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How People Handle Intercultural Conflict via Social Media vs. in Person

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to understand intercultural conflict as people experience it through technologically mediated communication; through social media. The literature reviews many studies that help understand how conflict arises and is manage, what it is like to experience intercultural conflict in a face-to-face environment and how to manage those differences, and lastly with conflict experienced through social media. With the research question: how do participants describe their experiences of intercultural conflict in social media as similar to and different from their experiences of in-person intercultural conflict? The findings of this research conclude that participants would distinguish their experiences through personal connections, interactive justification, personal dependencies, and if the conflict is appropriate for the medium.
How People Handle Intercultural Conflict via Social Media vs. in Person

Imagine the day in where someone had to wait for the morning newspaper to know what was going in either your city, state, country, or even what was going on globally. Now imagine yourself tuned into what is going on nationally and globally in the comfort of your own home. To open your computer to Facebook, Twitter, other social media cites, and you are now tuned to the latest conflicts going on. You are somehow now more prone to having more easy access to conflicts among your friends, family, acquaintances, or even just individuals you do not necessarily know. You are now behind a screen commenting on social justice issues like the post about the Dakota Access Pipeline because you do not agree with an oil company building on Native American land. What occurs then as you are typing away behind a computer screen? Is this how you felt when a peer had brought up the issue during a class discussion on the issue, but did you not mention your point of view because there were more people who believed that they were over exaggerating with this protest? Now we are faced with a cultural conflict, we are faced with one culture believing that building and creating is far beyond the caring of nature itself. The bigger issue, amidst the intercultural conflict, is understanding why it was much easier to vocalize your beliefs over social media versus in an in-person discussion.

Being a person who considers herself bicultural in every aspect of the meaning, it is easy to be swayed by ones’ own beliefs and/or values. Speaking from firsthand experience, there are many instances through my own childhood where my parents would encounter certain situations when there was conflict due to miscommunication or one party not understanding the cultures of the other. What this tends to look like is what I had you imagine in the beginning of this paper. Most of my encounters had to do with the rights, the wrongs, and the religious values of my Mexican culture in America. This is what focuses my scope on intercultural conflict because in
addition to being a bicultural individual, I also identity myself as a millennial who grew up with electronics and social media. Studies that have focused on exploring intercultural conflict have seemed to pay little, to no attention to the expression of conflict via social media versus face-to-face.

**Literature Review**

The phenomenon of conflict among cultures is interesting in the sense that both parties normally feel as if the other party is actively acting against one’s personal norms, values, and/or beliefs. As experiences differ person to person, multilayered and complex that it is what makes this notion of conflict interesting. Leading to an overall question on how do individuals from different cultures adapt to the new era of social media and still manage conflict? Something that most researchers tend to overlook when talking about intercultural conflict is the social media aspect and how it virtualizes and give voice to those who would not normally state their points of views face-to-face (Browne, Stack, and Ziyadah, 2015).

Many studies have explored intercultural conflict, though fewer have examined ways conflict’s expression or mediation compare across face-to-face settings (e.g., a classroom) versus on a social media platform (e.g., Facebook). Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012) defined intercultural conflict as “the implicit or explicit emotional struggle or frustration between persons of different cultures over perceived incompatible values, norms, face orientations, goals, scarce resources, processes, and/or outcomes in a communication situation” (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2012) As there is a lack of sense on how we seem to express this conflict, much of what will be research would be the effect of face to face and social media interactions when these intercultural conflicts seem to arise. In order to go forth with what we know about conflict, we must understand what has been noted in research as good conflict management.
Conflict Management

Conflict is seen to be a “disagreement process between two interdependent parties over incompatible goals and the interference each perceives from the other in her or his effort to achieve those goals” (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2012), and in a way it is this disagreement that we all tend to lead the rest of our interaction with one another. Eliason (2014) talks about groups/teams and confrontation as a whole, giving insight to the notion that not every conflict needs confrontation and that only in some circumstances is conflict needed to find common ground among individuals and/or groups. Throughout much of his quest to give some sort of meaning to the management of conflict vs. confrontations, he calls them the seven core beliefs in conflict management (Eliason, 2014). These seven core beliefs are: conflict is normal in close relationships, healthy relationships can’t be built on compromise-collaboration is key, a commitment to honesty, high stress lowers our tolerance for conflict, spiritual resources are vital, managing methods vary with cultures, and lastly disagreements can be an opportunity to build one another up (Eliason, 2014). Looking into the deeper meanings of each of these seven core beliefs, each of them play a particular role in understanding the cultural other. For example, all of the first six beliefs can be said that they are needed in order to reach the ultimate goal of the conflict being an opportunity to build each other up.

