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Mediation Techniques of An Informal Intermediary in Intercultural-Interpersonal Conflict

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Abstract

Based on previous studies on culturally different uses of a mediator and mediation techniques in formal mediation, this study explores two research questions: What mediation techniques would an informal intermediary use to intervene an intercultural-interpersonal conflict?; What are the differences in mediation techniques between individualist and the collectivist mediators? To collect data, a questionnaire was used with a hypothetical conflict scenario. A total of 207 participants were recruited, including American, Chinese, Taiwanese, and Korean students registering a mid-eastern university. As a result of analyses, 35 mediation techniques and five themes were identified, and cultural similarities and differences in mediation techniques were discussed.

The studies of conflict management in various cultures have focused on two aspects. First, a majority of the previous studies focus on cross-cultural comparisons, not the intercultural analysis, of negotiation/bargaining behavior among different cultures, e.g., China (Wall, Sohn, Cleeton, & Jin, 1995), Poland (Olszanska, Olszanski, & Wozniak, 1993), Israel (Abu-Nimer, 1996), Turkey (Goregenli, 1995), Latin America (Lederach, 1991), and Korea (Kim, 1986), to name a few. Second, formal mediation has been the main focus. Studies have been done in areas of mediation employed in international relations (Abu-Nimer, 1996; Bercovitch, 1996; Patai, 1983), labor-management disputes (Mumpower & Rohrbaugh, 1996), community disputes (Pruitt, Peirce, McGillicuddy, Welton, & Castrianno, 1993), and school settings (D. Johnson, R. Johnson, Ward, & Magnuson, 1995). As a result, little information is known about how an individual from one culture handles a conflict with an individual from another culture.

In today's global village, the chance that people meet one another beyond the traditional boundaries of cultures has increased; so has the possibility that they encounter conflict resulted from cultural differences. How would they resolve their conflict? What factors would affect their behavior? While pursuing to answer these broad questions, this study focuses on informal third-party intermediary as a way of handling an intercultural-interpersonal conflict. To explore informal intermediary, this paper first delineates previous studies on different perceptions and uses of a mediator in various cultures and mediation techniques in formal mediation settings, which leads to two research questions. Second, the data collection method and process are described. Third, answers to research questions are discussed. Finally, theoretical and practical implications, as well as limitations, of this study for the field of intercultural conflict and mediation are explored.

Mediation In Different Cultures

To intervene as a third-party is "to enter into an ongoing system of relationship, to come between, or among, persons, groups or objects, for the purpose of helping them" (Argyris, 1970, p. 15). Industrial relations and civil and criminal litigation are typical forms of mediation in which an intervenor, e.g., a lawyer, external to the situation, is asked to help disputants resolve an issue. The third-party in this study shares the same characteristics with one additional condition. The third-party in this study refers to an *informal* intermediary who is not trained as an official mediator and/or has no formal knowledge regarding mediation. In this study, an intermediary, a mediator, and a third-party all refer to the informal mediator.

To use mediators in conflict situations is common across cultures. However, the involvement of an intervenor has different implications in different cultures. In collectivistic cultures where people value group harmony, fitting in, and interdependence (Hofstede, 1984; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001), a third-party provides the disputants with a chance to resolve their conflict without directly confronting each other. As collectivists are dependent on one another, they are fully aware of their obligation to make repayment, e.g., mediating others' conflict as service/duty to the collective (Hsu, 1963). As a result, the use of an intermediary is more prevalent in collectivistic cultures than in individualistic cultures (Wall et al., 1995). In the society of Dou Donggo, an Indonesian people, most disputes/conflicts in the village are resolved through the mediation of one or more of the village elders (Just, 1991). In some Central American cultures, the third-party is both natural and constant (Lederach, 1991). In India, third-party involvement is typical for handling superior-subordinate conflict in organizations: Third-party mediation is one of the signs that a conflict has been resolved, along with signaling good intentions, mutual face-saving, and accommodation (Singh & Sinha, 1992).

China appears to be one of the historic cradles of mediation (Wall et al., 1995). In China, third-party intervention is construed as a norm, and mediators have historically played a central role in handling family disputes, community relations, and guild relations. These traditional mediation roles were later institutionalized in the workplace by the Communist government. The main purpose of the third-party in Chinese culture is not only to resolve conflicts but also to attain the Confucian goal of community harmony (Wall et al., 1995). Thus, mediators have substantial prestige and power, which allows them to be assertive while using gentle persuasion, nudging, arguing for concessions, advising parties how they should think or act, and criticizing the parties who they think are at fault (Wall, Stark, & Standifer, 2001).

Schwartz (1994) interpreted the construct of individualism and collectivism in terms of autonomy and embeddedness of the person vis-à-vis the group. Cultures high in embeddedness, equivalent to collectivism, view individuals as part of a social fabric, sharing the way of life and favoring propriety and harmony. Thus, disputes are a problem of the collective, and the third-party preserves harmony among members by reducing animosity between conflicting parties (Leung, 1987). The adoption of a mediator is less common and thought of less favorably in individualistic cultures, comparable to high autonomy where people are viewed as having independent rights and desires and relating to others via self-interest and negotiated agreement (Schwartz, 1994). Hall (1976) and Ohbuchi (1998) attributed unpopularity of mediation in the western cultures to unfamiliarity and negative preconceptions. Individualists generally do not understand, in fact distrust, the role of the intermediary and do not know how to use one (Hall, 1976). Asking for a mediator to smooth the way and prevent potentially embarrassing confrontations is likely to be judged by Americans as an inconvenience and at times as a sign of weakness or lack of courage (Condon & Yousef, cited in Ma, 1992).

Mediation Techniques

The literature on mediation techniques is primarily descriptive (Waller et al., 2001). By modifying the classification system of Pruitt, McGillicuddy, Welton, and Fry's (1989) study of community mediation in the U.S., Wall and Blum (1991) identified various techniques employed by mediators in China. Later, Wall et al. (1995) added new techniques based on the findings of the various mediation studies (e.g., Kim, Wall, Sohn, & Kim, 1993; Wall & Blum, 1991).

