Reaction Profiles by Americans, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and Vietnamese on 'Skeletons in the Family Closet' Topics

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Abstract

Americans, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and Vietnamese (*N*=250) rated 57 random proposed conversation topics on a five-point scale (i.e., very good, good, neutral, bad, very bad) to a same-culture, same-sex school friend. Five factors emerge and are characterized as: *Familial Biographical Data*, *Skeletons in the Family Closet*, *Small Talk Topics*, *Personal Information Topics*, and *Intimate Relations Topics*. For the 17 topics included in Factor Two, *Skeletons in the Family Closet*, about 51% of Americans appraise them at *neutral*, *good* or *very good*. Among the Asians, Thais report the lowest percentage at about 22% and Chinese the highest at about 35%. On those topics appraised as either *bad* or *very bad*, subjects then selected one of three possible reactions: *avoidance*, *false information*, or *silence*. Thai and Vietnamese favor *silence*, choosing it at about 38% of the time, while Chinese and Japanese select *avoidance*, at about 40%, as the preferred reaction. These results suggest that native English speakers could encounter a higher than expected frequency of avoidance and silence rejection strategies when communicating with Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and Vietnamese on some topics deemed appropriate among Americans.

Keywords: intercultural encounters, conversation topics, avoidance/ false information/ silence .

Introduction

Many cultures in the world share an aversion to bringing up certain taboo topics since mature adults intuitively realize which subjects are to be avoided in their native culture as well as recognizing verbal and nonverbal queues that signal an inappropriate topic has been broached. This paper compares the reported reactions by Americans, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and Vietnamese on 17 *Skeletons in the Family Closet* conversation topics which indicate that this taboo category is both more potent in the nuclear family and extends deeper into the extended family for these four Asian culture groups than it does for the American sample. By examining these 17 items along with their reported reactions, intercultural communicators may come to identify culture-specific topics to refrain from since these topics could result in communication breakdown among members of these five culture groups. Four general subject areas are covered in the literature review (e.g., self-disclosure, conversation rejection strategies, conversation topics to be avoided among acquaintances, and taboo acts and language use) which provide the support for these findings.

Among Americans, the extent of self-disclosure affects the development of human relationships. As self-disclosure increases in depth, people become closer (Altman & Taylor 1973). The extent of self-disclosure measures the strength or intensity of a relationship which is considered a fundamental quality of close relationships (Levinger & Rands 1985). Douglas (1994) notes that as people learn more about each other, the likelihood of an enduring relationship is enhanced.

Self-report survey instruments are a common method to derive levels of personal disclosure (Cozby 1973), such as, among same-culture group members, between ethnic groups, and across cultures. Early intracultural studies measured mean differences between White and Black subjects (Jourard & Lasakow 1958), between same-sex strangers (Certner1973), among White, Black, and Mexican-American adolescents (Littlefield 1974), and among various Middle-Eastern male university students (Melikian 1962). Cross-cultural studies have explored degrees of self-disclosure between British and American college females (Jourard 1961) and American and German adults (Plog 1965). This data elicitation technique has also been incorporated with Asian subjects: American and Japanese male and female university students (Barnlund 1975); Thai and Japanese females university students (McHugh & Wiriyachitra 1990); American, Japanese, Thai, and Vietnamese male and female university students (McHugh, Truwichien, Tong & Ross 1993); Chinese and British adults (Goodwin and Lee 1994); Chinese and American adults (Chen 1995); and among Americans, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and Vietnamese male and female university students (McHugh, Truwichien, Tong, Ross, & Zhang 1997).

Two studies supplied empirical data showing reaction profiles. The first study includes American, Japanese, and Thai subjects on 57 random topics with Thai and Japanese subjects reporting a greater number of similar reactions when compared to the American group (McHugh, Truwichien & Ross 1992). The second study indicates reaction strategies on 13 diverse conversation topics with Americans exhibiting higher mean ratings than the Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and Vietnamese while the Asian culture groups show comparable reaction profiles (McHugh, Truwichien, Tong, Ross & Zhang 1996).

Other researchers have recorded topic rejection strategies, related to avoidance, silence, and falsifications, among English-speaking peoples and Asians which are based on their personal observations. Rubin (1983) stated that Americans may

imply 'no' with the silence or the avoidance strategy. English second-language learners avoid topics because of a lack of lexicon (Richards 1980; Corder 1983) or structure (Tarone, Cohen & Dumas 1983; Schachter 1983). Brown has also reported ways language learners avoid specific topics: by changing the subject, by pretending not to comprehend, by not responding at all, or by halting an utterance once the thought becomes impossible to express (Brown 1980:179).