In a similar sense Bennett (2003) follows a similar way to manage conflict in terms of development of intercultural competence. She focused on the classroom setting and students in particular, paying special attention to the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS). The breakdown of DMIS is based on potential progression through two broad stages: Ethnocentric and Ethnorelative stages. Within both of these stages are sub-stages that seem to show our competence levels in regards to intercultural settings. Ethnocentric is “one’s own
culture is experienced as central to reality in some way…they reflect the worldview of difference-avoiders” (Bennette, p. 164) and with this there are three sub-stages that help with understand the stage overall; Denial, Defense, and Minimization. These sub-stages are what could be considered the idealistic views of an individual as denial works with the idea that our culture is the only true culture, defense is when one seems to differentiate other cultures being inferior, while minimization is kind of viewed as progress as they try to find similarities, but still holding onto the notion that our cultures way is better (Bennett, 2003). Progressing toward the second stage of DMIS, ethnorelative as “one’s own culture is experience in the context of other cultures; these stages reflect the worldview of difference-seekers” and is what is needed to achieve full intercultural competence (Bennett, p. 165). Taking into consideration the points that Bennette makes in the creating a connection from someone’s own culture with another, pointing out what are good ways to mediate intercultural conflict, or in other words reduce conflict.

**Conflict Experienced Across Cultural Lines**

When thinking of conflicts experienced across cultural lines you can think of people who do not seem to agree due to their beliefs and/or what they have been brought up to believe. One way to examine these differences and how they seem to manage their cultural differences and conflicts that arise from these cultural differences are through qualitative research done by Barker and Tili (2015) emphasizing that conflicting in communication is often theorized and has not been explored to its full potential (Barker and Tili, 2015). An assertion that seems to be very plausible as they went out and interviewed intercultural couples and what seems to be the biggest obstacles in their marriage.

A great addition to Barker and Tili’s research would be, what Ting-Toomey and Chung (2012) put as flexible intercultural conflict skills. These flexible intercultural conflict skills are
ways in which you adapt your cultural biases and create a way of communication that helps you understand the individual who does not come from the same cultural background as yourself. There is facework that can be defined as a way that we protect our own communication identity and in addition protect that of the opposing party, as well (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2012). A reason that this research is important is that you can see where individualistic or collectivistic cultures can differ and create intercultural conflict. An individualistic culture could be seen as a culture that emphasizes the importance of the individual and not the group, while collectivistic culture tends to emphasize the group and not just the individual (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2012). In Barker and Tili’s (2015) words when conflict is experienced across cultural lines they are trying to actively create a new culture (Barker and Tili, 2015). What this tends to look like if conflict is at a minimal and like these marriages they are trying to create a negotiation of face. When speaking in regards to face, face is “the socially approved self-image and other image consideration issues…it can be about give and take respect and disrespect… or it is about hone and shame belief and value systems,” (Ting-Toomey and Chung, p. 195). These intercultural marriages seemed to share some similarities when talking about the conflicts which they have faced over the time of their marriages. Bennett (2003) states that in order to combat these differences, one must accept that there are such differences and finding some sort of common ground in order to reach to reach the level of adaptation and integrations (Bennett, 2003). As one couple argued that one was more opened to talking about feelings and talking about problems, the other would walk away and/or avoid the conversation in which feelings or problems would be expressed (Barker and Tili, 2015). Many of the interviewees had agreed that marrying someone outside of their culture seemed to close a gap in their minds, kind of going back to DMIS model and their ethnocentric views were starting to become more ethnorelative, thanks to
the cultural conflicts that would occur with their significant others during the beginning of their marriages. As one of the biggest problems when talking about conflict across cultural lines, Barker and Tili (2015) touch on the importance and impact of language as many of the interviewees had decided to neutralize their native tongue to best suit the family for they were in America. This could also be seen as sense making or creating some sort of mindful listening, when couples are able to listen to each other and figure out what is important to the both of them. There were a couple of the spouses that spoke their native tongues at home and what this ended up creating was that some messages were not being clearly explained, but in the same sense that their spouses wanted to work with them to better communicate their ideas that way conflict could be avoided (Barker and Tili, 2015).