In a recent elaboration, Wall et al. (2001) categorized mediation techniques into three larger themes: techniques that focus on the disputants, techniques that focus on the relationship between disputants, and techniques that focus on the disputants' relationship with others. When focusing on the disputants, mediators provide the disputants with information or press them with threats or punishment (Touval, 1996). Mediators also use personal power or authority to press a point of agreement or rely on personal resources to win over one or both parties (Murray, 1997). In addition, mediators can determine which points are negotiable for each party; educate, advise, and persuade the disputants; and encourage concessions (Munro, 1997). They rely on reflexive techniques, such as reframing a statement in a more positive light (Umbreit, 1993), and help the parties to develop new norms and assist them in implementing their agreement (Maley, 1995).

When targeting the disputants' relationship, mediators take steps to smooth the relationship by convincing the disputants to accept mediation (Abu-Nimer, 1996), building trust between the disputants (Landau & Landau, 1997), and calling for apologies (Umbreit, 1993). Mediators control the agenda by establishing a protocol for the mediation and harnessing techniques that control the disputants' perceptions (McAllister, 1998). Often, mediators separate the parties (Callister & Wall, 1997), caucus with each separately (Keller, 1997), and bring them together (Burr, 1997; Kelman, 1996; Rouhana, 1995). Mediators might side with one disputant

(Laskewitz, van de Vliert, & de Dreu, 1994) and develop an integrative solution by proposing specific agreements (Conlon & Fasolo, 1990). Mediators also help the parties perceive new collaborative goals (Kaufman & Duncan, 1992). Sometimes, targeting disputants' relationship with others, the mediator asks other third-parties to advise the disputants (Bonta, 1996). At other times, the mediator makes the dispute public (Pinkley, Brittain, Neale, & Northcraft, 1995).

Focusing on the formal mediation, Young (1972) explained four functions of intermediaries: information, tactical, supervisory, and reconceptualization functions. First, an intermediary can facilitate a settlement by transmitting lacking and/or additional information to the disputants. Disputants might be unclear on the basic issue(s) at stake, their range of alternative choices or strategies, their own utility, and the number and identity of the relevant others. The intermediary then may transmit all the information to the disputants as simply and as accurately as possible. Alternatively, the intermediary may go beyond this to select or even to manipulate the information in the interests of achieving an early settlement (Stevens, 1966).

Second, the tactical function is closely related to the concept of face. In the process of negotiation, a variety of tactical rigidities may emerge to impede progress, which can and sometimes do lead to no agreement (Schelling, 1960). The rigidities occur in various conditions: when the disputants become committed to incompatible stands so that a stalemate will occur; when the disputants are unwilling to present any proposals; or even when one of the disputants is prepared to give in but reluctant to do so because of a belief that this will lead to an intolerable loss of face or bargaining reputation in future. In these cases, an intermediary can help: by suggesting plans for mutual or unilateral decommitment, supervising the actual decommitment process, or helping the disputants to accept the policy of decommitment without an acute sense of loss (Schelling, 1966); by introducing proposals that none of the disputants is willing to initiate; or by issuing a proposal from one or both of the disputants under the intermediary's own name (Shapiro, 1970). The disputants can make the concession while avoiding a loss of face as the intermediary creates the impression that one disputant is conceding to the pressures of public opinion rather than to the superior position of the other disputant (Young, 1972).

Third, when trust is the issue, a mediator as supervisor can either bolster the confidence of the disputants in each other's willingness to carry out the terms of an agreement or offer her/his services as impartial monitor of the continuing execution of an agreement over time (Young, 1972). Fourth is the function of reconceptualization. It is not uncommon to encounter situations where the disputants change their preference among the available choices as they acquire new information (Kuhn, 1962). Then, reconceptualization becomes relevant (Sawyer & Guetzkow, 1965). The disputants may redefine the underlying features of their relationship. An intermediary may simply supply information or engage in persuasion or coercion to induce the disputants to reconceptualize one or more of the major characteristics of their relationship, facilitating the achievement of a desirable outcome (Walton, 1969).

As mentioned earlier, research on mediation techniques in intercultural settings is scant. The same statement is particularly true for mediation research in informal interpersonal conflicts. Thus, it is the main goal of this study to explore techniques used by an informal intermediary in intercultural conflicts. This task is completed via two research questions. First, intermediaries' mediation techniques are examined regardless of their culture. Second, mediation techniques are compared between the two sub-samples, individualists and collectivists.

RQ 1: What mediation techniques would an informal intermediary use to help the disputants in an intercultural-interpersonal conflict?

RQ 2: What are the differences in mediation techniques between the individualist mediators and the collectivist mediators?

Method

Participants

A total of 207 participants were recruited in the sample. There were 98 males (47.3%) and 109 females (52.7%). College ranks of the participants were 45 freshmen (21.7%), 45 sophomores (21.7%), 26 juniors (12.6%), 32 seniors (15.5%), and 59 graduate students (28.5%). Average age of the participants was 23.29 ($n = 206$), ranging from 18 to 44. Participants included 140 Americans (67.6%), 38 native Chinese (18.4%), 19 native Taiwanese (9.2%), and 10 native Korean (4.8%) students attending a mid-eastern university. Participants from four countries were chosen based on Hofstede's (1980, 2001) Individualism-Collectivism (I-C) scale. The U.S. is ranked as the most individualistic culture on the I-C scale. Among Americans, only Caucasian American students were chosen as representatives of an individualistic culture as previous research has shown that Caucasian Americans are more individualistic than other ethnic groups in the U.S. (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993; Triandis, Marin, Hui, Lisansky, & Ottati, 1984).

The Caucasian American participants are referred to as the individualistic culture sample (IC sample, $n = 140$). There were 62 males (44.3%) and 78 females (55.7%) in the IC sample. The average age of the IC sample was 20 years old, ranging from 18 to 43. College ranks of the IC participants were 44 freshmen (31.3%), 44 sophomores (31.3%), 22 juniors (15.7%), 25 seniors (17.9%), and 5 graduate students (3.6%). Native Chinese, Taiwanese, and Korean students were chosen as representatives of collectivistic cultures (CC sample, $n = 67$). Although China is not included in the I-C scale, it is reasonable to infer that China is a collectivistic culture as other countries that have been influenced by China, such as Taiwan (#44), Korea (#43), and Hong Kong (#37), are ranked as collectivistic. Bond's Chinese Value Survey also supports this view: Values like tolerance of others, harmony with others, filial piety, and patriotism were found to be significant in Chinese culture (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987). There were 36 males (53.7%) and 31 females (46.3%) in the CC sample. The average age of the CC sample was 29 years old, ranging from 20 to 44. College ranks of the CC sample were a freshman (1.5%), a sophomore (1.5%), 4 juniors (6.0%), 7 seniors (10.4%), and 54 graduate students (80.6%). The average length of their residence in the U.S. was 2 years, ranging from 2 months to 12 years.

