



Face and Identity in Intercultural Conflict Management

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Abstract: Face negotiation theory has been an influential theory of intercultural conflict management. However, as a theory of functional approach, it has limitations in analyzing dynamic conflict management process. Using repeated episodic interviews, this paper attempts to combine this theory with Spencer-Oatey's (2007) face and identity model as well as post-structural perspectives of identity to analyze the dynamic and complicated conflict management process in two Chinese overseas students' cases. The findings reveal that face and identity are critical to spell out the dynamics and complexity of the intercultural conflict management process and examining the motives and reasons for the choice of a particular facework strategy.

Keywords: Intercultural; Face Negotiation Theory; Cultural Identity; International Students, Conflict Management, China

1. Introduction

The intensified globalization and mobility make overseas studies much easier than ever before. In Australia, for example, the latest statistics showed that the provision of education services was worth around \$37.6 billion in 2018-2019. The average proportion of international students in Australian universities was 21.9% in 2018. In some universities, this number approached 50%. Chinese students took up most portion of that (Department of Education 2019).

Intercultural conflicts are inevitable in these students' study-abroad lives. Intercultural conflict refers to an experience of emotional frustration associated with the perceived incompatibility of values, norms, face orientations, goals, processes, or outcomes between people from different cultures (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). Failure to handle intercultural conflicts may interfere with international students' academic and social life and thus hamper the achievement of their aims of studying abroad.

Face negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey 2005) has been an influential theory of intercultural conflict management. However, as a theory of functional approach, it has limitations in analyzing dynamic conflict management process. Recent research on intercultural conflicts has called for more collaborative research efforts and longitudinal qualitative studies so that the complexity and variation of the intercultural conflict process can be captured (Ting-Toomey 2017; Spencer-Oatey and Wang 2019; Riyanto, Nurmala, Agustina, & Maidari, 2023).

This paper, in line with this view, attempts to explore the complex process of intercultural conflict management in terms of face and identity concerns that happened to two Chinese overseas students in Australia because conflicts are face-threatening behaviours in nature, and face plays an essential role in Chinese people's social life as well as interpersonal relationships. In this paper, 'conflict' includes any face-threatening situation in which people have the potential to feel uncomfortable, confused, embarrassed, humiliated, angry, annoyed, stuck in a dilemma, etc. In this sense, conflict is dynamic and thus provides a fertile ground for study. Thus, the research questions of this paper are:

1. How did the two Chinese students choose their conflict management strategies?
2. What roles did face and identities play in this process?

2. Face-Negotiation Theory (FNT)

Initially, a theory focusing on conflict, face negotiation theory (FNT) integrates cultural-level dimensions and individual-level attributes to explain the cross-cultural conflict (Ting-Toomey 1988, 2005, 2017; Ting-Toomey and Kurogi 1998).

According to FNT, 'face' refers to "a claimed sense of desired social self-image in a relational and international setting", and it is an identity-boundary issue (Ting-

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Toomey, 1988; 1994, 2005; 2007: 256).

Ting-Toomey explains that the concept of face is the way in which “we want others to see us and treat us and how we actually treat others in association with their social self-conception expectations” (Ting-Toomey, 2017; (Xie & Chao, 2022)). She further argues that face is closely related to the emotional significance and individuals’ evaluation of social self-worth (both their own and others), so the face is an important identity resource in communication, which can be threatened, honoured, undermined and negotiated. She identifies five face needs: autonomy face, status face, competence face, inclusion/fellowship face, reliability face, and moral face. Face loss occurs when there is a mismatch of identity expectancy; that is, a face-threatening episode is an identity expectancy violation episode.

‘Facework’ refers to “verbal and nonverbal behaviours that protect/save self-face, other-face, mutual-face, or communal-face within a sociocultural situation” (Ting-Toomey, 2017: 1). Strategies that can be used in intercultural facework include dominating strategies (e.g., defending and aggressive behaviours), avoiding strategies (e.g., avoiding, giving in, seeking third-party help, and pretending), and integrating strategies (e.g., apologizing, compromising, considering the other, private discussion, remain calm, and talking about the problem) (Oetzel et al., 2000). In conflict situations, these facework strategies have the functions of defusing or aggravating a conflict, repairing a damaged image and mending broken relationships (Ting-Toomey 2005, 2017). The core assumptions of FNT are as follows:

