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A Comparative Study of Self-Disclosure in Face-to-Face and Email Communication Between Americans and Chinese

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Today's society is highly interconnected and interdependent and much more communication is being done internationally. With air travel becoming easier and more convenient, travelers can set off for countless destinations, and business can be conducted in person in any part of the world. With the increased use of communication technologies, such as the internet, people can communicate from thousands of miles away at any moment. Because of these technological advances, and the growing need to communicate internationally, it has become more important to study the communication patterns among different cultures. By learning how other cultures communicate with each other, we can learn how to effectively communicate with them, while avoiding problems and misunderstandings.

Intercultural communication is complicated by several dimensions. One that this study focuses on is the difference between individualist and collectivist cultures. Individualist cultures value the individual, the self, independence, and personal identity. Examples of individualist cultures include Western societies such as the United States. Collectivist cultures, on the other hand place more value on the interests of larger groups, society, and extended family. People of East Asian cultures, like China, are considered collectivistic, and stress the importance of interdependence and maintaining relationships, making decisions based on the needs of the group (Hofstede, 1980).

Another dimension of culture that affects communication is low-context versus high-context. Low-context cultures focus on the direct, literal meaning of the words when they are communicating, while high-context cultures take in all of the information from a situation, such as the time and place of the conversation and the relationship they have with the person they are speaking with. Previous research has indicated that people of low-context cultures prefer to get

information out in the open directly, while those of high context-cultures communicate more indirectly, and expect others to understand the meaning behind their messages (Hall, 1976).

One widely accepted idea among intercultural communication scholars is that individualistic and low-context cultures that communicate more directly, offer more self-disclosure, or personal information, when communicating than collectivistic and high-context cultures, who communicate more indirectly, do (Chen, 1995).

Self-disclosure is the act of communicating personal information about oneself to another person. This information can include facts, opinions, or feelings. In order for a piece of information to be considered self-disclosure, it must be intentionally shared, it must be meaningful, and it must be something that is not known by many other people (Adler & Proctor, 2007). The social penetration model exhibits two dimensions of self-disclosure. First, the breadth of self-disclosure illustrates the range of topics in which you disclose. Topics can include your work, relationships, body, and finances, among others. The more topics you disclose personal information about, the larger the breadth of self-disclosure is. The second dimension is depth. The depth of self-disclosure refers to how personal your disclosures are (Adler & Proctor, 2007). Disclosures can range from somewhat impersonal, such as hobbies and interests, to more private and significant, such as our feelings. Disclosing our feelings tends to portray the most depth, as we often keep our feelings guarded and only disclose them when we have developed a significant amount of trust in someone.

There are several reasons why people choose to participate in self-disclosure. Disclosing personal information to a friend, family member, or romantic partner can often strengthen the bonds you share, build trust, and improve the overall quality of the relationship. A self-disclosure from one person may also encourage a similar disclosure from the other person, as the

level of comfort and confidence in one another increases. Many people choose to self-disclose as a form of emotional release, or to help them understand their own thoughts by saying them out loud to someone else. Other times self-disclosure is used as a way to promote ourselves and emphasize our good qualities. We can also use this self-promoting strategy as a way to increase our influence over others. The reasons people have for self-disclosing depend on their situation and their needs (Adler & Proctor, 2007).

Self-disclosure can also bring about negative effects. Telling a truth about yourself that is undesirable may cause your target to develop a negative impression of you, or wish to terminate the relationship all together. Differences in opinions or feelings can cause a decrease in relational satisfaction or even hurt the person you disclose to if your disclosure includes a negative opinion you have of them. Another risk you take when you self-disclose is appearing weak and losing influence over a person who used to look up to you (Adler & Proctor, 2007).

There are several things to consider before you decide to self-disclose. In some situations, disclosing information can do more harm than good. The discloser must decide if the possible benefits are worth the risks. Self-disclosure is most appropriate when used constructively, and when disclosing relevant information in moderate amounts to a person who reciprocates equally with their own self-disclosures. It is also important to disclose information that could potentially help someone, or save them from harm (Adler & Proctor, 2007).