The interpretation of silence during interpersonal contact situations varies across cultures. Silence during interpersonal communications among Japanese suggests truthfulness, social discretion, embarrassment, and defiance along with it being applied as a necessary or desirable attribute to gain social acceptance or to avoid social penalty (Lebra 1987:347). Japanese tend to remain silent if they are asked to express their personal opinions before knowing those of the other people present (Naotsuka & Sakamoto 1981:117-118). Chinese consider silence as a virtue since it may indicate reflection and assessment of a situation or signal politeness to the Chinese listener (Seligman 1989:31).

During normal American social interaction, the speaking role frequently changes between partners and silences are infrequent and brief (Wilson & Zimmerman 1986:375). And when silences do occur in conversations, they convey negative impressions such as, tension, hostility, awkwardness, or shyness (Condon 1984:40-41) or indicate disapproval, disagreement, or signal an unsuccessful attempt at communication (Levine & Adelman 1982:23). And if an invitation, offer, request, or proposal is followed by silence, it may denote a rejection (Davidson 1984:103-107). Western business executives in China find themselves talking excessively, most likely because they feel ill at ease with extended pauses (i.e., perceived silences) between speaking turns (Seligman 1989).

Providing false information as a standard reaction may not be common but it is likely to happen in special situations. Thais go out of their way to maintain amicable relations with others and so they may even tell a small lie to prevent strained relations (Fieg 1980:31). And since pressures exist to maintain peaceable social relationships, Vietnamese may find it prudent to resort to a white lie (i.e., a small lie) to ensure that no one becomes upset (Ellis 1995:150). And, under some business conditions, Chinese might simply tell an abject lie to avoid saying no (Seligman 1989:33).

Among unacquainted American adults, such as with potential business contacts at a social gathering, several conversational subject areas should be avoided since introducing them could promote controversy which does not aide in creating a relaxed, congenial atmosphere. These adverse topics include: matters concerning money, your own health, other people's health, controversial subjects when individuals are emotionally involved (e.g., politics, religion, abortion, homophobia, nuclear energy), lugubrious subjects (e.g., death, destruction, torture, starvation, abuse, etc.), rumor and gossip (i.e., unsubstantiated stories), trite and overworked topics (e.g., celebrities' marital and financial scandals) and your own children (Baldrige 1993:127-128). For recent immigrants into the United States, Lanier (1978) mentions five subject areas that are considered too personal for newly acquainted persons to discuss, and they are: 1) age, 2) financial affairs, 3) the cost of clothes or personal belongings, 4) religion, and 5) love (or sex) life.

Prospective Americans negotiating business deals in China, are encouraged to avoid some areas of conversation. During periods of relaxation or at social gatherings, Chinese would feel uncomfortable discussing personal habits, family life, meeting social obligations, personal beliefs, family problems, or personal desires (Shenkar & Ronen 1987:271). Vietnamese may appear quite direct when quizzing people [non-Vietnamese] about their age, religion, family life, or how much money they spent on a purchase (Ellis 1995:149) but these kinds of questions help to establish the person's status and consequently facilitates conversation flow. With Thais, talking about Bangkok traffic, the weather, spicy food, the number of thieves, and mosquitoes are popular topics along with complaining about the police but criticisms of Thai institutions, including Buddhism and the King, should remain unspoken (Cooper & Cooper 1986:32-33). The extent Thais respect the position of the King is evident since even poking fun at him carries a punishment of three to 15 years in prison (Iritani & Matzer 1998).

Ford (1980) holds a different view of what are considered acceptable conversation topics Americans socialize. She (1980) believes that during these modern times people may contribute to discussions about sex, religion or politics but some topics still remain unsuitable in certain situations, such as, discussing an X-rated movie with an older person. Money topics are usually restricted among unacquainted individuals but the interactional setting plays a part in topic selection. Since housing is a constant concern for New York City residents, when someone even asks strangers how much they pay for rent, asking is not considered offensive (Ford 1980:36).

English-speakers command several techniques to deflect unpleasant personal inquires. Ford (1980) suggests three ways to refrain from disclosing excessive personal information: circumlocution, to respond with another question rather than answering, and to politely but firmly refuse to comply. But when listeners are confronted with requests to tell private information, and they agree to do so, Ford (1980) believes that people should answer truthfully. To divert solicitations about disturbing money matters, for example, people are offered suggestions on how to respond but without disclosing the truth. Examples of repartees include: "More than I probably should have" or "Not as much as you'd think" (Post 1984:225).

Thoughtful American native English speakers learn to circumvent taboo conversational topics. The word *taboo* refers to forbidden acts that are to be avoided. Consequently, language associated with an actual taboo act may also become taboo to express (Fromkin & Rodman 1993). In the taboo language category, a large body of taboo words exist in areas related to sex, sex organs, and natural bodily functions. Euphemistic expressions veil meaning and substitute for the taboo words or acts. Some common replacements include: *to sleep with* for having [sexual] intercourse, *private parts* for vagina, *male*

member for penis, and *to relieve oneself* or *to pass water* for urinate (Claire 1990). Another taboo word group sidesteps blasphemy. Some socially acceptable substitutes, in print for mass distribution or in colloquial usage among mixed sexes, include: *Gee* or *Jeepers* for Jesus, *heck* for hell, *deuce* for devil, and *bloody* for By our Lady (Wagner & Radner 1989:235) as well as *Gosh* or *Golly* (Claire 1990), an alternative for God.

