Is there a culture-general definition of intercultural communication competence? Or does it have to be defined differently in each culture (i.e., is it culture-specific)? In 1989, we were invited to present a conference paper that dealt with these questions. We then proposed that intercultural communication competence was both culture-general and culture-specific, and furthermore, culture-synergistic (Cupach & Imahori, 1989). Specifically, we argued that people’s ability to behave effectively (i.e., achieve personal goals) and appropriately (i.e., treat others politely) are culturally universal standards for intercultural competence. Different cultures, however, have different expectations regarding which communicative behaviors are considered effective and socially appropriate. Moreover, we maintained that intercultural communication competence is also culture-synergistic because relational partners are able to negotiate their own idiosyncratic ways of behaving competently within their relationship (Imahori & Lanigan, 1989; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, 1989) and this relationally negotiated competence reflects a synergy between the individual partners’ distinct cultural expectations for competence.

Identity management theory (IMT; Cupach & Imahori, 1993) was then conceptualized based on this relational and culture-synergistic view of competence. It was also heavily influenced by other identity-based theories of intercultural communication, such as identity negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 1988, 1993) and, particularly, cultural identity
theory (Collier, 1998; Collier & Thomas, 1988). According to Wiseman (2002), IMT is akin to cultural identity theory, and both theories share ontological bases regarding “actors’ meanings, interpretations, and the rules governing their behavior” (p. 216).

Similar to others with identity-based theories, we argue that communication competence requires the ability of individuals “to successfully negotiate mutually acceptable identities in interaction” (Cupach & Imahori, 1993, p. 118). However, IMT is unique in at least in two different ways. First, we contend that competence entails the effective management of relational as well as cultural identities. Second, we postulate that face is the communicative reflection of people's relational and cultural identities, and thus effective identity management requires competent facework. The inclusion of face and facework in IMT was stimulated by our shared metatheoretical interest in symbolic interactionism, and particularly the work of Goffman (1967).

Since the introduction of IMT, several studies have been conducted to apply the theory in various types of intercultural interactions and to test the validity of its propositions. This chapter begins by sketching the theoretical scope and assumptions of IMT. Next we consider the current status of its theoretical propositions based on recent empirical research. We conclude the chapter by addressing future directions for research and application.

THEORETICAL SCOPE

IMT attempts to explain how cultural identities are negotiated through development of an interpersonal relationship (Cupach & Imahori, 1993). The theory explains competent identity management across the developmental stages of a relationship, ranging from initial acquaintance to a relationship with deep intimacy and commitment. Although the theory pays particular attention to people’s cultural identities, it is not restricted to intercultural relationships because cultural identities are present in all types of relationships—intracultural, intercultural, or interpersonal. The theory limits its application to dyads, and does not address intergroup relations. Regarding culture, IMT’s theoretical premises can be applied to various types of cultures, including cultures of nation, ethnicity, region, socioeconomic class, sexuality, presence or absence of disabilities, and so forth. Since the introduction of IMT, it has been applied to interethnic relationships (Imahori, 1999, 2001, 2002, 2003) and to relationships between people with and without disabilities (Merrigan, 2000).

METATHEORETICAL AND THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS

Identity management theory involves several key concepts, including competence, identity, cultural and relational identities, face, and facework. Our definitions and ontological assumptions regarding these key concepts are discussed below.

IMT is based on a particular view of competence. Competence requires both appropriate and effective behavior that is mutually satisfying to the participants in a relationship (Cupach & Imahori, 1993; Imahori & Lanigan, 1989; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984, 1989). Although Collier (1998) argues that competence is “based on implicit privilege” (p. 142) and thus is often defined by the dominant culture, we argue that in a particular intercultural relationship, competent negotiation of cultural identities requires cultural identity support that is mutually satisfying. We acknowledge that a member of the dominant culture would benefit from the influence of social standards for competence that exist in the dominant culture. However, it is theoretically possible for any two individuals to achieve mutually satisfying identity negotiation that transcends the social standards of competence.
Following cultural identity theory (Collier, 1998; Collier & Thomas, 1988), IMT views cultural identity as a focal element in intercultural communication. Identity is defined as "self-conception—one's theory of oneself" (Cupach & Imahori, 1993, p. 113). Identity serves as a framework for understanding one's self and the surrounding world. Identity is formed through mechanisms such as self-categorization into social groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) and identification with particular social roles such as husband, wife, teacher, student, and so on (McCall & Simmons, 1978; Stryker, 1980; for a review, see Stets & Burke, 2000).