1. People in all cultures try to maintain and negotiate face in all communication situations.
2. The concept of face is especially problematic in emotionally vulnerable situations (such as conflict situations) when the situated identities of the communicators are called into question.
3. The cultural variability dimensions of individualism-collectivism and small-large power distance shape the orientations, movements, contents, and styles of facework.
4. Individualism-collectivism shapes members’ preference for self-oriented facework versus other-oriented facework.
5. Small-large power distance shapes members’ preferences for horizontal-based facework versus vertical-based facework.
6. The cultural variability dimensions, in conjunction with individual, relational, and situational factors, influence the use of particular facework behaviours in a particular cultural scene.
7. Intercultural facework competence refers to the optimal integration of knowledge, mindfulness, and communication skills in managing emotionally vulnerable situations appropriately, effectively, and adaptively.

(2017: 1-2)

Numerous empirical studies testing this theory revealed that cultural value, self-construal, relational and situational factors, emotions, interpersonal transgressions and forgiveness, intergenerational face, and the dark side of the face were important factors in people’s preference of conflict styles across cultures (Cai and Fink 2002; Ting-Toomey et al. 1991; Trubisky, Ting-Toomey, and Lin 1991; Oetzel and Ting-Toomey 2003; Baig, Ting-Toomey, and Dorjee 2014; Dorjee, Baig, and Ting-Toomey 2013; Zhang et al. 2019; Carballal-Broome & Pinillos, 2022).

FNT has been proven to be a practical theory in intercultural conflict. However, it also has been criticized for its limitations. For example, its overreliance on broad cultural variability dimensions (e.g., individualism–collectivism and power distance) makes it insufficient to capture the individual variations in intercultural conflict contexts. Moreover, a relatively small number of studies taking an emic approach, especially from non-Western cultures, limit its generalizability. There are some methodological limitations as well (Zhang 2017).

These limitations are partly due to the reason that studies testing FNT so far mainly took a functional approach. The functional approach to intercultural communication is useful for identifying variation in communication across different cultures and can specify variables in the communication process, but it has many limitations as well. For example, not all variables can be predicted (Martin and Nakayama 2007). Moreover, this approach can only organize cultures and communication styles into different categories and groups, which are static concepts. In other words, it offers a good framework to analyze why and how people from different cultures take up different conflict styles, but it does not adequately account for why people feel something face-threatening and why this leads to conflicts. Thus, this approach fails to capture some essential factors in intercultural conflict contexts, such as roles of second language, power issues and the dynamics of the conflict management process (Spencer-Oatey and Wang 2019).

As Ting-Toomey (Ting-Toomey 2017: 4) recently suggests,

The testing of the FNT via the tripartite paradigms of critical–interpretive–functional approaches is to be welcomed and embraced. FNT is viewed as a permeable theory with no rigidly set paradigmatic boundary—although the structure of the theory appears to be skewed toward the functional paradigm.

Following this suggestion, this paper will combine FNT with Spencer-Oatey's face and identity model as well as the post-structuralist approach to identity to analyze the dynamic intercultural conflict management process.

3. Face and Identity

In Face-Negotiation Theory, Ting-Toomey (1988, 2005b) claims that face-threatening episodes or difficulties occur when there is a mismatch of identity expectancy so that face is closely related to identity. As conflicts are face-threatening behaviours in nature and caused by the mismatch of identity expectancies (Ting-Toomey 2005, 2017), face and identity are closely related. The cause of this mismatch is significant for explaining face concerns and the selection of facework strategies in an intercultural context. However, FNT cannot explain why this mismatch occurs due to its limitations discussed above.

Many years ago, Tracy (1990) reviewed and critiqued two approaches taken in the face and facework studies: sociolinguistically-based politeness theory approaches and sociopsychologically based approaches, and offers the beginning of a communicative theory of facework which combines the strength of the two approaches.

As Tracy (1990) points out, although politeness theory offers a rich, linguistically elaborated sense of how two general identity concerns are displayed, it simplifies the complexity of identity issues in social interactions and thus fails to present an adequate picture. Sociopsychological studies of face, on the other hand, offer elaborated notions of how an individual's own identity concerns motivate communicative action and how these concerns can produce actions. Therefore, she concludes that facework has many faces in the same interaction and is highly complex because meaning is culturally situated and contextually cued. In the process of interaction, desired identities may be in competition, so she suggests that future study of facework needs to take the complexity of identity into consideration. However, little follow-up discussion occurred until Spencer-Oatey's model.

