

# Intercultural Friendship Competence: Research Prospects and Future Directions

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*ABSTRACT. This paper explores the possibility of building a relationship-specific theory of intercultural communication competence (ICC). It puts forward the concept of 'intercultural friendship competence' to incorporate relationship-specific aspects of competences into the existing ICC frameworks. To this end, this paper first reviews the outcomes and drawbacks of behavioural expectations and cultural identity approaches to ICC. It then submits a hypothetical model of intercultural friendship competence as an interface of the two different perspectives by drawing on literature on the formation and psychological functions of intercultural friendship. Finally, a summary with directions for future studies is provided.*

With expanded opportunities for interpersonal contact and relational development across national and cultural boundaries, research on intercultural communication competence (ICC) has gained wide acceptance and popularity. In the past few decades, the study of ICC has been conducted from various theoretical approaches (Chen & Starosta, 2005), based on a common assumption that relational development and maintenance are the functions of the interactants' ICC. In line with this viewpoint, many researchers have identified the structures and components of ICC (e.g. Imahori & Lanigan, 1989; Ishii, 2001; Spitzberg, 1994) or

social skills (e.g. Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). While earlier works attempted to develop general models and measurement instruments of ICC, recent studies have examined situation-specific constructs, especially in business, educational, medical and engineering contexts (Dear-dorff, 2009).

In addition to situational constraints of ICC, there is a need for research on relational constraints. For example, intercultural friendship, loosely defined as a friendship between people with different cultural conventions and expectations, is one of the areas in which ICC research is expected to make significant theoretical and practical contributions (Gareis, 1995, 2000a, 2000b; Kudo, 2003a). It has been argued that friendship serves as a catalyst for the reduction of intergroup bias and conflicts (Pettigrew, 1998) and for the promotion of intercultural adjustment and learning (Kudo, 2003b, 2009a). However, earlier research lacks sensitivity to the relationship-specific aspects of ICC (Kudo, 2003a), and little is known about the extent to which extant ICC models can be useful in friendship as well as in any other kind of intercultural relationships such as familial or romantic relationships.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the possibility of building a relationship-specific theory of ICC. It puts forward the concept of 'intercultural friendship competence' to incorporate relationship-specific aspects of competences into the existing ICC frameworks. To this end, this paper first reviews the outcomes and drawbacks of two of the major approaches to ICC: behavioural expectations and cultural identity (Martin, 1993). It then submits a hypothetical model of intercultural friendship competence as an interface of the two different perspectives by drawing on literature on the formation and psychological functions of intercultural friendship. Finally, a summary with directions for future studies is provided.

### **Behavioural expectations models**

The first major approach to ICC centres on an interactant's behavioural expectations. According to Martin (1993), this perspective postulates that the degree to which certain behaviour becomes competent depends upon the degree to which that behaviour meets the interactant's expectations of competence. The literature in this terrain has conceptualised ICC in terms of appropriateness (i.e. an ability to attune verbal and non-verbal behaviours to contextual constraints) and effectiveness (i.e. an ability to achieve interactional goals), arguing that each interactant should maximise his/her communicative repertoires that are applicable in different situational and cultural contexts. Based on this assumption, theorists have developed such concepts as anxiety/uncertainty management (Gudykunst, 1993, 1995), communicative resourcefulness (Ting-Toomey, 1993), conversational constraints (Kim, 1993, 1995, 2005), host communication competence (Kim, 2001) and social skills (Furnham, 1993; Tanaka, 2000; Ward et al., 2001), as well as mapped cognitive (knowledge), affective (motivation) and behavioural (skill) components.

The strength of the behavioural expectation models, when applied in intercultural friendship research, is their explanatory and predictive power. For example, Gareis's (2000b) incipient model of intercultural friendship formation that identifies seven communicative factors in international-host student friendship (i.e. greetings, self-disclosure, invitations, topic selection, commonalities, language proficiency and cultural knowledge) can be easily incorporated into an ICC model. Similarly, Kudo (2003a), on the basis of intensive interviews with international students in Japan and Australia, identifies the cognitive, affective and behavioural components of ICC in friendship formation. Although these studies do not ascertain the ways in which each component contributes to the overall competence and do not touch upon the interactive nature of competence (e.g. interaction of competences of sojourners and host nationals), they suggest that the prospect of intercultural friendship for-

mation can be increased by training a given interactant in concrete behaviours that are likely to become appropriate and effective within a specific relational context.