Identity is a complex construct. An individual's total identity is made up of numerous overlapping aspects or subidentities. Not as an exhaustive list, identities may be related to nationality, ethnicity, region, sex, sexuality, age or generation, occupation, political affiliation, various social groups such as groups of common hobby, common experience (e.g., survivors of the Holocaust, Vietnam veterans, Japanese American internees), and groups engaged in illegal activities including drug use and street violence. Furthermore, identity reflects that aspect of self that is defined in terms of a particular interpersonal relationship, that is, a relational identity (Cupach & Imahori, 1993). IMT concerns itself specifically with cultural and relational identities.

Cultural identity is defined "as identification with and perceived acceptance into a group that has shared systems of symbols and meanings as well as norms/rules for conduct" (Collier & Thomas, 1988, p. 113). It encompasses all types of identities associated with social and cultural groups. Relational identity is born out of shared relational culture, that is, "a privately transacted system of understandings" that helps people coordinate meanings and behaviors (Wood, 1982, p. 76). It is a specific sense of "we" rather than "you and I" that is shared in a given relationship. Montgomery (1992) explains, As with cultures in general, a relational culture arises when a couple develops a meaning system and evaluative norms that set them apart from other couples. These unique ways of engaging in, interpreting, and evaluating communication behavior represent and reinforce the unique identity of the couple in comparison with others. (p. 485)

Collier and Thomas (1988) explain the complexity of identity by using three dimensions of identity: scope, salience, and intensity. Scope is tantamount to the size of the group of people who share the same identity. Relational identity is extremely small in scope as it is shared between only the individuals in a specific relationship (e.g., husband–wife, best friends, etc.). Salience refers to the relative psychological importance an individual feels with respect to the various aspects of identity in a specific interaction, whereas intensity refers to how openly and explicitly an individual expresses an aspect of identity in a given interaction. Intensity is tantamount to the concept of activation in identity theory, which pertains to the enactment of an identity in a social situation (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Although scope is a relatively stable dimension, salience and intensity fluctuate across situations, rendering identity highly amorphous. Depending on the person with whom one is communicating, the topic of conversation, and the social context, one or more aspects of identity become highly salient. In turn, the salience of identity can motivate its expression with relatively high or low intensity. For example, a Japanese person who is asked about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is likely to experience Japanese cultural identity as highly salient. If the Japanese person prefers to minimize avowing Japanese identity, then low intensity could be demonstrated by shifting the topic of conversation.

An abundance of research demonstrates that salient identities influence the expectations for and interpretations of social interactions, as
well as motivate social behavior (see Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993; Stets & Burke, 2000). Moreover, identity salience determines whether communication is characterized as intercultural, intracultural, or interpersonal. IMT defines intercultural communication as occurring when people's cultural identities are experienced as salient and distinct, whereas intracultural communication occurs when people's cultural identities are salient and similar. On the other hand, when relational identity is more salient than cultural identity, then communication becomes interpersonal. Since identity salience can fluctuate momentarily, the type of communication two people are sharing can vary both within and between interaction episodes. Consequently, it is important not to confuse types of relationships with types of communication. Although two people from two different cultural groups may form an intercultural relationship, their communication may be intercultural in one instance, but shift to interpersonal or intracultural communication in another. For this reason, any relationship, whether interpersonal, intercultural, or intracultural, involves interpersonal, intercultural, and intracultural communication. Thus, IMT does not regard the strict differentiation of these types of relationships to be important.

During these interpersonal, intercultural, or intracultural interactions, identities are "played out" as individuals avow (via self-presentation; Goffman, 1959) the particular identities they wish to assume for themselves, and ascribe (via altercasting; Weinstein & Deutschberger, 1963) the identities they assign to other interlocutors (Collier & Thomas, 1988). Each person's socially situated identity is referred to as his or her face (Tracy, 1990). The maintenance of face is a natural taken-for-granted condition of interactions because it promotes orderliness and civility. Normally one cooperates in supporting the face of another to ensure that the other supports one's own face (Brown & Levinson, 1978; Goffman, 1967). In this way, the logical utility of reciprocal face support provides a structuring mechanism for interactions that allow people to meet their goals and accomplish their tasks in ways that are consistent with face. It is only when the mechanism breaks down by accident or design that face maintenance becomes the explicit objective. (Metts, 2000, p. 80)

Brown and Levinson (1978) proposed two distinct face wants that people possess. Positive face refers to the desire for acceptance and approval from others. "To have regard for others' positive face is to show approval of their personality, attributes, accomplishments, appearance, and so forth, as well as to show that they are considered likeable and worthy to be a friend and companion" (Metts, 2000, p. 84). Negative face, on the other hand, refers to an individual's desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. Addressing one with tact, as well as avoiding intrusive and constraining actions, demonstrates respect for one's negative face.

