

## **Cultural Perceptions of Equivocation and Directness: Dimensional or Unique?**

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### **Abstract**

This study is an exploratory literature review and analysis designed to provide an answer to the following question: which of two approaches is more likely to be productive in future research on the role of equivocal communication across cultures, a culture specific approach or one that focuses on key dimensions of cultural difference put forth by Hall and Hofstede? The likely role of equivocation and indirectness is examined in each of three cultures, those of the United States, Mexico, and Japan. Mexico and Japan have dimensional similarities, as high-context and collectivistic cultures, whereas the United States is dimensionally distinct from the other two, as a low-context and individualistic culture. Our review suggests that a research paradigm using the dimensions would likely be more productive in examining equivocation than would one that emphasizes idiosyncratic characteristics of each culture.

A limited amount of empirical research has been conducted on the role that culture plays in the use and perception of interpersonal equivocation and related concepts such as directness, vagueness, ambiguity, clarity, and face concerns. Hall's (1977) and Hofstede's (1991, 2001) fundamental dimensions of cultural difference, especially those concerning high versus low-context and individualistic versus collectivistic cultures, would appear to suggest that equivocation (the intended use of communicative vagueness or ambiguity—see especially Bavelas, Black, Chovil, & Mullett, 1990) would be used and viewed differently across these dimensions. Theoretically, they would suggest that equivocation should be considered more normative in high-context and collectivistic cultures. For example, Ting-Toomey (1988) has argued that members of collectivistic cultures are more likely to seek approval and use less direct strategies when negotiating face concerns than are members of individualistic cultures. Also, in reviewing some of the research of Ting-Toomey and others, Morisaki and Gudykunst (1994) point out that Japanese tend to equate losing face with an inability to “maintain ingroup harmony” (p. 56), while North Americans, from a much more individualistic culture, tend to perceive losing face as associated with personal failure. This finding would suggest that those from collectivistic cultures might need to rely on more equivocal communication tactics in order to smooth over social difficulties and promote harmony. High-context cultures such as those in Japan and Mexico, according to Hall (1977), are more likely to depend on

contextual factors (social situation, environment, etc.) and nonverbal cues from others to understand and perform effectively within interpersonal interactions. Again, in a manner similar to collectivistic cultures, this notion suggests that those from high-context cultures might be more accepting (than those from low-context cultures) of verbally equivocal and indirect messages because they make better use of context and nonverbals to aid in the interpretation of the verbal aspects of interactions.

However, some of the data that have been collected and analyzed suggest mixed results. Yeung, Levine, and Nishiyama (1999) found, for example, that Hong Kong Chinese (as expected) were more tolerant of message manipulations that United States citizens tended to view as deceptive. In other words, Hong Kong Chinese were less likely than Americans to view indirect and equivocal messages as violations of the conversational maxim of manner. On the other hand, a study by Tanaka and Bell (1996) did not suggest that Japanese participants were any more likely to equivocate in response to avoidance-avoidance conflict situations than were American participants; that is, the study found, surprisingly, that the Bavelas theory of equivocation held across cultures that were dimensionally different.

An alternative hypothesis, therefore, is that equivocation differences that exist across cultures represent unique aspects of the cultures themselves. In other words, what if the dimensions are not strong predictors of equivocation and indirectness, but rather instead that idiosyncratic or yet to be understood aspects of cultures are better predictors?

Therefore, we propose to examine the literature on interpersonal communication within and across three distinct national cultures: those of Mexico, Japan, and the United States. Japan and Mexico represent high-context and collectivistic sides of Hofstede's dimensions, whereas the United States represents low-context and individualistic sides of the same dimensions; at the same time, each country represents quite unique, idiosyncratic cultures. Our survey of the literature might suggest, therefore, that future empirical research should be focused on how the cultural dimensions influence equivocation (and related concepts—see above), especially if the literature suggests communication similarities between Mexico and Japan that are different from the United States. Alternatively, the literature might suggest a more idiosyncratic approach to studying equivocation and culture, especially if any similarities and differences do not break down along Hall's and Hofstede's dimensions.

Does the survey of interpersonal literature, especially concerning equivocation and related concepts, suggest a dimensional pattern or completely unique differences? Let us begin to answer this question with an examination of culture and communication in Mexico and among Mexican Americans.