Procedures

Data were collected from May 22nd till June 30th, 2002. To recruit participants, several procedures were employed. First, a letter that asked for permission to visit classes was sent to professors and instructors in Communication Studies and English departments at the university. Second, when permission was granted, the researcher visited classes and administered the questionnaire. During the class visits, the researcher briefly explained the goal and the procedure of present research. Questionnaires were distributed to those who volunteered to participate including all ethnic group members. Third, the snowballing method was used to recruit participants outside the classroom. The researcher distributed questionnaires to those who decided to participate and they completed the questionnaire and returned it to the researcher on their convenience. To gather data from the American students, the researcher visited eight undergraduate classes and 135 questionnaires were collected after five questionnaires were eliminated because of the participants' ethnicity and/or incomplete responses (three African-Americans and one Hispanic-American; one incomplete questionnaire). In addition, five questionnaires were collected through the snowballing method.

Data from native Chinese, Taiwanese, and Korean students were collected in several ways. First, the researcher visited two English classes during their class hours and gathered five questionnaires. Second, the researcher visited an informal Bible study group composed of Chinese and Taiwanese students who were attending the university. During the first visit, 21 questionnaires were distributed among the Bible study members. Participants from this group were asked to bring the questionnaires back to their next meeting. Five completed questionnaires were collected during the follow-up visit. Third, the researcher recruited 54 participants using the snowball method. Lastly, questionnaires were electronically mailed to the list-serve of the Chinese Student and Scholar Association at the university, and three completed questionnaires were returned via email. A total of 67 questionnaires were collected in the CC sample. For the overall sample, 140 questionnaires were collected through class visit (67.6%), 59 through snowballing (28.5%), 5 through a Bible study (2.4%), and 3 through email (1.4%).

Although participation was voluntary, two discrepancies occurred during the data collection. First, two instructors voluntarily offered extra credit points (ranging 2 to 5 points) for their students who participated (IC sample). Second, the researcher provided refreshments for a group of Chinese students *after* they returned their questionnaires, as a token of appreciation. This is a common way of expressing gratitude in the participants' and researcher's collectivist cultures. Refreshments were not mentioned to the participants during the data collection.

Questionnaire

To measure mediation techniques, a self-report method using a hypothetical scenario, as opposed to direct observation or experiment, was chosen for two reasons. First, the self-report method allows a researcher to explore the complex, multidimensional nature of interaction constructs (Metts, Sprecher, & Cupach, 1991). The context of this study is complicated to be manipulated through a controlled experiment (Metts et al., 1991). Second, due to the relative lack of research on informal mediation, participants were asked to express their ideas in their own words, instead of choosing from the existing list of mediation techniques.

The hypothetical scenario used in this study described an interpersonal conflict between an American student and an international student who are college roommates of same sex. There were six versions of the questionnaire to control nationality and sex: American-Chinese Male; American-Chinese Female; American-Taiwanese Male; American-Taiwanese Female; American-Korean Male; and American-Korean Female. For example, a Chinese female participant (as a third-party) was given an American-Chinese Female version questionnaire in which a conflict between an American female and a Chinese female was described (see Appendix A for the scenario). The nature of the relationship of the mediator to the disputants was always described as that of relative strangers. Participants were asked to provide at least three different methods of what they would do to help the disputants in the scenario. The scenario was written based on actual stories on campus and later evaluated as plausible by a former resident assistant and a former hall director. The current version of the scenario and the format of the questionnaire were finalized after several changes were made through a pilot study. To check the extent to which the participants perceived the scenario as realistic, the researcher asked the participants to indicate their perception, using a 5-point Likert scale: 1—"not realistic at all" and 5—"very realistic." Means on this scale are the following: the overall sample, 4.22 ($SD = .85$); IC sample, 4.34 ($SD = .83$); and CC sample, 3.98 ($SD = .87$). Thus, it is concluded that the research participants perceived the scenario in the questionnaire as highly realistic.

Analysis

Appendix A

Conflict Scenario (American-Chinese Female Version)

It is one week before the end of spring quarter. You are living in a residence hall on the South Green. Yang and Jamie are your next-door neighbors. Yang and Jamie have been roommates for about 20 weeks. Jamie is 19 years old. She is from Cincinnati, OH. Yang is 25 years old. Yang is from China. She has been in the U.S. for 2 years. Yang chose to live in the dorm in order to experience American culture. The three of you are not close friends, but when you see each other, you say hello and sometimes engage in casual conversation.

This quarter Jamie and Yang are having some problems. Jamie cannot stand that Yang has her friends in the room all the time. At the beginning of their life together as roommates, Jamie joined Yang and her friends from diverse countries (e.g., China, Japan, Argentina, and the U.S). However, as time passes, having 5 or 6 people in the room all the time creates some problems for Jamie, e.g., when Jamie tries to do her schoolwork in the room during the weekdays and when she wants to relax alone. Jamie talked to Yang about this once. Since then she has felt uncomfortable about bringing the topic up when the problem occurs.

Yang also has complaints. Jamie has a “significant other” who she has been going out with for 2 years. Jamie's significant other spends a lot of time (actually “too much time,” according to Yang) in Yang and Jamie's room. Occasionally, Jamie's significant other sleeps over. Although understanding American culture, Yang is so uncomfortable with this that she hasn't even tried to talk to Jamie about it.

