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# A cross-cultural comparison of Thai and US American rhetorical sensitivity: implications for intercultural communication effectiveness

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## Abstract

This paper reports the results of a cross-cultural study on rhetorical sensitivity between 316 Thai and 182 US American students. The study employs the notion of rhetorical sensitivity as a potential tool for the investigation of intercultural communication effectiveness. Rhetorical sensitivity emphasizes relational over pragmatic goal-seeking, a potentially useful feature for studying high-context, collective cultures. Since the highest Thai cultural values are those associated with social harmony, The Kingdom of Thailand provides a unique laboratory for the search of behaviors associated with effective intercultural communication. Based on an analysis of Thai and US American cultural values, several hypotheses were tested. Contrary to the prediction, US Americans displayed significantly higher levels of rhetorical sensitivity than the Thais. Consistent with the hypotheses, the Thais exhibited significantly higher levels of rhetorical reflection than did the US Americans, and the US Americans presented significantly higher levels of noble self than the Thais. Various methodological improvements to address more precisely variations in communication behavior attributable to cultural value differences are suggested. The study concludes with an extensive discussion of the findings and their implications for the investigation and development of effective intercultural communication behaviors.

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*Keywords:* Rhetorical sensitivity; Intercultural; Thailand; Communication; Cross-cultural; Methodology

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## 1. Introduction

Communication scholars have devoted considerable effort to the identification of skills and behaviors associated with intercultural communication competence. The assumption upon which these efforts rested usually involved the reconciliation of intercultural differences through the reduction of ethnocentrism and an increase in behavioral flexibility. Bhawuk and Brislin (1992) suggested that the accomplishment of good relationships with culturally diverse others almost always involved the term *intercultural sensitivity*. The problem with this approach emerged as the almost singular inability to specify precisely those variables to which intercultural sojourners should be sensitive. The present study investigated the theory of rhetorical sensitivity as a potential tool for the identification of meaningful communication variables contributing to intercultural communication effectiveness.

Some work has been done to recognize the behaviors of successful intercultural communicators. This research can be characterized by the term *intercultural transformation*, or a process of behavioral change beyond the norms of the home culture. Adler (1975) described phases through which one passes to achieve increased cultural awareness. Koester and Olebe (1988) selected eight categories of communication behavior which contribute to intercultural competence. Dinges and Baldwin (1996) concluded after their extensive survey of intercultural competency models that the use of behaviorally oriented measures is a positive development, but see a limitation in the conceptual frameworks guiding the research.

Both the notions of *intercultural sensitivity* and *intercultural transformation* combine to suggest that current conceptual frameworks used by communication scholars can be expanded for use in the identification of successful intercultural communication behavior. Hart and Burks (1972) and Hart, Carlson, and Eadie (1980) relied on the categories developed by Darnell and Brockriede (1976) to create a concept called *rhetorical sensitivity*. The theory of rhetorical sensitivity focuses on message transmission, a central concern for communication scholars, and suggests principles that can be employed to develop effective communication behaviors. Three general types of communicators are suggested: noble selves, rhetorical reflectors, and rhetorical sensitives. Noble selves maintain their personal goals and objectives without adapting to others. They do not cast their messages in terms of receiver acceptability; rather, the noble selves' messages are characterized by inflexibility and source-oriented expression. Rhetorical reflectors, the relative opposite of the noble selves, adjust themselves to the wishes of others. Rhetorical reflectors exhibit deference in their messages to others and express a profound concern for their receivers' requirements. The rhetorically sensitive individual displays message behavior located between the extremes of the noble selves and the rhetorical reflectors. The rhetorical sensitives combine concern for self and other with a situational perspective. Hart and Burks (1972) suggested that a rhetorical sensitive person:

- (1) tries to accept role-taking as part of the human condition,
- (2) attempts to avoid stylized verbal behavior,
- (3) is characteristically willing to undergo the

strain of adaptation, (4) seeks to distinguish between all information and information acceptable for communication, and (5) tries to understand that an idea can be rendered in multi-form ways (p. 76).