We do not presume to have either information or insight that is not available to others, nor do we wish to speak where others could do so from native experience. Instead, we base our discussion on other research about language used in Mexican culture. At the same time, we are aware that one can speak of a single culture in this multicultural nation only in very general terms and that this is merely a first step in identifying parameters of Mexican use of equivocation as a mode of discourse. It is important, however, to do at least this, not only because Mexico is a large and important nation, but because Mexican Americans now constitute at least 60% of the Hispanic population in the United States of America (Locke, 1992).

The concepts which would seem at once to be the most relevant in this inquiry are those developed by Hall (1977) and Hofstede (1991, 2001). By now, Hall's concept of high-

and low-context cultures has made its way into even the most basic communication textbooks and has become a highly heuristic contribution to cross-cultural understanding (Lustig & Koester, 2003). Complementing Hall's ideas are Hofstede's five dimensions of cross-cultural difference. Like those of Hall, these dimensions have become widely used and have prompted much discussion and application. Understanding how these principles illuminate the question of Mexican use of equivocation is itself not unequivocal however! This is an area wherein a paucity of research findings is the norm, and it is our hope that our rather limited conclusions here will provide a stimulus for future intercultural investigations.

Both Japan and Mexico are identified by Hall as high-context cultures (1977). Insofar as messages are concerned, high-context cultures prefer those which are covert and implicit. Low-context culture, such as that predominant in the United States of America, prizes overt and explicit verbal messaging. High-context cultures depend greatly upon nonverbal means, especially contextual ones, to make explicit that which is verbally covert and implicit, while low-context ones tend to diminish the content aspects of nonverbal communication as well as the environment. Condon (1985), for example, points out that Americans, particularly, are likely to have difficulty correctly interpreting the persuasive messages of Mexican shopkeepers. The Mexican's style is more dramatic and emotional than one might expect from an American, and there is a greater interest in keeping the customer happy than in accurate details. Americans would tend to miss the nuances of the emotional or nonverbal meaning and not to show much awareness of the environment. The outcome is likely to be not only that the American does not buy the shopkeeper's product but also adds to a mistrustful stereotype of Mexicans in general.

Hall (1977) would describe this type of communication used by the shopkeeper, among other things, as internalized messaging, wherein the content is not coded plainly. Such inclinations as these begin to suggest to us that communicators in high-context cultures might well be inclined to the use of equivocation. It would seem logical that those communicators who are most concerned about the setting, the emotional climate, and consideration of the receiver would be quite likely to choose equivocation in an effort to avoid unpleasant responses of any kind. Indeed, it has been found that in U.S./Mexican business negotiations Mexicans may be perceived as slow to start, because they are more interested in seeing that interpersonal dimensions of the negotiations are attended to first than are the task-oriented North Americans (Heydenfeldt, 2000).

Locke (1992) has summarized much of the available research on Mexican cultural characteristics for the purposes of mental health counselors working with Mexican Americans. He characterizes the interpersonal communication of Mexican Americans as utilizing a great deal of diplomacy and tact out of a concern and respect for the other person. That of non-Hispanic North Americans, by contrast, is open, frank, and direct. Unlike their non-Hispanic counterparts, Mexican Americans use an indirect and elaborate manner of expression, which to our minds implies at least the possibility of a dependence on equivocation. Finally, Locke (1992) observes that Mexican American communication avoids direct argument and contradiction and values at least the appearance of agreeability. Once again, we see this as a concern for the other, which is consistent with the usual aims of equivocation.

Of course, we are clearly hampered here by the absence of any direct examination of the use of equivocation by Mexicans. Let us, then, turn to Hofstede (1991, 2001) for any help which his findings may provide. In this account, we are following the helpful summaries of Lustig and Koester (2003). Hofstede's original study of 100,000 IBM employees in 71

countries yielded five dimensions of cultural difference: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, and long-term versus short-term goal orientation. Hofstede (1991) also codified these cultural differences by country through a standardized score with a mean of zero. The U.S.A., for example, was found to have the highest degree of individualism among all the countries at a value of 200. Japan scored 12, which is not surprising to those of us who have studied the structure of Japanese manufacturing enterprises with their quality circles and group decision-making. What may truly be surprising is how collective Mexico is: -55! Some North American stereotypes notwithstanding, Japan is the most male-oriented or male-preferential culture among the three at 238, with Mexico at 100, and the U.S.A. at 63. Mexico is the culture most sensitive to and deferential to class and socioeconomic differences. Its power distance value is 99, while that of Japan is -25 and of the U.S.A. -90.