**Conflict Experienced Face to Face vs. via Social Media**

Studies have shown how conflict could be experienced in intercultural settings with a medium of face-to-face, but have not yet to emphasize the parallels of that experience in a social media context. As face-to-face interaction is seen as an ideal means of effective communication, it is also now seen as an older way of communication. As social media makes its way into the everyday lives of most individuals around the world, it is also a way of channeling conflict across borders and cultural communities within the same geographic location. As an approach by Malachy Browne, Liam Stack and Mohammed Ziyadah (2015) argued, we are emerged in a conversation with a host. It was here that they spoke in regards to the use of social media and what it was to address conflict in this day-in-age. As cultural conflict and conflict in general seem to be the headlines of most of social media it is easier to create an audience which either agrees or disagrees with what they are either seeing on a computer screen or reading from live tweets (Browne et al., 2015). As they have broken the notion of time and space, they are quickly
emerging themselves in an intercultural conflict in which they are disregarding any type of mindful listening techniques and are pushing the dominating (competitive/controlling) style of conflict. What this means is that there is a sense of aggression, defensiveness, control, and intimidation in order to push one’s position/interest above the other person position/interest (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2012). Making valid points that they are able to address and issue to many people around the world, they are able to raise cultural issues around the world thanks to people like news-reporters or even civilians who believe that an injustice is occurring. As social media seems to take a more active role in these three men lives in addressing conflict there are many others that either consider social media and/or virtual platforms as “third space in between conflict parties” or talking about the “traditional setting of an interpersonal setting…Computer-mediated communication (CMC) or Face-to-Face (FTF)” (Sützl, 2016; Meluch and Walter, 2012). Both of these terms and definitions bring forth the notion that it may be that there is no significant difference in FTF and CMC (Meluch and Walter, 2012). As these three researches seem to take different paths later in their findings, they share an idea that seems to be very captivating in a way that both address the issue of arguing and conflict (Sützl, 2016; Meluch and Walter, 2012). Meluch and Walter (2012) seem to say that spaces like social media are mediums to bring people together that would not have done so on their own, yet they also argue that most of the conflicts that arise within those settings are merely arguments and not conflicts. While on the other hand Sützl seems to believe that “conflict is inevitable, and was in face considered essential part of life…and an obviation of conflict is neither possible nor desirable” (Sützl, 2016).
The purpose of this study is to understand intercultural conflict as people experience it through technologically mediated communication; through social media. The research question this study is hoping to answer with this research is:

RQ1: how do participants describe their experiences of intercultural conflict in social media as similar to and different from their experiences of in-person intercultural conflict?

Method

Participants

Participants in the study were drawn from those networked with the author’s privately operated social media account. Soliciting participants from this private Facebook accountants’ contacts. Facebook was crucial because it is the most widely used social media site, and the contacts in this account represent diversity in every aspect of the term. The contact list (or friends of this Facebook account) includes people who did not finish a high school degree and those who are pursuing/pursued higher education. They also are diverse in race, age, and sex. Participation will be anonymous: the participant’s identities will be unknown; they were not asked for their names or specific identifying information beyond basic demographic categorical questions. Of the 24 participants, 62.5% were female (n=15), 25% were male (n=6), and 12.5% (n=12.5) identified as other. Ages of participants ranged from 19 to 37 and their education level ranged from no GED to Masters degrees. Out of the 24 participants 70.08% (n=17) identified themselves as a minority (African-American, Asian, Latina(o)), while 29.92% (n=7) identified themselves as white.

Procedure

When first starting the survey, participants were directed to an informed consent, which let them know that they could stop participating at any moment and by continuing with the next
option then their answers would be recorded and used as research. The first question was a demographic question of age, the second followed of an open-ended question that let them answer which medium they preferred to use communicating in-person vs. social media and why.

The following series of questions were in regards to an intercultural conflict as experienced and viewed through social media. These questions were interactive, since the participants were to put themselves in a situation online and in person (see Appendix 1). Participants at this point were given a picture to reference to; a posting from a social media site. They are describing what they would do if they saw this intercultural conflict picture posting on their social media and why or what they would do if they were in the scene of the picture and why. After the completion of the survey the participants were asked to answer a series of demographic questions, which included highest level of education, sex, and ethnic-racial background.