Whenever a person engages in behavior that runs contrary to one's own or another's face needs, one is said to be committing a face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1978). Threats to a person's face challenge that person's situated identity, thereby undermining the working agreement of mutual identity support upon which smooth interactions are predicated. Communicators employ a variety of devices that are designed to counteract or mitigate threats to their own and others' positive and negative face; that is, they behave in ways that avoid face threats, and they endeavor to restore face when it has been lost or discredited. These communicative behaviors are collectively referred to as facework (Goffman, 1967).

Skill at facework is an essential ingredient of interpersonal competence (e.g., Cupach & Metts, 1994; Goffman, 1967; Weinstein, 1969). Situated identities represent the source of rewards and costs for social actors in all but the most impersonal of encounters (Weinstein, 1969). Facework validates situated identities
and promotes the mutual achievement of personal goals. Moreover, facework enables mutual respect. “This supports the ritual order of social interactions, allowing encounters between people to be relatively smooth and enjoyable, rather than disruptive and distressing” (Cupach & Metts, 1994, p. 15).

**THEORETICAL PROPOSITIONS AND RESEARCH EVIDENCE**

Identity management theory offers specific propositions regarding what identity issues are involved in intercultural relationships and how they are likely to be managed. Before testing these specific propositions, previous studies (Imahori, 1999, 2001) tested whether identities are indeed significant factors of intercultural communication competence. Imahori (1999) measured Japanese perceptions of various intercultural competence factors suggested by IMT, anxiety and uncertainty management theory (Gudykunst, 1993, 1995), and identity negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 1993). He found that cultural, relational, and personal identity management are perceived by Japanese as important factors of intercultural communication in conjunction with other factors of competence proposed by the other theories. In the second study, Imahori (2001) compared Japanese perceptions of identity management in hypothetical intraethnic (Japanese-Japanese) and interethnic (Japanese-white American) interactions. The results indicated that Japanese perceived management of cultural and relational identities as significant in interethnic and intraethnic interactions, and that relational identity was perceived as more important in interethnic than intraethnic interaction.

Although cultural and relational identities are both important aspects of identity management, intercultural interlocutors are particularly vulnerable to committing and receiving face threats related to their cultural identities. These face-related problems are reviewed in the section that follows.

**Propositions Regarding Face Problematics and Dialectics**

IMT proposes that people experience four specific types of face problematics related to cultural identity management (Proposition 1). First, people may experience face threat when their cultural identities are constrained because of being stereotyped or being seen only as a person with a particular cultural identity (Proposition 1a). This face threat occurs because people in early phases of intercultural relationships lack detailed knowledge about each other (e.g., Gudykunst, 1993, 1995). Since cultural memberships constitute the first type of information people obtain about each other through readily accessible cues (e.g., accent, clothing, and physical features), they tend to see each other only as members of their respective cultures and to ignore other aspects of each other's identity. We refer to this face-threatening tendency as "identity freezing." Identity freezing obviously threatens the other person's negative face since it constrains the other's desire to avow an identity that differs from the one ascribed. Moreover, identity freezing also threatens the other's positive face insofar as it disregards characteristics the other person values.

Research indicates that identity freezing is commonly experienced. Recently, Imahori (2002) conducted extensive interviews with more than 120 individuals in real intercultural relationships varying from acquaintance to marriage. Through open-ended interviews with an ethnically diverse sample in the San Francisco Bay Area, he assessed whether respondents experienced various face problematics and dialectical tensions, and how they coped with them. He found 22.3% of the respondents experienced identity freezing by their intercultural partners. Furthermore, previous studies on interethnic communication in North America (Hecht et al., 1993; Hecht & Ribeau, 1984, 1987; Hecht, Ribeau, & Alberts, 1989) found that African Americans
experience a "powerlessness" that is similar to identity freezing. This powerlessness entails feeling trapped, manipulated, or controlled by the other in a conversation.

