

Steps in a Thousand Mile Journey



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There is an old Chinese saying that “a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” The destination of this particular journey turned out to be, appropriately enough, in the Chinese city of Xi’an. This is where Judit Arends-Toth and I jointly received the Harry and Pola Triandis Dissertation Award presented at the XVIIth Congress of the IACCP. They say that the journey is always more important than the destination, but I never imagined that there would be such an honor at this journey’s end. Just when did I take the first step?

I came late into the academic business. Previously, I had more or less been in full-time motherhood, working intermittently in my earlier career as a geological/geophysical draftsman in the oil industry. During that period, my husband was transferred to Singapore for three years. So, with two small children in tow, I lived the indolent life of the trailing spouse, little guessing that this time would later provide the impetus and inspiration for a PhD dissertation. During that period of enforced leisure, I made the decision to enrol in a degree course on our return home to Australia—in librarianship! The late-addition third child delayed that goal until 1990 when I enrolled at Macquarie University. Luckily, the librarian idea was dead in the water by then, and instead I decided to stick with my strengths in math and science, choosing the “softer” option of a double major in psychology and statistics. For a third-year case study assignment in group processes, I chose a cross-cultural encounter. Drawing on my Singapore experiences, I interviewed a recently returned expatriate. The data were analysed accord-

ing to Hofstede's four dimensions, and the findings proved to be a Eureka moment for both of us. I was hooked on cross-cultural research! This was soon followed by my honours project examining decision-making differences between Chinese and Anglo adolescents at the local high school, forming the basis of my first publication in the International Journal of Intercultural Relations (IJIR).

At the commencement of my PhD in 1997, intercultural research in the Asia-Pacific area seemed like a good idea. The public debate at that time in Australia, among the elite of business, politics, media, and academia, focused on the role that Australia should play in this area. This role was not just about the more pragmatic areas of trade and commerce, our traditional focus, but included a broader and more fundamental vision in the areas of leadership and social capital, which implied far-reaching changes of direction in education and

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foreign policy. In the mid-nineties my husband had been travelling for a third of the year running training programs in SE Asia for his corporation's subsidiaries, and I had contacts through him. Between his trips, we would sit around the kitchen table, me teaching him the rudiments of cross-cultural dimensions à la Hofstede, Trompenaars, Bond and others, whilst he regaled me with his accounts of his intercultural interactions and his coping methods, sometimes successful, other times comical, never quite a disaster. Together we would unpack the mission statements of the mother corporation (Australian) and tailor them for the Asian subsidiaries. At the time, I don't think there were too many other executives off to do business in Asia with battered photocopies of key chapters from "Culture's Consequences" in their briefcases. Our earlier experiences in Singapore, exposure to my husband's business travails in East Asia, and my growing academic knowledge in the area provided the *raison d'être* for my PhD focus.

I chose interpersonal conflict at work because it seemed the obvious place of breakdown between people from different cultures. Besides, there was almost no research on conflict management at the *intercultural* interface as opposed to *cross-cultural* comparisons. Conflict in an Australian setting is usually apparent. It has boundaries and can be described. But in a SE Asian setting, conflict is covert, fuzzy, hidden behind closed doors. You know it's there, but it is difficult to grasp and understand.

Foreshadowing Hermann's and Kempen's (1998) proposal that, in an increasingly interconnected world, cultures are not static, they affect and alter each other, I decided in the initial stage that the research would be informed by an inductive approach using qualitative methods, and that there would be no hypotheses based on cultural dichotomies. A hypothetical framework based on traditional dimensions of cross-cultural variability would find just that, and phenomena that might turn out to be more important could easily fall

through the cracks. Therefore, I chose a model of conflict (Thomas, 1976) as a framework for my inquiry that was value-free and focused on the process of conflict from its antecedents through cognitive/emotional appraisal to action-interaction leading to an outcome rather than using a predictive-style methodology. Using critical incidents, I collected 35 rich narratives on intercultural conflict from both Western expatriates and host nationals in the Singapore, Bangkok and Jakarta subsidiaries of a large Australian multinational—enough for a book. I then had the job of analysing them in a way that would be accepted as rigorous. I tried the NUD*IST program, which was supposed to be the state of the art at the time, but in the end, opted for Excel. This program is great in that it has an infinite number of columns and allows you to sort the data according to endless structures and concepts as long as you have inserted keywords as headings (as in NUD*IST). For a time, my dining-room floor remained festooned in streamers of sticky-taped Excel output. Today, people look at me askance when I admit this, as if I have committed some terrible sacrilegious qualitative research blunder, so one day I will have to do battle with NUD*IST or QUALITAN to keep the pundits happy. At the end of the day, no computer program can contribute the intellectual input needed to interpret qualitative data. I found Excel, used in conjunction with axial coding according to Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory technique, very useful for exploring and making sense of the data.

