The Human Side of Intercultural Negotiation: Exploring Emotion, Culture and Ethics

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ABSTRACT

Intercultural negotiation requires more than cognitive ability, as negotiators must also recognise emotions, demonstrate empathy, understand cultural expectations and make ethical decisions. This exploratory qualitative study examines university students' understanding of the human and cultural dimensions of intercultural negotiation. Data were obtained from 25 university students through six open-ended questions administered using Google Forms. The questions explored the distinctions between intelligence quotient (IQ), emotional intelligence (EQ) and cultural intelligence (CQ), emotional awareness and active listening, authentic and strategic emotional expressions, gender and ethical decision-making, the Tripartite Model of Culture, and cultural tightness and looseness. Students' written responses were examined thematically to identify recurring patterns and conceptual understandings. The findings suggest that students generally recognised the limitations of cognitive intelligence in intercultural negotiation and emphasised empathy, active listening, cultural awareness and trust. They also demonstrated awareness of the ethical implications of strategically displayed emotions and the importance of avoiding gender-based assumptions. However, responses concerning the Tripartite Model of Culture revealed considerable conceptual variation, suggesting possible uncertainty in understanding and applying cultural frameworks. The study highlights the importance of integrating emotional, cultural and ethical dimensions into intercultural negotiation education.

Keywords: intercultural negotiation, emotional intelligence, cultural intelligence, emotional expression, cultural awareness, higher education

INTRODUCTION

Globalisation and increasing international interactions have made intercultural communication an essential competence in contemporary academic, professional and business environments. Individuals frequently interact, collaborate and negotiate with people whose cultural backgrounds, communication practices, values and social expectations differ from their own. In such contexts, successful negotiation requires more than the ability to present logical arguments or develop persuasive proposals. It also involves understanding interpersonal relationships, recognising emotional responses and adapting communication strategies to different cultural expectations. Intercultural communication competence encompasses several interconnected dimensions, including cultural awareness, empathy, flexibility, language proficiency and the ability to interpret different perspectives (Sarwari et al., 2024). Similarly, intercultural negotiation involves navigating differences in communication styles, formality, emotional expression and expectations concerning agreements. Ogliastri et al. (2023) demonstrated that cultural backgrounds influence negotiation patterns, particularly in relation to formality, commitment and emotional management. These findings suggest that negotiators need to develop an understanding of both the cognitive and interpersonal dimensions of negotiation.

Three forms of intelligence are particularly relevant to this discussion: intelligence quotient (IQ), emotional intelligence (EQ) and cultural intelligence (CQ). While IQ is generally associated with cognitive and analytical abilities, EQ concerns the recognition and management of emotions, whereas CQ relates to the ability to function effectively in culturally diverse situations. Although these forms of intelligence serve different purposes, their

combined relevance becomes particularly apparent in intercultural negotiations, where logical reasoning alone may not be sufficient to establish trust and achieve mutually acceptable outcomes.

Emotional awareness is another important dimension of negotiation. Recognising verbal and non-verbal emotional cues, listening actively and demonstrating empathy can help negotiators understand the concerns and expectations of others. Furthermore, emotional expressions may be genuine or strategically displayed to influence another party's decisions. Although strategic emotional expression may be used as a negotiation tactic, deliberately misleading another party raises ethical concerns involving honesty, trust and manipulation (Kang & Schweitzer, 2022).

Cultural expectations also influence how individuals interpret behaviour and respond during negotiations. For example, the concepts of face, dignity and honour offer different perspectives on how individuals understand and protect their social worth and reputation. Research involving 29 cultural groups has demonstrated that cultural logics associated with face, dignity and honour can shape individuals' concerns and responses during interpersonal conflict (Lun et al., 2023). Similarly, cultural tightness and looseness describe differences in the strength of social norms and tolerance for behavioural deviations, which may influence expectations concerning formality, conformity and flexibility. Despite the importance of these dimensions, students may understand intercultural negotiation concepts differently, particularly when translating theoretical knowledge into practical explanations. Exploring students' written responses can therefore provide insights into their conceptual understanding and identify areas that require further pedagogical attention. In response to this, the present study examines university students' understanding of the human, emotional, ethical and cultural dimensions of intercultural negotiation through their responses to six open-ended questions.

Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Explore students' understanding of IQ, EQ and CQ and their relevance to intercultural negotiation.
2. Examine students' perceptions of emotional awareness, active listening and empathy during negotiation.
3. Investigate students' understanding of authentic and strategically displayed emotions and their ethical implications.
4. Explore students' perspectives on gender, fairness and ethical decision-making.
5. Examine students' understanding of cultural frameworks, particularly the Tripartite Model of Culture.
6. Identify students' perceptions of cultural tightness and looseness and their implications for intercultural negotiation.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do students understand the roles of IQ, EQ and CQ in intercultural negotiation?
2. How do students conceptualise emotional awareness, active listening and perspective-taking during negotiation?
3. How do students distinguish authentic emotional expressions from strategically displayed emotions, and what ethical considerations do they identify?
4. How do students understand fairness and gender-related expectations in ethical decision-making?
5. How do students interpret the Tripartite Model of Culture and its influence on communication?

6. How do students perceive the influence of cultural tightness and looseness on negotiation practices?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Intercultural negotiation involves the interaction of cognitive, emotional and cultural capabilities. IQ, EQ and CQ represent different dimensions of human functioning that may contribute to how individuals approach negotiation situations. IQ is associated with analytical reasoning, information processing and problem-solving. These abilities are valuable when evaluating proposals, identifying alternatives and making decisions. However, cognitive ability does not necessarily guarantee effective communication across cultural boundaries. EQ concerns the ability to recognise, understand and manage emotions in oneself and others. In negotiation, emotional intelligence can support interpersonal understanding, empathy and relationship management. CQ, meanwhile, concerns an individual's ability to interpret unfamiliar cultural situations and adapt appropriately to different cultural contexts.

Recent research on intercultural competence highlights the importance of empathy, flexibility, cultural awareness and sensitivity in effective intercultural communication (Sarwari et al., 2024). A systematic review by Ramstrand et al. (2024) also highlights the continuing importance of developing and evaluating intercultural competence among higher education students. Consequently, intercultural negotiation should not be approached exclusively as a cognitive activity. Negotiators also need to understand the social and cultural expectations that influence how messages are interpreted and relationships are established.

Emotional awareness and empathy are important interpersonal dimensions of negotiation. Negotiators must be able to identify emotional cues, understand the concerns of others and respond appropriately to different perspectives. Emotional cues may be communicated through facial expressions, body language, gestures, tone of voice and verbal responses. Active listening involves giving attention to the speaker, avoiding premature judgements, asking relevant questions and acknowledging the concerns expressed by the other party.

These practices can contribute to mutual understanding and relationship development. In intercultural contexts, however, emotional expressions and communication behaviours should not be interpreted without considering cultural expectations. A behaviour considered direct and confident in one context may be perceived as confrontational in another. Diaz (2024), for example, found that the language used during negotiation can influence emotional expression and negotiation strategies. This demonstrates that language and emotion may interact in ways that affect negotiation behaviour.

Emotions can influence how negotiators communicate their intentions, establish relationships and respond to proposals. Authentic emotional expressions communicate feelings that correspond to an individual's actual emotional experience. In contrast, strategically displayed emotions may involve exaggerating, suppressing or deliberately communicating emotions to influence another party. Kang and Schweitzer (2022) distinguish between exaggerated or fabricated emotional displays and the suppression of emotions during negotiation. Their research highlights that individuals may evaluate different forms of emotional deception differently, raising important questions about the ethical boundaries of emotional management. Ye et al. (2023) further demonstrate that negotiators' reactions to emotional deception depend on the type of emotion communicated and the emotion actually experienced. Thus, strategic emotional expression should not be treated as a single uniform behaviour.

In educational contexts, discussing these distinctions can encourage students to consider the relationship between emotional regulation, persuasion, honesty and ethical responsibility. Gender expectations may influence how individuals interpret behaviour, evaluate competence and make ethical judgements during negotiation. For example, assertive communication may be interpreted differently depending on the gender of the individual demonstrating it. An important consideration is the distinction between recognising gender-related social expectations and relying on gender stereotypes. Ethical decision-making should consider individual actions, evidence, circumstances and relevant power relationships rather than assuming that particular behaviours or moral characteristics belong to a specific gender.