In this study, 50 members from each culture group completed a questionnaire in their native language in which they initially evaluated 57 conversation topics on a five-point scale from *very good* to *very bad*, with these topics being proposed with an imagined same-sex, same-culture *school friend*. With topics considered *bad* or *very bad*, subjects then supplied their preferred reaction from among the avoidance, false information, or silence choices. The test instrument measures the effect of culture group affiliation on both topic evaluation and reactions to *bad* and *very bad* conversation topics.

In those studies comparing Americans with an Asian culture group, the literature review reveals generally higher overall mean scores for American subjects. This signifies that the American group is expected to report higher mean values and consequently fewer topics in the *bad* and *very bad* categories. Former research reports that Japanese and Thai reactions appear similar (McHugh et al. 1992) and Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and Vietnamese also seem to coincide on 13 selected topics (McHugh et al. 1996) so results from these four Asian groups are expected to resemble each other on the 17 topics included in Factor Two, *Skeletons in the Family Closet*. These four culture groups share varying degrees of philosophical (Confucianism) and/or religious (i.e., Buddhism) cultural beliefs.

Method

Participants

Fifty-five Americans, 121 Chinese, 114 Japanese, 60 Thai, and 102 Vietnamese formed five, separate intact groups. The participants were enrolled in courses of the person who agreed to collect data in their respective country. They voluntarily agreed to supply data with the reward of learning the results which would heighten their awareness of the other cultures. The Vietnamese subjects also received a pencil for their efforts. From each culture pool, 25 male and 25 female surveys were randomly selected, to provide both a culture and a gender balance. Mean ages slightly differ among the five groups: American, 22.86; Chinese, 20.74; Japanese, 19.16; Thai, 19.36; Vietnamese, 21.07.

The American subjects go to a state university in the Midwestern part of the United States. The Chinese subjects are enrolled in a public, provincial university in Nanjing, China. The Japanese subjects attend two private universities in western Japan whereas the other subjects attend public [state supported] institutions. The Thai subjects attend a national university in northern Thailand, with 50% of the student body selected from that region. The Vietnamese attend a teacher's college in Ho Chi Minh City.

Materials

The 57-topic survey instrument simultaneously draws responses on the proposed conversation topic, within the defined range, and toward two targeted persons. One person is a same-culture, same-sex school friend while the other is a same-culture, opposite-sex school friend. Subjects read the survey titled "A Cross-Cultural Study of Conversation Topics" (McHugh & Truwichien 1991) in their native language after it had been translated by the committee method (Brislin, Lonner & Thorndike 1973:46-47) for the non-native English speakers. Subjects read the purpose, the introduction, and then the conceptual definitions describing: 1) the proposed interlocutor, 2) the five levels of topic appropriateness, and 3) the three supplied reactions to bad or very bad topics.

A same-culture school friend, both same-sex and opposite-sex, is defined as having the following characteristics:

"He or she is in the same culture group as you. This person is about the same age as you. You have often seen and talked with the person at your school. You have never socialized with this person off campus. This person is not a *good friend* or a *best friend* of yours" (McHugh & Truwichien 1991).

For brevity, only three of the five categories of topic appropriateness are explained. The good and bad categories are placed between very good and neutral, and between neutral and very bad, respectively.

"A *Very Good* topic is very suitable to discuss with the school friend. You would be willing to tell complete information about this topic. You feel very pleasant and you are very eager to discuss this topic. A *Neutral* topic seems neither good nor bad when introduced by the 'school friend.' You have neither positive or negative feelings when you discuss this topic. A *Very Bad* topic is undesirable to discuss with the school friend. You would not be willing to tell the information to your school friend. You have a very unpleasant feeling when your school friend introduces this topic for discussion" (McHugh & Truwichien 1991).

When subjects rated a topic as either *very bad* or *bad*, they then told a conceivable way to respond by choosing one of the three following reactions:

"With the *avoid* style of conversation strategy, you answer in vague, general terms. Or a person might answer on a slightly or totally different topic. With the *false* style of conversation strategy, you say clear and exact information to

the *school friend* but the information is not correct or true. With the *silence* style of conversation strategy, you remain silent for an unnatural length of time without orally answering or without giving a gesture" (McHugh & Truwichien 1991).