**Measure**

The interactive questions asked participants to look at a social media posting in regards to a popular intercultural conflict topic. There were only two questions, which they had to respond on how they would react to this posting if it had popped up on their newsfeed and why? The second question was asking them to put themselves in the situation of the picture, they are to explain how they would respond and why.

**Results**

This research was based on the premise of understanding how intercultural conflict is experienced through technologically mediated communication versus in-person. In order to make sense of the data, there has been a qualitative approach in coding the information that they had responded to the three questions and why they responded the way they did. Since the survey itself was distributed over social media through an online survey maker, Qualtics. Printing off
all of the participants responses and being able to find commonalities from their responses. Through many different groups with was clear, when the topic of dependency arose with many subcategories that underlined it as seriousness of the conflict to comparing means by using this or that scenarios. Second finding was personal connection and how this can trigger whether or not they will partake in the conflict at hand. The third finding talks about the interactive justification that participants seemed to do when they felt when responding to intercultural conflict whether it was in-person or over social media. Lastly, it is noteworthy that only two participants explicitly speaking in regards to figuring out if it is correct form/place/space to discuss the conflict.

**It Depends**

The first finding that I was able to conclude was the “...it depends” as 20 out of the 24 participants had used this term to explain what they would do on either social media or in-person when partaking in intercultural conflict. It was very interesting as the responses came in, one that was intriguing was “…well it always depends on how serious the issues is. Like you won’t see me arguing in-person about Trump being my president, but when you go onto my Facebook page you’d think I’m an activist,” or you’d get similar ones that would follow along the lines of “…I normally would prefer in-person, but it depends on the issue cause ya know I like knowing what I’m talking about. And I can’t always do that when I’m in front of someone, I can do it when I’m online cause I have google to help me out and everything...” Going forward through all 24 responses you would, for the most part, receive these “...it depends” scenarios because people are more inclined to weigh out their issues and in a sense take into account their *facwork* on a social media platform, as well as in-person discussions. As personal perspectives on whether social media or in-person conflict discussion was more valuable, the depends trickled over to questions three and four, which were the more interactive questions.
Many of them it depends on the context of the situation for example, “if I was standing rock and police were talking to us crazy, there’s no telling what I would do. Then again, it depends too cause if we are having a civil conversation about what’s going on then, yeah, we’d be discussing it like adults. No hard feelings, but it really depends on how rude or polite people are….this goes for when I’m on social media too. I don’t think I mentioned it though, but it always depends.”

**Personal Connection**

A second finding regarded whether people reported being more inclined to talk about issues in-person or over social media and why. Fifteen participants answered the question in regards to having a personal connection to the issue. One participant said, “I don’t think that social media is the place for discussion, but if it’s something I fully support or people are going off of nonsense then I intervene.”

Another instance of personal connection was when two people mentioned “…even though Standing Rock isn’t something I follow, I have a lot of native American friends” or “growing up and going to an alternative school that follows the beliefs of Native Americans, I feel like I have to stand up for them too.” Creating the connections that they are the voices of some of their peers and/or people they grew up with, is creating a personal connection that gives them the sense to speak up whether it was on social media or in-person. There was one answer in particular to question four, which had the participants imagine themselves in the picture, in-person intercultural conflict and he answered:

“…I was there you know. I may not be Native American and my voice may not have meant anything. But I know that me arguing with people that I was doing with stupid people on Facebook was pointless. There is nothing more heartfelt then going to this place have officers tell
you things and threaten your being. I was telling them they were pigs and that isn’t how you treat people…”

Even when these participants talked about what connected them or made them more inclined to talk in-person or over social media about a cultural conflict. It was their personal connection with the issues that made them vocalize when other people’s points of views were skewed.

