Identity Management and Competence in Interpersonal and Intercultural Relationships: Scholarly Contributions of Tadasu Todd Imahori

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Abstract. Tadasu Todd Imahori contributed significantly to the study of intercultural communication, and in particular, the theory and research regarding intercultural communication competence. Working from an identity negotiation and face management perspective, Imahori forged strong empirical approaches and conceptualizations for investigating and extending existing models of interpersonal competence within the intercultural context. In particular, his development of Identity Management Theory (IMT) provided an important integrative framework for studies of how facework and identity are negotiated in the development of intercultural relationships. Imahori's scholarly legacy in this and other disciplinary arenas has made, and will continue to make, a significant mark in the field.

We are pleased to pay tribute to our deceased friend and colleague, Tadasu Todd Imahori, by offering a synopsis of some of his important scholarly work. Our review is deliberately selective. Imahori made numerous and diverse contributions to communication scholarship. In this essay, we focus specifically on two important and interrelated themes reflected in his theorizing and research: intercultural communication competence and identity management. We amplify these particular themes for two reasons. First, competence and identity management themes stand out in Imahori's most programmatic and sustained line of works, spanning most of his career. Second, Imahori's publications on these topics are among his most provocative and influential among intercultural communication scholars. We do not review all of Imahori's writings relevant to the themes of competence and identity management. We concentrate on the most important works
published in English.

Although always keenly interested in matters concerning intercultural communication, Imahori's academic identity early in his career was that of a strong *methodologist*. He prided himself on meticulous attention to issues of quantitative research design, instrumentation, and data analysis. Early in his career he had a spirited debate with a prolific and highly esteemed intercultural communication scholar regarding the appropriate statistical design for analyzing a complicated multivariate data set. That scholar was William Gudykunst, whom Imahori admired and emulated professionally. Ironically, like Imahori, Gudykunst met an untimely death at the peak of his own career.

Imahori stayed true to his ethic of methodological rigor throughout his career. As his scholarly identity matured, he expanded his repertoire of analytical tools, realizing the value of strong qualitative data (e.g., Imahori, 2002; Margillo & Imahori, 1998). He sought appropriate content to which he could apply his methodological skills. Fairly early in his career, Imahori decided that issues surrounding intercultural communication competence merited attention. The topic was appealing for various reasons: (1) It covered a broad territory, and therefore was conducive to exploring a variety of specific issues; (2) It had an established literature on which to build; (3) It begged for attention. There were many unanswered empirical questions and the area was in need of fresh conceptualization. (4) The subject matter was conducive to practical application. Imahori served as an organizational consultant and conducted training throughout his career, reflecting his belief in the importance of producing knowledge that would ultimately enhance communicators and their messages.

**The Emerging Scholar: Conceptualizing Intercultural Communication Competence**

Much of the initial foundation for Imahori's thinking about intercultural communication competence (ICC) was presented in 1989 at a meeting of the Speech Communication Association, now the National Communication Association (Cupach & Imahori, 1989). This paper addressed the fundamental question: *Is intercultural communication competence a culture-general or a culture-specific construct?* The proffered answer was that ICC has both culture-general and culture-specific components, and they are complementary. Following the literature on interpersonal competence (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984), ICC was defined as "the extent to which objectives are fulfilled through cooperative interaction appropriate to the intercultural encounter. Thus, intercultural communication competence is judged in the context of a relationship between culturally heterogeneous interactants" (Cupach & Imahori, 1989, p.2; Imahori & Lanigan, 1989). The criteria for judging intercultural interaction were deemed to be the same as those commonly employed to judge
any (and perhaps all) interpersonal interaction — appropriateness and effectiveness (Spitzberg & Chagnon, 2009). Specifically, appropriateness involves communication that avoids violating the rules and expectations of others, while effectiveness refers to attaining personally valued outcomes. These criteria are culture-general and "central to a general theory" of ICC (Cupach & Imahori, 1989, p.4). It was posited, however, that "the manifestation (i.e., demonstration and inference) of appropriateness and effectiveness varies from culture to culture" (p.4), which would reflect a culture-specific point of view.