This behaviour-centred approach to intercultural friendship, however, has three limitations. First, culture is conceived as interchangeable with nation states and is often treated solely as an independent variable of communicative behaviours (e.g. Gareis, 1995, 2000a, 2000b; Gudykunst, 1993; Kim, 1995). This kind of reductionist conceptualisation of culture cannot capture the ongoing nature of culture, the inequalities among cultures and co-cultural variations based on ethnicity, gender, occupation and age (Kramsch, 2002; Mabuchi, 2002; Yoshino, 1997). Second, the communication process is conceived as static rather than dynamic. For instance, how a sojourner coordinates his/her behaviour during an ongoing interaction with the host members has not been elucidated. Finally, the approach ignores the fact that the evaluation of an interactant's competence occurs in a web of situational, cultural, socio-political and many other kinds of contexts (Kudo, in press). Thus, there remains a question of whether it is possible to make a list of context-free behavioural repertoires. These limitations imply that shifting the focus from what Stier (2003, p. 84) termed 'content competencies' to 'processual competencies'—from a static, reductionist explanation to a fluid, contextual explanation of ICC—is of paramount importance in looking at the dynamic aspects of interpersonal relationship.

### **Cultural identity models**

Another major approach to ICC examines the individual's coordination and management of cultural identities. Mary J. Collier and Michael L. Hecht are two prominent figures in this approach. First, Collier (1989, 1994, 1996, 1998; Collier & Thomas, 1988) presents the Cultural Identity Theory (CIT) to explain the dynamic interplay between cultural identity and intercultural friendship communication. Cultural identity,

according to her, is 'the particular character of the communicative system that individuals, friends and group members enact' (Collier, 1998, p. 371). Unlike conventional psychological approaches that tend to view identity as a characteristic of individual persons, her communication perspective conceptualises identity as 'something that emerges when messages are exchanged between persons' (Collier, 1994, p. 40).

According to CIT, communication competence is conceptualised as the extent to which individuals can confirm their own and others' cultural identities in the process of dyadic interaction. Collier (1998) and Collier and Thomas (1988) argue that confirmation of cultural identities requires mutual understanding and sharing of cultural symbols, meanings and norms. In other words, to be able to confirm the preferred identities of oneself and others, one must seek common grounds of verbal and non-verbal messages and rules in interactions. In addition, Collier (1998) posits the existence of four communicative dialectics in intercultural friendships: independence and interdependence; openness and privacy; novelty and predictability and relational identity and divergent cultural identities. To Collier, communicative discourse regarding cultural symbols, meanings and rules in these dialectics is a useful unit of analysis to detail the cultural identity management processes.

Similar to Collier, Hecht (1993) presents the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) on the basis of the notions of dialectic (Baxter, 1988) and paradox (Capra, 1975, in Hecht, 1993). Whereas CIT focuses on personal and interactional levels, CTI takes a broader perspective on identity management by incorporating four interpenetrating layers into analysis: personal, enactment (interactional), relational and communal. Here, the inclusion of 'relational identity' is important, because intercultural friendship takes the form of relational bonds (Kudo, 2003a), or what Collier (1998, p. 370) later codified as 'interpersonal alliances'. Other theorists have adopted the relational identity to further understand the dynamics of (intercultural) relationships (e.g. Cupach & Imahori, 1993; Ho, 1998; Kudo, 2003a; Lee, 2006, 2008).