Students therefore need to recognise how assumptions may influence their interpretation of negotiation behaviour. Fairness requires evaluating individuals based on their reasoning, actions and ethical principles while

remaining aware of contextual differences. Cultural values influence how individuals understand self-worth, reputation and interpersonal relationships. The concepts of face, dignity and honour provide a useful framework for examining different cultural logics associated with social identity and interpersonal conflict.

Face is associated with maintaining social reputation, respect and relational harmony. Dignity emphasises individual self-worth and personal autonomy, while honour concerns the protection of personal or collective reputation and standing. These cultural logics may influence communication preferences, responses to disagreement and approaches to conflict resolution. Lun et al. (2023), in their cross-cultural study, found that face concerns and the need for approval were associated with how individuals approached interpersonal conflict. However, cultural frameworks should not be used to categorise individuals rigidly. Cultural patterns provide possible interpretive perspectives, but individual experiences and situational factors must also be considered.

Cultural tightness and looseness refer to differences in the strength of social norms and the degree to which deviations from those norms are tolerated. Tighter cultural environments generally emphasise established rules, conformity and behavioural expectations, whereas looser environments allow greater flexibility and tolerance for individual variation. These differences may influence negotiation practices, including punctuality, formality, communication styles, hierarchy and responses to unexpected changes. Recent studies have continued to examine the influence of cultural tightness and looseness on social behaviour and normative expectations (Leng et al., 2023; Ikizer et al., 2024). In negotiation, awareness of these differences may help individuals avoid misunderstandings arising from contrasting expectations about acceptable behaviour.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed an exploratory qualitative research design to examine university students' understanding of intercultural negotiation. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study focused on students' written explanations, interpretations and perceptions of selected negotiation concepts rather than measuring their actual negotiation performance or psychological competencies. The data consisted of short written responses collected through a Google Forms questionnaire. The responses were analysed thematically to identify recurring patterns and areas of conceptual understanding across the six questions. The participants were 25 university students of a public university in Malaysia. All 25 students submitted responses to the six open-ended questions. The participants were assigned anonymous identifiers, P01 to P25, for the purpose of data analysis and reporting.

The research instrument consisted of six open-ended questions designed to explore students' understanding of different dimensions of intercultural negotiation. The first question examined students' understanding of the differences between IQ, EQ and CQ and why high cognitive ability alone might not guarantee successful intercultural negotiation. The second question explored emotional awareness, active listening and perspective-taking during negotiation. The third focused on the distinction between authentic emotional expressions and strategically displayed emotions, including their ethical implications. The fourth question examined students' understanding of gender and ethical decision-making, with particular attention to fairness, social expectations and contextual factors. The fifth question explored students' understanding of the Tripartite Model of Culture and its influence on behaviour and communication. Finally, the sixth question investigated students' understanding of cultural tightness and looseness and how differences in social norms may influence negotiation practices. The questions were designed to encourage students to explain concepts and relate them to practical negotiation situations through brief written responses.

Students were required to provide short written responses to all six open-ended questions. The responses were subsequently exported into a spreadsheet for analysis. The dataset contained 25 responses for each of the six questions. The responses were reviewed and anonymised before being examined for recurring ideas, similarities and differences. The responses were examined using thematic analysis, following the general procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022). The analysis involved familiarisation with the responses, initial coding, identification of recurring patterns, development of broader themes and interpretation in relation to the research questions. An initial coding process focused on identifying key ideas expressed by participants. These included cognitive ability, emotional awareness, empathy, active listening, trust, emotional manipulation, fairness, cultural values, communication expectations and conformity to social norms. The codes were then organised

according to the six research dimensions. Illustrative responses were selected to demonstrate the ways in which students explained and applied the concepts. The analysis was primarily interpretive and descriptive. It did not involve statistical testing or the measurement of students' actual intelligence, emotional intelligence, cultural intelligence or negotiation competence.