Ward, Bluman, and Dauria (1982) believed that the theory of rhetorical sensitivity recasts "... the concept of instrumental communication by emphasizing *relational* over *pragmatic* rhetorical goal-seeking" (p. 189). Knutson, Vivatananukul, and Hwang (1995) suggested that the emphasis on the relationship in the theory of rhetorical sensitivity may be particularly useful when investigating different cultural norms influencing communication behavior.

The theory of rhetorical sensitivity seems remarkably responsive to both intercultural sensitivity and intercultural transformation, and may be even more powerful in determining the behaviors associated with intercultural competence. The work of Hall (1976) and Hofstede (1991) can be used to augment ideas presented in the theory of rhetorical sensitivity. With this combination, a new conceptual framework from which to assess intercultural competence may emerge. Furthermore, the unique communication characteristics found in Thai culture may provide specific operational definitions for teaching intercultural communication competence.

Hall's (1976) description of cultures varying along a contextual dimension can be linked with other concepts to facilitate the identification of theoretically sound competencies. Hall saw high-context cultures demanding close attention to the physical environment in which the message takes place. Relatively little information is contained in the explicit message and members of high-context cultures exhibit considerable sensitivity to nonverbal cues. Low-context cultures, the opposite of high-context cultures, rely on the explicit message to carry most of the information. Hall's approach can be linked to Hofstede (1991), the Dutch management researcher. Hall's approach relates to Hofstede's individualism–collectivism dimension. Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) wrote, "all cultures Hall labels as low-context are individualistic..., and all of the cultures Hall labels as high-context are collectivistic in Hofstede's scheme" (p. 44), an observation later confirmed by Deng (1992). High-context, collective societies display unique communication characteristics, quite different from low-context, individualistic cultures. The high-context, collective cultures emphasize social harmony and selflessness; the low-context, individualistic cultures accentuate self-realization and the domination of nature. Low-context, individualistic people refer to themselves as, "... independent, self-contained, autonomous, and distinct units" (Bochner, 1994, p. 274). Deng (1992) commented further on the identical nature of the Hall and Hofstede schema:

For example, individualistic, or low-context cultures indicate a preference of direct and overt communication style, confrontational and aggressive behaviors, a clear self identification, and a priority of personal interest and achievement. Collectivistic, or high-context, cultures manifest a preference of indirect and covert communication style, an obedient and conforming behavior, a clear group identification, and a priority of group interest and harmony (p. 38).

The high-context, collective cultures are mostly Asian and South American. The low-context, individualistic cultures tend to be European and North American. Care must be taken, however, to recognize that the contextuality construct and the individualistic/collectivistic dimension are conceptually distinct. The contextual concept refers to the mode of communication most appropriate within individualistic and collectivistic cultures, respectively.

The communication behaviors of Asian, high-context, collective cultures seem specifically compatible with the theory of rhetorical sensitivity. Hart et al. (1980) may have anticipated this observation when they mentioned that people vary considerably in their attitudes toward encoding messages and that these variations “are partly a function of specific philosophical, economic, geographic, and cultural forces impinging upon people” (p. 19). Specifically, the emphasis of the high-context, collective Thai culture on social harmony and pleasant relationships strongly suggests that Thai people will exhibit high levels of rhetorical sensitivity and reflection and low levels of noble self in their interpersonal communication.

Flexibility has been noted as one of the defining characteristics of the effective intercultural communicator (Lustig & Koester, 1999). The ability to adapt and adjust to others during conversations involves a person’s proficiency to “relate in new ways when necessary” (Bochner & Kelly, 1974, p. 291). The flexibility skill becomes even more apparent in intercultural encounters requiring participants to deal with uncertainty and the unexpected. Koester and O’Leary (1988) BASIC, a tool for measuring intercultural communication competence, emphasized flexibility in terms of tolerance for ambiguity, empathy, and the ability to respond to others in a nonjudgmental fashion. An inflexible posture during intercultural communication episodes frequently produced misattributions resulting in intercultural conflict (Ting-Toomey, 1998), a condition obviously threatening to successful dialogue. In short, suitable intercultural communication demands adaptation and alteration, conduct characteristic of rhetorical sensitivity and reflection. The inflexible nature of those in the noble self-category would emerge as a distinct interference with competent intercultural communication. Therefore, the theory of rhetorical sensitivity may provide a conceptual framework for the identification of skills associated with intercultural communication effectiveness.