When they first met, Yang and Jamie talked about rules for living together, but neither of them expected these kinds of problems. They do not know how to handle the situation. Therefore, Yang and Jamie ask you to help them solve their problem. That is, they want you to be a mediator to solve their interpersonal problem. To organize responses, several procedures were employed. First, the researcher examined the questionnaires and identified *responses* (the first level) as they emerged from the data without pre-set coding schema. Responses are the raw materials in the participants' own words, e.g., “I would talk to each to see the other's perspective.” A total of 618 responses were identified and gathered in a master list: IC sample, $n = 426$ (69%); CC sample, $n = 192$ (31%). Second, through a process of comparing and contrasting the 618 responses, the researcher categorized them into 35 mediation *techniques* (the second level). The response used earlier as an example would be categorized as “using empathy” as a technique. Then, to examine the reliability of the resulting coding scheme, a graduate student who was trained as a second coder examined the data set independently. The independent coder, a communication major, had some level of knowledge regarding conflict and conflict management. The researcher provided the coder with the purpose of the study and the list of 35 techniques that she came up with. Data collected through the pilot study were used for the coder training. The coder independently sorted the 618 responses into the 35 techniques. When there was a disagreement between the researcher and the coder, the two discussed until they reached an agreement. After the coder completed his coding, to examine the inter-coder reliability between the researcher and the independent coder, Cohen's kappa coefficient (Cohen, 1960) was computed, using the formula: $k = \frac{Po - Pc}{1 - Pc}$ (k = maximum kappa; Po = percent of

observed agreement; P_c = percent of agreement expected by chance). Inter-coder reliability was relatively high: Cohen's kappa = .87.

Lastly, the 35 techniques were sorted into the five *themes* (the third level) according to similarity of techniques. Now the technique of using empathy would be sorted into a theme of relationship-oriented. Since this study is exploratory, emphasis of the analysis was placed on the content of the techniques rather than the quantity of techniques composing each theme.

Results

RQ 1: Mediation Techniques in the Overall Sample

RQ 1 asked, "What mediation techniques would an informal intermediary use to help the disputants in an intercultural-interpersonal conflict?" As the result of analyses, 618 responses (first level), 35 techniques (second level), and 5 themes (third level) were identified. The answer to RQ 1 is organized through the final five themes: no involvement, passive mediation, disputants-active approach, mediator-active approach, and relationship-oriented approach (see Table 1 for details in Appendix B).

Appendix B

Table 1

Frequency Table for Mediation Techniques for Each Sample

| Techniques | Overall | Individualists | Collectivists |
|--|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| No Involvement | 8 (1.3%) | 3 (0.7%) | 5 (2.6%) |
| No involvement | 8 (1.3%) | 3 (0.7%) | 5 (2.6%) |
| Passive Mediation | 25 (4.0%) | 17 (4.0%) | 8 (4.2%) |
| Mediator's vague suggestion | 25 (4.0%) | 17 (4.0%) | 8 (4.2%) |
| Disputants-Active Approach | 221 (35.8%) | 174 (40.8%) | 47 (24.5%) |
| Have them talk about the problem | 81 (13.1%) | 62 (14.6%) | 19 (9.9%) |
| Have them set the rules | 79 (12.8%) | 61 (14.3%) | 18 (9.4%) |
| Have them talk about solutions | 19 (3.1%) | 16 (3.8%) | 3 (1.6%) |
| Have them make a list | 13 (2.1%) | 13 (3.1%) | — |
| Have them talk about common ground | 8 (1.3%) | 5 (1.2%) | 3 (1.6%) |
| Have them write a letter to each other | 7 (1.1%) | 6 (1.4%) | 1 (0.5%) |
| Have them talk about differences (culture) | 6 (1.0%) | 3 (0.7%) | 3 (1.6%) |

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| | | | |
|---|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Have them listen to each other's viewpoint | 5 (0.8%) | 5 (1.2%) | — |
| Have them use a game | 3 (0.5%) | 3 (0.7%) | — |
| Mediator-Active Approach | 270 (43.7%) | 186 (43.7%) | 84 (43.8%) |
| Tell each or both to change/compromise | 88 (14.2%) | 72 (16.9%) | 16 (8.3%) |
| Tell them to move out or get a different roommate | 32 (5.2%) | 14 (3.3%) | 18 (9.4%) |
| Meet with them separately | 29 (4.7%) | 17 (4.0%) | 12 (6.4%) |
| Meet with them together | 26 (4.3%) | 20 (4.7%) | 6 (3.1%) |
| Gather information | 23 (3.7%) | 11 (2.6%) | 12 (6.3%) |
| Use another third party | 12 (1.9%) | 11 (2.6%) | 1 (0.5%) |
| Tell them to get tough and deal with it | 10 (1.6%) | 5 (1.2%) | 5 (2.6%) |
| Analyze the situation | 9 (1.5%) | 7 (1.6%) | 2 (1.0%) |
| Tell them to ignore it | 9 (1.5%) | 8 (1.9%) | 1 (0.5%) |
| Criticize Jamie or Yang; scold | 7 (1.1%) | 6 (1.4%) | 1 (0.5%) |
| Monitor if the agreement works: follow-up | 7 (1.1%) | 6 (1.4%) | 1 (0.5%) |
| Educate the disputants: culture | 7 (1.1%) | 1 (0.2%) | 6 (3.1%) |
| Force them to reach an agreement | 4 (0.6%) | 3 (0.7%) | 1 (0.5%) |
| Side one side | 3 (0.5%) | 3 (0.7%) | — |
| Have them sign a written agreement | 2 (0.3%) | 2 (0.5%) | — |
| Use others' examples | 2 (0.3%) | — | 2 (1.0%) |
| Relationship-Oriented Approach | 94 (15.2%) | 46 (10.8%) | 48 (25.0%) |
| Call for respect for each other | 20 (3.2%) | 12 (2.8%) | 8 (4.2%) |
| Create a good environment | 18 (2.9%) | 12 (2.8%) | 6 (3.1%) |
| Tell them to enhance communication | 18 (2.9%) | 9 (2.1%) | 9 (4.7%) |

| | | | |
|---|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Call for empathy | 17 (2.8%) | 13 (3.1%) | 4 (2.1%) |
| Invite them to a social gathering | 13 (2.1%) | — | 13 (6.8%) |
| Stress the importance of the relationship | 6 (1.0%) | — | 6 (3.1%) |
| Tell them to spend more time together | 1 (0.2%) | — | 1 (0.5%) |
| Tell them to forgive each other | 1 (0.2%) | — | 1 (0.5%) |
| Total | 618 (100%) | 426 (100%) | 192 (100%) |

No Involvement.

