"I am just doing my job!" What does conflict have to do with culture?

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The two principal goals of this paper are to further develop the concept of intercultural conflict on a theoretical level and to make a contribution on the empirical level by presenting results from a qualitative, non-representative field study of expatriates from the United States in Austria.

With people becoming increasingly mobile both as far as their economic relationships as well as the organization of their private life is concerned, the issue of cultural differences and their effects on intercultural understanding and conflict is becoming increasingly important. Understanding intercultural interpersonal conflict requires a basis which is not restricted to culturally determined ideals of conflict management but rather relies on an enhanced approach of conflict research that takes the different systems of values and orientation as well as their various representations into consideration.

DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDINGS OF INTERCULTURAL INTERPERSONAL CONFLICTS

Depending on the understanding of culture and the role culture plays in intercultural conflict a differentiation in intercultural interpersonal conflict in a broad sense and intercultural interpersonal conflict in a narrow sense is suggested.

The first would correspond to the common definitions in the US-American literature:

> „Intercultural conflict is defined in this book as the experience of emotional frustration in conjunction with perceived incompability of values, norms, face orientations, goals, scarce resources, processes, and/or outcomes between a minimum of two parties from two different cultural communities in an interactive situation." (Ting-Toomey and Oetzel, 2001:17)

This means that any conflict of two parties „from two different cultural communities" could be called intercultural as opposed to intracultural conflict that occurs between representatives of a shared cultural system.

However, a number of authors advise against an inflationary use of the label „intercultural conflict" as this could also be used strategically. It is not suggested that culture has a major impact on each of these conflicts, but rather that it is one of many factors such as personal, interpersonal, situational as well as structural factors.

Intercultural interpersonal conflicts in a narrow sense could be those where culture plays a major role in the course of the conflict (Haumersen/Liebe 1999; Liebe 1996). This, however, implies that it also makes a difference which conceptualization of culture is used in this

context.

The etic (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1996) approach of the value studies (Hofstede, 1980; Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961; Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz, 1994; Trompenaars, 1993) is the foundation of the socio-psychological „cultural variability" approach (Gudykunst, 1989). They try to describe, explain and compare cultures through universal values. Differences in values can be measured and have impact on rules, norms and behavior. Most studies in cross-cultural and intercultural conflict research follow this tradition (Brew and Cairns, 2002; Brew et al., 2001; Gelfand et al., 2001; Ma et al., 2002; Miyahara et al., 1998; Pearson and Stephan, 1998; Smith et al., 1998; Ting-Toomey, 1985; Ting-Toomey, 1988; Ting-Toomey, 1992; Ting-Toomey, 1993; Ting-Toomey, 1994; Ting-Toomey, 1999b; Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998; Ting-Toomey and Oetzel, 2001; Triandis et al., 2001; Triandis and Singelis, 1998; Trubisky et al., 1991). Nearly all of these studies work with the dimension individualism–collectivism (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1995; Triandis, 2001).

From a cognitive perspective, culture is described through collecting, sampling and organizing of information and building special knowledge structures (Glenn and Glenn, 1981). Members of a social group (like a family, religion or culture) tend to develop similar cognitive structures because of shared experiences. "The methods for organizing information differ depending on the amount of information to be organized and the numbers of people to whom the information is to be communicated." (Glenn and Glenn, 1981:i) Differences in these cultural knowledge structures influence many aspects of behavior and communication (such as the topics brought up during a discussion and the kind of information being accepted as an argument for a statement). Some recent studies follow this conceptualization (Gelfand and Cai, 2001; Gelfand et al., 2001; Kozan, 1997; Morris and Gelfand, 2002).

From a semiotic perspective "Culture is the system of shared meanings that is based on a signifying order, a complex system of different types of signs that cohere in predictable ways into pattern of representation which individuals and groups can utilize to make or exchange messages." (Danesi and Perron, 1999:67) Geertz (1987; 2000 <1983>) already proposed in the 1960ies that cultures are systems of shared meaning which are approachable through „thick description" only. As cross-cultural comparisons do not easily make sense within this approach no recent cross-cultural conflict studies have been found. On the other hand this conceptualization seems attractive for the studying of intercultural conflicts as it is all about assignment of meaning and understanding.

THE (POSSBLE) ROLES OF CULTURE IN INTERCULTURAL INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

First of all, conflict per se is culturally construed and therefore a culturally bound concept (Gelfand et al., 2001:1070). Whether an interaction is seen as discussion or conflict, whether the course of a conflict is seen as constructive or destructive depends on the assigned meaning it has for the interactors.