As an illustration of the jointly culture-general and culture-specific components of ICC, Cupach and Imahori (1989) considered the function of identity management in all interactions. All communicators possess, enact, and negotiate individual identities, as exemplified by Goffman's (1967) concepts of face and facework. As Goffman (1967) indicated, people in all societies are "taught to be perceptive, to have feelings attached to self and a self expressed through face, to have pride, honor, and dignity, to have considerateness, to have tact and a certain amount of poise" (p.44). The ability to successfully manage identities through facework is essential to being a competent communicator (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Weinstein, 1969), and this general skill cuts across all cultures (e.g., Brown & Levinson, 1987; Ting-Toomey, 1988). Facework is intimately involved with effectively achieving goals in an appropriate manner. At the same time, there are significant cultural differences in the ways that identity management and facework play out during interactions. Specifically, the relative importance placed on different aspects of identity, the degree to which specific acts serve to confirm or threaten face, and the perceived appropriateness and effectiveness of specific behaviors designed to counteract or repair face damage are heavily influenced by culture (e.g., Collier, 1989; Matsumoto, 1988; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Ting-Toomey, 1988).

Extending the thinking about culture-general and culture-specific, Cupach and Imahori (1989) further argued that ICC also entailed an important culture-synergistic component. "This suggests that intercultural communication does not merely reflect members from two cultures attempting to discover pre-existing overlap, nor does it merely represent a sojourner unilaterally ‘adjusting’ to a host national. Instead, cultural synergy depicts the process whereby individuals interactively and jointly negotiate appropriate and effective behaviors in intercultural encounters and relationships" (Cupach & Imahori, 1989, p.9). The culture-synergistic view of competence drew attention to more dynamic, emergent, and developmental aspects of competence, such as mutual adaptation between communicators, previously overlooked and underdeveloped aspects of ICC. As Collier and Thomas (1988) put it, intercultural competence requires "the demonstrated ability to negotiate mutual meanings, rules, and positive outcomes" (p.108). Such a culture-synergistic approach blurs the sharp distinction between intercultural communication and interpersonal
communication (Spitzberg, 1989).

The achievement of these outcomes is not entirely culture-bound, nor is it completely free of cultural constraints. To the extent the process of negotiating goals, rules, and identities, is constrained by cultural identity differences of interlocutors, the interaction can be labeled relatively more intercultural than interpersonal. However, as the relationship develops, the interactants will negotiate goals, rules, and identities based on personal constraints. In other words, competence and communication become more interpersonal and less intercultural over time.

(Cupach & Imahori, 1989, p.16)

Building on the culture-synergistic approach, and importing key concepts from the interpersonal competence literature (e.g., Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984), Imahori teamed up with his student Mary Lanigan in 1989 to present more formally a detailed conceptualization of ICC. In this landmark publication, the authors integrated the diverse approaches of ICC represented in the literature. This integration yielded four axioms about ICC. First, ICC is composed of motivation, knowledge, and skill dimensions. Prior intercultural research tended to privilege one of these dimensions, rather than requiring all three in conceptualizing ICC. Second, competence is determined by measuring both individuals' competence in a specific relationship. Imahori and Lanigan emphasized that competence requires an "interactive" and dyadic perspective in which mutual adaptation occurs. This approach explicitly recognizes that one's competence depends, to a degree, on the cooperation of an interlocutor. It also leads to novel propositions. For example, Imahori and Lanigan contended that "a highly competent sojourner not only adapts his/her behavior to the host-nationals but also helps the host-nationals to adjust their behaviors. Similarly, appropriate intercultural communication is not necessarily characterized by the sojourner's ability to speak the host-national's language fluently" (p.274).

Third, Imahori and Lanigan (1989) proposed that ICC leads to effective relational outcomes. "If competence is measured in light of a relationship, the next logical step is to study outcome variables that are relational in nature" (p.274). Imahori and Lanigan suggested that "individuals in ideal intercultural relationships would exhibit characteristics of close interpersonal relationships such as intimacy, relational stability and commitment, high degree of interpersonal knowledge, and idiosyncratic rules" (p.275).

Fourth, ICC requires both appropriateness and effectiveness. In this proposition, the authors integrated prior ICC approaches that tended to focus either on messages (i.e., appropriate behaviors) or outcomes (e.g., effective cultural adaptation), but not both.

From these four axioms, Imahori and Lanigan (1989) derived their formal definition of
ICC, which they defined as "the appropriate level of motivation, knowledge, and skills of both the sojourner and host-national in regards to their relationship, leading to an effective relational outcome" (p.277). Following this definition, the authors presented a relational model of ICC. The model is captured in six theorems: (1) Knowledge, motivation, and/or skills (i.e., the components of competence) influence relational outcomes, one's goal, and one's experience. (2) Goals in an intercultural relationship influence levels of ICC (i.e., knowledge, motivation, skill). (3) Self-perception of ICC influences the goals pursued in a relationship. (4) Past intercultural experience influences ICC. (5) High levels of ICC yield positive experiences. (6) Both dyad members' competence, past experience, and goals influence relational outcomes; and relational outcomes influence competence, experience, and goals.