A number of factors can affect a person's self-disclosure tendencies. Women, in general, tend to self-disclose more than men – in both breadth and depth. Outgoing, confident people share more personal information than shy, quiet people. The targets persons to whom the self-disclosers are speaking also influence how much is revealed. Sharing personal information with just one other person is most often easier and less intimidating for a discloser. People are also

inclined to self-disclose to people they like and trust, and who reciprocate with self-disclosures of their own. In these situations one can expect to receive support and understanding. Conversely, many people choose to self-disclose to perfect strangers, indicating a sense of security that they would most likely never meet again. The topic of conversation is likely to affect the depth of a person's self-disclosure as well. Lighter topics, such as hobbies and interests, are easier to talk about than more serious topics, like one's feelings (Adler & Proctor, 2007).

Finally, the medium through which people communicate may affect their self-disclosure. The widespread availability and use of the internet has provided another medium for communication. Computer-mediated-communication, such as emailing, has become extremely popular, for both personal and business use. Some research has been conducted examining how self-disclosure over the internet may differ from face-to-face disclosure (Barak, 2007). It could be argued that communicating through email or other internet channels would seem less personal, and therefore inhibit self-disclosure. On the other hand, the anonymity of internet communication could make the online environment seem a safer place to self-disclose. A 2001 study by Adam Joinson, for example, discovered that levels of spontaneous self-disclosure were higher in computer-mediated-communication than in face-to-face communication, and among computer-mediated conversations, self-disclosure was higher when the two people could not see each other's pictures or video through a web cam, further emphasizing the aspect of anonymity (Joinson, 2001).

The purpose of this study is to determine patterns of self-disclosure among American and Chinese students through both face-to-face and internet communication. In particular, I will try to determine whether or not Americans will continue to have higher levels of self-disclosure than

Chinese, as they have in previous studies, and also how the inclusion of email will affect the self-disclosure of participants from each culture. I will also examine gender differences and how self-disclosure differs when directed at various target persons.

Method

A consent form was distributed before the survey and agreed to by the students. The questionnaire was then completed by 311 students made up of 150 Chinese students living in China, and 161 American students attending the University of Rhode Island. Their ages ranged from 17 to 29 years old, the average being 19.91. Of the Chinese students, 61 were male and 89 were female, and of the Americans, 71 were male and 90 were female.

The questionnaire used was developed by Dr. Guo-Ming Chen from a revised version of the Self-Disclosure Scale created by Dean Barnlund in 1975. There were 25 topics in the categories of opinion or belief, interests and taste, work or study, money, yourself, and body. The targets included father, mother, stranger, acquaintance, and intimate friend. Students used a scale of 1-5 to rate their likelihood of self-disclosing aspects of each topic to each target person, 1 being not at all, and 5 being very much. We then asked the students to provide how much they disclosed on the same topics and targets when communicating through email. We used T-tests to analyze the differences in self-disclosure among the two nationalities, genders, topics, and targets.

Results

Overall, the participants from China reported disclosing more than American participants in both face-to-face and email contexts. The average rating for Chinese in face-to-face communication was 3.24, while Americans averaged 3.16, and the average Chinese rating for email disclosure was 3.22, while Americans averaged 2.66. American students reported disclosing more than Chinese to both their mothers and their fathers when communicating face-to-face, but less than Chinese for both their mothers and their fathers through email. The Chinese students disclosed more to both strangers and acquaintances in both face-to-face and email contexts than the Americans did. Finally, Americans disclosed more than Chinese participants to their intimate friends when communicating face-to-face, but less than the Chinese when communicating through email.

Nation Difference (MANOVAR)

Between-Subjects Factors

		Value Label	N
china-1, US-2	1	china	150
	2	US	161

Descriptive Statistics

	china-1, US-2	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
FTFAll	china	3.2406	.51500	150
	US	3.1622	.54914	161

	Total	3.2000	.53354	311
EMAll	china	3.2213	.68468	150
	US	2.6638	.82930	161
	Total	2.9327	.81126	311
FatherF	china	3.7114	.72904	150
	US	3.7212	.77462	161
	Total	3.7165	.75179	311
FatherE	china	3.6126	.94233	150
	US	3.0535	1.10972	161
	Total	3.3232	1.06804	311
MotherF	china	3.6850	.73797	150
	US	3.8606	.76464	161
	Total	3.7759	.75581	311
MotherE	china	3.5754	.93245	150
	US	3.1603	1.13367	161
	Total	3.3605	1.06037	311
StrangerF	china	2.0860	.71957	150
	US	1.9721	.66288	161
	Total	2.0271	.69203	311
StrangerE	china	2.3155	.92894	150
	US	1.7334	.81970	161