Related to identity freezing, stereotyping is also commonly experienced in intercultural relationships. People may not only see each other as members of their respective cultures, but also try to interact with each other based on beliefs about each other’s culture. Such stereotyping ignores the unique characteristics of an individual and forces a person into a predefined category. Consequently, the stereotyped person’s negative face is threatened, whether the stereotype is favorable or pejorative in nature. Prior studies on interethnic communication provide ample evidence for the occurrence of stereotyping (Collier, 1988, 1991; Collier, Ribeau, & Hecht, 1986; Hecht et al., 1993; Hecht, Larkey, & Johnson, 1992; Hecht & Ribeau, 1984, 1987; Hecht et al., 1989; Hecht, Ribeau, & Sedano, 1990). In a recent interview study of real intercultural relationships (Imahori, 2002), 66% of the interview respondents admitted experiencing stereotyping from their relational partners.

Although these studies have generally reported that negative stereotyping is more commonly experienced by ethnic minority groups, even people from a dominant cultural group can experience identity freezing and stereotyping if they are perceived solely in terms of their cultural group. In this sense, IMT considers identity management issues of dominant groups and oppressed groups to be similar, even though identity freezing and stereotyping may be subjectively experienced in different ways and to different degrees by the two groups.

An obvious corollary to the identity freezing problem is when one’s cultural identity is not sufficiently supported. This may occur because experienced intercultural communicators are quite aware of the danger of stereotyping and identity freezing, and thus try to see each other more as individuals than as members of their respective cultures. This can result in virtually ignoring each other’s cultural identities. Thus, when people’s cultural identities are ignored, they experience threats to their positive face. We refer to this as the nonsupport problematic (Proposition 1b).

In addition to these face problematics, intercultural interlocutors face a dialectical choice between supporting one’s own face and the other’s face. This face dialectic becomes increasingly difficult to resolve as the cultural identities of intercultural partners become more distinct. Supporting one’s own cultural identity legitimizes one’s own cultural norms or values, which may be at considerable odds with the partner’s cultural norms or values, thus threatening the partner’s cultural identity. On the other hand, supporting the partner’s cultural identity may require sacrificing feelings of belongingness and pride with respect to one’s own culture. In short, intercultural communicators experience a "self-other face dialectic," that is, dialectical tension between supporting one’s own face versus the partner’s face related to their cultural identities (Proposition 1c). According to Imahori (2002), this face dialectic is commonly experienced in intercultural relationships, as approximately 60% of his interview respondents stated that they experienced this dialectical tension.

In addition to the self-other face dialectic, intercultural communicators experience a positive-negative face dialectic, “that is, a dialectical tension between supporting the partner’s negative face or positive face” (Proposition 1d). In supporting the other’s cultural identity by making it a conversational focus or by directly issuing a compliment about it, one incurs the risk of constraining the other’s identity to that particular cultural identity, thus threatening the partner’s negative face. In other words, this dialectic tension is experienced if one is afraid of freezing the other person’s identity but at the same time wants to show appreciation regarding the other’s cultural identity. In Imahori’s (2002) interview study, 22.3% of the respondents reported experiencing this dialectic.
Identity Management Theory

Although the original version of IMT (Cupach & Imahori, 1993) identified three of these face problematics and dialectics, it did not specify what types of facework strategies are employed to cope with them. However, a recent interview study by Imahori (2002) was able to delineate a typology of facework strategies used to cope with each type of face problematic/dialectic proposed in the original version of IMT. In general, Imahori (2002) found that people use a full range of facework strategies designed to support positive or negative face of the self, the other, or both self and other. One exception was that a strategy that is designed solely to protect self's negative face did not appear in his study. Tables 9.1 through 9.3 summarize the specific facework strategies used to counteract face threats in intercultural interactions. These strategies are briefly identified below.