Cultural differences in values, different ways of perceiving and processing information and/or different meaning assignments for symbolic systems therefore could be causes for conflicts. But also differences at the observable level of culturally influenced behavior (communication styles, expression of emotions..) can lead to intercultural conflict as well as become an issue in the conflict. Also cognitive evaluation processes like biases in attribution processes in favor of the ingroup can provoke conflicts.

Also cultural differences in the preference for the goals in a conflict can become an „issue" of

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an intercultural conflict. Whether task and relationship can be separated, if the process goal or the identity goal is more important or has a completely different meaning depends on cultural values, norms, rules, knowledge structures and/or assignments of meaning. Also the trespassing or ignoring of need for cultural identity (as one aspect of a person's social identity) can cause conflict or become a severe issue.

When it comes to conflict behavior, cultural preferences for certain conflict styles were identified. Pursuing strategies and behaviors suitable for one cultural system can have an escalating effect in an intercultural context.

Several intercultural findings that could provide explanations for some of the above mentioned phenomena shall be mentioned here organized according to three theoretical approaches.

According to studies following the attribution theory (Heider, 1977 <1958>) there seem to be differences in attribution schemes and preferences between representatives of different cultural systems namely between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. The self serving bias explaining certain causal attribution schemes in individualistic cultures is empirically supported for individualistic cultural systems but has not been found within collectivistic cultures (Smith and Bond, 1993:110ff.). On the other hand, there tend to be group biases in favor of the ingroup. This effect was shown to be weaker in groups representing individualistic cultures (Smith and Bond, 1993:179; Ting- Toomey, 1999a:155).

Using Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Tajfel and Turner, 1986) it can be proposed that culture must become salient as a category for social categorization for a conflict to become intercultural. Therefore at least one of the conflict parties has to define his/her ingroup culturally and define the other group as outgroup because of using different systems

of symbols and meanings. The existence of culturally defined ingroup/outgroup differentiation again favors cultural attribution of causes in intergroup conflict.

The identity negotiation perspective (Ting-Toomey, 1993) tries to explain the influence that identity has in intercultural communication and conflict. "Identity is defined as the mosaic sense of self-identification that incorporates the interplay of human, cultural, social, and personal images as consciously or unconsciously experienced and enacted by the individual." (Ting-Toomey, 1993:74) Three processes within the identity negotiation process are distinguished: interactive identity confirmation, interactive identity coordination and interactive identity attunement (Ting-Toomey, 1993:106ff.). Together with the proposition of the independent versus the interdependent construal of the self (Markus and Kitayama, 1991) found in different cultural systems, different identity needs of the parties have to be taken into consideration.

Therefore, a definition in the narrow sense is proposed as follows: An intercultural interpersonal conflict is an interaction between actors (individuals, groups, organizations...) representing different cultural systems where at least one of the actors experiences contradictoriness due to cultural differences or particularity in thinking, expecting, perceiving and/or feeling and/or wanting with the other actor (the other actors), that with the realization an interference by the other actor (the other actors) would occur (Glasl, 1999 <1980>:14f.).

OVERVIEW OF CULTURALLY INFLUENCED PROCESSES IN INTERCULTURAL INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

The following graphical representation tries to outline some of the main processes underlying intercultural interpersonal conflicts.

Graphic 1 should be inserted here

At least one of the conflict parties prevents the other party from attaining her or his goal on one or more of the four levels: Content, relationship, process, and identity. These four interaction and goal levels are interdependent and can not be dealt with independently (there was a long discussion in US-American organizational conflict studies on the independence of task versus relationship conflicts, which seemed to have come to an end with recent work done by Jehn/Chatman (2000) and DeDreu/Weingart (2002)).

Especially in intercultural conflicts it happens easily that the interactors perceive their communications as "misfitting" (e.g. person A thinks she is talking about the issue, person B hears her cultural identity being endangered answers back, person A suspects an attack at the relationship level and makes a process proposal, whereupon person B ends the interaction thinking that it is impossible to talk to „someone like this").

How the interactors interpret the content and meaning of an interaction is influenced by the cultural system they represent. Culture is depicted in this graphical representation three times according to the three perspectives described above:

1)   as a medium (LeBaron, 2001), carrying values that serve as a basis for the person, that „carries" her or him ("culture" for cultural variability approach);

2)   as cognitive lenses built up by knowledge structures that decide which information will be perceived and operated ("Kultur" for the cognitive approach);

3)   as a system of shared meanings, where each party is using her/his own system until subsequently shared meanings have been negotiated. Here a common net of meanings is depicted as the best possible basis for understanding ("M E A N I N G" for the

semiotic approach).