Shuter (1998) admonished intercultural researchers to adjust research strategies to “... return culture to preeminence in their studies” (p. 42). This study follows his advice by focusing on the links between culture and interpersonal communication by comparing dissimilar societies. The Kingdom of Thailand serves as a unique laboratory for the search of behaviors associated with effective intercultural communication. Thai communication patterns display the flexibility associated with rhetorical sensitive and rhetorical reflective people. Komin’s (1991) brilliant analysis of Thai psychology identified the highest Thai cultural values as those associated with interpersonal relationships. Komin called these values “social smoothing” and reported very little demographic variation in areas such as “... sex, different educational levels, different occupations, poor and rich, politically conservative and

radical, and, religions” (1991, p. 144). The Thai value of social harmony differs notably from the US American preference for individual and self-recognition, values measured by the acquisition of material things (Rokeach, 1972, 1973, 1979; Stewart & Bennett, 1991).

The Thai language emphasizes the importance of social harmony. For example, proper linguistic decorum must be used when addressing people of different status, conventions no longer operative in the English language. Chantornvong (1992) explained that English has “I” as the first person pronoun, and “you” as the second person pronoun, but the Thai speaker must choose from up to 17 forms for the first person pronoun and up to 19 forms of the second person pronoun depending on the relative politeness, intimacy, and status of those involved in conversation. Buddhist religious beliefs form the basis for the Thai genuine care and concern for others (Knutson, 1994), an idea known as *nam jai* (“water of the heart”), which seldom allows Thais to see strangers as threatening or suspicious. The Thai term, *kreng jai*, also demonstrates compatibility with the theory of rhetorical sensitivity. *Kreng jai*, one of the most difficult of Thai concepts for Westerners to grasp, is defined by Komin (1991) as,

...to be considerate, to feel reluctant to impose upon another person, to take another person’s feelings (and ego) into account, or to take every measure not to cause discomfort or inconvenience for another person (p. 164).

Another Thai term, *bunghun* (the reciprocity of goodness) further enhances the role of rhetorical sensitivity in Thai interpersonal relationships. Kindness elicits gratitude, and *bunghun* is the very foundation of friendship. Klausner (1993) noted:

To be *katanyu*, or constantly aware and conscious of the benefit or favor another person has bestowed, is a highly valued character trait in Thai society. To the contrary, one of the most reprehensible sins in the Thai social context is to be *akatanyu*, or ungrateful (p. 275).

The Thai talent of remaining calm and in control of one’s emotions even during difficult situations is described by the term *jai yen*. Komin (1991) described the importance of *jai yen*:

[*Jai yen*] ... is the core cognition behind the behavioral pattern of the everyday life social interactions of the Thai. And it is this value of smooth and pleasant interpersonal interaction that gives Thai people the image of being very “friendly” people, and Thailand, the “Land of Smile” (p. 148).

Knutson et al. (1995) relied on the Hall–Hofstede connection in their comparison of Thai and US American interpersonal communication behaviors. Among other characteristics of the high-context, collective Thai culture, they found that young people are quiet in the presence of older people, younger people seldom disagree with older people, students rarely express their opinions in class, and quietness is considered a virtue in Thai culture. Smutkupt and Barna (1976) reported that doubts

are seldom verbalized in Thai culture. The Thai emphasis on interpersonal harmony can perhaps best be noted by Komin's (1990) comment, "Good relations win all, not tasks" (p. 695).

*Kreng jai, nam jai, bunkhun, jai yen*, the wide variations in personal pronouns, and the overall respectful behavior of others all can be seen as elements of rhetorical sensitivity. Also, since rhetorical sensitivity emphasizes *relational* over *pragmatic* goal-seeking, the concept departs from the Western rhetorical tradition in ways compatible with Thai communication practices. These observations inspired to the following hypotheses:

H1: The Thai sample will display significantly higher levels of rhetorical sensitivity than the USA sample;

H2: The Thai sample will display significantly higher levels of rhetorical reflection than the USA sample; and,

H3: The USA sample will display significantly higher levels of noble self than the Thai sample.