FINDINGS

The thematic analysis identified several recurring patterns across the six dimensions of intercultural negotiation. Overall, students demonstrated an understanding that effective negotiation requires a combination of cognitive, emotional, interpersonal and cultural capabilities. However, differences were also evident in the depth and accuracy of their conceptual explanations.

a) Understanding IQ, EQ and CQ: Beyond Cognitive Ability

Students generally distinguish IQ, EQ and CQ according to their cognitive, emotional and cultural functions. IQ was associated with logical reasoning, analytical thinking and problem-solving, while EQ was linked to understanding and managing emotions. CQ was commonly associated with cultural awareness, adaptability and the ability to interact with people from different backgrounds.

One participant explained:

> *"IQ focuses on intelligence and problem-solving; EQ focuses on understanding and managing emotions; CQ focuses on understanding and adapting to different cultures."* (P02)

Students also recognised that high cognitive ability does not automatically translate into effective intercultural negotiation. Several responses suggested that individuals who rely heavily on logic and factual arguments may overlook cultural expectations, indirect communication and relationship-building. For example, P08 explained that a highly intelligent negotiator might develop a logical proposal but unintentionally offend another party due to insufficient cultural awareness. Another participant highlighted that intercultural negotiation involves building trust and relationships rather than simply winning an argument. These responses suggest that students understood negotiation as a relational process in which cognitive reasoning needs to be complemented by emotional awareness and cultural adaptability.

b) Emotional Awareness and Active Listening: Understanding the Other Party

The second dimension revealed that students associated emotional intelligence with the ability to recognise verbal and non-verbal cues, listen attentively and demonstrate empathy. Commonly identified emotional indicators included facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, posture and changes in speaking patterns. Students also emphasised the importance of giving the speaker full attention, avoiding interruptions and acknowledging the other party's concerns.

P04 described the process as:

> *"Transitioning from a mindset of winning to a mindset of understanding."*

This response reflects an important shift from competitive argumentation towards relationship-oriented communication. Other participants highlighted paraphrasing, asking questions and placing themselves in another person's position as ways of demonstrating understanding. P20, for instance, associated empathetic listening with considering another person's perspective fairly and avoiding one-sided judgement. Overall, students demonstrated an understanding that effective negotiation involves more than speaking persuasively. It requires listening, interpreting emotional cues and acknowledging the concerns of others.

c) Authentic and Strategic Emotional Expressions: Trust and Ethical Responsibility

Students generally distinguished authentic emotional expressions from strategically displayed emotions according to the intention behind the expression. Authentic emotions were described as genuine feelings that

arise naturally during negotiation. Strategic emotions, in contrast, were associated with deliberately displaying or exaggerating emotions to influence another party's decisions. Several participants expressed concerns about the use of fabricated emotions to manipulate or pressure others. Trust emerged as a recurring consideration.

P24 explained:

> *"In a negotiation, maintaining trust to reach a fair agreement is important, and deliberately playing with the other party's emotion is not a good way to reach said fair agreement."*

Similarly, P12 highlighted the possibility that deliberately faking emotions could damage long-term relationships and create hostility between negotiating parties. Nevertheless, some students acknowledged that emotional expression could be managed strategically without necessarily being unethical. This suggests that students recognised a distinction between regulating genuine emotions and deliberately deceiving another party. The responses indicate that students were beginning to understand the ethical complexity of emotional expression, particularly in relation to honesty, manipulation, trust and the fairness of negotiation outcomes.

d) Gender and Ethical Decision-Making: Fairness Beyond Stereotypes

The fourth dimension revealed a relatively consistent emphasis on fairness and individual evaluation. Students generally argued that gender should not be used as the primary basis for judging a person's ethical decisions, competence or negotiation behaviour. Participants highlighted the importance of evaluating individuals according to their actions, reasoning, values and specific circumstances. P03 provided an example of how gender expectations may influence judgement:

> *"A woman who speaks firmly might be judged as aggressive, while a man who did the same way will consider as confident."*