“No involvement” refers to responses indicating that the participants would not be involved in the situation as a third-party. Some directly expressed their refusal with or without reasons for their decision: “I’d most likely not get involved”; “I’d not help because they need to figure it out on their own”; and “Since they are adults and they should know what they need to do unless they don’t want [to solve the problem].” Others expressed their refusal in rather indirect ways: “I’d just joke about this and postpone to solve the problem”; “I’d try to listen and be a friend to them”; and “I’d just tell them it’s gonna be all right.” These participants seemed uncomfortable or uncertain about what to do and thus were unwilling to get involved.

One participant argued that the scenario presented in the questionnaire did not constitute a conflict: “I’d tell them that there are no principal conflicts between them.” Therefore, there was no reason for him to be a mediator. A couple of possibilities were explored to interpret his response. First, the response exemplifies that people define conflict differently in different cultures and different perspectives in defining the conflict episode direct different goals and different ways of managing conflict (Ting-Toomy&Oetzel, 2001). Given that the participant was a collectivist and that no individualist participants expressed the same concern, the response might have reflected his cultural view of conflict: The situation described in the scenario was not serious enough to be considered as a conflict. Second, the relationship between the disputants in the scenario was described as roommates, which some participants explicitly distinguished from friendship. Roommates share the living environment, and thus it is inevitable to have their differences collide; yet, since group harmony is highly valued in a collectivistic culture, those differences are not something that they have to solve, but something to endure; thus, the situation is not a conflict. Interestingly, defining the relationship between the disputants was important also in other themes for quite a few participants tried to define the nature of the relationship to decide what to do to help the disputants.

Although the first theme represented only a small portion of the overall cases ($n = 8$, 1.3% of the master list), it was decided that refusing to mediate has significance and therefore has to be categorized independently. Essentially, this theme reflects a belief about conflicts: Disputants in a conflict (at least in this particular conflict) should be capable of managing the problem for themselves. To better understand the reasons behind the refusal, however, some other factors also need to be considered. For example, uncertainty resulted from the intercultural

setting might have doubled participants' discomfort of getting involved in an already uncomfortable situation—personal conflict between relative strangers.

Passive Mediation.

“Passive mediation” refers to techniques involving the mediator making vague suggestions to the disputants rather than specific directions or methods to take action. Responses categorized in this theme represent the *principles*, rather than concrete actions, that would guide the participants for their role as mediator, e.g., “I’d be realistic toward helping them make goals with each other” and “I’d take the situation seriously; if not, one of them could be offended.” One participant listed three methods which provide manners where the mediator can or should behave in the process of mediation: “I’d be polite because it is the only way it will work”; “I’d be congenial because it is easy to adapt to others that way”; and “I’d be in a good manner and not raise my voice.” Although these participants did not indicate specific methods, they were aware of their role as an intermediary: to smooth the way or to provide safe environment where the disputants can discuss issues without embarrassment (Condon & Yousef, cited in Ma, 1992).

Another group of responses in this theme involved offering general advice: “I’d give a few suggestions myself”; “I’d tell them this is an experience”; “I’d tell something based on my experience to both Jamie and Yang”; “I’d tell them what I think and feel if I were in each of their situation”; and “I’d tell them what I would do if I were one of them.” Although a bit more directional than the group described above, these responses are relatively vague and still do not specify the details of their advice or suggestions, compared to responses, such as “I would tell them to move out” (as in Mediator-Active Approach) and “I would tell them to respect each other” (as in Relationship-Oriented Approach).

In this theme, while the mediator expressed concerns for the situation and/or the disputants, what was stated was not specific or clear in regards to *how* the mediator would help the disputants or *what* the mediator would do. Thus, this category is named as passive mediation. Admittedly, the title of this theme, *passive* mediation, might carry negative connotation, particularly in the U.S. Yet, in some cultures, the term *passive* can be interpreted in a positive way, or at least in an objective way. Wall et al. (1995) reported that occasionally, third-parties assume a passive role, instead of taking charge. In this study, the term *passive* connotes neither negative nor positive. Rather, the term reflects the nature of advice or the level of involvement of mediators. A total of 25 responses (4.0%) were categorized as composing this theme.

Disputants-Active Approach.

The theme of “disputants-active” approach encompasses cases in which the participants, i.e., the mediator, would challenge the disputants to work things out themselves. In these cases, the mediator become more involved than in the previous two themes by suggesting specific directions about what to do. Still, the key actors were the disputants, not the mediator. The participants described their role in this theme as *bridge* or *catalyst* between the two disputants.

The most distinguishing aspect of responses in this theme is the participant’s emphasis on open, honest communication between the disputants: “I’d tell them to be straightforward with each other because holding the problems makes it worse”; and “I’d first ask them to tell each other what is bothering them.” In these cases, the participants highlighted the importance of ‘putting everything on the table’ as the initial steppingstone to solve the problem. The second and the third most frequently mentioned techniques were found in this theme: to have the disputants talk about their problem and feelings ($n = 81$, 13.1%) and to have them set the rules ($n = 79$, 12.8%). Among the different suggestions, establishing the rules and time arrangement seems to be the easiest and simplest solution to the problem: “I’d tell them to assign a time to see

their friend or girlfriend”; “I’d try to establish rules where both parties are aware of what can and cannot be done”; and “I would tell them to set up strict rules and time schedule such as when to party and when to sleep.” One participant even pointed out the violation of *shared* rules at the beginning of the quarter as a source of a problem: “I’d try to let them remind of the rules they talked about when they first met, so [they can] reflect both have been wrong. It may help them to cool down and they may talk to get [to] any negotiable points.” Other techniques in this approach are having the disputants make a list of things each wanted, having them listen to each other’s point of view, having them find common grounds, and having them talk about differences.

Although not frequently mentioned, two techniques provide an opportunity to ponder. First, while facilitating communication between the disputants, participants touched upon different communication channels, such as emails and online chatting. Emails were mentioned as a method to *initiate* problem-solving talks between the disputants, which eventually would be followed by the face-to-face confrontation. This tactic could help disputants reduce awkwardness or unease and be particularly useful among the young who are familiar with technologies. Thus, this new communication mode might serve the disputants to give and save their face. Second, one participant, an individualist, suggested to use games to make decisions: “I’d tell them to wrestle over it” and “I’d tell them to flip a coin every time they have a dispute.” Although he might sound frivolous, not taking the situation seriously, it was worthy of note: displaying a common attitude to a conflict: rule-based competitions where it is clear who wins and who loses.