An important distinction that became apparent in the early stages of this analysis was that the discourses describing the perceived causes of the conflict incidents could be split into manifest and latent types. The manifest or proximal causes were easy to categorise, but the latent descriptions of underlying contextual causes were by far the richest section of the data. Eventually, I managed to crunch the latent data down to 22 themes. I would have remained stuck here forever if my chief supervisor hadn't accepted a promotion to Dean at another university, bringing about a change of chief supervisors. My new supervisor knew nothing about cultural research but was an expert in statistics, particularly less used techniques such as facet theory. He rescued me by getting me to submit my 22 themes to a multidimensional scaling procedure. By simply using binary coding, magic is performed and order emerges from chaos. The themes separated into two broad clusters with a sub-cluster common to the two chiefly made up of the expected cross-cultural differences. The two clusters could be labelled as *differences in conversational style between expats and host-nationals* and *expats behaving badly*. The latter I eventually labelled a communication competence factor as clearly many of the themes in this segment were related to the pre-conditions for good or bad communication experiences.

After a year, I had some flesh on the bones of Thomas' process model and some specific areas to continue to develop and investigate. Qualitative research takes time and requires revisiting, but is worth the effort and the challenge. During that year (1998), I also carried out a piece of more quantitative research with undergraduates. I was very aware that the qualitative data were descriptions of perceptions filtered through the cognitive-emotional lens of the respondent, and wondered if I could achieve an "objective" fly-on-the-wall response to these conflict situations. I devised a very intricate questionnaire based on the "in-basket" methodology used in organisational psychology. Needless to say, this piece of research produced only

a few insights and was condemned to the bottom drawer (behind the filing cabinet might be more appropriate). Clearly, if I was interested in “process” rather than “prediction” then I could make a virtue of the cognitive-emotional lens rather than seeing it as a flaw. However, it was many months later that I went back and revisited the qualitative data to work harder on understanding and interpreting this part of the conflict model.

In 1999, I returned to East Asia to collect more qualitative data from a number of organisations to confirm the case study material collected earlier and to explore more specifically communication issues in conflict management. I also wanted to set up the process for collecting some quantitative data by remote control from Australia. However, the political and economic landscape in that part of the world had changed dramatically since 1997. Then, their seemingly unstoppable economies had only just begun to wobble, but by 1999 they

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were severely battered. Many multinationals had scaled down their operations and withdrawn many of their expatriate staff. My former sample had literally flown the coop. For many, their East Asian business was being run from a single location, either in the more stable Singapore or Hong Kong, with a token local presence in more unstable areas. Political turmoil and the independence of East Timor (supported by Australia’s government) resulted in Australians not being welcome in Indonesia. All of this meant that I could not continue with my three East Asian locations and I had to concentrate on whatever sample I could get in Singapore. It was critical to my project that I had enough expatriates in one organisation interacting with local staff to be suitable, and that was a problem. Many organisations had even scaled their expatriate staff in Singapore to a skeletal presence. I had hoped to use the Singapore-Australia Business Council to locate several participating organisations, but had to abandon this approach and simply use my contacts as best as I could. I considered myself lucky to have obtained 5 willing organisations with enough expatriates to ensure that inter-cultural interactions and the inevitable conflict were common events.

Returning home with a brief-case bulging with audio-tapes and another year’s work, I constructed a factorial survey based on some of this material to investigate situation-specific conflict behaviour related to status, cultural similarity of other, and time stress. Through my personally-established relationships with the HR or general managers of my 5 organisations, I distributed the survey to selected staff via email or web. It seems incredible now, but then, only a small number of organisations were connected to the web and email attachments were cumbersome and likely causes of computer crashes. So, the survey had to go into the body of the email for many of my respondents. I believe this lowered the response rate compared to the traditional paper and pencil method because it was unwieldy and time-consuming to complete. (In 2000, a colleague collected a Thai sample for me using the old-fashioned

method and the response rate was excellent.) Nevertheless, with two of the organisations, I was able to use a web-based survey with radio buttons that was attractive and easy to use. I believe I was one of the first at Macquarie University to use this mode of data collection. The results of the factorial survey were published in IJIR last year.

A short time later, I was soliciting my long-suffering respondents for “just a wee bit more data.” I had one more important area to investigate before I could call it a day—the issue of “face” in conflict interactions. Alarmed by my even smaller response rate, I ran the study with a respectable number of university students, having access to a large number of overseas students from East Asia. I was surprised how closely the student results mirrored the employee results given the differences in age and experiences. These results have just been published in the *International Journal of Conflict Management*.

I believe my multi-method approach was very successful as it provided both the quantitative rigour and the qualitative richness to aid in model-building and sense-making. I finished the thesis with a far more comprehensive model than the bare bones with which I began. I am still to publish the qualitative results and the derived modelling, so perhaps the journey continues...

Finally, I would like to thank Harry and Pola for the great honour that they and the Award committee have bestowed and to express the hope that this award is not a destination after all, but the first step in the next long journey of a thousand miles.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fran Brew is currently working as a part-time lecturer for the Psychology Department at Macquarie University in Sydney teaching postgrad students the principles of research and design and giving occasional lectures and workshops in cross-cultural issues in the workplace. She is also designing a web-based course in organisational behaviour for the Open Learning Australia network of which Macquarie University is a member. She is currently involved in a collaborative research project with Kwok Leung investigating Leung et al.'s dualistic model of harmony and its relation to conflict management with a sample of Australian and Chinese employees.

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