However, the most interesting values for our purposes are those for uncertainty avoidance. Japan is the culture which is most threatened by ambiguity and therefore has the highest value: 107. In Japanese culture, uncertainty is an uncomfortable experience. For the U.S.A., it is no surprise that the value is -87. The value for Mexico is between these two at 65. Such findings as these may portend trouble for our working hypothesis that the high-context Mexican culture should favor the use of equivocal messages. To the extent that such messages seem ambiguous to interpersonal communicators and produce uncertainty, one would think that Mexicans would avoid them. It may be, though, that Hofstede's findings and the observations of Hall and Locke can be synthesized into a unified theory.

Consider, first, the observations mentioned above regarding the nature of high-context cultures. It is quite possible that what would seem unknown or uncertain in such a culture is not the same as it is in a low-context culture. In North America, for example, uncertainty suggests a lack of information, that which is ordinarily coded verbally. A lack of emotional expression, as might be found in the nonverbal communication dimension, is not regarded as being uncertain. With the greater attention to and awareness of nonverbal communication in a high-context culture such as Mexico, then, it may well be quite acceptable to be equivocal verbally without creating the discomfort of uncertainty. Such a possibility remains to be investigated directly.

To continue our attempt to discover whether a culture dimensional or culture specific explanation of equivocation and indirectness is preferable, we now turn to a more in-depth analysis of the culture of the United States.

Individualistic cultures concentrate on autonomy and independence by stressing individual needs, desires, and rights. The perception of individual separateness is an integral part of the U.S. culture. Klopff noted that "we assume intrinsically that each person is not only a separate biological entity but also a unique psychological being and a singular member of our society" (1998, p. 40-41). Further, this concept of a separate self is so deeply ingrained that it is the framework that defines all of our relationships, both personal and professional. Klopff goes on to argue that members of the U.S. culture are typically interested in their own self image, self-actualization, self-determination, and the like. Essentially, in an individualistic culture members are highly focused on achieving their goals and the goals of the group are secondary.

Conversely, collectivistic cultures stress the group, not the individual. In collectivistic cultures the needs, values, and goals of the group are considered primary and individual goals are secondary. Additionally, the concept of self is entirely different than in

individualistic cultures. Rather than seeing self as separate and unrelated to the group, the notion of self is defined in relation to the group. In collective cultures there is not a tendency to separate one's self from the group. Rather, individuals do not see themselves as that different from the other "selves" in the group (Klopf, 1998). Hence, in collective cultures the association with families, clans, and organizations is key to defining one's perception of self. Both the Mexican and Japanese cultures are considered to be collective cultures because of the focus on the group rather than the individual.

The individualistic-collectivistic classification is closely related to the high versus low-context dimension. Cultures are categorized based on whether or not a message is explicitly stated or implied. Clearly, this categorization is critical in cross-cultural communication because high and low-context cultures operate by very different rules, norms and expectations.

In high-context cultures the message is implicitly stated and resides in either the nonverbal cues or the internalized framework of the communicators. The members of these cultures are more attuned to reading nonverbal cues from the face, the body and the environment. Conversely, low-context cultures typically place less emphasis on such nonverbal cues so they rely much more on an elaborated verbal message to carry the meaning (Klopf, 1998). As a whole, the United States is classified as low-context culture. However, since the United States is composed of a variety of people from around the world, it should be noted that there are likely to be some exceptions to the predominant cultural low-context expectation. Generally, members of a low-context culture are talkative, direct, and redundant because they rely on the verbal channel. Individuals from the U. S. are direct, informal, sincere, and they are typically impatient with conversational detours and indirectness (Klopf, 1998). Additionally, they value objectivity, innovation, and practicality.

Both of these concepts, individualism-collectivism and high-context and low-context, are related to the concept of face. Face is a metaphor used by Erving Goffman to describe the individual's social self. Face describes an individual's self presentation in social situations. In order to present one's self an individual will take a *line*. According to Goffman, a *line* is all verbal and nonverbal behavior used in an interaction in order to engage in order to appropriately and creatively maintain an individual's *face* (Trenholm & Jensen, 2004). Miller said, "Face is the self presentation of identity in interaction and it depends on the self, the situation, and others involved in the interaction. As such, face is something that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced during interaction" (2002, p. 287). So, if an individual does not take an appropriate line and says or does something that is inconsistent with the social identity he/she is trying to present it is likely that person will lose face. Although this is a rather academic discussion of the concept of face, in the U.S. there are a number of expressions in the vernacular that address the idea of face as a social identity. For example, an individual might "lose face," "save face," "put on a face," "have egg on his/her face," or be "two-faced." These expressions demonstrate the importance members of the U.S. culture place on the presentation of the socially approved identity.