Following Tracy's (1990) suggestion, Spencer-Oatey (2007) draws on social psychological perspectives of identity and develops a framework to analyze face and identity. Identity refers to the reflective self-conception or self-image that an individual derives from his/her socialization process (Ting-Toomey 1993). Spencer-Oatey (2007) points out that many scholars have already defined face with reference to identity; for example, Goffman (1967: 5) defines face as an "image of self", and Brown and Levinson (1987: 61) give the definition of face as "public self-image". Ting-Toomey (1994: 3) refers to face as an "identity-boundary issue", and Scollon and Scollon (1995: 34-36) associate face with identity as "interpersonal identity of individuals in communication" and the "self as a communicative identity". However, she notices that few studies on face and facework have elaborated on the interrelationship between these two concepts, Spencer-Oatey argues that face and identity are similar cognitively. They are both associated with the notion of self-image and have multiple self-aspects or attributes, but they are different in that face is "only associated with those attributes that are effectively sensitive to the claimants" (644). She further claims that interactionally, face threat/loss situations can only occur when there is a perceived mismatch of attributes between the one claimed by an individual him/herself and the one ascribed by others. Spencer-Oatey (2007) also views face and identity as dynamic rather than static. She argues that face and identity, in their nature, are both cognitive and social. Cognitively, people form a relatively stable and enduring identity, but at the same time, their face and identity are under constant reconstruction and renegotiation in the process of social interaction. This dynamic concept of face and identity is very useful to understand the dynamic nature of the conflict management process that this study is trying to capture.

Spencer-Oatey's model enables researchers to analyze the complex face concerns from three perspectives—individual, relational and collective. However, in real social interactions, identity issues are not neat and clear-cut. It is complex and even contradictory. Also, her model mainly focuses on the face-sensitivity aspect and thus is not sufficient to analyze the facework strategies in the conflict management process in which power issues are usually involved. To analyze the intercultural conflict management process in which power is an unavoidable factor, I will also draw on the poststructuralist's assertion that identity is multiple, fluid, sometimes contradictory and a site of struggle (Block 2007; Baxter 2016; Dervin 2012; Norton 2013).

4. Method

The data of this paper is from a big project in which five Chinese overseas students participated. Due to the space limitation and relevance to this paper, only two participants' examples were analyzed here. The two participants had been studying at Australian universities for a year when the data collection started. Both were born and received their education in mainland China before coming to Australia to enrol in a Master's and a PhD program, respectively. The project used the research method of repeated episodic interviews. An episodic interview combines narrative and semi-structured interviews. In the project, each of the participants was interviewed individually. During the interview, they were first asked to give narratives of any face-threatening experience in social interactions, that is, any events they had been involved in which had led to feelings of confusion, anger, embarrassment, humiliation or frustration when they were interacting with others in English. Face-threatening situations are usually emotion-laden, and storytelling is a good way for the teller to mentally relieve the experience to some extent so that genuine emotions are evoked and expressed (Rintell 1990). As Labov (1972) claims, telling stories and describing emotion-evoking events could provide the speaker with opportunities to reflect on his/her own responses to the experience. These claims echo Flick's (2009) argument that talking about experiences in a narrative way often provides a richer version than other forms of presentation.

To avoid interrupting the fluency of the narrative and minimize distraction, only a few questions regarding the details were asked during the participants' narrative, such as "What do you mean by using this word?" "Could you possibly recall the words as exactly as possible that he/she used in English at that moment?" Questions regarding perceptions were noted down and delivered when the narrative was completed.

When the narrative was completed, questions regarding participants' perceptions were asked, such as why they felt angry or embarrassed, how they expected to be treated, why they reacted to these problems in that way, what might be other options to deal with the situations, what the consequences were and how they perceived their English communicative competence.

As shown above, an episodic interview is not a one-sided situation as it is in the case of a narrative interview, but rather an open dialogue between the interviewer and the interviewee. As Flick (2009: 185-86) claims:

The episodic interview yields context-related presentations in the form of a narrative because these are closer to experiences and their generative context than other presentational forms. They make the processes of constructing realities more readily accessible than approaches which aim at abstract concepts and answers in a strict sense. ... it starts from episodic—situational forms of experiential knowledge. Special attention is paid in the interview to situations or episodes in which the interviewee has had experiences that seem to be relevant to the question of the study.