All three conceptualizations of culture see culture as ideational systems (Allaire and Firsirotu, 1984) which means that culture develops only "in the heads" of the people. At a collective, as well as at an individual level, culture is influencing cognitive processes (such as social categorization, identity construction and conflict strategies) and affective processes within a person. There it depends on personal dispositions (like the „need for cognitive closure", „NFC" (Fu et al., 2002)) and cultural factors (e.g the „cultural constraints" (Payne in Ting-Toomey, 1985: 73ff.)) how much a person has internalized the values of the cultural system and how closely a person sticks to the cultural rules of the system she or he is representing.

What is important in an intercultural interpersonal conflict is that the four levels of communication (which can be levels of goals also) become understandable by negotiation of the respective meaning assignments (implicitly via the context or explicitly via spoken words) for each interaction.

RESULTS FROM RECENT STUDIES

Recent studies explored mainly the causes for intercultural conflicts and conflict behavior. Most assumptions and recommendations for behavior in intercultural conflicts have been drawn from cross-cultural research. Differences in conflict styles found in cross-cultural comparisons were presented as stable across cultures with the underlying assumption that conflict behavior would stay the same in an intracultural or intercultural context.

For the following short review of the very few existing empirical studies on intercultural

interpersonal conflict, this paper follows a chronological order that is also inherent to famous conflict models, like Pondy's (1967; 1992) or Thomas' (1992; 1976) process models or Deutsch (1973) structural model: causes and conditions of conflict, issues and goals in conflict, conflict behavior, outcome and evaluation of conflict.

Causes and conditions of conflict

Brew/Cairns (2002) analyzed conflict incidents reported by expatriates and host-nationals in a multinational organization with subsidiaries in Singapore, Bangkok and Jakarta. Reasons for manifest causes varied with two thirds are likely to be found in any workplace. For causal explanations for latent aspects three clusters were found: communication differences between Eastern and Western nations (the direct versus indirect style), poor expatriate management behavior, and the third cluster was connected with individualism-collectivism. It can be said that among other, cultural differences were seen as one main reason for intercultural conflict in the cited study. A study by Lindsley/Braithwaite (1996:206) showed nevertheless using causal attribution theory, that, whether a conflict was perceived as being caused by the other conflict party's representing another cultural system or not depended upon whether it was an intracultural or intercultural conflict. Their ethnographic study in US-American off-shore factories ("maquiladoras") in Mexico showed that similar conflicts were seen as interpersonal within the own cultural group, whereas they were seen as intercultural and caused by cultural differences when the other conflict party belonged to the outgroup.

Issues and goals in conflict

There are indications from cross-cultural research that the hierarchy of goals, whether the most important is the content, the relationship, the process or the identity aspect (Ting-Toomey, 1999a), depends on culture and also on the priority of personal versus group goals (Triandis, 1999:129; Triandis, 2001:36). This phenomenon again is connected with the

independent versus the interdependent construal of the self (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

Conflict behavior

Most research in the cross cultural conflict management field has been done concerning conflict styles (Jehn and Weldon, 1997; Kozan, 1989; Kozan, 1991; Miyahara et al., 1998; Morris et al., 1998; Ting-Toomey, 1988; Ting-Toomey, 1992; Ting-Toomey et al., 1991; Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998; Ting-Toomey et al., 2000; Trubisky et al., 1991). Some of the key differences they found was that representatives of many collectivistic cultures show conflict styles of „avoiding" and „obliging" more often, while representatives of individualistic countries tend to use „dominating" and „integrating" conflict styles. Intercultural studies on conflict styles (Kappe, 1993; Khoo, 1994; Cole 1989 in Ting-Toomey, 1994) and on negotiation (seen as a behavior shown in conflicts) (Adair and Brett, 2002; Adair et al., 1998) show among others one interesting effect: Despite the belief that preferred conflict styles would stay stable across time, situation and culture, the representatives of collectivistic cultures tended to be more flexible in their conflict behavior and adopted styles more typically for representatives of individualistic cultures. This could be explained according to Social Identity Theory as follows. Representatives of individualistic cultures tend to show similar behavior in any context as they do not make such big distinctions between ingroup and outgroup. Thus they interact more or less in the same way with ingroup as with outgroup people.