## 2. Methodology

USA data were collected from students enrolled at California State University, Sacramento, a public, tax-supported institution, and the Thai sample came from Bangkok University, a private school in Thailand. Likert-type questionnaires were administered on the first day of the semester before roll was taken in order to reduce the "sophisticated subject" demand characteristic. Questionnaires were completed anonymously and voluntarily by a total of 498 people (USA  $N = 182$ ; Thai  $N = 316$ ). Fifty-eight percent of the US American sample and 66% of the Thai sample were female. The average age of the US American sample was 23.14 years compared to the average age of 20.49 for the Thai sample. Respondents in both samples were undergraduate students.

The questionnaire contained the 40-item RHETSEN scale developed by Hart et al. (1980) to measure rhetorical sensitivity, noble selves, and rhetorical reflection. Due to prior methodological difficulties with the RHETSEN, the questionnaire also included the 30-item RHETSEN2, an improved measurement of rhetorical sensitivity devised by Eadie and Powell (1991). Thus, a total of 70 Likert-type items were randomly presented in order to avoid response set bias. Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they strongly agreed or strongly disagreed with each item on a five-step scale. Additional items were also included to obtain demographic data. Prior to actual data collection, the questionnaire was pre-tested, translated into Thai, back-translated into English, and revised to insure equivalence. US American participants completed questionnaires in the English language and the

Thai participants in the Thai language. Copies of the questionnaire are available from the senior author.

### 3. Results

Using principal component analysis and varimax rotation, factor analyses were performed on the data generated by the two measures of rhetorical sensitivity. No factor solution explained an appreciable amount of variation for the original Hart et al. (1980) RHETSEN instrument; the scale failed to factor into the anticipated three dimensions of rhetorical sensitivity (rhetorical sensitivity, noble self, and rhetorical reflectors). The intercorrelations between items were very weak and scales constructed from RHETSEN were unreliable. This finding is consistent with the difficulties in using RHETSEN as reported by Martin and Rubin (1993).

The factor analysis of the Eadie and Powell (1991) RHETSEN2 revealed the anticipated three dimensions. The three-factor solution explained 33.7% of the variation. Subscales developed for all three dimensions displayed adequate reliability for both the Thai and US American samples. Alphas for Reflectors, Sensitives, and Noble Selves were 0.661, 0.710, and 0.713, respectively. Means for the three subscales were calculated by summing across the six highest loading items for each of the three dimensions.

The first hypothesis predicted that the Thai sample would display significantly higher levels of rhetorical sensitivity than the US American sample. The mean for the Thai sample on rhetorical sensitivity as measured by RHETSEN2 was 33.1178 ( $N = 314$ ) and the mean for the US American sample was 36.8475 ( $N = 177$ ). The US American sample displayed significantly higher levels of rhetorical sensitivity than the Thai sample ( $F = 54.101$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ), a difference accounting for 10% of the variation as calculated by  $\eta^2$ . The analyses do not provide support for the first hypothesis.

The second hypothesis predicted that the Thai sample would display significantly higher levels of rhetorical reflection than the US American sample. The mean for the Thai sample on rhetorical reflection as measured by RHETSEN2 was 36.6508 ( $N = 315$ ) and the mean for the US American sample was 28.8539 ( $N = 178$ ). The Thai sample exhibited significantly higher levels of rhetorical reflection than the US American sample ( $F = 259.223$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ ), a difference accounting for 34.6% of the variation as calculated by  $\eta^2$ . The analyses support the second hypothesis.

The third hypothesis estimated that the US American sample would display significantly higher levels of noble self than the Thai sample. The mean for the US American sample as measured by RHETSEN2 was 31.2753 ( $N = 178$ ) and the mean for the Thai sample was 29.4762 ( $N = 315$ ). The US American sample presented a significantly higher level of noble self than the Thai sample ( $F = 10.413$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), a difference accounting for only 2.1% of the variation as calculated by  $\eta^2$ . The analyses support the third hypothesis.

