

# Cross-cultural communication patterns - Korean and American Communication

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## Abstract

The most recent extant studies on Korean communication were carried out in the 1990's. Thus, the purpose of this study is to test and thereby update research on Korean in contrast to American communication practices. Students in Korea and the US filled out questionnaires testing their direct, indirect, immediate, verbally aggressive and communicatively apprehensive communication. This study quantitatively tested the impact of culture on direct, indirect communication as well as verbal aggressiveness and communication apprehensiveness. Results showed that Koreans use less direct and more indirect communication than US Americans and that Koreans were also more communicatively apprehensive and less nonverbally immediate than their US American counterparts. Tests on culture and verbal aggressiveness were not significant.

**Keywords:** cultural differences, verbal behavior, direct and indirect communication, verbal aggression, nonverbal immediacy, communication apprehension.

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## Korean and American Communication Practices

Globalization due to internet use, international markets, and outsourcing has increased contact between people from different cultures. This contact highlights the divergence of perspectives between members of different cultures such as Korea and the United States. For example, in the American workplace, Caucasian colleagues often mistake Asians' reserved manner for a lack of assertiveness. It is inevitable that differences in cultural perspectives will be channeled through communication; and if this communication is to be productive, interactions based on cultural knowledge and mutual respect will be needed to encourage Korean and American relations to progress.

The South Korean economy has been the fastest growing economy in the world (Lydon & Wasik, 2008). Korea is also an important economic partner for America. However, Noland and Pack (2002) point out that South Koreans perceive American prominence in the merchandise trade to be eroding, especially in comparison with China. Although there are other emerging areas of services and investment, in which the US role is growing, the United States could improve its relations with South Korea to help build an increasingly prominent position in the newer, more rapidly expanding areas of business it is trying to pursue.

To help achieve this aim, the purpose of this study is to test and report on Korean and American communication practices. This update is partly necessary because the most recent extant studies on Korean communication were carried out in the 1990's (e.g., Park & Kim, 1992). Given the increased exposure of Korea to the world, this study carried out an updated test of present day communication practices in Korea as compared to the US. To do this, cross-cultural theories will be used to underlie further analyses of hypothesized communication traits across Korea and the US.

## High- vs. Low-Context Cultures

Research has shown that the degree of context and amount of information in a culture effectively differentiates between communication in Eastern cultures as opposed to Western cultures (Kim, Pan, et al., 1998; Cho, Kwon, et al., 1999). In particular, Hall (1973)

categorized cultures into high-context cultures (where the communication style in which most of the information is already shared by people in the society, leaving very little information in the explicit transmitted part of the message) and low-context cultures (where the communication style in which most of the information is incorporated into the message and detailed background information is needed in the interaction with others).

In high-context cultures, messages are indirect and are delivered in an abstract implicit manner because the message is actually highly dependent on the context. In contrast, in low-context cultures, communication is direct and explicit. Accordingly, in low-context cultures, a large amount of in-depth background information is needed, because people express messages directly with little need for context.

High-context cultures include Eastern cultures such as Korea, where people have widespread networks with family, friends, and organizations. Low-context cultures include the US, Germany, and other northern European individualistic cultures (Hall & Hall 1990; Irwin, 1996). Several intercultural communication researchers point out that Asian cultures have a strong orientation towards high-context information (for example, Gudykunst, Yoon, et al., 1987; Kang 1988) and that Asian languages reflect its high-context culture with an abundance of implicitness. Past research indicates that Koreans create ambiguous messages to obscure their meaning (Lim & Choi, 1996). Furthermore, Asians have been known to prefer indirect and ambiguous communication in contrast to the direct and clear communication preferred in low-context cultures (Cocroft & Ting-Toomey, 1994; Merkin, 2005). In addition, indirect communication is likely to appeal to Korean citizens because they tend to value Confucianism which emphasizes harmony and egalitarianism. Not taking a stand and obscuring one position on an issue that helps others save face and is, therefore, a preferred communication strategy for Koreans (Park, 1993). For example, Jiang (2006) found differences in journalists' request and refusal strategies in press conferences between Korea and the US to vary in that the journalists from the US used more direct requests and refusals to give information. However, the journalists from Korea, while they used requests, instead of refusals, they used more avoidance strategies or gave insufficient answers to questions they were uncomfortable with. With the present evidence in mind, the following hypotheses are posed:

H1: High-context Korean citizens are more likely to employ indirect communication strategies than their low-context US American counterparts.

H2: Low-context US Americans are more likely to employ direct communication strategies than their high-context Korean counterparts.