Outcome and evaluation of conflict

Only cross-cultural comparisons were found for this topic. Gelfand/Nishii et al. (2001:1059) wanted to know: „Are the dimensions used to evaluate conflict situations universal (etic), or are they culture-specific (emic)?". They found that the US-American and the Japanese interviewees used culture general as well as culture specific dimensions for the cognitive

evaluation of conflict situations (depending on the way of self construal as interdependent or independent) .

Tinsley/Pillutla (1998) found in a cross-cultural negotiation simulation that U.S. negotiators reported more satisfaction when they maximized joint gain and Hong Kong Chinese negotiators were happier when they achieved outcome parity.

Altogether it can be said that we need more intercultural studies as the few findings so far tend to support an interactional view that a third cultural system emerges when representatives from two cultures interact. Therefore findings from cross-cultural studies could be of limited use for intercultural predictions as the interactors might behave in an intercultural conflict in a different way than they do when they interact with members of their own cultural group (Smith and Bond, 1998). There could be cases when cross-cultural knowledge could even be misleading for intercultural conflicts.

QUALITATIVE STUDY: UNDERSTANDING CONFLICT BEHAVIOR OF US AMERICAN EXPATRIATES IN AUSTRIA

The study was carried out following a non-representative, qualitative approach that enables the reconstruction of crucial systems of orientation (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). It follows the belief that the social world is socially constructed and for reaching mutual understanding an exchange process where the interactors take part is necessary (Wilson, 1973). The research was conducted with open interviews (Fontana and Frey, 1994) and objective-hermeneutic (Lueger and Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik, 1994) interpretation for deeper insights in the patterns of handling conflict.

The interviewees were chosen according to the rules of "theoretical sampling" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967:45ff.). Finally six expatriates from different parts of the U.S., 2 males and 4 females, between the age of 30 and 45, who had been staying in Vienna for 6 months to twenty years, three of them with Austrian partners, two working for multinational companies, one with a global organization, one with an international research institute, one journalist and one teacher were interviewed.

The interviews took place in the interviewee's office, apartment or at a neutral place. A protocol for the context was completed, where the interview dynamics and all discussion before and after were recorded. The language of the interviews was English (with the interviewer being aware of a lot of potential biases that might have influenced the research (Mattl, 1999)) and took between 1,5 and 4 hours recorded on tape and fully transcribed.

The interview technique was that of open narrative interviews in a day to day language, beginning with an open question about their experiences as an expatriate in Austria (Hoffmann-Riem, 1980). Then questions were asked about their experiences and the stories the interviewees had talked about and only later the issue of conflict was brought up, in cases where the interviewees had not opened this topic by themselves (Rosenthal, 1992).

The interpretation procedure was the following. One case was chosen as the core example and analyzed in detail according to the rules of hermeneutics (Oevermann, 1984) following the inherent rules and structures of the case. This "Feinanalyse" (Lueger, 2000) was carried out for various separate "Sinneinheiten" (the shortest possible part of a sentence that still makes sense). For this case other material such as CVs and e-mail messages were also used. Using the results from "Feinanalyse" and "Grobanalyse" (Lueger, 2000) the main conflict pattern

was described. The other interviews also have been analyzed with the 'Grobanalyse''. Then, after the "theoretical sampling" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) strategy of minimal or maximal difference, the main conflict pattern was compared with the other cases, whether the main pattern was also found there or other conflict patterns existed.

To ensure the quality of the analysis procedure, the 'Feinanalyse'' was conducted by a minimum of two or three persons with the interviewer and author only writing down their discussion. The first two sequences were interpreted two times by two independent groups to recognize eventual biases, omission or contradiction in an early stage of the procedure.

FINDINGS FROM THE CASE ANALYSES

The findings show that the conflict patterns vary depending on whether the workplace or private life of the expatriates is concerned.

Main conflict pattern „confrontation and enforcement"
The main pattern of the main case was that the expatriate enforced his interests. In case someone impeded him with an action or hindered him from reaching his interests by not doing something, the expatriate directly confronted the person. Usually he told them in a very direct way what to do or to leave. This way of handling conflict was influenced by his thinking in a very achievement and solution oriented way. He believed that he knew the right solution. His behavior used for conflicts taking place in Austria did not differ from his behavior for conflicts taking place in the U.S. The conflicts analyzed happened at the workplace or in the private context. However, the latter conflicts dealt with professional relationships as well.

The contrasting cases also showed the pattern "enforcement" with one important limitation. "Enforcement" as a conflict behavior was seen as being part of professionalism ("I am doing my job"). But in private life and in the public space when no professional relationships were touched the expatriates tried to avoid conflicts as much as possible.