Responses in this theme provide clear directions to manage the conflict. Participants emphasized the importance of communication between the disputants, playing a role as bridge or facilitator. Communication focuses on between the disputants and *their* own problem-solving efforts. The mediator maintains a proper distance from the situation or the disputants while, nonetheless, trying to help them. This point will become clearer when this theme is compared with the next two themes. A total of 221 (35.8%) responses were categorized into this theme.

Mediator-Active Approach.

The “mediator-active” approach encompasses techniques the mediator would use to play an active role in the situation. The participants would tell directly each disputant what to do or what not to do: “I’d tell Yang to have people over when Jamie is in class”; “I’d tell Jamie to study in the library”; and “I’d tell Jamie that his girlfriend can only sleep over on the weekends.” In fact, telling the disputants to change their behaviors is the most frequently mentioned technique in the overall sample of mediation techniques. Other techniques include gathering information from each party to grasp the situation, analyzing the situation, and using another third-party, e.g., a RA or a counselor. It seems to be important for the mediator to listen to both disputants to gather information: “I’d ask each of them to explain their side of the dispute.” While gathering information, some participants expressed their concerns not only for factual information but also for emotional aspects: “I’d ask Yang what his feelings are about the way the living conditions are being handled, we would hear his side and why he feels this way, and then I would ask Jamie the same and he would tell his side.” The term, *investigator*, seems to capture the nature of responses and techniques in this theme: active engagement in the situation through listening to both parties, collecting information (facts and emotions), evaluating information, and prescribing disputants what to do. This demonstrates the essential difference from the disputants-active approach where the mediator functions as *bridge or facilitator or catalyst*.

Reaching an agreement is another major concern for the mediators in this category. Two techniques directly state this concern. First, the idea of finding a solution seemed to be prevalent: “I’d have them reach an agreement”; “I’d tell them to make a contract or agreement”; and “I’d

have them propose fair solutions until the other is agreed upon.” Some participants said that they would even *force* the disputants to reach an agreement: “I’d tell them to talk about it in front of me so I could act as a *referee* and make sure everything stays in line.” Second, some participants mentioned that they would go further by monitoring whether the agreement worked and/or would be carried out in the future: “I’d have a 2-week trial period to see if it [agreement] works”; “I’d ask both how they feel after the implementation of the new rules”; and “If the plan doesn’t work, then [I’d] try a new one.” Here Young’s (1972) supervisory functions are at work. One participant showed her willingness to get involved with the disputants for a fairly extended period of time: “After a few months, I’d ask them if they can accept the change. If they can, it will be great. If they cannot, I’d ask the reason. Then, I’d try to get them together to discuss the problem.” Siding with and criticizing one party are also identified in this theme: “I’d tell Jamie that Yang feels uncomfortable when his girlfriend sleeps over”; “I’d tell Jamie she should be more conscious of Yang’s feelings”; and “I’d suggest Yang not be so insensitive.”

Defining the relationship between the disputants seems to be key to the mediator’s analysis of the situation as mentioned earlier. The participants clearly pointed out the relationship *was not friends, but roommates*: “I’d first explain the difference between friendship and roommates and define this as a roommate issue so [they] don’t take it personally.” The definition of relationship then determines how to manage the situation. Focus is on the issues at hand, not the relationship, which seems to be consistent with the overall atmosphere of the theme: communication of problem-solving or task-oriented. The goal of meeting with the disputants separately or together and gathering information is to do finish their task, to evaluate the situation through investigation and find a way to resolve a conflict. Wall et al. (1995), by comparison, categorized the same response, meeting with them separately or together, as relationship-oriented. In this study, the feature of task-oriented/problem-solving communication distinguishes the mediator-active approach from the relationship-oriented approach.

However, there is a group of techniques that deviates from this feature: “I’d tell them to ignore it as the quarter is almost over”; “I’d tell them to get tough and deal with it”; “I’d tell them to grow up”; and “I’d ask Jamie if he wants to move to another apartment.” These techniques are categorized in this theme because the mediator directly and specifically tells the disputants what to do. Too direct and too specific, they almost sound like an order. However, the mediator does not focus on solving the problem at hand; he or she merely suggests that the disputants toughen up just to make it until time runs out. Two factors are considered as what might have contributed to these responses. First, the temporal context of the scenario (the end of the quarter) might have contributed most to these responses. Since only one week is left in the scenario, it might seem unnecessary to invest efforts to make things better between the strangers. Second, defining the relationship as roommates is another possible factor. Thus, given that the disputants are not friends and that only a week is left, mediators simply suggested that the disputants deal with the situation until the last day together. A total of 270 (43.7%) responses were identified as the mediator-active approach.

Relationship-Oriented Approach.

The “relationship-oriented” approach refers to the mediator’s particular concerns for the relationship between the disputants. Similar to techniques in the disputants-active and the mediator-active approaches, communication is key among the tactics in this category. However, here, communication is underlined in a more general sense, focusing not only on problem-solving but also on ways of relating to each other. For example, enhancing everyday communication (e.g., setting a time for group meetings on a regular basis) and spending more

time together (e.g., doing things together), compared to talking about the issue and feelings in other themes, were identified as the concern for the relationship between the disputants.

The technique of creating a good environment includes responses where mediators emphasize positive atmosphere or nonviolence during the interaction, e.g., calming down the disputants, and using humor or jokes to lighten the interaction: “I’d help them talk things through without fighting”; “I’d let them work it out by themselves, but just [I would] be there in case it gets a little heated an to help them stay somewhat calm”; “I’d keep the other person from interrupting as each person tells their side”; and “I’d tell them to always stay calm when they get upset with one another. Screaming and rage won’t help the situation.” Participants seemed to be aware of needs to control feelings or emotions involved in conflict and even expect emotional episodes along the way although emotional aspects of disputants were not described in the scenario at all. Calling for empathy and respect for each other were also cited: “I’d go over how the other person feel”; “I’d ask them to think from the point of view of the other party”; “I’d tell them to be more tolerant to each other, no one is perfect. And understanding is helpful to got along with each other”; “I’d tell them to consider each other’s lives and learn to accommodate to each other”; and “I’d tell them to respect each other at all time.”