In other words, the episodic interview has the advantages of both the narrative interview and the semi-structured interview. On the one hand, an interviewee is allowed to express his/her views with minimal interruption from the interviewer. On the other hand, by asking different types of relevant questions to the interviewee's narration details, assumptions and perceptions, the interviewer can further explore his/her interviewee's knowledge, assumptions, and positions in a dialogical form.

In this way, narratives and question-answer sequences in the episodic interview compose two different forms of data. That is the narrative of the interviewee's experience and his/her assumptions and perceptions of the experience.

Triangulation of the research requires multiple sources of data (Lincoln 1985). But how could I enhance the triangulations of my study? In doing interviews, I noticed that my participants mentioned that "At that moment I felt..., but now I felt...." This was very important for my study. As Stryker (1976: 259) claims that

...when a person defines a situation as real, this situation is real in its consequences, which leads directly to the fundamental methodological principles of symbolic interactionism: researchers have to see the world from the angle of the subjects they study.

In other words, this approach requires the reconstruction of the participants' viewpoints in different respects (Flick 2006). In relation to my study, the focus is not solely on what actually happened but more on how my participants interpret their experiences from their own perspectives and their reflections over time. Thus, I went back to my participants from time to time and interviewed them about their reflections on their experiences. These repeated follow-up interviews conducted at different points in time could be regarded as a third source of data. They made it possible for events or processes to be analysed in terms of their meaning for individuals retrospectively (Flick 2009) because the event itself might not be very meaningful to them at the time of its performance or it may acquire different meanings for them over time (Anderson 1987). This reflection can be regarded as experiential learning, that is, "a dynamic view of learning based on a learning cycle driven by the resolution of the dual dialectics of action-reflection and experience-conceptualization" (Passarelli and Kolb 2012: 138). It is quite similar to the method of moment analysis (Li 2011), in which participants recall and reflect on their past experiences and identify some important events, referred to as "critical moments". In this way, not only the individual's critical and creative capacity and practice in his/her experience (Li 2011) but also "the concomitant transformative processes of self" (Zhou and Pilcher 2019: 28) can be captured.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. All the interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission. When I finished the first round of interviewing, I listened to the recordings and took notes. If some details still needed to be clarified, I went back to my participants for follow-up interviews. At this stage, I faced the question: how did I know whether their stories were true or not? There might be constraints on their memories or they might have lied or exaggerated their own control and ability for self-enhancement. I may lean on Spencer-Oatey's (2007) argument that concepts about subjective perceptions, such as face issues, cannot be judged in terms of true/false.

Across a period of 6 months, each participant was interviewed three times, at an interval of about 2 months, about their reflections on their intercultural experiences. Since I have a fluent understanding of both English and Chinese, interviewees were free to speak in either language. English might well be used because the interactions had taken place in English, and the participants could try to recall them in English so that the conversations and words used in the interview would be as close to the initial event as possible, at least close to what the participants thought they had heard in the interaction. Chinese could be used because participants might feel they could be more flexible and accurate when expressing their true feelings in their native language.

The data were separated into the story-telling section, the question-answer section and the reflection section. The interviews at different times were filed under the name of the participant and by interview order (1, 2, 3) (for example, Leo 1, Leo 2, Leo 3) so that their reflections at different points of time could be clearly indicated. Those conducted in Chinese were transcribed, but only the parts used in the data analysis were translated into English. The conversations that participants in English recalled remained in English. The translation was done by me, who had worked as a professional translator in an earlier career. The interview transcripts and translated versions were presented to the participants for the check to make sure that no misunderstanding or misinterpretation occurred.

There are some limitations to this method. First, this paper focuses on only two Chinese overseas students, and its findings may not be generalized to other contexts. Second, recorded naturally occurring discourses of the conflicts plus interlocutors' interpretations of these discourses can provide ideal data, but practicalities prevented that. Future studies can be done to make up for these limitations.

In the following section, I will present some events extracted from the data of two participants in this paper (Leo and Fay) to illustrate their intercultural conflict management process.

5. Results

5.1. Leo

Leo, a male, 31 years old, was studying a two-year coursework program in Business at an Australian university. Leo received his Bachelor of Science and then worked as a computer engineer for 8 years in China. He had had few opportunities to practice English, but he had been interested in English and had watched English movies a lot. In Australia, Leo was sharing a unit with a Chinese friend and had a part-time job at a local convenience store.