This second pattern "avoiding and obliging" in the private context and the public space was mainly used for avoiding conflicts especially with "unknown Austrians" (people they met on the street). All expatriates (this was even told about the main case bearer from other interviewees) renounced from "typical American behavior" ("making noise in the subway", "showing certain gestures") when they did not want the others to react in "the Austrian way" ("being unfriendly", "becoming aggressive"). Appropriate behavior in the public space was a topic most expatriates seemed very sensitive about and which they discussed with their Austrian or international friends/partners/colleagues. Those who wanted to extend their stay in Austria started to learn German (all interviewees first mentioned the German language in a private context not in a job context) and tried to adapt to what they perceived as the Austrian way of behaving in public and communicating in private life once they had made up their decision. But even then these expatriates did not adapt their conflict behavior in the workplace.

In addition, gender discrimination was a topic that none of the interviewees had recently experienced in the US but was seen as a cause of conflict in Austria.

CONTEXTUAL DISCUSSION

It is noteworthy, that

1) professional conflict behavior of the expatriates did not change from the intracultural to

the intercultural context;

2) conflict and especially communication behavior in the private sphere changed - the expatriates tended to adapt to Austrian habits (at least once they had decided to prolong their stay).

Conflict behavior in the professional field

It is striking that the expatriates did not change their conflict behavior at the workplace once they knew that they acted against cultural rules and norms. Oftentimes they made their knowledge about Austrian norms (like the higher importance of relationship in a workplace matter) part of their considerations. Nevertheless they decided actively against changing their strategies or behavior.

Interactional theories (such as symbolic interactionalism (Blumer, 1973)) state that in any interaction interactors influence each other. The acculturation research (Berry/Sam 1996; Black/Mendenhall et al. 1991; Kim 2001; Searle/Ward 1990; Ward 2001) also suggests that at least one party will go through some changes. Researchers (Finn Jordan 1996) proposing the "third culture" suggest that at any intercultural encounter a third culture will emerge. Others insist that certain conditions must apply: „As identity, recognition and meaning-making are addressed, a third culture can emerge." (LeBaron 2001b:13)

The empirical studies cited above show that intercultural conflict behavior differs from intracultural conflict behavior (Adair/Okumura et al. 1998; Adair/Brett 2002; Brett/Okumura 1998; Kappe 1993; Khoo 1994; Ting-Toomey 1994). In all these cases (with the exception of Kappe's study) the representatives of collectivistic cultural systems adapted their behavior more than the others. The findings of the group research, especially the Social Identity Theory, are essential to understand the dynamics of intercultural conflicts. Representatives of

collectivistic cultural systems (e.g. Japan) also tend to show behavior towards outgroups that would breach ingroup cultural norms and values (Moran/Allen et al. 1994).

Representatives of individualistic cultural systems change their conflict behavior less than representatives of collectivistic cultural systems. This could be explained for the U.S. by the basic principle of „equality" (Gannon/Associates 1994:302ff.; Stewart/Bennett 1991:90ff.). In line with the proverb: „We're all human, after all" (Stewart/Bennett 1991:90), U.S. Americans are not used to make differences where status and hierarchy or different rules and norms are concerned. U.S. business culture could be called a low-context culture in Hall's sense (1981). Representatives of individualistic cultural systems make little differentiation within the ingroup and also little differentiation towards the outgroup. This could explain one aspect of the U.S. expatriates' conflict behavior in the professional context.

Another aspect could be that their professional identity had much more importance than their cultural identity in the workplace conflicts. This professional identity was based on orientation towards action, achievement and success. Expatriates based on this orientation acting consciously against traditional Austrian (and European) business culture did not have in mind to bring American business culture to Austria but to act upon a global code of business conduct.

This opens the discussion about a „global business culture". Is there any and if so, is it more likely to be European or U.S.-American dominated or might there even be a „shared culture", in the sense of a third culture, all (or some?) participants have agreed upon?

Conflict behavior in the private context

On the contrary to the professional context adaptation is high in the private context. As soon

as the expatriates learned by observation, own conflicts or discussions that there was a different communication culture in Austria, or at least when they decided to prolong their stay, they adapted their communication behavior to avoid conflicts.

One possible explanation for this adaption in the private context is that the expatriates' communication culture in the US was more complex in the private context than in the professional context. The interviewees indicated that there were ritualized forms of being friendly at home, of giving and saving face (especially within the family) and implicit role assignments. With these high-context communication patterns the expatriates might possess a wider variety of communication and action pattern allowing them to adapt more easily.