In order to understand and update Korean and American communication orientations further, this study also assessed where both cultures stand in terms of their degrees of two divergent communication orientations (1) communication apprehension as an avoidance orientation and (2) nonverbal immediacy, and verbal aggressiveness as contrasting approach orientations). Cultural values such as Confucianism and self-construals relating to this communication will be described to promote greater cross-cultural understanding.

### **Confucianism, Face, and Communication Apprehension**

Part of the reason Koreans engage in high context communication is reflected in their deeply rooted Confucian values and ideology which includes allowing all participants in communication to save face if possible (Lim & Choi, 1996). For example, Ting-Toomey, Gao, et al. (1991) found that South Koreans report a higher degree of focus on others' face than U.S. Americans; whereas U.S. Americans had a higher degree of self-face than South Koreans. In high context cultures substituting direct communication with indirect communication is considered to be an important way to help others save face. If a stand is not taken, then people do not have to stick out, which is a form of face threat in Confucian Korean cultures (Lim & Choi, 1996).

Given that communicating explicitly is shunned in Korea, a dread of communicating generally is likely to be higher among Koreans whose Confucian values underlie their communication (Klopf, 1984). In fact, both **Aune, Hunter**, et al., (2001) and Yook and Ahn (1999) found that South Korean students reported significantly higher communication apprehension than US American students. In addition, Hong (2003) found that Korean students in intercultural conflict situations were considerably more communicatively apprehensive than U.S. American students. On the other hand, conflicting results exist. In particular, Klopf and Cambra (1979) found that Americans had a higher incidence of apprehension than Koreans. However, this study was carried out in 1979, which is close to thirty years ago.

### **Self-Construals and Communication Apprehension**

Recently, Kim, Tasaki, Kim, and Lee's (2007) findings on independent and interdependent self-construals showed support in a different direction. Basically, a self-construal is conceptualized as how individuals see the relationship of their self to others or their self as at a distance from others (Singelis & Sharkey 1995). According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), there are two types of self-construals: independent and interdependent. An independent self-construal is a unique entity that emphasizes a person's own internal thoughts and feelings. An interdependent self-construal is defined as an entity that is closely intertwined with others and that is responsive to, and dependent on, the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others.

Researchers (e.g., Gudykunst, Matsumoto, et al, 1996; Kim, 1994; Singelis & Brown, 1995) report that individuals' self-construals are shaped by cultural influences. Independent self-construals are representative of individualistic cultures, while interdependent self-construals are representative of collectivistic cultures (Gudykunst et al. 1996; Singelis & Sharkey 1995). Hence, US Americans have independent self-construals and Koreans have interdependent self-construals. Kim, Tasaki, et al.'s (2007) findings show that the higher one's independent self-construal, the less likely one is to be apprehensive and the higher one's interdependent self-construal, the more likely one is to be apprehensive. Taking the above findings together, the following hypothesis is posed:

H3: Korean citizens are more likely to be communicatively apprehensive than their US American counterparts.

### **Culture, Touch Avoidance, and Nonverbal Immediacy**

Nonverbal immediacy is related to the emotional distance communicated nonverbally between people. A close emotional distance would be communicated nonverbally by touching and affection displays. In contrast, one who is less immediate would be more touch avoidant and less likely to display emotion outwardly.

Andersen and Leibowitz (1978) found that communication apprehension is positively correlated to touch avoidance. The degree of touch avoidance people sense varies by culture (Beaulieu, 2004; Hall, 1966; Remland & Jones, 1988). Hall (1966) designated societies on the basis of how much they avoid touching. At least in terms of public touch, Hall designated both Korea and the US, as being touch-avoidant cultures. However, McDaniel and Andersen's (1998) study found this not to be the case in that people from the US were among the most tactile cultures in their entire study. On the other hand, McDaniel and Andersen as well as Ruch (1989) fully supported Hall's (1966) characterization of Korea as a culture possessing disinclination toward touch.

In addition to touching behavior, all public displays of emotion are embarrassing to Koreans (Park, 1993). According to Kim (1977), Korean couples avoid any outward displays of affection. This was corroborated by Park and Kim (1992) and Matsumoto, Takeuchi, et al., (1998) who found that after Russians, South Koreans exert the highest control over their expressions with Americans having the least controlled emotions. Accordingly, the following hypothesis is posed:

H4: US Americans will be more nonverbally immediate than Koreans.

Immediacy reflects positive feelings and verbal aggression reflects negative feelings. Thus, this negative-approach communication will be considered as the last distinguishing trait between Korean and US American cultures. Verbal aggressiveness is defined as "a personality trait that predisposes persons to attack the self concepts of others instead of, in addition to, their positions on topics of communication" (Infante & Wigley, 1986, p. 61).