	Total	2.0142	.92002	311
AcquaintF	china	3.0209	.62018	150
	US	2.4902	.67346	161
	Total	2.7462	.69964	311
AcquaintE	china	3.0082	.72413	150
	US	2.1611	.83885	161
	Total	2.5697	.89162	311
IntimateF	china	3.7003	.73758	150
	US	3.7642	.68330	161
	Total	3.7334	.70956	311
IntimateE	china	3.5943	.80547	150
	US	3.2112	1.05430	161
	Total	3.3960	.96036	311

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
National	FTFAll	.477	1	.477	1.679	.196
	EMAll	24.137	1	24.137	41.461	.000
	FatherF	.007	1	.007	.013	.909
	FatherE	24.275	1	24.275	22.776	.000
	MotherF	2.394	1	2.394	4.235	.040

MotherE	13.377	1	13.377	12.332	.001
StrangerF	1.007	1	1.007	2.111	.147
StrangerE	26.313	1	26.313	34.440	.000
AcquaintF	21.869	1	21.869	52.030	.000
AcquaintE	55.727	1	55.727	90.289	.000
IntimateF	.317	1	.317	.629	.428
IntimateE	11.393	1	11.393	12.824	.000

When analyzing gender differences in self-disclosure, Chinese females disclosed more overall than Chinese males in both face-to-face and email contexts. Additionally, it was found that Chinese females disclosed more than Chinese males to each target, with the exception of strangers, to whom Chinese males disclosed more in both face-to-face and email communication. As for the American participants, overall the females disclosed more than males in face-to-face communication, but less than males in email. Males disclosed more to their fathers, while females disclosed more to their mothers in both contexts. American females reported disclosing more to strangers face-to-face, while males disclosed more to strangers through email. American males disclosed more to acquaintances, while females disclosed more to intimate friends in both contexts.

Some of the results of the survey were found to be statistically insignificant. When comparing the Chinese and American responses, overall face-to-face disclosure, and face-to-face disclosure to fathers, strangers, and intimate friends were insignificant. The results for face-to-

face self-disclosure to strangers were also found to be insignificant when comparing males and females.

Gender Difference (MANOVA)

Between-Subjects Factors

		Value Label	N
CM=1, CF=2, AM=3, AF=4	1	CM	61
	2	CF	89
	3	AM	71
	4	AF	90

Descriptive Statistics

	CM=1, CF=2, AM=3, AF=4	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
FTFAll	CM	3.0929	.62465	61
	CF	3.3419	.39690	89
	AM	3.1603	.62668	71
	AF	3.1637	.48294	90
	Total	3.2000	.53354	311
EMAll	CM	3.0228	.80855	61

	CF	3.3574	.54950	89
	AM	2.7098	.88468	71
	AF	2.6275	.78599	90
	Total	2.9327	.81126	311
FatherF	CM	3.4601	.83142	61
	CF	3.8837	.59568	89
	AM	3.7634	.75152	71
	AF	3.6879	.79496	90
	Total	3.7165	.75179	311
FatherE	CM	3.3018	1.06829	61
	CF	3.8256	.78266	89
	AM	3.1502	1.10264	71
	AF	2.9772	1.11546	90
	Total	3.3232	1.06804	311
MotherF	CM	3.3682	.81782	61
	CF	3.9022	.59057	89
	AM	3.7241	.78489	71
	AF	3.9684	.73481	90
	Total	3.7759	.75581	311
MotherE	CM	3.2024	1.01958	61
	CF	3.8310	.77513	89

	AM	3.1322	1.13028	71
	AF	3.1825	1.14217	90
	Total	3.3605	1.06037	311
StrangerF	CM	2.1751	.82640	61
	CF	2.0250	.63386	89
	AM	1.9621	.68918	71
	AF	1.9800	.64515	90
	Total	2.0271	.69203	311
StrangerE	CM	2.4166	1.00638	61
	CF	2.2463	.87098	89
	AM	1.7932	.79423	71
	AF	1.6863	.84066	90
	Total	2.0142	.92002	311
AcquaintF	CM	2.9967	.65500	61
	CF	3.0375	.59835	89
	AM	2.6207	.73155	71
	AF	2.3873	.60842	90
	Total	2.7462	.69964	311
AcquaintE	CM	2.9029	.80220	61
	CF	3.0804	.66037	89
	AM	2.3257	.86462	71