This response illustrates students' awareness that identical behaviours may be interpreted differently depending on gender-related expectations. Other participants emphasised the importance of considering contextual factors such as organisational hierarchy, social expectations and power dynamics. The findings suggest that students recognised the potential influence of gender stereotypes on ethical judgement and supported a more individualised and context-sensitive approach to negotiation.

e) Understanding the Tripartite Model of Culture: Conceptual Variation

The fifth dimension revealed the most noticeable conceptual variation among the responses. A number of students interpreted the Tripartite Model of Culture through the concepts of face, dignity and honour. These responses associated face with social reputation and harmony, dignity with individual autonomy and self-respect, and honour with the protection of personal or family reputation.

For example, P08 explained that face-oriented negotiators might indirectly reject an offer to avoid embarrassment, whereas dignity-oriented negotiators may express concerns more directly. However, other students interpreted the model through different conceptual frameworks. Several identified the three components as cognitive, affective and behavioural. Others referred to universal, group and individual levels, while some described cultural layers involving artefacts, values and underlying assumptions. This variation is illustrated by P19, who explained:

> *"The model consists of cognitive (thinking), affective (feeling) and behavioural (acting) components."*

The differences suggest that students did not share a consistent interpretation of the model being discussed. While some responses demonstrated an understanding of face, dignity and honour, others drew on alternative frameworks for explaining cultural behaviour. This finding is important because it highlights the need for greater conceptual clarification when teaching cultural frameworks. The responses should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence that students lack cultural awareness; rather, they indicate variation in how the terminology and theoretical concepts were understood.

f) Cultural Tightness and Looseness: Norms, Formality and Flexibility

The final dimension revealed that most students understood the distinction between tight and loose cultures in terms of the strength of social norms and the tolerance of behavioural differences. Tight cultures were commonly associated with established rules, formal communication, hierarchy, punctuality and conformity. Loose cultures were described as more flexible, informal and accepting of different behaviours. Students also identified possible negotiation challenges arising from contrasting expectations. These included differences in communication styles, adherence to schedules, negotiation protocols and willingness to modify agreements.

P19 highlighted the possibility of misunderstandings concerning punctuality, formality and negotiation procedures, suggesting that parties should clarify expectations and respect one another's cultural practices. Some students also used national examples to illustrate their understanding. However, these examples were sometimes presented as general characteristics of entire societies. Overall, the responses demonstrated an awareness that social norms influence negotiation behaviour. They also suggest a need to emphasise that cultural frameworks describe broader tendencies rather than fixed characteristics of every individual within a society.

DISCUSSION

The findings provide insights into how students understand the interconnected cognitive, emotional, ethical and cultural dimensions of intercultural negotiation.

a) Intercultural Negotiation as a Combination of Intelligence and Adaptability

Students' responses to IQ, EQ and CQ indicate that they generally recognised the limitations of cognitive ability when interacting across cultural boundaries. They understood that logical reasoning and problem-solving may be insufficient when negotiators fail to recognise cultural expectations and interpersonal concerns. This understanding is consistent with the broader conceptualisation of intercultural communication competence, which emphasises cultural awareness, empathy and flexibility alongside knowledge and communication skills (Sarwari et al., 2024). The findings also support the argument that intercultural negotiation involves multiple behavioural and relational dimensions. Ogliastri et al. (2023) demonstrated that cultural background can influence negotiation prototypes, particularly in relation to formality, commitment and emotional expression. From an educational perspective, these findings suggest that teaching negotiation should extend beyond the presentation of strategies and logical decision-making techniques. Students should also be encouraged to consider how their communication choices may be interpreted by individuals from different cultural backgrounds.

b) Empathy and Active Listening as Relational Negotiation Skills

The emphasis on emotional cues, active listening and perspective-taking indicates that students understood the relational nature of negotiation. Their responses suggest that empathy involves both recognising another person's emotions and making an effort to understand the concerns underlying those emotions. This is particularly relevant in intercultural communication, where differences in language, communication conventions and emotional expression may complicate interpretation. The findings also reinforce the importance of moving away from a purely competitive approach to negotiation. Rather than focusing exclusively on presenting arguments or defending individual positions, negotiators need to develop listening behaviours that support mutual understanding.