In coping with the identity freezing problematic, Imahori (2002) identified four sets of strategies: self positive face support, mutual positive face support, other positive face support, and mutual negative face support. Self positive face support strategies are used to protect one's own face when it is threatened by stereotypes or identity freezing. Mutual positive face support strategies attempt to support both one's own and the partner's face. Other positive face support strategies aim to uphold the partner's face. Finally, mutual negative face support is designed to honor each other's autonomy by avoiding interactions that express stereotypes. Previous studies on African American–European American

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Brief Definitions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self Positive Face Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Educating about the stereotype/identity freezing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disregard</td>
<td>Discounting validity of the stereotype/identity freezing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request simple</td>
<td>Asking to stop stereotyping/identity freezing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request empathy</td>
<td>Asking to empathize about being stereotyped/identity frozen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request confirmation</td>
<td>Asking to confirm if the partner really meant to stereotype or freeze identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Positive Face Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laughter</td>
<td>Laughing off the stereotype/identity freezing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humorous interchange</td>
<td>Joking back to the partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humorous retaliation</td>
<td>Joking back with a stereotype applicable to the partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Positive Face Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>Accepting the stereotype as true, a compliment, or advice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apology</td>
<td>Apologizing for oneself being true to the other's stereotype/identity freezing comment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Negative Face Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Avoiding interaction about the stereotype/identity freezing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 9.2  Facework Strategies for Coping With Self-Other Face Dialectic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Brief Definitions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other Positive Face Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other orientation</td>
<td>Supporting the partner’s face while sacrificing own face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocity expectation</td>
<td>Supporting the partner’s face with an expectation that the partner will reciprocate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advice acceptance</td>
<td>Accepting the partner’s comment that created dialectic tension as advice for one to change (e.g., not making an excuse for being a foreign student)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self Positive Face Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assertion</td>
<td>Asserting one's own identity over the partner's identity (e.g., refusing to learn the partner's language)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>Justifying supporting one's own identity (e.g., arguing that one's own religious belief is correct)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reliance</td>
<td>Supporting one's own identity by relying on the partner's other-face support strategy (e.g., &quot;my partner likes my culture better than his own.&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Positive Face Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual support</td>
<td>Supporting both one's own and the partner's identities in alternate areas or alternate occasions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual adaptation</td>
<td>Adapting to each other's cultural ways of doing things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptation facilitation</td>
<td>Not changing one's own cultural way of doing things but helping the partner to adapt to one's own culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptation facilitation request</td>
<td>Asking the partner to help one's adaptation toward the partner's culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Negative Face Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Avoiding interaction that causes the dialectic tension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference recognition</td>
<td>Recognizing the differences in identities and in some cases choosing to behave in separate ways</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For coping with the self-other face dialectic, Imahori (2002) found four sets of strategies: other positive face support, self positive face support, mutual positive face support, and mutual negative face support. Other face support strategies try to support the partner’s culture rather than the self’s. Self positive face support is a set of strategies specifically designed to increase self-approbation. Mutual positive face support strategies are designed to alternately support each other’s identities, adapt toward each other’s culture, or facilitate the other’s adaptation toward one’s own culture. Finally, mutual negative face support avoids culture-related interactions or simply accepts cultural differences.
Table 9.3  
Facework Strategies for Coping With Positive-Negative Face Dialectic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies</th>
<th>Brief Definitions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other Negative Face Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bouncing past</td>
<td>Supporting the partner's identity within the partner's comfort zone that was learned from past interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bouncing explicit</td>
<td>Supporting the partner's identity until she or he says explicitly to stop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bouncing sign</td>
<td>Supporting the partner's identity until she or he shows signs of discomfort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus shift</td>
<td>Avoiding imposition on the partner’s face by shifting focus away from the partner’s cultural identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self support</td>
<td>Allowing time and space for the partner to support partner’s own identity (e.g., letting the partner go back to home country)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtle nonverbal support</td>
<td>Engaging in nonverbal acts that support the partner’s identity (e.g., using artifacts from the partner’s culture)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Negative Face Support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance</td>
<td>Avoiding interaction that causes the dialectic tension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mutual Positive Face Support (in combination with Bouncing)</td>
<td>Apologizing for threatening the partner’s negative face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>Justifying why one imposed upon the partner’s identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In coping with the positive-negative face dialectic, Imahori (2002) reported three sets of strategies. Other negative face support includes strategies that are all intended to avoid impositions on the partner’s autonomy, such as “bouncing” off the other’s autonomy boundary (e.g., avoiding certain topics). Mutual negative face support avoids interactions that cause positive-negative face tensions. Mutual positive face support includes apologizing for or justifying threat to partner’s negative face. Offering an apology supports one’s own positive face by showing that one is competent enough to admit one’s own fault.