#### 4. Discussion

The results reveal that the traditional measurement problems associated with the assessment of rhetorical sensitivity using the RHETSEN instrument were not overcome. The problems of subject interpretation, scoring difficulties, and other confounding components all contribute to the unreliability of the RHETSEN instrument in this study. Research conducted by Daly, Vangelisti, and Daughton (1987) and Dowling and Bliss (1984) raised doubts about what the RHETSEN actually measures. Martin and Rubin (1993) concluded, “whereas the theory behind rhetorical sensitivity is well stated, the measurement and application of the RHETSEN scale is questionable” (p. 172). The RHETSEN instrument does not appear to be a useful tool in determining the applications of rhetorical sensitivity theory.

The RHETSEN2 instrument (Eadie & Powell, 1991) displays none of the logistic problems associated with the RHETSEN scale. Data gathered using the RHETSEN2 emerge into the anticipated and distinct dimensions of rhetorical sensitivity theory and display sufficient reliability for use in this study. These findings provide persuasive support for Eadie and Powell’s (1991) claim “... that the RHETSEN2 scale not only improves on its predecessor but will prove to be easier to use as well” (p. 11). The RHETSEN2 scale, however, did present challenges unique to cross-cultural research. Items measuring rhetorical sensitivity, for example, are incompatible with Thai cultural values in such a way as to question RHETSEN2’s ability to measure the concept in a Thai setting.

The failure to support the first hypothesis that Thais would be significantly more rhetorically sensitive than US Americans can be attributed to those items on the RHETSEN2 instrument measuring this category. Table 1 displays the five highest loaded items of the RHETSEN2 on each of the three dimensions, followed by the five remaining items for each category. Six of the 10 RHETSEN2 items (3, 4, 17, 24, 28, and 29) intended to measure rhetorical sensitivity refer to conflict, disagreement, criticism, argument, or difficult people or situations. To one degree or another, each of these concepts is taboo in Thailand rendering RHETSEN2’s face validity of Thai rhetorical sensitivity suspect. Komin (1998) observed, “avoidance of face-to-face conflict ... characterizes Thai interpersonal relations” (p. 225). Knutson (1994) examined the differences between Thai and US American cultural values and concluded:

The Thai ego-orientation and the quest for grateful and smooth interpersonal relationships combine to develop a caring and considerate interpersonal style, or *kreng jai*. Suppressing a desire to criticize and acknowledging another’s kindness creates a pleasant atmosphere, soothing to all parties concerned.... For the Thais, the expression of emotion, especially negative emotion, is considered unwise, uncouth, and a jeopardy of the smooth interpersonal rapport considered so important (pp. 19–20).

Thais expect people to be mild and modest, a condition Phillips (1965) called “social cosmetics”. Thai interpersonal relationships demand that no one be placed in

Table 1

RHETSEN2 items with highest loadings on the three dimensions followed by remaining scale items

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<i>Rhetorical reflectors</i>	
6. I usually avoid others rather than risk saying something that might hurt them.	(0.502)
8. I prefer to go along with others rather than openly disagree with them.	(0.764)
19. I would rather say nothing than say something that another wouldn't like to hear.	(0.765)
20. If what I would like to say might make others uncomfortable, I generally keep quiet instead.	(0.709)
26. If at all possible I try to avoid arguing with others.	(0.533)
5. Pleasing the other person is an important goal for me in most conversations.	
9. I feel uncomfortable when people argue in public.	
15. In conversations I am most successful when I am able to please the other person.	
21. I usually feel uncomfortable when faced with persuading others.	
22. More than occasionally I have felt that others take advantage of me when we communicate.	
<i>Rhetorical sensitives</i>	
3. Others have told me that I communicate well with difficult people.	(0.592)
4. In an argument, I can usually get my point across without hurting my relationship with the other person.	(0.572)
11. I'm good at figuring out the meanings behind what others say.	(0.537)
12. I value my ability to adapt when faced with various communication situations.	(0.671)
17. I have been told that I am able to give criticism in a way that does not hurt others.	(0.530)
7. As a child I communicated easily with adults.	
14. In group situations, I usually offer my opinions about the topic of discussion.	
24. I can usually disagree with someone without damaging our relationship.	
28. Most of the conflicts I have with others are resolved to everyone's satisfaction.	
29. More than a few times I've been told that I communicate well in difficult situations.	
<i>Noble selves</i>	
1. Other people sometimes think that I am too direct with them.	(0.649)
2. More than occasionally, I am honest to the point of being blunt when communicating with others.	(0.641)
16. Others are sometimes uncomfortable because I do not hide my opinions from them.	(0.650)
27. More than occasionally others react negatively because I am too honest with them.	(0.605)
30. Most of the time, I tell others exactly what I feel.	(0.523)
10. Most of the time I express my opinions, even if they bother others.	
13. I usually talk according to my own beliefs, no matter what others may think.	
18. When I disagree with others, I find it difficult to back down.	
23. When asked for an opinion, I usually say the first thing that comes to mind.	
25. Regardless of the consequences, I tell my friends what I think.	

