandings at the interpersonal level.

However, our findings also suggest possible ways to bridge this cultural divide in organizations. Our results demonstrate that, given the right conditions, Americans can be as attentive to relational clues as East Asians. Thus, one strategy for reducing cultural miscommunications in organizations is to encourage Americans to use their non-work relational skills at work. This could be accomplished through a variety of methods. For instance, one could create informal environments where team members from different cultures could interact prior to important joint projects. Given that East-West differences in indirectness are minimal in non-work settings, such an intervention can create effective "base-line" communication norms, processes, and expectations team members can use throughout the duration of the project. Similarly, miscommunication can be reduced if more cross-cultural work discussions are conducted in informal contexts such as dinner, drinks or other situations outside the workplace.

Back to our initial example, if the author of the paper and the colleague giving the feedback are from different cultures, the chance of miscommunication may be lessened if they discussed the paper in a non-work setting.

Nonetheless, many important intercultural business interactions will undoubtedly need to occur within the formal context of the workplace. Given this reality, European Americans need to recognize that East-Asians expect social emotional concerns to be relevant and noticed in the workplace, and express these concerns via indirect communication cues. Americans can learn to more carefully manage the relational cues they send to others, as well as paying attention to the cues sent by their colleagues (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993). Likewise, East Asians need to recognize that although Americans typically put aside relational concerns in workplace interactions, it does not necessarily signal a dislike or lack of concern for one's colleague and the working relationship.

The present research raises a few questions for further work. First, we did not examine gender differences in the present studies, as the small number of women in our samples precluded any robust analysis of gender differences from our data. Both scholarly (Lakoff, 1977; Tannen, 1982) and popular works (Tannen, 1990; Gray, 1992) have argued that women are generally more sensitive to relational cues than men. However, empirical support for this claim remains mixed, with many studies failing to reveal reliable gender differences in indirectness (Holtgraves & Yang, 1992; Kashima et al., 1995; Holtgraves, 1997; Lee, 1993, 1999). Far from being resolved, questions about the nature and reliability of gender differences in indirectness require further empirical study. It should also be noted that besides East Asian cultures, many other cultures may emphasize the relational and social emotional concerns in work relations. In addition to Koreans, Chinese, and Thais, strong traditions of social emotionality in work

relations have been documented in Mexico (Triandis et al., 1984; Sanchez-Burks, Nisbett, & Ybarra, 2000), India (Sinha, 1980; Kool & Saksena, 1988), and many Middle Eastern cultures (Hui & Luk, 1997). Thus, we would expect the present results to be replicated in these other cultures as well.

Weber (1904/1930) noted in his famous treatise on the Protestant Work Ethic that ascetic Protestant Ideology directly contributed to economic prosperity and effective business organizations in America and Western Europe. Ironically, our findings suggest that what was essential to the success of Western business organizations may serve as a barrier to a global and cross-cultural business environment. Insights from the present research can bridge these barriers by illuminating the conditions which facilitate or hinder effective communication across cultures.

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Footnotes

[1] All p values reported are based on two-tailed tests.

Figure 1. Indirectness as a function of context and participant's culture (Study 2). Error bars represent one between-subjects standard error.
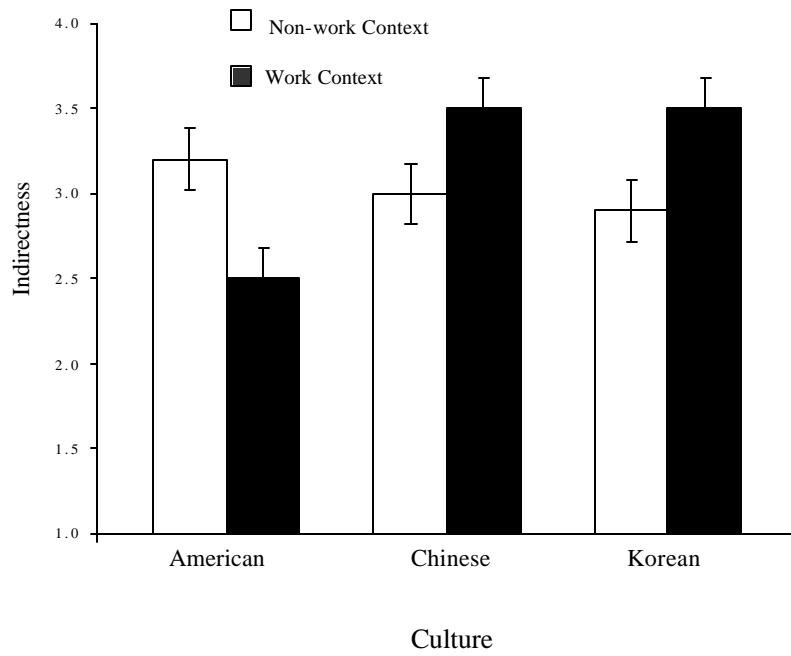
Figure 2. Indirectness as a function of context and cultural priming (Study 3). Error bars represent one between-subjects standard error.