The merits of the cultural identity approach to ICC for friendship research are two-fold. First, it becomes possible to analyse the dynamic interplay among communication, cultural identity and friendship, because the approach emphasises moment-to-moment strategies to correct or adjust the flow of conversation to keep it running smoothly (Martin, 1993). Any interpersonal relationship involves constant changes over a long period of time, and so does cultural identity. The cultural identity approach, for example, enables an examination of an interactant's perception of change (transformation) and lack/resistance of change (maintenance) of his/her cultural identity in relation to intercultural contact and relational development (e.g. a balanced, bicultural model of acculturation: Ward et al., 2001).

The other strength of the cultural identity approach is its capability to analyse macro-social as well as micro-personal elements of relational processes (Collier & Bornman, 1999). Cultural identity management at a communal level involves negotiations of intergroup tensions and power that are associated with the unequal distribution of economic wealth and the history of colonialism. Although one of the characteristics of friendship that is distinct from other kinds of relationship (e.g. family, workplace) is equality (Goodwin, 1999), intercultural friendship is not free from the issues of power and privilege (Collier, 1998). In this respect, the holistic vision of cultural identity may pave the way to overcome the methodological individualism that has permeated the current interpersonal and intercultural communication literature (Keshishian, 2005; Lan-namann, 1991).

The current status of the cultural identity perspective, however, holds limited practical value due to the paucity of solid empirical foundations. The perspective has yet to explain what kinds of communication practices facilitate identity management in intercultural friendship in concrete terms. Another weakness in this approach is that it is difficult to integrate various cultural identities (e.g. ethnicity, gender, age, corporate identities) that become salient in different socio-cultural and situational con-

texts. Recent arguments on the multiplicity, hybridity and fluidity of identity in global contexts (e.g. Kim & Hubbard, 2007; Marginson, 2009; Sen, 2006) make it more complex and challenging to explain the patterns of competent or incompetent practices of identity management. Thus, one can safely state that, up to now, the cultural identity approach has not made contributions as concrete as those of the behavioural expectation models to our understanding of actual interactional processes in intercultural friendship.

### **Intercultural friendship competence**

To reiterate, some complementary relations exist between behavioural expectations and cultural identity approaches to ICC. The behavioural expectation models are useful in specifying behaviours leading to appropriate and effective communication, yet they provide limited knowledge of the process of intercultural friendship due to their inclination toward a static conceptualisation of communication and culture. In contrast, the cultural identity perspective looks into the fluidity of intercultural friendship communication and multiplex contextual factors in the development of intercultural friendship. However, the perspective is hitherto too abstract to meet practical ends and concerns for better intercultural relationship.

On the basis of these arguments, I submit that the integration of the two approaches may enhance our understanding of communication competence and intercultural friendship. In this section, the concept of 'intercultural friendship competence' is presented as a platform for the theorisation on relationship-specific aspects of ICC. For the convenience of the following discussion, Kudo's (2003a) definition of ICC is adopted: a system of cognitive, affective and behavioural competences through which an interactant manages his/her own cultural and relational identities through interactions with culturally different people, while attuning verbal and non-verbal messages that are appropriate and effective in