The framework of ICC offered by Imahori and Lanigan (1989) exhibited three important and distinctive features. First, it proposed a more holistic and comprehensive view of ICC than most prior conceptualizations by incorporating knowledge, motivation, and skill as equally important and interdependent components of competence. Second, it represented a melding of literatures and conceptualizations from intercultural and interpersonal scholars. Third, it nudged the conceptualization of ICC away from monadic views of acculturation, cultural adaptation, and assimilation, and toward shared interactions in intercultural relationships and relationship outcomes. The model was, and is, considered exemplary of the most integrative and comprehensive approaches to theorizing ICC (Spitzberg, 2009; Spitzberg & Chagnon, 2009).

As Imahori's thinking about ICC progressed in the 1990s, the function of successfully managing identities in intercultural interactions emerged as a central feature of his conceptualization of competence. The seeds of this connection were sown in his earlier work, when identity management was used to illustrate that ICC had both culture-general and culture-specific elements. Imahori's desire to bridge intercultural communication and interpersonal communication was fueled by Spitzberg's (1989) contention that "progress in the study of intercultural communication competence is going to derive mainly from the development of sound interpersonal communication competence theories that can be applied to the intercultural setting" (p.261). The principles of face and facework, which originated in the writings of sociologist Goffman (1967), were being applied in interpersonal research and provided an appealing approach to ICC. At the same time, the importance of identity negotiation was prominently featured in the intercultural communication literature, and Imahori was particularly influenced by Collier's work on cultural identity (Collier, 1989; Collier & Thomas, 1988), and Ting-Toomey's emerging theory of face management (Ting-Toomey, 1988, 1993). Building on the assumptions embedded in his earlier conceptualization of ICC, Imahori advanced Identity Management Theory to flesh out the
intricacies of communication competence in intercultural episodes and relationships (Cupach & Imahori, 1993a; Imahori, 2006; Imahori & Cupach, 2005).

The Maturing Scholar: Identity Management Theory

Identity Management Theory (IMT) built on the earlier conceptualizations that competence features a culture-synergistic aspect, and that competence is communicatively managed in a relational context. The core claim of IMT is that communication competence entails successfully negotiating mutually acceptable identities in interaction. IMT focuses specifically on the management of both cultural and relational identities. Cultural identity refers to "identification with and perceived acceptance into a group that has shared systems of symbols and meanings as well as norms/rules for conduct" (Collier & Thomas, 1988, p.113). Relational identity refers to the idiosyncratic system of rules and meanings created and shared by dyad members (i.e., interpersonal partners; e.g., Wood, 1982).

Identities are reified in interactions through the situated enactment of each person's face (Goffman, 1967). Because people expect to have their own face supported, they generally cooperate in maintaining each other's face during interactions (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967). In general, people desire acceptance and approval from others (i.e., positive face) as well as autonomy and freedom from imposition (i.e., negative face) (Brown & Levinson, 1987). An individual threatens or damages face when he or she behaves in a way that runs contrary to his or her own face or another's face. Individuals employ facework in order to avoid, mitigate, or counteract threats to own and others' face (Goffman, 1967).

In intercultural encounters, the interactants' cultural identities are dissimilar and salient, and the interactants "are particularly vulnerable to committing and receiving face threats related to their cultural identities" (Imahori & Cupach, 2005, p.199). IMT explicates specific face problematics related to cultural identity. For example, when an individual lacks personal information about an intercultural partner, that partner may be treated based on stereotypes associated with the cultural identity ascribed to that person. Such "freezing" of the partner's identity threatens the other's negative face. "In supporting the other's cultural identity by making it a conversational focus or by directly issuing a compliment about it, one incurs the risk of constraining the other's identity to that particular cultural identity, thus threatening the partner's face" (Imahori & Cupach, 2005, p.200). On the other hand, to ignore another's cultural identity threatens positive face. Thus, IMT proposes that the more discrepant the cultural identities in intercultural interactions, the more each interactant must manage the dialectical tension between supporting a partner's positive face versus negative face.