### **Self-Construal, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Verbal Aggression**

According to Fujihara, Kohyama, et al., (1999), Asian cultures, which possess interdependent self-construals, seem to be more permissive of direct verbal aggression compared with Western cultures. In addition, Merkin (2006) found that hostility strategies were associated with cultures possessing a high degree of uncertainty avoidance (e.g., Korea) as opposed to cultures possessing a low degree of uncertainty avoidance (e.g., US Americans). According to Hofstede (1979, p. 395), people from high-uncertainty avoidant cultures have a lower tolerance for "uncertainty and ambiguity, which expresses itself in higher levels of anxiety and energy release... and less tolerance for groups with deviant ideas and behavior." More specifically, Hofstede (2001) found that people from high-uncertainty-avoidant cultures tend to display their emotions more than those from low-uncertainty-avoidant cultures (e.g., the North Korean leaders' aggressive communication about their nuclear program). Furthermore, though US Americans have been found to be more argumentative (Jenkins, Klopff, et al., 1991) and assertive (Sallinen-Kuparinen, Thompson, et al., 1991) than Koreans, nevertheless, Koreans were found to be more aggressive in their communication than US Americans (Park & Klopff, 1992). Therefore, it is possible that despite their need to be indirect, members of the high-uncertainty-avoidant interdependent Korean culture could be more likely to resort to using verbal aggression than the US American low-uncertainty-avoidant independent culture. Thus, the following hypothesis is posed:

H5: Koreans are more likely to communicate with verbal aggression than their US American counterparts.

### **Method**

#### Participants

Participants were 263 junior or senior undergraduate students (those who reported their gender were 87 men and 168 women) enrolled in classes in a New York City University ( $n = 117$ ) and in a South Korean University ( $n = 146$ ). The age of the respondents ranged from 18 to 44 years ( $M = 22.25$ ,  $SD = 3.51$ ). Seventy-seven percent of participants reported their social class. From those who reported their class, 4% were lower class, 10% were working class, 51% were middle class and 11% were upper class.

#### Procedures

Instructors gave students self-report questionnaire instruments to fill out in their spare time on a volunteer basis. After students returned the questionnaire, instructors input and analyzed the data. In this study the independent variable was country and the dependent variables were direct, indirect, communication apprehension, nonverbal immediacy and verbal aggression. Because direct and indirect communication was measured using dichotomous variables, a logistic regression analysis was warranted. The other dependent variables were tested together using a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) design.

#### Instrumentation

This study employed the question "If you have contact with people from foreign countries, is it direct? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_ Indirect? \_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_" to see whether they communicate either directly, indirectly or both. Communication apprehension was operationalized using Neuliep and McCroskey's (1997) Intercultural Communication Apprehension Scale (ICAS). Nonverbal immediacy was measured using Richmond,

McCroskey, and Johnson's (2003) Nonverbal Immediacy Scale (NIS). Finally, verbal aggressiveness was measured using the aggressively-worded VAS items, consisting of the positively worded 10-item Likert-type questions from Infante and Wigley's (1986) Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (VAS) as suggested by Levine, Beatty, Limon, Hamilton, Buck, and Chory-Assad (2004). The ICAS, NIS, and VAS items consisted of Likert-type questions. Participants were asked to self report their use of communication using response options ranging from 1 (almost never true) to 5 (almost always true).

## Results

### Overall Logistic Regression Model

H1 stated that high-context Korean citizens would be more likely to use indirect communication strategies than their low-context US American counterparts. The overall model with country as the independent variable and indirect communication as the dependent variable was highly significant ( $p < .003$ ). The main effect for country was significant with Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .05$ . Results showed that the odds of someone using indirect communication were 2.21 times higher if the person is Korean as opposed to a US American.

H2 stated that low-context US Americans are more likely to employ direct communication strategies than their high-context Korean counterparts. The overall model with country as the independent variable and direct communication as the dependent variable was also highly significant ( $p < .0001$ ). Main effects for country were significant with Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .09$ . Results showed that the odds of someone using direct communication were .70 times lower if the person is Korean as opposed to a US American.

### MANOVA

#### Results

Results showed that multivariate analysis was warranted because the multivariate main effect for country was significant (Wilk's  $\lambda = .78$ ,  $F(3, 233) = 21.99$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $h^2 = .22$ ). There were significant univariate effects for intercultural communication apprehension ( $F(1, 235) = 57.77$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $h^2 = .20$ ), and intercultural nonverbal immediacy ( $F(1, 235) = 22.36$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $h^2 = .09$ ). Verbal aggression results were not significant. Internal consistency reliabilities obtained for both the US and Korea together were acceptable for ICAS ( $r = .94$ ), NIS ( $r = .82$ ), and VAS ( $r = .79$ ). The exact means and standard deviations can be found in Table 1.