In the first round of interviews, Leo mentioned that his English learning in China had mainly followed the 'native-speaker' model, a teacher-centred, exam-oriented method focusing on vocabulary, grammar and structures. He hoped that he could speak English as well as native speakers. This 'native speaker' model in his English learning led to disappointment and frustration in using English in Australia. For example, he had difficulties in understanding the Australian accent and delivering arguments, as in the following event.

5.1.1. Patrol Station Event

Leo talked about an event in which he was overcharged by a check-out lady at a petrol station. He really wanted to deliver an argument with the lady, but it turned out that he had to take an avoiding strategy—keeping silent.

What could I say? If I had said one word, she might have followed with a long speech. What if I didn't understand her while she spoke fast? You know people always speak fast when they are excited or angry. I couldn't even understand Australian English well when spoken slowly, not to mention fast-speaking arguments! Who knows what she would say about me? What if people around me thought that I was picking on her? Anyway, I didn't want to look ugly or woman-like to be arguing over several dollars in public places, especially with my (Chinese) friend around.

(Leo 1)

This event happened shortly after Leo arrived in Australia. As this event revealed, not in line with FNT (Ting-Toomey 2005, 2017), Leo's choosing an avoiding strategy was not out of other- or mutual-face concerns, but self-face concerns: his self-image regarding English use in other local people's eyes, in his community member's eyes (his Chinese friend), and his self-image in public as a man over money issues. Chinese face is communally oriented and determined by the significant others (Mao 1994; Yu 2003). When located in an English-speaking community, a Chinese person's face depends on or is determined by the participation of others in this new speech community. The 'native speaker' model will make him/her regard the people around as authorities or judges of his/her English use. This will inevitably lead to his/her self-perceived inferiority and powerlessness. Just as Aveni (2005) contends that while speaking a second language (L2), L2 speakers have to put their self-image at risk since they might be misunderstood or misperceived during the communication. In other words, under the influence of the 'native speaker' model, Chinese students are sensitive about their English competence face as English learners when they are communicating with native speakers who are regarded as authorities with power.

Furthermore, the Chinese face is "intimately linked to the views of the community and to the community's judgment" (Mao 1994: 46). Leo's avoidance strategy was out of self-face concern as a man because, in Chinese culture, a man arguing with a woman for a small amount of money is usually seen as stingy and mean. After staying in Australia for some time and doing a part-time job at a convenience store, Leo began to change his opinions about English and conflict management, as his reflections on the *Petrol Station Event* showed:

I would argue and fight for myself the next time I was in a similar situation. Because my English improved a lot, and I realized that communication, rather than perfect English, should be the goal. Also, I learned from my Australian colleagues that people should be tough in this country. If I said nothing in such a situation, other people would assume that it was my fault and that I had nothing to say to defend myself. I actually solved some problems using this strategy, and being tough makes me feel good.

(Leo 2)

However, in the following example, Leo still chose the avoiding strategy, although he claimed he was capable of defending himself.

5.1.2. Excuse Me Event

Once, I passed in front of a customer to give a hand to my colleague, to whom the customer complained, “Why didn’t he say ‘excuse me’?” I was surprised and annoyed. I didn’t think my passing would bother her since there was enough space for me to get through. But I said nothing. I mean, I could say something to defend myself, but I wouldn’t. I didn’t want to invite trouble. If I said something that made that woman feel offended, she would make a complaint to the manager. You know, English is my second language; you know how easy for me to say something inappropriate to cause misunderstandings and offences. So in that situation, I’d better keep my mouth shut.

(Leo 2)

Although Leo perceived that different pragmatic rules between Chinese and Australian cultures caused the misunderstanding, and he would have been able to say something to defend himself linguistically, he still chose to keep his mouth shut. For one thing, Leo still viewed the ‘native speaker’ model of English used as dominant in this situation. He felt that he was disadvantaged in terms of English use and worried that his potentially inappropriate use of English or pragmatic failure might invite more trouble, such as a formal complaint—a more severe face-threatening act. For another, his customer could exert power over him. A customer’s formal complaint might threaten his job security, which he could not afford to lose. As Leo said, “When I am a customer, I can be tough and don’t have to worry about many things, but as a service provider who needs job security, things are different” (Leo2). By this, he meant, as a customer, he at least had some power and had the right to lodge a complaint, but now he was in a less powerful position, both linguistically and socially. Therefore, potential misunderstandings caused by language problems and long-term interests prevented Leo from being tough and fighting for himself in this situation.