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an embarrassing or shameful situation and criticism is seen as a social affront or a personal insult. Nakata and Dhiravgin (1989) observed, "the Thais are keen to avoid conflict ... and adverse to criticizing others in their presence" (p. 185). Although Hart and Burks (1972) claimed that rhetorical sensitivity "best promises to facilitate human understanding and to effect social cohesion" (p. 75), measuring the concept by asking Thais to agree with culturally inappropriate behavior reflects an

ethnocentrism incompatible with cross-cultural research. The operational definition of rhetorical sensitivity designated by RHETSEN2 with its emphasis on handling criticism, conflict, and difficulties, precludes its use in high-context, collective environments. Rhetorical sensitivity may be desirable, but the RHETSEN2 instrument must be adjusted to Thai cultural values before the concept can be scrutinized in Thailand.

Another possible explanation of the failure to find support for the first hypothesis may be in the traditional definition of the individualism–collectivism dimension of cultural variability. Moemeka (1998) indicted this major dichotomy as an inaccurate description of the way in which cultures differ. Rather than conceptualizing individualism and collectivism as polar opposites, Moemeka suggested a concept known as communalism as the polar opposite of individualism. Communalistic societies stress the supremacy of the community as arranged in a clear social hierarchy as a means to safeguard welfare. Moemeka asserted that scholars have wrongly classified cultures as collective when they are communal cultures. The Triandis and Singelis (1998) reconceptualization of the individualism–collectivism dimension to include horizontal and vertical elements in each category also lends support to Moemeka's claim. Horizontal collectivism appears roughly similar to the communalism category. The communication acts of communalistic cultures "... are engaged in to conform, solidify, and promote communal social order" (Moemeka, 1998, p. 133).

Moemeka (1998) asserted that scholars have wrongly classified Thailand as a collective culture when it is in fact a communal culture, but he presented no evidence for this assertion. Support for Moemeka's argument can be found, however, in Verluyten's (1997) analysis of Thai scores on Hofstede's (1991) cultural dimensions. Verluyten pointed out that none of the Thai ratings ever appear at the extreme of any dimension. On the individualism–collectivism dimension, for example, Thailand score is 20, or fortieth of 53 countries. With the Thai score in the middle range, the classification of Thailand as a collective culture becomes problematic. If Thailand is indeed a communalistic culture, then the communal emphasis on social order operates in a fashion consistent with the high Thai rhetorical reflection scores found in this study. Communalistic communication requires "... considerate behavior, concern for the underprivileged, abhorrence of selfishness, love of one's kin, respect for life, and the right to participate in community affairs" (Moemeka, 1998, p. 132). These conditions are similar to the Thai concept of social harmony as well as the nature of rhetorical reflection. The theoretical foundations of communalistic cultures are basically identical to those characterizing rhetorical reflection.

In addition to the measurement and conceptual problems, other factors may also contribute to the lower level of Thai rhetorical sensitivity found in this study. The participants in the Thai sample, students at Bangkok University, engage in quite different pedagogical activities than their US American counterparts at California State University, Sacramento. Thai students have few opportunities to participate in academic communication in the form of seminars, presentations, or speeches. The Socratic method, popular in the West, contrasts sharply with the Thai lecture