Procedure

Subjects first read the purpose, the introduction, and the conceptual definitions for a) the proposed interlocutor, b) the five categories of topic appropriateness, and c) the three supplied reactions to *bad* or *very bad* topics. Then, they found an unrelated example of how to answer a potential conversation topic. Subjects completed the surveys during a regular class period in about 20 minutes.

Following this explanation and example, subjects provided biographical data along with reviewing a simple reminder. It repeated to the subjects to imagine that a same-sex and an opposite-sex school friend had introduced the particular conversation topic and then to select the level of topic appropriateness. And if the topic were considered either very bad or bad, to then choose one reaction from among the three supplied.

Scoring

Data for the nominal categories of very good, good, neutral, bad, and very bad were entered numerically as 4, 3, 2, 1, and 0, respectively. For topics selected as either bad or very bad, subjects reported one of three reactions, that is, avoid, false, or silence which was entered as a, f, or s. For subjects who failed to select a reaction of avoid, false, or silence for a bad or very bad topic, an x was entered.

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Results

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This study incorporates Panyard's (1971) modification of the Jourard and Lasakow (1958) scale which increases the choices from three to five for improved reliability with the resultant reliability analysis of the same-sex scale showing high values of Cronbach's alpha for each culture group: Americans (.9652), Chinese (.9411), Japanese (.9343), Thai (.9603), Vietnamese (.9366) (SPSS 1993). The initial scree test identified five major factors. Factor analysis with varimax rotated loadings shows from seven to 17 items in each factor and these five factors account for 56.3% of the variance (Wilkinson 1990).

Raw data were converted to a set of standardized *z*-scores for analysis which Comrey (1973) considered a simple but adequate method for comparing factors (as cited in Tabachnick & Fidell 1989:641). The five factors emerged through factor analysis and they are characterized as: 1) *Familial Biographical Data*, 2) *Skeletons in the Family Closet*, 3) *Small Talk Topics*, 4) *Personal Information*, and 5) *Intimate Information*. *Skeletons in the closet* refers to an Americanism which indicates people have a secret to hide about themselves. *Personal* acquires the third sense "relating to the person or body" and *intimate* the fourth sense "of a very personal or private nature" (*Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary* 1963).

Males (1.22) post an average higher mean value across the five factors than females (1.01) on the 0- to 4-point rating scale. Males and females show a significant difference on the five factors (F (1,248) = 4.604, p = .0329) as well as on Factor 2 (F (1,248) = 6.6436, p = .014) (McHugh et al. 1997). By culture group affiliation, Americans (1.52) report the highest raw mean scores on Factor 2 followed by Chinese (1.16), Vietnamese (1.07), Japanese (0.98) and Thai (0.82) (McHugh 1997).

Table 1, *Item Number, Description, and Loadings on 'Skeletons in the Family Closet' Topics*, lists the 17 items which have been characterized as *Skeletons in the Family Closet* topics along with their respective loadings. Thirteen of the 17 items, about 75%, pertain to your mother, father, uncle, brother, or sister, and the remaining four refer to yourself.

Table 1

Item	Description	Loadings
50	if your mother has had serious trouble with the law	0.845
39	if your father has had serious trouble with the law	0.815
48	if your mother is living apart from your father because of discontent	0.804
38	if your father has had minor trouble which brought in police	0.781
47	if your mother and father were unhappily married	0.744
40	if your father has had a sexual relationship with a woman other than your mother	0.735
57	if your uncle has had serious trouble with the law	0.705
54	if your brother or sister were mentally ill	0.696
46	if your mother is divorced from your father	0.648
49	if your mother is living apart from your father because of his business	0.613
55	if your brother or sister were physically handicapped	0.605
53	if your sister has had a baby when she wasn't married	0.605
31	if you have had minor trouble which brought in police	0.524
44	your mother's annual income in a monetary amount	0.507
30	if you now have a contagious disease	0.449
23	the problems you have with your parents	0.449
27	if you have had serious trouble with the law	0.431

Table 2, *Chi-square Paired Comparison on Reaction Profiles by Five Culture Groups at p < .05 on 17 Items*, shows that most paired items between both the Chinese-Japanese group and the Thai-Vietnamese group are not significant. Contrarily, the American-Thai (14 of 17), the American-Vietnamese (13 of 17), and the Japanese-Vietnamese (12 of 17) groups report most items with significant differences.