In general, the ICAS mean in Korea was higher than the mean in the US. This result substantiated H3, that Korean citizens are more likely to be more communicatively apprehensive than their US American counterparts. H4, that US Americans will be more nonverbally immediate than Koreans was also supported because the mean for NIS was lower for Koreans than the mean for US Americans.

VAS results were not significant; therefore, H5, that Koreans are more likely to use verbal aggression than their US American counterparts, was not supported. It was clear that the VAS Scale was reliable because the VAS demonstrated acceptable reliabilities with alpha coefficients of .79 for the combined US and Korean sample ( $n = 242$ ), .75 for the Korean sample ( $n = 147$ ), and .83 ( $n = 118$ ) for the US sample. The VAS Scale also had adequate power and an adequate sample size for this test because when this scale was factor analyzed, all samples warranted multivariate analysis given that all of the tested samples had KMO's greater than the usual criterion of .66 (i.e., US/Korea KMO = .844; Korea KMO = .743; and the US KMO = .836).

#### Discussion

## Implications

This study tested present day Korean and US American communication. Overall, it appears that despite widespread global influences, cultural values such as Confucianism, low-/high-context communication, independent/interdependent selves, and uncertainty avoidance impact on Korean and US communication. American communication has remained fairly constant for the communication traits tested in this study. Thus, even though global forces appear to be strong, so are traditions. While this study tested US Americans, the primary focus was on Korean communication which seemed more likely to change, given this country's changing status as a global trading partner.

In particular, H1 and H2 results show that Hall's high-low context schema still applies to Korean and US communication. Similar to past results, US Americans were reported as being more direct and Koreans were reported as being more indirect. The Confucian values of harmony, not sticking out, and preserving others' face by not taking a stand appears to be reflected in the finding, substantiating H3, that Koreans are more communicatively apprehensive than their US American counterparts. Thus, Korean traditions still appear to be operating despite widespread exposure to people and popular culture professing non-Confucian values.

Another side of the culture clash between the Korean Confucian value of not-sticking-out and the US practice of touching and public display of emotions is the stoic controlling of emotions that still appears to be practiced by Koreans. H4, that US Americans will be more nonverbally immediate than Koreans still appears to be the case, and the cultural implications are many. This is because the possibility of misunderstanding communicated on the nonverbal level is on the one hand, more subtle, yet, on the other hand, more intense. People experiencing nonverbal messages cannot necessarily figure out what is bothering them about the other. Unwanted touching, for example, can be perceived as a major violation by people when it implies a lowering of their status.

Finally, H5, that Koreans are more likely to use verbal aggression than their US American counterparts was not significant. Perhaps follow-up interview questions could help identify precisely what patterns of thinking Koreans and US Americans are employing when they are considering using aggressive communication.

## Strengths and Limitations

One of this study's strengths was that it collected data in the native cultures of both Korea and the US. This allowed for a more representative sample of viewpoints than more readily available foreign students for example. One of the limitations of this study is that the information presented here is based on self report data; and while the sample was reasonably large, and had statistical adequacy and power for the test carried out, it was not truly random; thus, caution should be exercised in interpreting the findings. Another limitation of this study was the use of college students. On the one hand, the use of college students is not truly representative of an entire population. On the other hand, the use of college students in both samples allowed for psychological matching to be carried out, as suggested by Hofstede (2001). The demographic variance present in more random populations can be controlled for in college populations because both populations were matched on socioeconomic variables. These caveats notwithstanding, it was clear from the present analyses that Korean and US communication has been relatively stable over time.

## Future Directions for Research

The present research has provided updated cultural findings on research carried out more than a decade ago. Though the conclusions of this study were, for the most part, consistent with past research, this may not be the case with other theoretical conclusions about culture in the literature of the past. The consequences of intercultural interactions are more vital than ever. Given the rise of terrorism, the outsourcing of work, and the increasing markets abroad, it is important for scholars to update cultural studies to assess whether or not past

conclusions still stand or whether communication has changed. This knowledge will aid people in preventing dire communication mishaps and will help provide appropriate cues for carrying out the intercultural communication of the future.

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## Appendix

<b>Table 1</b>			
<b>Communication Means and Standard Deviations</b>			
<b>Communication Traits</b>		<b>Koreans</b>	<b>US Americans</b>
<b>Communication Apprehension</b>		37.21	27.79
<i>M</i>		(9.34)	(9.70)
<i>SD</i>			
<b>Nonverbal Immediacy</b>		56.14	59.73
<i>M</i>		(6.23)	(5.33)
<i>SD</i>			
<b>Verbal Aggression</b>		N.S.	N.S.
<i>M</i>			

SD				
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*Note.* M = Mean, SD = Standard deviation, and N.S. = Not significant

### **About the Author**

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