Some responses capture the core of the relationship-oriented approach. These participants mentioned that they would host social gatherings (e.g., parties, dinners, and picnics) for the disputants along with others. Yet, the purpose of these gatherings is *not* to reconcile the dispute; rather, those meetings are to create a place where the disputants could *hang out* together and others while forgetting the problem for a while. One participant testified to this idea:

I would invite Jamie and Yang to join a dinner with me and one of my best friends. I would not tell my friend the situation about Jamie and Yang. All we do are just enjoy gourmand food and talk about something fun. Just like snoop around girls.

Social gatherings are to ease the tension between the disputants, to provide psychological comfort, and to create a safe, light environment in which the disputants get together *before* examining their current situation. The participant explained the idea behind the gatherings: “Going out and having fun together could be a good way to break the ice for their current relationship.” Yet, the role as mediator is not forgotten. She would gradually get to the task.

At the later event, she would bring up the issue: “Maybe they and me [sic] could sit and talk about their problems.” She wanted to make sure that three of them spend enough time to rejuvenate the disputants’ relationship before they get to the business. It takes more time and effort to accomplish this dual goal, but the mediator is willing to invest her time and efforts to host series of social events. The level of involvement of the mediator is greatly extended. Others directly stress the importance of the relationship: “I’d talk to them that it is very important to keep a good relationship between two roommates”; “I’d let them know both of them care about the relationship”; and “I’d tell them harmony is important for people living together.” To forgive each other, directly or indirectly mentioning the issues at hand, was also identified.

Different communication channels are mentioned also in this theme, similarly in the disputants-active approach. This time it is more clearly stated that the use of emails is to restore the relationship. Although the participant who would host BBQ parties mentioned that after several gatherings she would gradually try to talk with the disputants about the problem, she was rather skeptical of making the disputants confront each other face-to-face and offered to use online chatting room for discussion:

I would invites Jamie and Yang to join my chat room on the Net. Then we would talk about their problem together. The way people interact with each other in the Cyber space is kind of different from the way they talk in the real world. First, one can see and hear each other [in face-to-face talk]. Even you [do not] show angry expression on

your face, others still tell your feelings[in face-to-face talk]. Type-to-talk [online] could ease some tension between people who have problems [in] relationship.

Being able to not show anger on face and in voice, people can not only save their own face by keeping poise and staying calm but also make the other party feel comfortable in an uneasy interaction (simultaneous face-giving and face-saving). This response could be categorized as talking with the disputants together in the mediator-active approach. However, what makes this response unique was the purpose of using an online chatting room: making the disputants comfortable. Thus, this technique was categorized as relationship-oriented. A total of 94 (15.2%) responses were categorized in this theme. Thus far, mediation techniques for the overall sample are discussed. In the following section, the results of two sub-samples comparison are discussed.

RQ 2: Comparison between IC Sample and CC Sample

RQ 2 asked how the IC sample and the CC sample are different regarding mediation techniques. Although no statistical analysis was conducted, several similarities and differences emerged between the two sub-samples. The rank of frequency of the five themes is the following: IC sample, the mediator-active ($n = 186$, 43.7% of the total tactics found within the IC sample), the disputants-active ($n = 174$, 40.8%), the relationship-oriented ($n = 94$, 15.2%), passive involvement ($n = 17$, 4.0%), and no involvement ($n = 3$, 0.7%); CC sample, the mediator-active ($n = 84$, 43.8% of the total tactics found within the CC sample), the relationship-oriented ($n = 48$, 25.0%), the disputants-active ($n = 47$, 24.5%), passive involvement ($n = 8$, 4.2%), and no involvement ($n = 5$, 2.6%). (See Table 1 in Appendix B for comparison.) The difference between the two samples in rank is the concern for the disputants' relationship with the other themes in the same order. In addition to the higher rank for the relationship-oriented, collectivists put more weight on the relationship: In the IC sample, the disputants-active (40.8%) and the relationship-oriented (15.2%) approaches show a big gap in their percentage; in contrast, in the CC sample, the two approaches are similar, 25% and 24.5% respectively. This seems to be consistent with characteristics of individualism and collectivism.

Collectivists' focus on the relational aspect is demonstrated in other forms. Two techniques within the relationship-oriented theme, hosting social gatherings where participants indicated the long-term commitment with extended time and effort and forgiving where the relationship itself seems to be more important than the problem at hand, were mentioned only in the CC sample. This well reflects the collectivist's emphasis on harmony within the community. Although indirect and rare, some signs of concerns for relationships were identified also in the IC sample: "They both seem like rational people. If that [talking with the two disputants] fails, [they] just keep being nice about it, make the best of the quarter until you move out. Then trade some stuff"; and "I'd tell them to relax. Your time together is short."

Have the disputants make a list of things that bothered them, have them listen to each other's point of view, have them use a game, siding with either of them, and have them sign a written agreement were listed only by the IC participants. Use others' conflict examples, invite them to a social gathering, stress the importance of the relationship and harmony, tell them to spend more time together, and tell them to forgive each other were found only in the CC sample. These differences seem to reflect the characteristics of each culture. Having them make a list and sign a written agreement appears to reflect the low-context culture's feature, being explicit, direct, and specific. Suggesting to "flip a coin" or to "wrestle over" for a serious matter is a reflection of a sense of humor that is rare to be found in cultures like China, Taiwan, or Korea. These responses also mirror the attitude of the individualistic culture: value on competition. That

is, in games, it is judged who wins and who loses. This response in the IC sample presents a clear contrast to those focusing on the importance of relationships within the CC sample.