In addition to these facework strategies, IMT proposes that both self-other face and positive-negative face dialectics may be resolved if a relational identity can be emphasized and mutually supported (Cupach & Imahori, 1993). In the following section, we discuss identity management in the context of relationship development.

Propositions Regarding Identity Management Phases

IMT suggests that people manage their identities differently at different junctures of their relationships. The theory proposes that there are three highly interdependent and cyclical phases of intercultural relationships based on unique features of identity management in each phase: trial, enmeshment, and renegotiation (Proposition 2).

Trial. Cultural differences are often evident early in intercultural relationships, and, thus, people experience their cultural identities as different and as salient. Moreover, their cultural differences are often seen as barriers to their communication and relationships because
of differences in language, communication styles, and cultural norms. Due to these differences, intercultural partners in this early phase of identity management strongly experience the self-other face dialectic or the nonsupport problematic. In addition, they may face the identity freezing problematic because their initial knowledge of each other’s cultures may be based on stereotypical information or images. Finally, they may demonstrate excessive interest in each other’s culture, resulting in identity freezing or the positive-negative face dialectic.

People tend to react to these face challenges in at least two ways. First, they may simply decide that costs stemming from their cultural differences are too great for them to maintain an intercultural relationship. Second, they may try to build their relationship based on commonalities they can find, such as common interests, joint activities, mutual need fulfillment, and the like. IMT calls this early phase of identity management “trial” because trial and error experimentation is required to identify such commonalities.

In addition to identifying commonalities, people also go through a trial-and-error process in identifying boundaries for each other’s face support and face threats. For example, in showing interest toward the partner’s culture, an individual may engage in stereotyping or identity freezing. However, the partner may then react with facework strategies such as education (see Table 9.1). In turn, one learns to discern, not stereotype, the partner’s comfortable negative face boundary. As this example illustrates, one’s incompetent act leads to discovering competent ways of dealing with the face threat.

In summary, the following two propositions are relevant for the trial phase of identity management:

Proposition 2a: Identity management in the trial phase necessitates balancing the self-other face dialectic and the positive-negative face dialectic while avoiding the nonsupport problematic and the identity freezing problematic.

THEORIES FOCUSING ON IDENTITY

Proposition 2b: Identity management in the trial phase necessitates certain degrees of face threat to discover the balancing point for various face dialectics and problematics.

Enmeshment. Intercultural partners will proceed to a relationship phase called “enmeshment” if they are able to find enough commonality between them during the trial phase (Cupach & Imahori, 1993). In this phase, increased coactions around commonalities between intercultural partners result in convergence of symbols and rules, further enmeshing the partners’ interpretive framework for understanding each other and their relationship (Proposition 2c). Interpersonal communication theory and research have claimed that people develop symbolic interdependence (Stephen, 1986; Wood, 1982) or symbolic union (Duck, 1991) in close relationships. Specifically, Baxter (1987) identified five types of symbolic systems that are shared between relational partners. These shared systems were found for symbols related to verbal and nonverbal actions (e.g., nicknames), prior events or times, physical objects (e.g., stuffed animals), special places (e.g., meeting places for the partners), and cultural artifacts (e.g., songs, music, books, films) that have special meanings for the partners.

In addition to converging on symbols, partners converge on rules they follow in communicating with each other (Shimanoff, 1980). Partners increasingly share expectations regarding what behaviors are considered obligated, prohibited, and preferred in the context of the shared relationship. Partners improvise and negotiate their own relational standard for competent communication with each other. Montgomery (1992) suggests that, “Creative standards are a unique set of mutually held beliefs that partners develop about what constitutes competent interaction between them. They are distinguished by being decidedly different from more global, societal standards and by being the product of negotiation and agreement between partners” (p. 485).
The increased convergence in symbols and rules, in turn, leads to the development of a shared relational identity. Although intercultural partners in the enmeshment phase are able to begin developing a strong sense of relational bonding, IMT claims that their relational identity is not yet fully developed. Furthermore, they are still not entirely comfortable with their cultural differences in this phase. Rather, they tend to ignore or de-emphasize their cultural differences because they are buoyed by the personal commonality they have been able to discover. In summary, \textit{identity management in the enmeshment phase is characterized by de-emphasis on cultural identities and emphasis on developing a relational identity (Proposition 2d).}

According to IMT, face problematics and dialectics are not entirely resolved in this phase, either. Even with their increased symbolic and rule convergence, intercultural partners encounter new kinds of cultural differences as their relationship develops. For example, intercultural (platonic) friends normally do not have to deal with cultural differences in sexual expectations, customs, and rituals. If they become romantic partners, however, they may discover unexpected differences in rules regarding public displays of affection or in expectations regarding who initiates sexual advances. Thus, they must deal with the self-other face and the positive-negative face dialectics in this phase.