Table 2

item	American-Chinese	American-Japanese	American-Thai	American-Vietnamese	Chinese-Japanese	Chinese-Thai	Chinese-Vietnamese	Japanese-Thai	Japanese-Vietnamese	Thai-Vietnamese
50	ns	ns	0.046	ns	ns	ns	ns	0.010	0.018	ns
39	ns	ns	0.004	ns	ns	0.028	ns	0.000	0.012	ns
48	ns	ns	0.000	0.001	ns	0.005	0.041	0.008	0.016	ns
38	ns	ns	0.014	ns	ns	0.031	ns	0.005	ns	ns
47	ns	ns	0.000	0.027	ns	0.006	ns	0.002	ns	0.007
40	ns	0.035	0.003	0.011	ns	0.029	ns	0.000	0.003	ns
57	0.004	ns	0.000	0.002	ns	ns	ns	0.023	ns	ns
54	0.028	ns	0.003	0.000	ns	ns	0.016	ns	ns	ns
46	0.001	0.000	0.000	0.000	ns	0.000	0.002	0.000	0.001	ns
49	ns	0.018	ns	0.000	ns	ns	0.015	ns	0.028	ns
55	0.030	0.002	0.000	0.000	ns	ns	0.005	ns	0.020	ns
53	0.004	0.001	0.000	0.000	ns	0.023	0.000	ns	0.005	ns
31	ns	ns	0.046	0.098	ns	ns	ns	ns	0.035	ns
44	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
30	ns	ns	ns	0.000	ns	ns	0.017	ns	0.013	ns
23	ns	ns	0.000	0.000	ns	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.007	0.027
27	ns	ns	0.007	0.004	0.004	ns	ns	0.000	0.028	ns

Table 3, *Cumulative Percentages on 'Skeletons in the Family Closet' Topics*, lists the cumulative frequency of reactions in percentages by culture group affiliation and shows that Chinese and Japanese report about 40% *avoidance* reaction while Thai and Vietnamese display a preference for the *silence* reaction at about 39%. American results reveal about 51% of the 17 items are categorized as *none*, therefore these items were rated at *neutral* or above. The four Asian groups, on the other hand, rate the *none* reaction of the 17 items between about 22% and 35%.

Table 3

Reaction	American	Chinese	Japanese	Thai	Vietnamese
avoid	29.8%	40.1%	40.7%	31.7%	26.8%
FALSE	7.2%	4.5%	6.4%	6.2%	5.5%
none	51.2%	35.1%	34.5%	21.5%	28.4%
silence	11.9%	19.5%	14.1%	39.7%	38.8%
x	0.0%	0.8%	4.4%	1.1%	0.5%

Table 4a, *Vietnamese Rate the Most Reactions on Five 'Skeletons in the Family Closet' Topics*, shows that Vietnamese report the highest percentages of reactions on five topics (i.e., 54, 49, 55, 53, 44) which include a mentally ill and a physically handicapped sibling.

Table 4a

Item	Reaction	American	Chinese	Japanese	Thai	Vietnamese
54	avoid	26%	46%	44%	32%	32%
	FALSE	4%	0%	4%	6%	8%
	none	52%	28%	28%	18%	14%
	silence	18%	26%	22%	44%	46%
	x	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%
49	avoid	24%	36%	40%	28%	28%
	FALSE	2%	0%	6%	2%	6%
	none	66%	46%	34%	46%	26%
	silence	8%	18%	14%	22%	40%
	x	0%	0%	6%	2%	0%
55	avoid	22%	38%	46%	32%	26%
	FALSE	0%	0%	2%	8%	8%
	none	70%	44%	30%	30%	24%
	silence	8%	18%	18%	30%	42%
	x	0%	0%	400%	0%	0%
53	avoid	20%	44%	42%	40%	26%
	FALSE	2%	0%	6%	10%	10%
	none	70%	36%	28%	16%	12%
	silence	8%	20%	20%	32%	52%
	x	0%	0%	4%	2%	0%
44	avoid	28%	22%	40%	34%	34%
	FALSE	6%	4%	6%	4%	4%
	none	54%	60%	44%	40%	38%
	silence	12%	14%	8%	20%	22%
	x	0%	0%	2%	2%	2%

Of the 17 topics in '*Skeletons in the Family Closet' Topics*, Topic 40, *If your father has had a sexual relationship with a woman other than your mother,* shows the highest percentage of reactions, from 76% (Japanese) to 94% (Thai) and the American sample reports the highest percentage of *false* reactions at 22%. Table 4b, *Thais Rate the Most Reactions on 11 'Skeletons in the Family Closet' Topics*, indicates that Thais rate the highest percentages of reactions on 11 topics with five relating to mother or parents.