Here the Social Identity Theory could also be used to arrive at an explanation. Expatriates did adapt in this context because they did not want to belong to an outgroup but wanted to be accepted as individuals living in Austria. They did not want to achieve their view of what is normal (which might have been the case in the professional context) but to become accepted by the ingroup they wanted to belong to.

As a suggestion for further research it would be very interesting to study how expatriates' conflict behavior is influenced by the identification with a cultural system and acculturation strategies (Berry/Sam 1996; Berry 1997, 2002).

Finally, here is an attempt to answer the question in the title of this paper: "I am just doing my job!" What does conflict have to do with culture?

From the theoretical standpoint, a universal answer still must be rejected. As conflict is culturally construed, the outcome of this study suggests to look at conflicts in their contexts

from an interactive and process oriented perspective.

In the case of the qualitative, non-representative study, the findings propose that with U.S. expatriates in Austria it was not so much their representation the U.S. American culture that influenced their experience of workplace conflicts. It was rather their business culture and professional identity that had an impact on their conflict behavior and experience. The expatriates seemed not to be aware that business culture and professional identity could have been related with U.S. American mainstream culture but thought them to be universal values. In the second context of private life, culture seemed to have more impact, cultural identity seemed to be more important and therefore also the willingness to learn about the Austrian "system of shared meanings" and to adapt to rules and norms of conflict behavior in public and family life was higher (especially once people had decided to prolong their stay in Austria).

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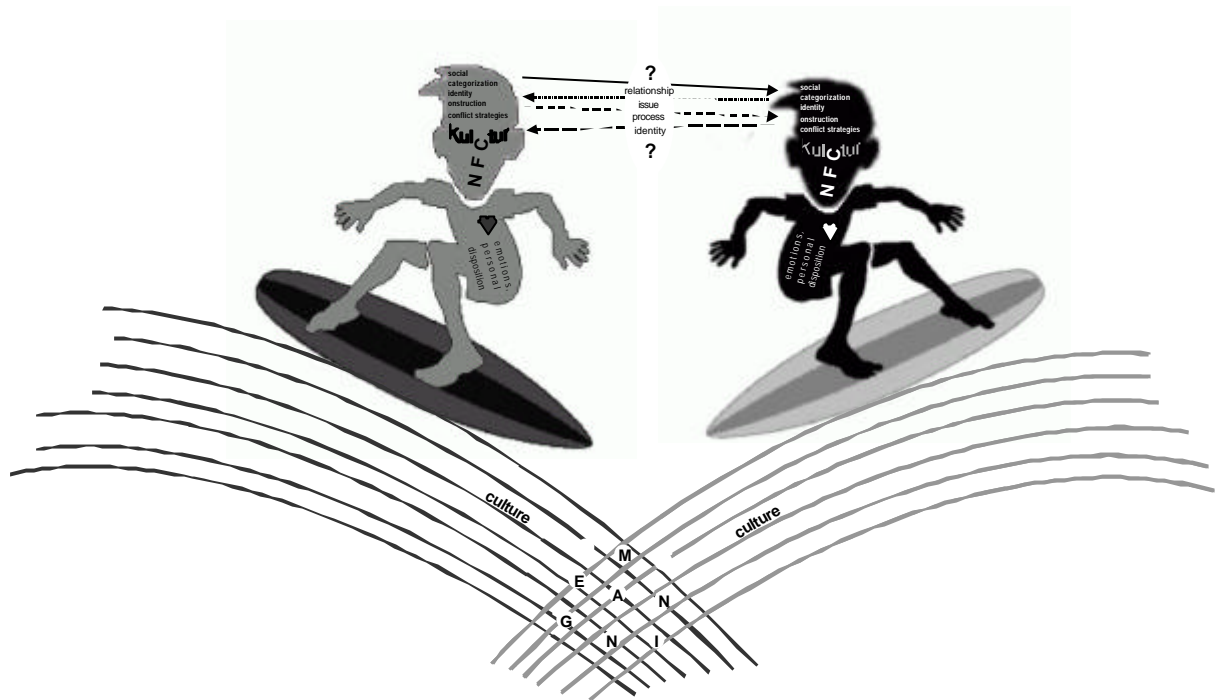Miyahara, A., Kim, M.-S., Shin, H.-C. and Yoon, K. (1998) 'Conflict resolution styles among

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Graphic 1: Overview of culturally influenced processes in intercultural interpersonal conflict