Another challenge for intercultural interlocutors is the dialectical tension between
supporting their own face versus the partner's face with respect to cultural identities (Spitzberg, 1993, 1994). Expressing one's own cultural identity may run counter to the values and norms associated with the partner's cultural identity. "On the other hand, supporting the partner's cultural identity may require sacrificing feelings of belongingness and pride with respect to one's own culture" (Imahori & Cupach, 2005, p.200). Thus, intercultural communicators must work to find a mutually satisfying balance between these competing wants.

Imahori (2002) conducted extensive interviews with individuals in intercultural relationships with varying degrees of intimacy, ranging from acquaintance to marriage. He found that the dialectical tensions anticipated by IMT were commonly experienced. For example, 60% of respondents reported experiencing the dialectic of supporting self versus partner's face, and 22% reported experiencing the dilemma of supporting the partner's positive versus negative face. In addition, 66% of respondents said they experienced stereotyping from their partners. Imahori (2002) also discovered a wide array of facework strategies used by intercultural partners to cope with the dialectical tensions. Some strategies were designed to support self's own face, some to support the partner's face, and some to support both self's and other's face.

IMT also posits that features of identity management vary as a function of relationship development. Specifically, IMT proposes three interdependent and cyclical phases of intercultural relationships (Cupach & Imahori, 1993a; Imahori & Cupach, 2005). Although the phases are sequential, intercultural partners may progress through them multiple times as they wrestle with newly emerging cultural identity issues over the relationship lifespan. In the first phase, labeled trial, interactants' cultural identities are highly salient and seen as discrepant. Interactants establish an initial relationship by discovering commonalities "such as common interests, joint activities, mutual need fulfillment, and the like (Imahori & Cupach, 2005, p.204). In addition, they must manage dialectical tensions through trial and error as they seek to identify the boundaries for each other's face support and face threat. Ironically, some degree of incompetence is necessary in order to gain knowledge about the partner and ultimately develop competence in the unique relationship.

In the second phase, called enmeshment, "increased coactions around commonalities between intercultural partners result in convergence of symbols and rules, further enmeshing the partners' interpretive framework for understanding each other and their relationship" (Imahori & Cupach, 2005, p.204). In this phase, partners become more connected through shared symbols and they negotiate their own relationally-unique standards regarding the appropriateness of behavior. Consequently, a shared relational identity emerges and cultural identities are less salient. Although the intercultural partners develop a sense of relational bonding in this phase, "IMT claims that their relational identity
is not yet fully developed. Furthermore, they are still not entirely comfortable with their cultural differences in this phase" (Imahori & Cupach, 2005, p.205). Cultural differences tend to be downplayed or avoided (Imahori, 2003). But as new cultural differences become salient, they require more trial and error management, as in the first phase.

The third phase of identity management is renegotiation. In this phase the partners have achieved a high degree of symbolic convergence and agreement on rules governing relational behavior. In a sense, the relationship is now more personal rather than cultural (Cupach & Imahori, 1993a). Relational identity is highly salient in this phase, and the partners share a common view of each other and their relationship. "The distinct cultural identities are recognized as integral components of the shared relational identity," thereby permitting an effective management of the self-other face dialectic (Imahori & Cupach, 2005, p.205). Cultural differences that were avoided in the enmeshment phase become valued as an asset in the relationship. "Furthermore, close intercultural partners have less need for positive face support regarding their cultural identities because emphasis shifts to giving and receiving support for positive face associated with the shared relational identity" (p.205). This diminishes the positive-negative face dialectic tension regarding the cultural identities (Imahori, 2003).

IMT offers a heuristic framework for understanding intercultural communication competence by highlighting the identity management processes in the context of relationship development. Several features of the theory are appealing. First, IMT views the negotiation of cultural identities as integral to interpersonal relationship development. The theory "explains interpersonal relationships more generally, and intercultural interaction is considered a special case of interpersonal communication. Thus, by applying concepts of identity and facework to intercultural episodes and relationships," IMT simultaneously informs about both interpersonal and intercultural communication competence (Cupach & Imahori, 1993a, p.129). Second, IMT has potential to be applied broadly to interactions between individuals who are culturally diverse. Although Imahori's (2002, 2003) research concentrated on inter-ethnic relationships and individuals with different national cultural identities, the principles of the theory should apply equally well to explaining the negotiation of other types of identities (e.g., gender, sexual preference). Merrigan (2000), for example, usefully applied IMT to relationships between people with and without disabilities. Third, IMT offers rich opportunities for empirical research. Imahori's cross-sectional research on individuals in intercultural relationships in various stages of development evidences tentative empirical support for some of the propositions of IMT (Imahori, 2002, 2003). More investigation is needed, however, to uncover the specific ways in which symbolic convergence is accomplished through communication. Longitudinal research that tracks the development of intercultural relationships over time would ideally
provide a more rigorous test of IMT claims. Finally, “IMT suggests a set of principles to promote competent communication between intercultural partners: (a) establish relational identity through increased coactions, symbolic convergence, and coordination of relationship rules; (b) view cultural differences as assets rather than barriers; and (c) recognize that identity management and relationship management represent two sides of a single coin” (Imahori & Cupach, 2005, pp.207-208).