\textbf{Renegotiation.} \textit{The third phase of identity management is characterized by the increased ability of intercultural interlocutors to work out face problematics and dialectics based on salient relational identity, and increased symbolic and rule convergence (Proposition 2e).} As the intercultural partners develop a stronger sense of relational identity, it serves as a newly shared interpretive framework, or what Stephen (1986) calls "relationship worldview." Through this relational identity the relational partners are able to view their relationship, each other, and the world outside of their relationship in similar ways. This shared relational perspective allows the intercultural communicators to reinterpret their distinct cultural identities as an asset and as integral to their relationship rather than as a relational barrier.

By using a facework strategy that relies on this increasingly bonded sense of relational identity, the self-other face dialectic can be resolved because the distinct cultural identities are recognized as integral components of the shared relational identity. Consequently, intercultural partners have less need for positive face support regarding their cultural identities because emphasis shifts to giving and receiving support for positive face associated with the shared relational identity. Consequently, intercultural interlocutors can now afford to emphasize the negative face rather than the positive face related to the partner’s cultural identity, resolving the positive-negative face dialectic.

In addition to managing face problematics and dialectics successfully, \textit{intercultural partners in the renegotiation phase are able to deal directly with cultural differences that were skirted during the enmeshment phase because the cultural differences are now seen as integral and positive aspects of their relationship (Proposition 2f).} Intercultural dating couples, for example, may have avoided dealing with cultural differences regarding marital ceremonies due to fear of conflict. As their relationship grows with increased relational identity and symbolic and rule convergence, however, they may reinterpret their cultural differences as unique assets of their relationship, an opportunity to have a wedding ceremony like nobody else’s. As this example suggests, intercultural partners in this phase are not only able to perceive their cultural differences positively, but also to integrate their cultural differences as positive aspects of their relationship. Furthermore, their ability to integrate their cultural differences into their relationship leads them to view their cultural differences as smaller or less significant.
compared to the way they viewed the differences in the earlier phases.

Although IMT proposes that the three phases of trial, enmeshment, and renegotiation are sequential, the pace at which people go through these phases may or may not correspond to development of other relational factors such as closeness, interdependence, commitment, and satisfaction. Moreover, these identity management phases may be experienced repeatedly and cyclically because intercultural partners may go back to earlier phases after reaching the later phases if they discover new areas of cultural identity differences that need to be managed.

Abrams, O'Connor, and Giles (2002) criticize IMT as "overly optimistic" (p. 228) in its assumption that enmeshment of relational identity is possible. We do acknowledge that "individual identities cannot be totally isomorphic" (Cupach & Imahori, 1993, p. 128). Enmeshment occurs in degrees, and the establishment of relational identity does not resolve all identity management problems in the life of that relationship. Competent intercultural partners must continue to grapple with various face problems and dialectics as they encounter growing and ever-changing cultural and relational identities. "Indeed, the more two individuals interact and become interdependent, the more complex their relationship becomes and, therefore, the more aspects of identity will have to be negotiated and renegotiated" (Cupach & Imahori, 1993, p. 129).

Research Evidence Related to Identity Management Phases. IMT's propositions regarding the identity phases have gained partial empirical support. For example, studies on interethnic communication have demonstrated the importance of a common identity (Hecht et al., 1993; Hecht & Ribeau, 1984, 1987; Hecht et al., 1989). Furthermore, an investigation of opposite-sex relationships found that strength of relational identity was associated with constructive relational outcomes such as positive thoughts about one's relationships and relational satisfaction (Acitelli, Rogers, & Knee, 1999).

Imahori (2003) recently measured perceptions of likelihood of use, appropriateness, and effectiveness of facework strategies in dealing with identity-related face-threatening situations in a cross-sectional survey of 973 respondents residing in the San Francisco Bay Area in various stages of intercultural relationships. He specifically explored how facework strategies were associated with relational identity, relationship types (i.e., acquaintances, casual friends, friends, best friends, dating partners, and cohabiting/engaged/married couples), and symbolic and rule convergence. Results generally found that intercultural partners were more likely to use mutual positive face support strategies and to perceive them as competent if their relationships were developed with significant relational identity. On the other hand, Imahori (2003) found that people tended to emphasize mutual negative face support via avoidance in less developed intercultural relationships. These results suggest that with increased relational identity, people are able simultaneously to support each other's cultural identity with less tension stemming from the self-other face dialectic (Proposition 2e).