method of instruction. Students are encouraged to listen and learn from professors' lectures rather than participate in the dialogue as critical consumers of information. Knutson (1994) found Thai students reluctant to engage professors in discussion and, "... in some instances merely to ask a professor a question is seen as an implicit criticism that the teacher failed to explain matters properly and is eschewed" (p. 8). Furthermore, Knutson et al. (1995) determined that Thai youngsters were less likely to participate in family discussions and parents frequently discouraged verbal communication. Thai students seldom express their opinions in class, preferring to be quiet in the presence of older people. For the Thai students, quiet is a virtue and they learn at an early age that subdued behavior enables them to engage their social situations with care and consideration. In order to score high on the rhetorical sensitivity items, the self-report nature of the questionnaire requires respondents to express openly a very high opinion of one's self, an activity most Thais would find arrogant and unacceptable. Consequently, the Thais may lack the background and circumstances to develop the rhetorical sensitivity as measured by RHETSEN2. To the extent rhetorical sensitivity obtains in Thailand, it may be a skill developed later in life.

In contrast, US American youngsters are taught to be independent, autonomous, and assertive. Individualism, probably the most distinguishing feature of US Americans, leads people to develop self-identity largely through personal achievement (Deng, 1992). Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, and Tipton (1985) viewed Benjamin Franklin's phrase, "God helps those who help themselves", as the epitome of the US American concept of self. Individualism, coupled with the low-context cultural characteristics, results in an incredible variety of US American communication practices in comparison with the Thai experiences. These communication practices among the US Americans contribute heavily to their relatively high scores on the rhetorical sensitivity dimension. The US American tendency to assert independence in dealing with difficult problems requires proactive strategies, something Thais regard with suspicion and futility.

Given the strong emphasis in Thailand on social harmony and deferential behavior, their high scores on rhetorical reflection are not surprising. Komin's (1991) exhaustive survey identified the most important Thai cultural values as those associated with interpersonal communication, values not appearing in Rokeach's (1979) list of US American cultural values. The Thai preference for social *relations*, a strong collective desire, contrasts sharply with the US American cultural value of social *recognition*, an important individualistic concern. Taken as a whole, the Thai cultural values of gratitude, care, responsiveness, caution, contentment, and interdependence combine to emphasize rhetorical reflection. The RHETSEN2 items measuring rhetorical reflection focus predominantly on communication behaviors others are likely to find pleasing, messages common to Thai culture. Indeed, the notion of rhetorical reflection may play a crucial role in the development of effective intercultural communication behavior.

Infante, Rancer, and Womack (1993) summarized the importance of reinforcement as a tool in relational development and attraction. People are attracted to

others who provide them with rewards and reject those perceived as punishing. While the operational definitions of reward and punishment may be culturally dependent, verbal compliments and favorable comments typically provide strong reinforcement in both Thai and US American cultures. The RHETSEN2 items measuring rhetorical reflection emphasize the avoidance of hurt and punishment in favor of pleasing other people. As such, the Thai propensity for pleasant and harmonious discourse may provide an important insight to the development of intercultural relationships. Miller and Sunnafrank (1982) used the social penetration model in describing relational development, a process proceeding through various levels. In the initial stages of social penetration, the conversations can be characterized by phatic and shallow messages as the participants assess the potential rewards to be gained from the communication. The Thai rhetorical reflector behaviors identified in this study reinforce and reward initial encounters making likely the progress of intercultural attraction and relationship. The unique *kreng jai* characteristic of Thai communication behavior may well be an effective tool in moving conversations to deeper levels of intimacy. Since people like those who reward them, Thais may have a strong ability in the early stages of conversations to encourage relational development, a valuable characteristic of intercultural communication competence. On the other hand, the conversation behavior of noble selves may be too direct and self-oriented to inspire participants to progress beyond the initial stages of relationship development. Given this speculation, additional research should address the time and history aspects of rhetorical sensitivity with respect to relational development.