Table 4b

Item	Reaction	American	Chinese	Japanese	Thai	Vietnamese
50	avoid	36%	46%	44%	30%	30%
	FALSE	14%	10%	6%	12%	6%
	none	32%	18%	30%	14%	22%
	silence	18%	26%	14%	42%	42%
	x	0%	0%	6%	2%	0%
39	avoid	34%	46%	44%	26%	28%
	FALSE	14%	12%	8%	6%	8%
	none	30%	14%	26%	10%	22%
	silence	22%	24%	14%	56%	42%
	x	0%	4%	8%	2%	0%
48	avoid	38%	48%	42%	28%	24%
	FALSE	2%	0%	6%	6%	2%
	none	48%	26%	26%	10%	26%
	silence	12%	26%	20%	54%	48%
	x	0%	0%	6%	2%	0%
38	avoid	38%	44%	46%	28%	32%
	FALSE	8%	6%	10%	4%	6%
	none	38%	32%	26%	20%	30%
	silence	16%	16%	12%	46%	32%
	x	0%	2%	6%	2%	0%
47	avoid	34%	42%	42%	32%	22%
	FALSE	2%	6%	8%	4%	4%
	none	54%	30%	28%	10%	40%
	silence	10%	22%	18%	54%	34%
	x	0%	0%	4%	0%	0%
40	avoid	30%	44%	44%	20%	24%
	FALSE	22%	12%	4%	6%	6%
	none	18%	8%	24%	6%	10%
	silence	30%	34%	24%	66%	60%
	x	0%	2%	4%	2%	0%
57	avoid	24%	44%	42%	44%	30%
	FALSE	8%	2%	6%	4%	2%
	none	60%	30%	34%	12%	32%
	silence	8%	20%	14%	38%	36%
	x	0%	0%	4%	2%	0%
46	avoid	14%	36%	42%	26%	30%
	FALSE	0%	2%	8%	6%	6%
	none	82%	44%	32%	14%	16%
	silence	4%	18%	12%	54%	48%
	x	0%	0%	6%	0%	0%
31	avoid	28%	34%	38%	32%	16%
	FALSE	6%	2%	8%	8%	4%
	none	62%	48%	46%	40%	62%
	silence	4%	14%	6%	20%	18%
	x	0%	2%	2%	0%	0%
23	avoid	32%	32%	32%	48%	30%
	FALSE	8%	6%	6%	6%	0%
	none	56%	60%	48%	12%	30%
	silence	4%	2%	8%	34%	36%
	x	0%	0%	6%	0%	4%
27	avoid	28%	38%	22%	24%	24%
	FALSE	10%	4%	8%	4%	8%
	none	50%	36%	66%	30%	42%
	silence	12%	22%	4%	42%	24%
	x	0%	0%	0%	0%	2%

In Table 4c, *Americans Rate the Most Reactions on One Topic in 'Skeletons in the Family Closet' Topics*, Americans show 72% reactions to the topic *if you now have a contagious disease*, including the highest *false* reporting at 14%.

Table 4c

Item	Reaction	American	Chinese	Japanese	Thai	Vietnamese
30	avoid	50%	38%	42%	34%	20%
	FALSE	14%	10%	6%	8%	6%
	none	28%	36%	36%	38%	36%
	silence	8%	12%	12%	20%	38%
	x	0%	4%	4%	0%	0%

Discussion

The hypothesis that the four Asian culture groups would report matching reaction profiles is not supported. Former studies report the frequency of reaction profiles but the chi-square comparison of paired culture groups fails to support a similarity between each of these four Asian culture groups (Table 2). However, the Chinese-Japanese and the Thai-Vietnamese paired groups show the least different reaction profiles: one for the Chinese-Japanese and two for the Thai-Vietnamese. It is unclear exactly what factors account for results. Possibly, these paired groups' shared writing systems or their common philosophical or religious backgrounds have been influential in shaping their interpersonal communication styles over the centuries.

Over the last 12 centuries, the Japanese have borrowed and adapted many of China's practices and institutions, including part of its writing systems and its concepts of an orderly society. Chinese only write with ideographs, normally with one reading per character which is differentiated by four possible tones. Japanese also use ideographs, often with multiple readings per character, plus either or both of their native scripts, hiragana and katakana. Fundamental aspects of the Chinese and Japanese scripts fail to reflect a commonality between these two cultures so a brief examination of traditional Confucianism and its influence over today's modern culture may shed light on these findings.

The five Confucian relationships in traditional Chinese culture include three based on kinship responsibilities (i.e., father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother) and two based on responsibilities toward the throne and friends (i.e., ruler and subject, friend and friend). Kinship in one's family regards not only living relatives but also five generations in each direction (i.e., ascendants and descendants) (Reischauer & Fairbank 1960). Under modern Chinese rule, since 1949, assaults have been made on old concepts and social institutions but the traditional respect for an authoritarian leadership remains.

The socialization of private property and business, eliminated inheritance rights which greatly destroyed the strength of and need for strong kinship groups as before. Rampaging Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) further aimed to destroy the Four Old's (i.e., old customs, old ideas, old culture, old habits) of the exploiting classes (Wright 1989:59-60), including intellectuals. Ancestral worship, indicated by offering food, beverages, and money to ancestors with the burning of incense sticks, is rarely visible on China proper whereas this tradition remains intact on Taiwan, the second major stronghold of Chinese culture. Undoubtedly, Chinese still look after their nuclear family members but the persuasiveness of traditional Chinese kinship groups, the clan, has diminished in strength.