Here, Leo chose the avoidance strategy after weighing the cost and benefit in the interaction (Spencer-Oatey 2008). A stranger (customer) whom Leo has a very slim chance of encountering again in the future actually has little influence on him. Given his job security, which was much more important, Leo would rather sacrifice his image in this customer’s eyes and not argue with her so that she would not put him in trouble by making a formal complaint.

5.2. Fay

Another participant, Fay, has different experiences than Leo. Fay, a female 29 years old, was doing a PhD in a law program at an Australian university. Fay had received her Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees in Law in China and had worked as a university lecturer of Legal English and as a part-time lawyer for two years in a big city in China. Passionate about English, Fay had practised English a lot in China and had obtained many English certificates, such as a Certificate as an English Interpreter. She thus had occasionally acted as an interpreter at international conferences in China. In Australia, she was living with her husband in a shared house with other international students. She also had some part-time jobs as a shop assistant and as a casual in an office.

In Fay’s repertoire of identities, she was a teacher of Legal English, a lawyer, an international student, an employee, a wife, a Chinese, so she had these symbolic resources available to draw on in conflict management. She encountered a similar English pragmatic problem at her part-time workplace, a local grocery market, but she took a different strategy.

5.2.1. “Please” Event

I found people here say “please” all the time. But Chinese people seldom say it to people with close relationships. I worked for a grocery in a market. One day I couldn’t reach for something on the shelf, so I asked my workmate to reach it for me. My boss said, “Please say ‘please’!” She said loudly with a serious look. Then I realized that I had to follow this custom in Australia since I was living in this country. But to be honest, I felt a bit uncomfortable at that moment. I explained to her that in China, people seldom say “please” to people who are close to them to show solidarity. She got it but insisted that I should follow the custom here because they would feel uncomfortable if I didn’t say it. Yeah, a little bit uncomfortable, but it’s acceptable.

(Fay1)

In this event, Fay was faced with a misunderstanding caused by her English pragmatic problem and confronted by her boss. This confrontation made Fay feel that her personality was misperceived and thus her moral face was threatened (Ting-Toomey 2005, 2017), so she was assertive in this confrontation and explained her behavior explicitly to her boss. Apparently, Fay was linguistically capable to do so. Although the event ended up with Fay’s obligation (accommodation) to her boss, she successfully protected her moral face by convincing her boss that she was not rude and impolite and her inappropriate language use was due to her cultural background. Though Fay said it was “acceptable”, she still felt that Australian people, such as her boss, should have been more “tolerant” of these pragmatic mistakes (Fay1).

FNT suggests that intercultural conflict management needs facework competence which refers to the “optimal integration of knowledge, mindfulness, and communication skills in managing vulnerable identity-based conflict situations appropriately, effectively, and adaptively” (Ting-Toomey 2017: 2). However, this facework competence needs to be mutual. As in Fay’s “*Please*” Event, although Fay explained the causes of her English pragmatic mistakes, her boss still insisted that Fay should change. That is the power issues involved in intercultural interactions. On the one hand, ‘native speaker’ model requires L2 users to follow the standard English rules. On the other hand, the power difference in the employer-employee relationship between Fay and her native-speaker boss silenced her further arguments. This power issue has not been mentioned in FNT.

In the next event, Fay responded differently.

5.2.2. A Quarrel with Mary Event

In the market where Fay worked, Friday evenings and Saturdays were the busiest time of the week. To take as many customers as possible, most shop owners did not give their employees supper break and lunch breaks during these two days, but some employees would buy some finger food if they were starving and finished quickly while serving customers. Fay’s quarrel with her boss happened on one of those Saturdays.

One Saturday, I told her (Mary) I would go to the toilet. On the way back, I bought some food for my lunch. I thought it more convenient to buy my lunch on my way back so that I wouldn’t have to waste time by making a second trip. But when she (Mary) saw the food, she was unhappy and told me, “If you want to buy some food, you should let me know first.” But I felt that it’s my right, you know, it’s lunchtime. I just wanted to save time. So, I explained to her that I felt hungry, and I bought something on my way back so that I didn’t have to waste time making a second trip. You know, usually on Saturdays, we don’t have time to have lunch because it’s too busy. So usually, we bought chips or something easy to carry and eat.

After hearing the explanation, she was still unhappy, and I was angry and accused her of being inhumane because we were human beings and we needed to have lunch, but she didn’t give us time. I also said that I just bought the food easily to be finished so that I could save some time. After our argument, she changed and gave us some time for lunch on Saturdays.