It may very well be that Thais display the characteristics of rhetorical sensitivity later in the development of relationships. Komin (1998) relied on Mead's (1934) description of symbolic interaction to characterize Thai interpersonal relationships. All Thai social interaction stems from a dichotomous self-concept, the "I" and the "Me". "I" refers to an internal ego-self wherein resides a person's ethical standards. In contrast, the "Me" designates an external or social-self, consisting of behaviors designed to meet others' perspectives. Komin (1998) suggested that Thais choose the "I" or the "Me" self-concept depending on the relationship between and among the discussants. Suvanajata (1976) claimed that Thais selecting the "I" interaction display a psychological investment in a grateful relationship (*bunkhun*). In contrast, the "Me" emerges to guide more evanescent encounters, a condition Komin termed "etiquetrical relationship" (1998, p. 222) and related to phatic communication (Knutson, Komolsevin, Chatiketu, & Smith, 2002). As Knutson et al. (2002) observe, "the development of *bunkhun* involves a long-term obligation; the grateful relationship does not happen immediately" (p. 18). Over time, the "I" and the "Me" coincide in *bunkhun* and the interaction becomes "... sincere, honest, reliable, open, caring, and the interactors are more likely to be adaptive, flexible, and submissive (if interacting with superiors) as indicated by the value of being 'responsive to circumstances and opportunities'" (Komin, 1998, p. 221–222). These characteristics develop as a relationship develops history and coincide with rhetorical sensitivity. Without *bunkhun*, the "Me" interaction proceeds in a noncommittal fashion represented by such values as "... polite, caring, considerate, self-control, and

tolerance” (Komin, 1998, p. 222), conduct relating more closely to rhetorical reflection. The development of Thai rhetorical sensitivity, therefore, depends on the degree of psychological investment in the relationship, a condition emerging only over time as the communicators develop history and experience. As such, Thais may behave as rhetorical reflectors early in a conversation in an effort to determine the value of the subsequent psychological investment leading to rhetorical sensitivity.

Many of the methodological difficulties encountered in this and likely other intercultural communication studies result from the heavy reliance on self-report data. The differences between individualism and communalism constrain not only the ways in which people behave, but also the way in which people reflect on their own behavior. One of the items in the RHETSEN2 scale, for example, posits, “Others have told me that I communicate well with difficult people”. While it may be true that people from communalistic cultures do, in fact, communicate more successfully with difficult people, prevailing cultural value constraints almost certainly require more modesty in asserting such abilities.

This problem argues for a research strategy that moves away from self-report indicators towards actual behavioral choices. At the very least, a research strategy is needed that obligates subjects to choose among hypothetical responses to actual communication scenarios. Such a strategy in all likelihood would better test hypotheses associated with rhetorical sensitivity. For example, one such research method, conjoint analysis, force subjects to make difficult choices from alternatives. The conjoint analysis measurement of the relative importance of situational attributes may very well correspond to the theoretical attributes of rhetorical sensitivity.

## **5. Conclusions**

Several conclusions, some reasonably firm and others tentative, can be drawn from this study. Of course, additional investigation is required before the relationship between Thais and rhetorical sensitivity can be advanced without skepticism. The following claims appear justifiable:

1. The original RHETSEN instrument fails to measure the essential elements of rhetorical sensitivity theory and the RHETSEN2 survey is more suitable for intracultural research in the West.
2. The RHETSEN2 instrument must be adjusted to locate rhetorical sensitivity variations in cross-cultural and intercultural environments.
3. Rhetorical reflection may be employed by the Thais as a means to develop rhetorical sensitivity.
4. Noble self behavior probably interferes with intercultural communication competence.
5. Thai people may display rhetorical sensitivity if a psychological commitment develops over time.

These claims are tempered by several limitations in the study. The samples consisted of undergraduate college students and may have resulted in an unfair comparison due to the Thai relative lack of communication experience compared to the US Americans. The choice of participants may also restrict the generalizability of the study. A wider sampling variety consisting of different ages, educational levels, and occupations should be included to clarify further the relationship between rhetorical sensitivity and intercultural communication. Even though this study intended to measure rhetorical sensitivity, the *development* of the concept seems more important than any *initial predisposition*. Future research should consider the evolution of the concept across time. Various intervening variables, such as status, topic of conversation, and the degree of psychological commitment among the communicators should also be considered in the potential evolution of rhetorical sensitivity. More investigation of the relationship between communalism and the theory of rhetorical sensitivity must also be conducted. The possible connection between social attraction and rhetorical sensitivity also should be explored in greater detail across time. Finally, research methodologies should be adjusted to include responses to actual communication episodes.

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