Imahori (2003) also found that intercultural dating couples and best friends with stronger relational identity were more likely to view other negative face support strategies as effective in dealing with the positive-negative face dialectic than were casual friends and friends. This finding supports that with stronger relational identity, there is less need for emphasizing positive face support of cultural identity (Proposition 2e).

Imahori (2003) additionally reported partial support for IMT's proposition that cultural differences are avoided in the enmeshment phase (Proposition 2d). Best friends with the stronger relational identity tended not to avoid cultural issues, whereas friends tended to use
strategies that focused on their relationship and individuality. This finding, however, was mixed with a contradictory result for cohabiting/engaged/married couples, who also tended to favor strategies that focused on relationships and individuality rather than on culture. These contradictory findings seem to suggest that there are two different motivations for avoiding cultural differences. We speculate that cohabiting/engaged/married partners “avoid” cultural issues since they are “beyond” their cultural differences as they have established significant relational identity. On the other hand, friends are still in the trial phase, and are therefore busy identifying commonality not related to their cultures, and consequently they are avoiding cultural issues. This speculation is supported by another finding that friends in the self-other face dialectic situation rated another avoidance strategy of mutual negative face support more appropriate and effective than did cohabiting/engaged/married partners and best friends.

In terms of rule and symbolic convergence, Imahori (2003) found only weak associations with specific facework strategies. Rule convergence was associated with the mutual positive face support strategies (for perceptions of use and effectiveness) in the positive-negative face dialectic situation. As IMT claims, one of the rules that must be converged for competent intercultural identity management is the rule regarding stroking the other’s positive identity while keeping the other’s autonomy intact. Symbolic convergence was correlated with self face support by request facework in the stereotyping/identity freezing situation. This suggests that symbolic convergence allows intercultural partners to emphasize their own identities over the other’s because they share many symbols of relational unity.

Imahori (2003) also found that the identity freezing dialectic was consistently managed with self positive face support strategies regardless of the nature of relationship or the perceived significance of relational identity. It appears that identity freezing is a problematic experienced throughout the three phases of identity management, and the protection of self’s face seems to override emphasis on relational identity in dealing with this dialectic.

Finally, Imahori’s (2003) study failed to provide evidence that views on cultural differences would become more positive as relational identity develops (Proposition 2f). Instead, Imahori (2003) found that intercultural partners, regardless of the nature of the relationship or the degree of perceived relational identity, tended to view cultural differences either as good or as an insignificant part of their relationship.

CONCLUSION

Identity management theory has been able to contribute to the understanding of competent intercultural communication by clarifying the relationship between identity management and facework strategies within the context of relational development. The theory’s tenets have mostly withstood criticisms and gained some research support.

Nevertheless, the theory is still in its infancy and needs a lot of maturing. Although Imahori’s studies (2002, 2003) were able to identify a typology of facework strategies for managing face problematics and dialectics, and further investigated how relational identity, relationship type, and symbolic and rule convergence affected facework strategies, these studies did not longitudinally follow intercultural partners through their relational development process. To test the validity of IMT’s propositions fully, longitudinal research must be conducted.

IMT was proposed as a heuristic framework to aid our understanding of the complex process of identity management in intercultural interactions. Although not designed to be prescriptive, IMT suggests a set of principles to promote competent communication between intercultural partners: (a) establish
relational identity through increased coactions, symbolic convergence, and coordination of relationship rules; (b) view cultural differences as assets rather than barriers; and (c) recognize that identity management and relationship management represent two sides of a single coin. We are confident that additional "research regarding the processes of face management in intercultural couples can provide insight into how intercultural partners overcome the cultural barriers that can undermine the formation of a successful close relationship" (Cupach & Metts, 1994, p. 103).

NOTES

1. This proposition was not included in the original version of identity management theory (Cupach & Imahori, 1993).
2. In the original study, Imahori (2002) used the label self face restoration.

REFERENCES


THEORIES FOCUSING ON IDENTITY


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