c) Emotional Expression and Ethical Negotiation

Students' responses demonstrate awareness of the potential ethical consequences of deliberately manipulating emotional expressions. Trust, honesty and fairness were frequently identified as important considerations. This is consistent with Kang and Schweitzer's (2022) discussion of emotional deception in negotiation, which distinguishes between exaggerated or fabricated emotional displays and the suppression of genuine emotions. Ye et al. (2023) further demonstrate that the effects of emotional deception depend on the particular emotions communicated and experienced. Therefore, ethical emotional management cannot be reduced to a simple

distinction between showing and hiding emotions. The students' responses suggest an emerging understanding that negotiators may regulate emotional expression without necessarily engaging in deception. This distinction provides a valuable opportunity for classroom discussion about the boundaries between professional emotional regulation, strategic persuasion and manipulation.

d) Gender Awareness and Contextual Ethical Judgement

The responses concerning gender and ethical decision-making demonstrated students' awareness of the risks associated with gender stereotypes. Participants generally supported evaluating individuals according to their actions and the circumstances surrounding a particular decision. The example of assertive communication being interpreted differently depending on gender illustrates how social expectations may influence perceptions of negotiation behaviour. These findings highlight the importance of developing ethical awareness that extends beyond formal principles of fairness. Students should also be encouraged to examine how assumptions, power relations and contextual expectations influence the way individuals are treated during negotiations.

e) Conceptual Understanding and the Need for Clarifying Cultural Frameworks

The variation in students' interpretations of the Tripartite Model of Culture represents an important finding. Although several students provided relevant explanations of face, dignity and honour, others interpreted the question through different three-component models. These included cognitive-affective-behavioural dimensions and universal-group-individual levels. This variation raises an important pedagogical issue: students may remember the terminology associated with cultural theories without necessarily distinguishing between the theoretical frameworks to which those terms belong.

The finding also suggests that the wording of instructional questions requires careful attention. The phrase "Tripartite Model of Culture" may be interpreted differently if the specific theoretical framework is not explicitly identified. Research on face concerns across different cultural groups demonstrates that cultural logics can influence interpersonal conflict and negotiation-related concerns (Lun et al., 2023). However, the educational value of these frameworks depends on students understanding their specific concepts and avoiding the assumption that all individuals within a cultural group behave identically.

f) Cultural Tightness and Looseness in Negotiation

Students' understanding of cultural tightness and looseness was generally centred on differences in social norms, formality and behavioural flexibility.

Their responses suggest that students could identify how contrasting expectations may create misunderstandings during negotiation. For example, one party may expect strict adherence to an agreed schedule, while another may consider adjustments acceptable. This understanding is consistent with contemporary research examining the influence of social norms on individual and collective behaviour (Leng et al., 2023; Ikizer et al., 2024). However, the use of national examples also indicates a potential tendency towards cultural generalisation. Students need to understand that cultural tightness and looseness are not absolute categories that determine every individual's behaviour. Negotiators should consider situational expectations, organisational practices and individual preferences rather than relying exclusively on national cultural labels.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study examined 25 university students' understanding of six dimensions of intercultural negotiation: IQ, EQ and CQ; emotional awareness and active listening; authentic and strategic emotional expressions; gender and ethical decision-making; the Tripartite Model of Culture; and cultural tightness and looseness. The findings indicate that students generally recognised that successful intercultural negotiation requires more than cognitive ability. They emphasised emotional awareness, empathy, active listening, trust, fairness and cultural adaptability. Their responses also demonstrated awareness of the ethical implications of manipulating emotional expressions and relying on gender stereotypes.

However, the variation in students' interpretations of the Tripartite Model of Culture revealed an important area requiring further pedagogical attention. This suggests that understanding cultural concepts involves more than recalling definitions; students must also be able to distinguish theoretical frameworks and apply them appropriately. Overall, the study highlights the importance of developing a more holistic approach to intercultural negotiation education. Integrating cognitive, emotional, ethical and cultural dimensions into classroom learning may help students develop a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in communicating and negotiating across cultural boundaries.

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