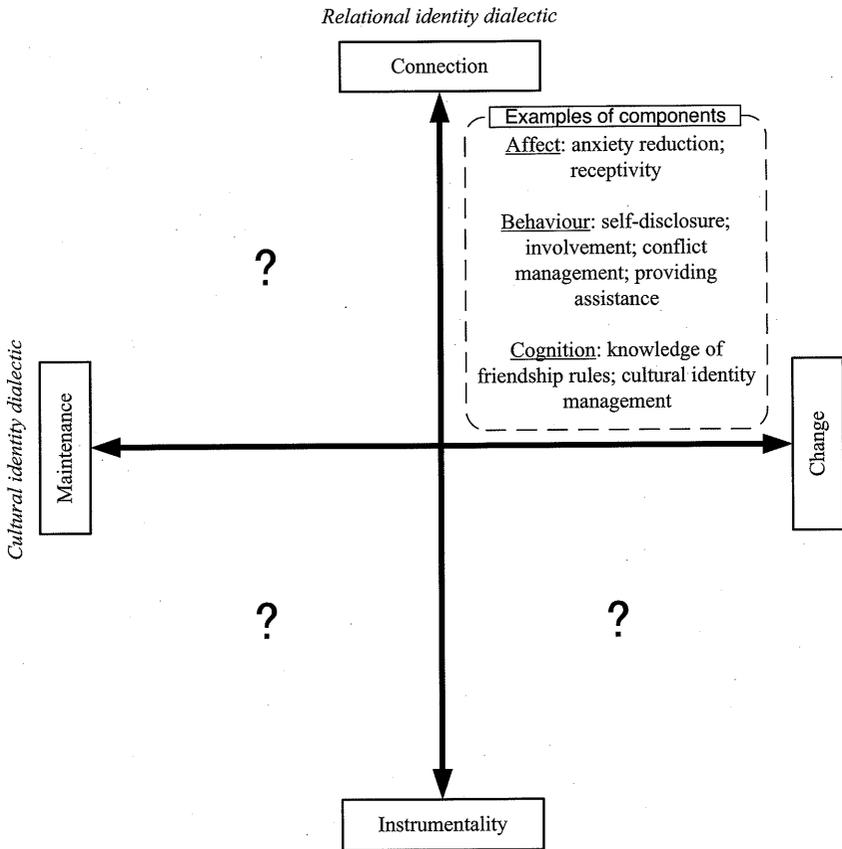
continual time and space. Albeit it is still exploratory, this definition is broad enough to encompass all the aforementioned theoretical issues.

Overall, the notion of intercultural friendship competence emphasises interaction between cultural identity management and behavioural expectations leading to a relaxed and harmonious relationship. It is postulated that, through shared activities and self-disclosure, an interactant attempts to achieve two interactional goals simultaneously (Gareis, 2000; Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Lee, 2006): (1) to engage in self-representation and continual contact (i.e. appropriateness) and (2) to develop and sustain homophily and mutuality (i.e. effectiveness). Based on this assumption, I formulate a hypothetical model of intercultural friendship competence (see Figure 1). This individual-level four-quadrant model indicates that the interactant's appropriate and effective behaviours are interrelated with his/her ever-changing state of cultural and relational identities.

Borrowing the dialectical perspective of (intercultural) friendship (e.g. Chen, 2006; Collier, 1998; Rawlins, 1992, 2009), this categorical model stands on two dimensions of dialectics, with each pair placed along a different continuum. While Collier (1998) views cultural identities (i.e. autonomy) and relational identity (i.e. connection) in a pair of dialectics, the current model looks into further complexities by dividing them into a smaller unit of dialectics that presupposes the possibilities of cultural change and relational instrumentality:

1. *Cultural identity dialectic of maintenance and change.* This describes the psychological state in which one attempts to change or to maintain his/her sense of identification with a particular cultural group that becomes salient during intercultural encounters. This also represents the degree to which one adapts his/her communication to the other to enhance mutual understanding and sharing of cultural symbols, meanings and norms.
2. *Relational identity dialectic of emotional connection and instrumentality.* Relational identity is essential in intercultural friendship

## Intercultural Friendship Competence



**Figure 1** Exploratory model of intercultural friendship competence

(Kudo, 2003a; Lee, 2008) and is formed within the continuum of emotional gratification (i.e. ‘pure relationship’: Giddens, 1991) and instrumental value. This echoes Rawlin’s (2009, p. 10) dialectic of affection and instrumentality, in which friendship involves caring for others as an ‘end-in-itself’ and relying on others as ‘self-serving ends’.

Each pair of identity management (i.e. maintenance–change and connection–instrumentality) works dialectically and constitutes overall iden-

tity management patterns in given contexts. As shown in Figure 1, each quadrant of the model highlights examples of behaviours that can be evaluated as appropriate and effective by the interactants. The two continuums represent the dynamic shifting of the interactants' cultural identity orientation and the ongoing nature of cognitive, affective and behavioural competences that emerge concurrently in certain identity and relational states.