	AF	2.0312	.79900	90
	Total	2.5697	.89162	311
IntimateF	CM	3.4643	.78361	61
	CF	3.8620	.66135	89
	AM	3.7250	.76829	71
	AF	3.7951	.61066	90
	Total	3.7334	.70956	311
IntimateE	CM	3.2888	.91955	61
	CF	3.8036	.64265	89
	AM	3.1497	1.14163	71
	AF	3.2598	.98378	90
	Total	3.3960	.96036	311

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
sex	FTFAll	2.722	3	.907	3.257	.022
	EMAll	28.459	3	9.486	16.588	.000
	FatherF	6.726	3	2.242	4.085	.007
	FatherE	35.395	3	11.798	11.382	.000
	MotherF	15.086	3	5.029	9.530	.000
	MotherE	27.782	3	9.261	8.863	.000

StrangerF	1.835	3	.612	1.281	.281
StrangerE	27.816	3	9.272	12.135	.000
AcquaintF	24.091	3	8.030	19.312	.000
AcquaintE	60.310	3	20.103	33.157	.000
IntimateF	6.239	3	2.080	4.261	.006
IntimateE	21.464	3	7.155	8.306	.000

Discussion

The findings of this study were somewhat surprising. The Chinese participants reported that overall they were more likely to self-disclose than Americans were. This result is inconsistent with the majority of previous studies conducted on this subject. In the past, high-context, collectivist cultures, such as China, have reported low levels of self-disclosure. This could be explained by the understanding that these cultures communicate indirectly, and place more emphasis on the larger group than on themselves and their personal interests. These attributes would cause the Chinese to disclose less personal information to others. On the other hand, low-context, individualist cultures, such as the United States, have previously reported higher levels of self-disclosure. These types of cultures tend to communicate more directly and place emphasis on themselves as individuals, explaining why they would be likely to disclose personal information about themselves to others.

The fact that the results of this study indicate that the Chinese self-disclose more than Americans could be explained by several reasons. The questionnaire gave no context besides the

channel of communication and the target person. This could have affected how the Chinese rated their likelihood of self-disclosure. Since China is a high-context culture, they may have assumed a certain context existed, in which they would normally self-disclose, for instance if the disclosure was for the benefit of a larger group. The participants' answers may also have reflected their interest levels in each topic, rather than their willingness to disclose. For example, if an American student did not like sports, they may have marked a 1, indicating that they would not likely disclose information about their interest in sports, which may falsely reflect their willingness to disclose information about their hobbies and interests in general.

Chinese females reported self-disclosing more than Chinese males to almost all target persons, which is consistent with previous studies. As for the American students, the difference in self disclosure between males and females was much less than expected. This could be explained by the fact that no genders for the target persons were assigned with the exception of mothers and fathers. Typically, female-female and male-male dyads will disclose more to each other than female-male dyads. This could have affected how respondents rated their own self-disclosure to strangers, acquaintances, and intimate friends.

Finally, because of increased communication technologies, different cultures have more of a chance to interact and influence each other. It is possible that traditional cultural values are being shared and different communication styles are adapting to one another. If this is the case, other factors, such as personality, may be affecting self-disclosure more drastically than culture. For instance, outgoing, self-confident people are more likely to self-disclose than those who are shy and less confident.

Finally, the introduction of self-disclosure through email in this study poses additional factors to consider. Both Chinese and American participants recorded lower levels of overall

self-disclosure when communicating through email than when communicating face-to-face. Additionally, each culture reported less self-disclosure through email for each target person, with the exception of Chinese to strangers, to whom they reported self-disclosing more through email than face-to-face. These results could indicate that email is considered less personal and that people are more comfortable self-disclosing in a face-to-face context. Another possible reason for the low levels of self-disclosure through email is the fact that email is an older form of online communication, and many people may not use it as often anymore. Using a more modern form of online communication may produce different results.

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