Roots of Confucian concepts in modern Japan are traced to the Tokugawa Shogunate (1542-1867) where ethics and social relations were adopted and codified to fit Japan's social needs. Four rigid social classes, in descending order, samurai, farmers, craftsmen, and merchants, were officially established with the samurai as the scholar-administrator class. This differs from the traditional Chinese open-examination system which allowed for upward advancement through intellectual prowess without regard to their family's social position. Also, instead of the Chinese propensity for strong loyalty to one's family, the Japanese rulers demanded this loyalty to one's lord where subjects remained the lord's chattel.

The sense of duty and gratitude to one's supervisor, embodied in the Samurai class, spread to lower classes which may account for the stability of the Tokugawa Shogunate, in addition to its intricate political structure (Reischauer & Fairbank 1960). The accession of the Meiji Restoration (1867-1912) brought an official end to Japan's feudal society so Japanese citizens then faced no restrictions seeking other employment and could also take on family names (Fairbank, Reischauer & Craig 1965:238). With this new found occupational liberty together with the industrialization of Japan, a man's loyalties shifted from one's lord to one's employer, as it remains today. Chinese and Japanese show few vestiges of Confucian philosophy except for the acquiescence to leadership demands. Since current Chinese leaders obliterated traditionally defined Confucian relationships and Japanese exhibit loyalty to one's employer, rather than to one's family, strong family ties appear not to be a contributing factor in their reporting of similar reaction profiles.

Religious foundations, and current practices, found in China and Japan also fail to offer an explanation of the results. A new, Confucianization of the Buddhist faith took place in the 17th century to attract followers back to into this floundering religious society. Instead of requiring followers to believe and to practice proper Buddhist thought and actions, the new Buddhist movement allowed Chinese to gain enlightenment through charity, filial piety, and loyalty to the throne, with the last two points being at the roots of traditional Confucianism (Cotterell 1993:97-116). Buddhism had been periodically

persecuted in China, but it came under intense pressure during China's Cultural Revolution when even revered monks had to publicly denounce their faith and the Buddhist temples became forbidden places (Heng & Shapiro 1983:91). Japanese possess the freedom to practice any religion but few clerics or citizens seriously embrace any religion.

Japan retains prodigious wooden Mahayana Buddhist temples but mainly in a few historical centers, such as Kyoto, Nara, Koyasan, and Kamakura. And except for these few areas, monks are seldom observed carrying out religious duties. The Shinto Shrine (jinja) predominates throughout Japan with nearly every community maintaining at least a small shrine where citizens may occasionally practice their traditional animistic practices. Both Japanese Buddhist monks as well as Shinto priests marry and their position as head monk or priest is commonly passed on to either their eldest son or son-in-law so that their position may stay within the same family for several generations. This means of succession suggests that most Buddhist monks or Shinto priests are not spiritually inclined but mainly pursue the religious life as just an inherited occupation, similarly to the practice of other families who operate businesses. The Buddhist tradition is even less visible in today's China.

The philosophical basis of Buddhism, rather than a related language, may explain the similar results between Thai and Vietnamese. Both Thai and Vietnamese include tonal markers in their script but Vietnamese write a romanized script adopted during the early part of French colonization, while the Thai script is more akin to Sanskrit. In today's modern Thai society, Theravada Buddhism plays a prominent role in life. Every male Thai Buddhist, aged 20 and over, is expected to be ordained as a monk sometime during his life with the three-month Buddhist Lent as a popular time for ordaining (Segaller 1989). Buddhist monks are seen from before dawn collecting alms from homes and shops. And throughout the day, monks in their brightly colored robes go about other daily business.

Vietnamese culture, on the other hand, appears to be an amalgamation of mainly the Buddhist religion along with some traditional Chinese customs. Approximately two thirds of the Vietnamese practice Buddhism with Mahayana being the largest sect, followed by Theravada, and the smaller home-grown Mendicant sect founded in the south. Also, Roman Catholicism constitutes from 8 to 10% of the population (Ellis 1995:51-75). Even though the Vietnamese practice Buddhism, unlike the Thai who observe Buddhist New Year's holidays and write the Buddhist year on both official records and in ordinary dealings, Vietnamese follow the Chinese lunar calendar for ancestral worship and for the New Year's celebration period. The sharing of the Buddhist faith seems unlikely to account for the closeness of Thai and Vietnamese results.