Pattern of involvement of another third-party is a difference between the two samples. Individualists listed *formal* positions in referring to another third-party, such as a resident assistant at the dorm or school counselors or therapist. The reason for this choice is to have “someone with more experience with conflict.” Also someone with similar experience as disputants is recommended by some participants: “I’d recommend that they possibly talk to someone else who has had similar problems and see how they were able to work things out.” It seems that for the IC sample the mediator’s qualification, in the form of formal position, authority, experience, or expertise, is important. By comparison, collectivists recommend *informal* persons, such as mutual friends. This difference concurs with the research finding that mediators in China are quite familiar with disputants unlike in the western cultures (Wall et al., 2001). The mediator’s relationship with the disputants is a more important factor to be considered than the mediator’s formal position or expertise. This might explain how the mediator is willing to invest his/her own time and effort for an extended period to help disputants. Differences in tone of responses are also noticeable. Responses from the IC participants were direct and blunt, e.g., “I’d tell them to get tough and deal with it” and “I’d tell them to move out.” In contrast, responses from the CC participants were rather indirect and soft: “I’d tell them to hang in there until the quarter is over”; “I’d suggest they move out from the dorm and live in the apartment where they can have their own rooms. I think this can give both of them privacy.”

It was rather surprising that the CC sample showed a greater frequency for the “no involvement” approach than the IC sample. Given the cultural characteristic of each culture, it was expected that collectivists would tend to get involved with each other’s life. The conflict context described in the questionnaire might have contributed to this unexpected finding. Collectivists are influenced by the context and the relationship: With an outgroup member, e.g., strangers, collectivists tend to be more independent than with an ingroup member, e.g., family; individualists are not concerned with the matter (Oetzel, 1998). The collectivist participants might have perceived the scenario as an outgroup situation: Everyone involved in the scenario was depicted as relative strangers, and one disputant in the scenario was an outgroup member.

Discussion

The results of analyses in this study provide theoretical and practical implications for the intercultural conflict management. First, the most interesting findings are the five themes emergent from the mediation techniques: no involvement, passive mediation, disputants-oriented, mediator-oriented, and relationship-oriented. Labeled according to the characteristics of techniques composing each, the five themes are found to be on the continuum of level of involvement and commitment of an intermediary: Involvement and commitment increase from none as in no-involvement to high as in relationship-oriented approach. The expressions used by the participants exactly mirror this pattern. A *bridge* or *go-between* was used in responses of the disputants-active approach whereas a *referee* was employed in the mediator-active approach. Although the relationship-oriented approach might appear to be a different dimension from the rest, a careful examination of responses within the theme assures the essence of the theme, the mediator’s highest commitment among the five categories. In addition to the task of solving the problem, techniques in this theme demonstrate the mediator’s deep concerns for the relationship in general (emphasizing the importance of life with others), constructive ways of handling the current situation and the disputants’ future relationship (calling for empathy and respect), and willingness to involve for an extended period of time to recover the disputants’ relationship

(hosting social gatherings for the disputants and monitoring the situation in the future). These findings are not surprising. Scholars have identified tactics where mediators take steps to smooth the relationship (Abu-Nimer, 1996), building trust between the disputants (Landau & Landau, 1997), and calling for apologies (Umbreit, 1993).

Second, the findings of this study are consistent with those of the previous studies. With no pre-established coding scheme, many tactics in this study are similar to those of Wall and his colleagues' work, e.g., write an agreement, meet with the disputants together and/or separately, use humor or lightness, use examples, ask for another third-party, and gather information. The present study also supports previous research in that the mediator help the parties to develop new norms and assist them in implementing their agreement, e.g., "define the relationship as roommates," "set the new rules," "reach an agreement," and "monitor if the agreement works" (Maley, 1995). Some techniques concur with the functions of formal intermediaries (Young, 1972): information function, e.g., gathering information from the disputants; supervisory function, e.g., monitoring; tactical function, e.g., setting the new rules; and reconceptualization function, e.g., defining the relationship between the disputants.

Third, this study makes its own unique contributions to mediation studies as exploratory research for informal mediation. Despite the similarity in labeling for the mediation techniques, careful examinations of Wall and his colleagues' categories and the techniques identified in this study reveal certain distinctions. The mediators were given more *power* or *authority* in their research. For example, the "disputants oriented" category refers to tactics where mediators not only provide the disputants with information but also press them with threats or punishment (Wall et al., 2001). "Educate/advise/persuade the disputants" is one of the most frequently used tactics in Wall and his colleagues' research and mediators are not construed as neutral when using those tactics. In contrast, the techniques emerged in this study did not imply *power* or *authority* of a mediator. The disputant-active approach refers to techniques where a mediator puts the disputants in charge to find solutions on their own. The participants did not seem to give themselves much power even within the mediator-active approach despite the greater involvement or commitment than in the disputants-active approach. Although reaching an agreement was the major concern as a third-party, the participants in this study would not press the disputants, with an exception of the respondents who used the term *force*. These differences between the present study and previous research are comprehensible when the context of mediation is considered: formal vs. informal. Most previous research has focused on formal mediation where mediators are given certain type of authority. In some cultures, e.g., the U.S., this authority might be based on knowledge or training. In other cultures, e.g., China, authority might come from a mediator's reputation as a respected community leader. In contrast, mediators in this study were as ordinary as the disputants. They have no knowledge, no formal training, and no societal reputation. Also the participants' involvement as mediator in this study was voluntary whereas formal mediations are not voluntary.

Fourth, the differences in mediation techniques between the IC sample and the CC sample provide worthy discussion. Some techniques appeared only in either of the two samples: making a list, signing a written agreement, and using a game (IC sample); hosting social events, underlying the importance of the relationship, and asking to forgive each other (CC sample). Techniques identified in the IC sample seem to reflect characteristics of low-context (being explicit), bound through contracts (written), and a different sense of humor (using a game) in individualistic cultures, or at least in the U.S. Techniques identified in the CC sample also mirror

a central aspect of collectivism, importance of relating to others. Thus, it is not surprising that the relational-oriented approach is where the IC sample and the CC sample differ most.

Although not common in the western cultures, mediation is a useful common practice in many other cultures. Particularly in China, not only is mediation used extensively, but also it seems to work: 85% of the disputes in China are resolved through mediation (Wall et al., 2001). The results in this study demonstrate the possibility of mediation, e.g., participants' willingness to involve regardless of their cultures, and the utility of mediation, e.g., a way of saving and giving face in intercultural conflict. Given these advantages, workability of informal mediation seems more appealing than that of formal mediation. Informal mediation might save disputants' face, time and money. To better understand informal mediation, in future research, contextual variables, such as the nature of the relationship between the disputants and the mediator, e.g., work place, family, and friends, and the nature of a conflict, e.g., fundamental cultural differences, are to be explored more systematically.

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