She later explained to me that it’s the rule of the shop that we should let her know whatever we want to do. If we do not come back from the toilet after 15 minutes, she would begin to worry about the safety of her employees. After these explanations, we could understand each other, but I still felt that she was too concerned about her shop to consider our feelings.

(Fay2)

In this event, Fay at first tried to be assertive to her boss Mary and explained that as a considerate employee, her behaviour was in the interest of Mary’s business. Still, when this integrative strategy did not work, Fay had to shift to a dominating strategy for fairness. Reframing her relationship with Mary from an employee-employer one to a human-human and a lawyer-defendant one by using the legal discourse (“accused”), she strategically changed the power difference and solved the conflict effectively. Only when their power difference reversed did Mary communicate with Fay on the same footing and explain to Fay her intention of making rules for her employees.

6. Discussion

Leo and Fay’s examples reveal that intercultural conflict management is a complex process. Face concerns and the choice of facework strategies are changing in different contexts.

Leo’s examples show that he chose to avoid strategies in both situations, which is in line with Ting-Toomey’s (2005, 2017) claim that people from Collectivistic cultures tend to choose to avoid conflict styles, but the reasons and motivations behind them are totally different. In the *Patrol Station Event*, Leo’s avoiding strategy was out of self-face orientation. He remained silent to prevent himself from putting his competence face and moral face at risk and to save his status face as a man in front of his Chinese friend. In the “*Excuse Me*” Event, on the other hand, Leo’s silence was to avoid further face-threatening interactions between him and his customer, and therefore it was out of mutual-face orientation. Examined further, these two examples demonstrate the complexity of face and identity issues in intercultural conflicts. As an L2 user, Leo was very sensitive to his competence face when he was about to deliver an argument with the check-out lady in the *Petrol Station Event*. But in the “*Excuse me*” Event, his identity as a customer service provider was more sensitive than his identity as a L2 user at that moment, which led to his giving up defending for himself to avoid further arguments.

Interestingly, when asked whether he was worried that this customer and his colleague might think him rude for not saying “excuse me” to customers, Leo turned back again to his ‘foreigner’ identity for rescue, saying, “Actually, I didn’t worry about my image in my colleagues’ eyes. They knew I was a foreigner who couldn’t speak English well. Even if I said something wrong, they understood I didn’t mean it” (Leo3). As for the customer’s opinion, Leo thought job security was much more important than a “stranger” (the customer)’s opinion (Leo3). This shows that Leo’s identity as an L2 user was sometimes contradictory. On the one hand, he felt that

he was disadvantaged because of his language problem. On the other hand, he sometimes used that identity as a protection against his language mistakes.

Fay's examples demonstrate that identity is multiple, fluid, sometimes contradictory and a site of struggle (Block 2007; Baxter 2016; Dervin 2012; Norton 2013). When Fay came to Australia and engaged in interactions with her Australian interlocutors, she brought in different social and symbolic resources. Drawing on her symbolic resources in conflict management, she reframed their identity and relationships with her interlocutors and thus influenced the selection and outcomes of strategy use. When her relationships and power difference between her and her interlocutor are reversed, or on an equal footing, their intercultural communication could possibly go on effectively.

7. Conclusion

This paper analyzes some intercultural conflict management examples from Spencer-Oatey's face and identity (2007) and the post-structuralist perspective of identity (Block 2007; Baxter 2016; Dervin 2012; Norton 2013). The data show that face and identity are critical to spell out the dynamics and complexity of the intercultural conflict management process. They enable researchers to figure out the motives and reasons for choosing a particular facework strategy. Post-structuralist assertion of identity that identity is multiple, fluid, sometimes contradictory, and a site of struggle (Block 2007; Baxter 2016; Dervin 2012; Norton 2013) helps to elaborate on the play of power issues in conflict management.

This study has some theoretical and methodological implications. Theoretically, combining FNT and Spencer-Oatey's model as well as the post-structuralist perspective of identity, that is, both functionalist and post-structuralist approaches, enables the researcher to analyze the dynamic characteristics of intercultural conflict management on both cultural and individual levels. Methodologically, using qualitative approaches, this study explores the functions of context and intercultural interactions in depth. The repeated episodic interview method makes it possible to capture the complexity of decision-making and change in the process of intercultural conflict management.

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