A major finding reported in this paper is the way Americans, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and Vietnamese elect to respond to these 17 topics which largely concern nuclear and extended family members. Table 3, *Cumulative Percentages on 'Skeletons in the Family Closet' Topics*, shows that Americans report about 51% of their total reactions on these 17 topics in the *none* category so they require no other reaction (e.g., *avoid*, *false*, *silence*) and consequently these responses fall within the *very good*, *good*, or *neutral* categories of self-disclosure. Chinese and Japanese report only about 35% of the 17 topics falling within these three categories, followed by Vietnamese at 28% and Thai at 21%. These results suggest that Americans have a higher tolerance for self-disclosure on topics dealing with their family members than do these four Asian culture groups. Possibly, the independently-minded American sample feels detached from the misconduct of their nuclear and extended family members while these Asians, in general, believe a misdeed by one family member negatively reflects upon each person in their whole family.

In the Vietnamese culture, a person's image does not solely rest on his or her own personal accomplishments. A person's identity is derived from his or her family and its social standing, as well as from his or her [family's] religion, class, and occupation (Ellis 1995:63). Maintaining family honor or face may be a prominent guiding force within these societies and by not disclosing shameful acts, through avoiding of the topic or with silence, a family's prestige could therefore be maintained.

Another explanation of the results could be the strength of the proposed targeted person. The defined relationship of the intended interlocutor, an unacquainted, same-sex school friend, could skew the pattern of responses. The American tertiary educational system allows flexibility in course selection, so American university students may not meet the same people in ensuing courses and as much as 30% of the student body enrolls in evening courses while working full-time during the day. As a result, the American sample may fail to establish and maintain lasting friendships from among their university peers so adhering to proper conversational etiquette may be overlooked.

Contrarily, much less flexibility is possible in the southeast and east Asian educational systems with students often meeting identical students over their four-year university career. They not only build life-long friendships, strengthened by regular reunions, but these trusted contacts may also benefit their later business careers. Maintaining a light, congenial atmosphere may be a more important conversational goal than to exchange personal, possibly incriminating, information.

Also in Table 3, the strategies these five culture groups take in not complying with the requests is informative. Chinese and Japanese show the highest percentage of avoidance, at about 40%, signifying that they would talk about or around the topic but not answer it directly. At about 39%, Thai and Vietnamese find the silent reaction most appropriate which suggests that neither verbal or non-verbal reactions would be forthcoming, thus leaving the meaning of the silence up to the interlocutor to interpret. These reaction profiles suggest a propensity of these groups to select varying means of rejecting an unfavorable conversation topic with an unacquainted person.

Anomalies exposed by each culture's reaction profile require comments. As reported in Table 4b, Thais report the lowest frequency of *none* in 11 of 17 items, followed by the Vietnamese in Table 4a at 5 of 17 and the Americans in Table 4c with 1 of 17. Six of the topics the Thai rate the lowest contain a *mother* (5) or *parents* (1) as the reference. Mothers in Thai society experience an extremely close relationship with their children. Through the normal socialization process, Thais consider their mother as the preeminent person in their lives since she gave them life; she suffered to do it; and she has freely shown love and care so this sacrifice and dedication leads the child to being obedient and forever showing gratitude and respect (Mulder 1994:69). This mother-child relationship is considered at the core of Thai ideology and, with its strong emphasis on the goodness of the mother, respect is owed to the mother's position in society (Mulder 1994:58).

Americans appear reluctant to broach item 30, *if you now have a contagious disease*, since they report the lowest *none* category as well as the highest *avoidance* and *false* reactions to it. Contagious diseases or unusual health ailments may be less common in the United States than in the other four countries. Both items 30 and 40, *if your father has had a sexual relationship with a woman other than your mother*, fulfill the requirements of an American taboo topic, dealing with one's health and sexual intercourse. On these two items, Americans report the highest application of the false reaction found among these 17 topics, 14% and 22%, respectively. Lying about an inappropriate sexual relationship appears sanctioned in the American psychology.

This study adds empirical evidence supporting distinctions not only between the American sample and these four Asian culture groups but also differences among the Chinese, Japanese, Thai, and Vietnamese when encountering identical situations. The communicative styles of various Asian culture groups should be viewed separately rather than by placing all *Asians* together into one, homogeneous basket. Intercultural communicators should become aware of and adapt to their characteristic communication styles, including conversation topics to be selected or rejected, which would then enhance effective interpersonal relations.

The results show that the breadth of these 17 taboo topics are deeper among the four Asian culture groups, extending beyond the self and encompassing both nuclear and extended family members, than they are among the American sample. This implies that in cross-cultural contact situations, Americans and possibly Westerners in general, may unwittingly introduce sensitive topics about family members with east and southeast Asians.

Another important implication concerns the interpretation of an avoidance or a silence reaction when Americans, or possibly Westerners in general, communicate with Asians in English. These two reactions may actually be due to introducing an unfavorable topic but the Westerner could perceive them as a lack of fluency in the language of discourse.

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previous study (McHugh et al, 1992) and reactions on items 46 and 53 were published for these five culture groups (McHugh et al., 1996).

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