The concept of face can easily be related to the concepts of individualism-collectivism and high/low-context cultures. In low-context, individualistic cultures such as the U.S., individuals are very concerned with their own face. They are concerned with the consistency between their private self-image and their public self-image, because for members of this culture the idea of a consistent and stable core identity is critical (Miller, 2002). The desire to be consistent across interactions could result in North Americans being

less likely to use equivocal communication strategies than members of collectivistic cultures. It should also be noted that equivocation is likely to be used to protect one's own face as opposed to protecting the face of others.

In collectivistic, high-context cultures such as Japan, China, and Mexico individuals are also concerned with face. Clearly, they want to protect their own face but they are also very concerned with protecting the face of others. For members of these cultures face is socially situated and relationally defined. "Thus, the concept of presenting a pure and real self-image makes little sense to members of these cultures. Instead, the self is 'is bounded by mutual role obligations and duties and it is structured by a patterned process of give-and-take'" (Ting-Toomey, as cited in Miller, 2002, pp. 287-288). The relationship between the individual's social identity and the group is exemplified by the two Chinese concepts of *lien* and *mien-tzu*. *Lien* refers to the moral character of all members of society and can be lost or damaged by engaging in some sort of reprehensible act. *Mien-tzu* refers to a more dynamic form of face. It is based on the social expectations that accompany an interaction. Hence, this form of face is contingent on the relationship between the individuals in the interaction. For example, *mien-tzu* could be lost if one were to use an inappropriately informal form of address with an elder because it would be considered impolite (Miller, 2002).

Brown and Levinson (1978) developed the theory of politeness. They asserted that politeness is a cultural universal, meaning all cultures are concerned with politeness issues. However, it should be noted that different cultures require different degrees and types of politeness. The relationship between politeness theory and face is clearly demonstrated by Brown and Levinson's two different types of face needs. First, positive face addresses an individual's desire to be respected, included, and approved. Appeals to positive face needs include communication behaviors such as complements and behaviors that denote respect. Second, negative face refers to an individual's desire to be independent and free from imposition or intrusion. An appeal to an individual's negative face need might be acknowledging the imposition when making the request (Littlejohn, 2002). Miller (2002) noted that positive and negative face are not in opposition to one another because an individual can desire both autonomy and social approval simultaneously.

Face threats are defined as any threat or challenge to one's social identity. For example, making a request without acknowledging the inconvenience to the individual could be perceived as a threat to individual autonomy or negative face. Positive face could be threatened if someone belittled an accomplishment or achievement. In both cases an individual may feel that he/she needs to engage in some type of *facework* to restore their social identity. Facework could be preventive or restorative. Preventive facework is an attempt to avoid or minimize the loss of face. Edwards and Bello (2001) asserted that politeness strategies serve to protect the face of another, but can also serve to protect self-face. They found that individuals (sampled from the U.S. population) who used equivocal language in an attempt to protect the other's face while addressing that person's shortcomings or weaknesses were rated as most polite, and they also found that equivocal language used to address one's own shortcomings was rated as more polite than unequivocal criticism about self (probably because such unequivocal criticism constrains the other's autonomy face). The equivocal message serves two purposes: it protects the face of the recipient and it protects the face of the speaker by being consistent with social expectations about behavior. Restorative facework attempts to correct damage to one's face after an incident occurs. In such cases, an individual may offer excuses, apologies, or justifications for his/her behavior. This type of

facework is concerned with protecting the self as opposed to others.

Overall, individuals in individualistic cultures are more concerned with protecting their own face and they are more likely to use equivocation to that end. Conversely, individuals in a collective culture are concerned with face as a part of a larger social fabric so they are likely to equivocate to protect both their own and others' face. Miller (2002) also noted that individualistic cultures are more likely to restore face after a transgression while collectivistic cultures act in an effort to prevent a loss of face. It is evident that all cultures value face and equivocation can be used to protect and restore face.

The last culture to be analyzed in this comparison is Japan. Some of the comparisons made above already included Japan using key dimensions of cultural difference. A recap and summary of how Japan compares to the U.S. and Mexico follows.

In Japan uncertainty avoidance is important on various levels. Locke (1992) describes most Japanese as equating uncertainty with discomfort. Both face-saving strategies and personal concern for other (e.g., politeness) which are valued in the Japanese culture fall under potential uses of equivocation. It is easy to see how, for Japanese trying to make the other person feel more comfortable, equivocation strategies like indirectness, ambiguity, etc., could serve their purpose.

