

# Theory Applications: Intensity Factors

## Introduction and background

Random State University (RSU) and Any National University (ANU) recently signed an agreement supporting the exchange of junior faculty. The partnership provides faculty with opportunities to take courses, conduct research, and collaborate on publications all while obtaining an intensive international experience. While the host institution provides reduced course fees and housing, the sending institution is responsible for all other expenses.

James is one of three Chinese faculty members selected to participate in the exchange. While this is his first extended trip abroad, he presented at an international conference in Japan and worked with a U.S. American Fulbright scholar in China. In many ways, James is the leader of the three Chinese visitors. He is the most senior in age and rank, and he has the highest level of English proficiency.

## The Incident

Due to visa delays, James and his colleagues arrived a week after the semester started. They failed to complete a housing contract until the day of their arrival and were subsequently placed in an undergraduate residence hall. The resident adviser (RA), a young sophomore, greeted the group when they arrived. James quickly realized that while he could read the technical words on the housing contract, he had a very difficult time understanding the RA. After having the three sign the necessary paperwork, she explained they would need to return the next night to attend a make-up hall meeting. James explained they had much work to do in the lab, but after the RA pointed to the signed contracts and insisted the meeting was required, the three agreed they would try to attend. The RA cleared her calendar and waited for the group to arrive. After an hour, she e-mailed James to see why they didn't show. James replied they were very busy preparing for research in the lab and apologized for missing the meeting.

The two crossed paths the next morning and the RA asked to reschedule the meeting for the next evening. James said they had a lot of work to do, but they would try to attend the meeting. The next night the RA again cleared her schedule and waited for the group, but no one arrived. The following morning she walked into the hall director's office and complained about James and the others.

The hall director e-mailed the group stressing the importance of the meeting and also copied the director of the international student and scholar services office. James and his colleagues visited the hall director's office that afternoon and seemed very apologetic. The hall director stressed the importance of punctuality and provided the information they missed at the original hall meeting. That evening, the RA was on duty at the front desk and James stopped by to say he was very upset by the way she behaved especially after he had repeatedly explained how busy the three were in the lab. He felt she should be helpful, but instead it seemed she and others in the United States only want to cause trouble for him and his colleagues.

## *Case questions to consider:*

1. What are some of the stated and implied intensity factors contributing to conflict in this scenario?
2. How might James and the RA have failed to communicate regarding the meeting time?
3. How might the RA or hall director have handled the situation differently?
4. How might the director of the international student and scholar services office respond to the email?

## Analysis

In this case, the conflict between James and the RA is fueled by a number of obvious and elusive situational variables. In the intercultural context, R. Michael Paige refers to such variables as intensity factors. He identifies ten such factors: cultural differences, ethnocentrism, cultural immersion, cultural isolation, language, prior intercultural experience, expectations, visibility and invisibility, status, and power and control.

A quick read of the case may result in the temptation to assign fault to either James or the RA. Was James irresponsible? Does the RA not understand the demands of a visiting researcher? Fortunately, an awareness of intensity factors aids interculturalists to maintain objectivity while striving to make sense of the situation.

As is clear from the beginning, James has had very limited prior intercultural experience. While he presented at a conference in Japan, it is fairly safe to assume this sojourn was short, structured, and encapsulated within an academic or professional subculture. It is similarly safe to assume that an extended sojourn in the United States, where the cultural differences are likely greater than those he experienced in Japan, would make for a more difficult psychological adjustment.

It is also important to understand the status James likely holds in his home culture and how his status may be different in the United States. In China, he is a respected professor at a national university. In the United States, he is a visiting researcher living in an undergraduate residence hall. What does his residence hall assignment say about how he is valued by colleagues at the partner institution? Also, James was able to read technical English, but found it very difficult to understand the spoken English of the RA. How might these new realities differ from his expectations? Is James experiencing a loss of power and control?

It is important to note the miscommunication regarding meeting times. The RA is very explicit in explaining the requirement, and choosing a date and time. However, what might James be saying by stressing how important he and his colleagues are in the lab? Is a commitment actually made by saying he will *try* to attend the meeting or is it a polite way of saying his attendance should not be expected?

The RA and hall director each communicated with James and his colleagues, but the hall director proved to be much more successful at securing a meeting. How might James view the hall director differently than the RA? Did copying the director of the international student and scholar services office have any impact on the group's responsiveness?

The director of the international student and scholar services office has three options: 1) not respond, 2) gather additional information about the incident, or 3) gather information and then actively intervene. James' statement about individuals wanting to cause trouble for him could be a sign that he is in the ethnocentric stage of defense. The director could arrange a meeting to talk with James and his colleagues about the adjustment challenges they are facing and direct them to relevant support services (e.g., a Chinese student association or a host national friendship program). She could also offer to provide intercultural training to the residence life staff. Perhaps most importantly, she could aid the institution to be more intentional in the support of its international community.

- *David L. Di Maria*