To the best of my knowledge, previous studies have investigated only one quadrant, the connection–change dimension. Assuming that the formation of relational identity involves interpersonal adaptation and identity change, Kudo (2003a) modelled six components of international students' communication competence in host friendship: (1) knowledge of friendship rules; (2) cultural identity management; (3) conversational competence; (4) involvement; (5) anxiety reduction and (6) receptivity. Lee (2006) identified seven types of behavioural strategies/activities that shape the construction of relational identity across cultures: (1) positivities/providing assistance; (2) rituals, activities, rules and roles; (3) self-disclosure; (4) networking; (5) exploring cultures and languages; (6) emphasising similarities and exploring differences and (7) conflict/conflict management. Considering their resemblance to other studies on intercultural friendship formation (e.g. Gareis, 2000b; Kudo & Simkin, 2003; Lee, 2008; Sias et al., 2008), these studies are valuable in providing solid empirical foundations for modelling the structure and components of intercultural friendship competence. However, they have yet to explore whether intercultural friendship can be formed and maintained within the identity state that places more emphasis on instrumentality than emotional connection and on cultural maintenance than change.

### **Summary with implications for future research**

This paper has provided a critical review of the two major approaches (i.e. behavioural expectations and cultural identity) of ICC and examined

the possibility of constructing an integrative model of friendship-focused communication competence. It has been shown that the two conventional approaches can complement each other, and that the integration of them is not only possible but also opens a possibility for the development of a heuristic and practical theory that can be applied in intercultural communication education and training. Then, a hypothetically formed, categorical model of intercultural friendship competence as an initial step towards theorisation is presented.

The current status of intercultural friendship competence research is surely under development and thus requires more empirical studies and theoretical discussions. At least five issues need to be explored further.

1. Research needs to be done with regard to the possibilities of intercultural friendship formation that is explained not only in the connection–change quadrant but also in the other three quadrants in Figure 1 (i.e. connection–maintenance, instrumentality–maintenance and instrumentality–change), together with identifying the cognitive, affective and behavioural components in each quadrant of identity management strategies.
2. Future research needs to respond to the question of whose competence should be theorised. The vast majority of the existing studies on intercultural contact and relationship have examined the minority's (e.g. international students, businesspersons, immigrants) experiences of communication with the majority, not vice versa. So-called 'deficit' models and 'assimilationist' perspectives of the cultural minority still permeate intercultural studies and education (Kudo, 2009b; Marginson, 2009). This leaves room for discussion, for example, of the extent to which the structure and its components of intercultural friendship competence can be the same or different between sojourners and hosts, and of the possibilities of mutual respect and the learning of competences on equal terms.

3. It is also important to explore the roles of language difference and bilingualism in intercultural friendship and their implications in the ways in which intercultural friendship competence can be (re) modelled. Language difference is one of the most significant factors in intercultural friendship formation (e.g. Sias et al., 2008); therefore, more attention should be given to the language issues in ICC research. Considering the dominance of English as a global cultural capital and its impact on an individual's reconstruction of identity (Hashimoto & Kudo, 2009), future studies must maintain a critical eye on language and inequality in relational processes.
4. One must not forget the possibility of constructing an emic perspective of ICC (Kudo, in press; Witteborn, 2003). As is evident in the emergence of 'non-Western' approaches to intercultural communication (e.g. Gordon, 2007; Ishii, 2001, 2006; Kim, 2002, 2007; Miike, 2003, 2007) and the revision of the 'conventional' approaches to communication by 'Western' researchers (e.g. Baxter, 2004; Lannamann, 1991), future studies on intercultural friendship competence could flourish by analysing its emic (i.e. culture-specific) as well as etic (i.e. culture-general) dimensions and constructs. In so doing, it would be wise to consider the range and limits of specificity/generalisability of friendship competence across different socio-cultural and situational contexts.
5. Given that interpersonal relationship involves constant change, more research needs to be conducted concerning competences surrounding the maintenance and dissolution as well as the flowering of intercultural friendship.

Whether further explorations would result in the refutation of the current research programme or not, these tasks should be pursued for deepening our understanding of communication competence that should help im-

## Intercultural Friendship Competence

prove the quality of our life and personal relationships.

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## Intercultural Friendship Competence

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## Intercultural Friendship Competence

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