Another important component of the uncertainty reduction dimension in the Japanese culture is Hall's (1977) concept of high-context/low-context cultures. The clearly defined social roles imbedded in both the family and workplace environments in Japan are evidence of the high-context nature of their culture. This results in communication messages that are covert and implicit. Much important communication occurs on the nonverbal dimension. Because of this high-context orientation, Hall and others point out that Asians in general, and in this case Japanese in particular, easily interpret the subtle nonverbal cues that U.S. communicators may not be even aware they are sending.

The dimension of power distance is another example of how the Japanese might find equivocation useful. As reported above, Hofstede (1991) found Japan to be somewhat in the mid-range of the two power distance extremes expressed by the U.S. with the low of -90 on the power distance scale and Mexico on the high end with a score of 99. Japan's score of -25 indicates moderate power distance, supporting the general notion that Japanese still value respect for authority and other manifestations of a collectivistic view.

Similar results were presented above on the dimension of individualism/collectivism. Japan falls in between the highly individualistic U.S. and the very collectivistic Mexico (with respective scores of 12, 200 and -55) (Hofstede, 1991). This strong preference for group over individual manifests itself in a high value for face maintenance in both self and others as well as the Japanese value of "enryo," meaning reserve or constraint. (Smith & Beardsley, 1962).

On the masculinity/femininity dimension, Japan is by far the highest of the three cultures in masculinity. Benedict (1945) describes the typical divorce in Japan as resulting in the woman losing everything, home, children, etc., and returning to her family in shame. To what extent that traditional patriarchal view of marriage is still present today, or to what degree intermarriages between Japanese and U.S. citizens have changed how masculinity and/or femininity are now valued by the Japanese people are important questions still to be answered. However, to whatever extent this highly masculine value is present in Japan today, it is easy to see how beneficial equivocation could be in preserving peace and harmony in a marriage.

In summarizing the findings on Japanese culture, there is much to suggest that the Japanese could see equivocation as a productive and effective tool in communication. Japanese values such as collectivism, restraint, deference to authority, concern for others (including preservation of others' face), plus the general high-context nature of the culture, all point to the potential value of equivocation strategies in the Japanese culture. The extent to which Japanese actually use particular equivocation strategies requires more study. One particularly promising area of study would be the use and relative skill of the Japanese in nonverbal modes of communication.

### Conclusion

What patterns, if any, have emerged and what do they suggest about future research using Hall's and Hofstede's dimensions and about the study of equivocation in cross-cultural communication? Overall, the dimensional approach appears to be more productive, at least at this time, than the culture specific approach for future research on equivocation and culture. There were more communication similarities in our literature review between dimensionally similar Mexico and Japan, and more differences between the United States on the one hand and Mexico and Japan on the other hand. Some of these similarities and differences included (1) more concern about protection of self-face in the U.S. than in either Mexico or Japan implies the use of more equivocation in Mexico and Japan for the purpose of smoothing over social difficulties; (2) more reliance on the verbal channel of communication for carrying the key message in the U.S. likely results in less linguistic equivocation and indirectness there; (3) stronger belief within U.S. culture in the idea of a stable core of self-identity likely means more concern in the U.S. (than in Mexico or Japan) for consistency in self-presentation, resulting in less variance in equivocal language use from one situation to the next.

What should we make of the apparent inconsistency regarding Hofstede's ratings of uncertainty avoidance for Mexico and Japan, both substantially higher than for the U.S.? Shouldn't this work against the notion of more emphasis on and tolerance of equivocal language in these cultures, despite their character as high-context, collectivistic cultures as well? The answer is, at least in part, dependent on whether equivocal language actually serves to increase uncertainty (pragmatically) within such cultures. In low-context, individualistic cultures, it appears that equivocal language might be less favored even where uncertainty avoidance is relatively low, as in the U.S. culture. If so, a plausible explanation—as alluded to previously in this paper—is that the verbal channel carries much of the message meaning in these cultures, so that equivocal language has the potential to create substantially more uncertainty there; on the other hand, equivocal language would appear to create much less uncertainty in high-context, collectivistic cultures where the nonverbal channel carries much of the message meaning. The implication here is that the fundamental function of equivocal language in interpersonal communication, and not only its level of use and importance, might be significantly different across cultural dimensions. Further research on equivocation using the dimensional paradigm would appear, then, to be quite useful for examining these and other issues.

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