We believe that Imahori’s contributions to the study of intercultural communication competence are provocative and estimable. The emphasis on intercultural relationship development is unique (Spitzberg, 2009), and provides a framework that places the focus squarely on symbolic interaction. His theory continues to resonate in new theoretical avenues, such as Kim’s (2006, 2008) conceptualizations of interethnic identity and “intercultural personhood.” Our review of Imahori’s work, however, has been selective. It is noteworthy that Imahori’s scholarly contributions are not confined to issues of intercultural competence. The concepts of face and facework have proven to be useful in his other areas of research. For example, Imahori collaborated with Metts and Cupach (Metts, Cupach, & Imahori, 2002) to explore how variations in message features and relationship type influence reactions to sexual compliance-resisting messages. The face implications of such messages accounted for the numerous empirical findings. In a pair of studies, Imahori and Cupach (1994; Cupach & Imahori, 1993b) conducted cross-cultural comparisons of the ways in which U.S. Americans and Japanese responded to face-threatening predicaments. In a study of self-induced predicaments (where an embarrassing or awkward act is committed in front of others) they found that Japanese predominantly experienced shame in predicaments, whereas Americans experienced embarrassment and stupidity. Japanese used remediation as a coping response more often than Americans, while Americans relied more on humor than did Japanese (Imahori & Cupach, 1994). In a study of responses to predicaments caused by others, Japanese were found more likely than Americans to respond with remediation and apology, whereas Americans were more likely than Japanese to respond with humor or aggression (Cupach & Imahori, 1993b). Cultural differences in the interpretations of face implications were central to explaining findings in both of these investigations (see also Imahori & Cupach, 1993; Imahori et al., 2001).

Even beyond considerations of face and facework, Imahori worked to delineate cultural differences between the Japan and the U.S. — differences that undoubtedly play out in intercultural interactions and relationships. For example, Imahori worked with Seki and Matsumoto (Seki, Matsumoto, & Imahori, 2002) to clarify differences in the meanings for and expressions of intimacy. Among their findings, “directly verbalizing how you feel about each other” was more valued by Japanese than by Americans for mother, father, and same-sex best friend. On the other hand, “indirectly verbalize how you feel about each other” was
valued more by Americans than by Japanese toward mother, father, and lover. Most recently, Imahori collaborated with his former student Matsunaga (Matsunaga & Imahori, 2009) to investigate the underlying structure of beliefs regarding ideal family communication in the U.S. and Japan. They revealed three distinct family communication standards profiles (i.e., laissez-faire, high context, and open-affectionate) that are differentially associated with subjective well-being and family satisfaction. Clearly, Imahori devoted his talents to understanding diverse aspects of communication and relationships, with the ultimate goal of enhancing the quality of interactions between people.

**In Memoriam**

The burning of the library at Alexandria annihilated many things of priceless value for our knowledge of antiquity; most of Leonardo's paintings are lost to us because the colors in which they were painted have not lasted. But even in these cases the works as such remain tied to the whole of culture as if by invisible threads.

(Cassirer, 1961, p.216)

Tadasu Todd Imahori left many threads by which we may better understand culture, and the many variegated paths we traverse across cultures, both as theorists and as interactants. We are fortunate that these threads are not so invisible, and tributes such as this are important for tracing the composition of a discipline's intellectual fabric. Imahori left a legacy of rich theoretical speculation, a model of methodological rigor by which such speculations could be sharpened, and a host of students and scholars who owe much to his collegiality. What students he might have mentored, and theoretical work he might yet have produced, will be greatly missed. His own presence will be missed more.

**References**


three types of cross-sex relationships. *Western Journal of Communication, 56*, 1-17.