**Interactive Justifications**

Alongside the *it depends* and the *personal connections*, we find ourselves with participants fully giving their interactive justifications on why or why not they would engage or not engage in cultural conflict discussions. Out of 24, 10 participants would talk about how they prefer talking about cultural conflict in-person because (a justification word) “I can see someone’s non-verbal cues on whether they get where I’m coming from or not.” Non-verbals and getting the messages across seemed to be a really big issue when partaking in in-person discussions. 17 out of the 24 respondents would say phrases along the lines “it’s easier to talk in-person about issues because they can understand you better,” or “there is no miscommunication when talking in person,” or “facial expressions are the best because that’s how you know if they get you or not, like they can say yes. Their face could tell you something different and that’s why I prefer to do in-person.” While on the other hand you get the justifications of social media use and that is because of “being able to google important facts,” “your friends having your back when it gets heated,” and lastly “being able to take my time and give a thoughtful and very intellectual answer w/o feeling the pressure.”

Most of these findings go hand-in-hand with personal connection, but most of the justifications were a sense of security that each participant had in the back of their heads when answering the questions in the manner that they did.
Place of Interaction

This was the smallest of the findings, but it was significant in a sense that the two participants who brought this up gave great insight on when there is the to discuss cultural conflict over social media versus in-person. The first goes as follows:

“…I think that social media is ok to use when it’s talking about an issue that you can’t grasp in-person. I’m the kind of person who doesn’t like confrontation. That doesn’t mean I go talking about issues on social media either. You have to pick and choose your battles, not all of them are meant to be through social media, just like not all of your cultural conflict arguments deserved to just be talked about in-person (they need audiences too sometimes).” The second reference to there being a time and place for both types of mediums and that participant answered, “I won’t always waste my time on social media, somethings are just meant to be kept to yourself because some people just want to be idiots online. It happens in person too. But like there’s certain things I argue about on social media that I wouldn’t do in person. Sometimes you just have to let something go cause it’s not worth it through whatever or wherever you want to argue.”

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand intercultural conflict as people experience it through technologically mediated communication; through social media. The research question that I hoped to answer with this study examined how participants described their experiences of intercultural conflict in social media as similar to and different from their experiences of in-person intercultural conflict. As personal connection seems to get their attention it, goes back to the findings by Eliason (2014) that conflict is normal and Bennett (2003) in the stages of ethnorelative on the second stage of adapting and this is adapting other cultural beliefs with a mixture of our own beliefs that make us find common ground. Also, going back to the literature
and going off of the three research studies conducted Sützl (2016), Browne et al. (2015), and Meluch and Walter (2012) that there is no true distinction between utilizing a technological mediated communication and in-person communication. The findings from this research proved different as many of the participants seemed to distinguish what they could get out of each of the interactions whether that was through social media or in-person. When adding conflict into the mix, they would talk about what they look for in a conflict discussion and as touchy as intercultural conflict can be, many had said that they preferred to do it in person, due to the fact that they are more prone to understand the non-verbal cues from the people whom they are speaking with or when choosing social media, they are prone to have more time to come up with a thoughtful response, without feeling rushed.

What hopefully others are able to find from this study is how social media seems to operate differently with people who differ by generation. As the older participants of this study seemed to lean more towards the need for an in-person interaction, than a social media platform. Many would say they were comfortable because they would be looking to educate on their two opposing thoughts rather than creating a long thread of miscommunicated ideas and perceptions that could potentially happen over social media. On the contrary, those who feel the most comfortable are those who seem to feel more comfortable with using the internet to help support their stance and being able to get enough time to respond with a coherent answers.

Limitations

One of the biggest limitations of this research is the perception that people have when answering questions that ask about behavior. Questions on this survey were designed to evoke some sort of response from the participants, but at the same time, the participants were answering in ways that sounded like the best way to answer the question and were not truly
answering as if they were truly in the situation. They may have been subject to social desirability bias in a way another method may not have triggered as much. Future research designs should try accounting for and avoiding that influence.

Conclusion

It will be insightful to see what subsequent studies discover about people’s experiences of conflict in social media and face-to-face contexts. This research shows a few ways people are aware of their differences engaging conflict between the two mediums. The experiences they were to have in-person differed from a projected social media encounter in regards to intercultural conflict. This is an interesting phenomenon for further study.
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Appendix 1

The following two questions are in regards to this picture

Imagine this picture (taken at the Dakota Access Pipeline protests happening on North Dakota’s Standing Rock reservation) came across your social media feed, with those two comments from other viewers immediately below it. In the textbox below, please type how you would respond online to such an image and comments, and why.

Now imagine you have come across this same situation in person, where two of the people present have just spoken the comments listed above. In the textbox below, please type how you would respond next in that in-person situation, and why.