

Learning About "Face"—"Subjective Theories" as a Construct in Analysing Intercultural Learning Processes of Germans in Taiwan

Doris Weidemann

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Abstract: International transfers require adaptational processes by the persons concerned that also include changes in everyday knowledge. Taking the Chinese concept of "face" as an example, changes in knowledge structures of 15 Germans in Taiwan were explored in a longitudinal study. By use of a structure formation technique, a method that was developed in the context of the "research program subjective theories", these changes were monitored over the period of one year. Despite of theoretical shortcomings of the underlying framework "research program subjective theories" the method proved fruitful for analysing personal experiences in intercultural encounters as well as documenting changes of everyday knowledge that can be interpreted as an expression of an intercultural learning process. Results further suggest that a modified version of a structure formation technique might also be used for intercultural coaching purposes.

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1. Introduction

Even though cultural psychology is still marginal in the wider field of psychology the concept of "culture" has definitely entered the discipline. Cross-cultural psychology is well established and has brought general attention to the influence of culture on psychological phenomena—if not to the interrelatedness of both. In the same vein the investigation of intercultural interactions has demonstrated that individual psychological processes show distinct cultural patterns and, more important, that communication across cultural gaps often meets with difficulties. Far from being abstract or theoretical, intercultural communication problems

make different cultural belief systems, values or practices very real and they convincingly define human beings as cultural as well as individual actors. [1]

Intercultural interactions constitute a distinct problem field in many social and organisational situations and have been extensively studied in various contexts. Communication across cultural divides is usually described as difficult and often results in misunderstandings and failure to achieve individual or even common goals. This is especially true for persons transferring to a different cultural context, as overseas students, expatriate managers or immigrants do, and adaptation to the new cultural environment can be frustrating and painful. Acute distress and health problems experienced by sojourners as well as high costs resulting from unsuccessful overseas posting of organisational staff have motivated a lot of research and led to the development of various intercultural training programs. Whereas intercultural competence has been widely discussed as a goal of intercultural training programs, little is known how it is acquired outside the classroom, e.g. by way of interaction with the host population in a foreign country. The study presented here—which is part of a dissertation project—focuses on this issue by documenting a change in reconstructed "subjective theories" about the Chinese concept of "face" held by German sojourners in Taiwan. [2]

Chinese-German encounters have been studied by various scholars, and their work shall be presented in brevity as a background for the topic chosen. The Chinese concept of "face" is a major obstacle for Germans communicating with Chinese, and a short outline of this concept will sketch its contours. The present study is then positioned in relation to the research presented and a cultural psychological approach to studying intercultural interactions shall be proposed. The "research program subjective theories" serves as a general framework but is critically reviewed before finally presenting empirical results of the longitudinal study that was conducted in Taiwan from 1998 to 2000. [3]

2. The Psychology of German-Chinese Interactions

In the wake of China's growing economical importance the practice of German-Chinese cooperation has met with a lot of scientific interest in Germany even though the number of actual German-Chinese encounters is still very small. Reflecting the general impression of China being an attractive as well as a "difficult" market, empirical research mainly focuses on (problematical) experiences of German companies or individuals in China. Involved disciplines range from economics, psychology, Chinese studies or history to socio-linguistics and have thus naturally concentrated on different levels and aspects of interactions. In contrast to an interest of economics researchers in case studies, psychologists have mainly been concerned with detecting general patterns of cultural differences. There is thus a strong component of cross-cultural analysis in the social psychological research on German-Chinese encounters, as for example in the notable work of THOMAS and colleagues (THOMAS 1993, 1996; THOMAS & SCHENK, 1996) which received a lot of attention in Germany. Their work provides a well defined methodical approach to the study of intercultural

interactions as well as practical results concerning German-Chinese encounters. Based on interviews with German returnees from China, recurrently reported interaction problems were collected as typical "critical incidents". While the critical incident technique is widely used to analyse intercultural interactions and often serves as a starting point for the compilation of training material (e.g. CUSHNER & BRISLIN, 1996), THOMAS proceeds to analyse reported critical incidents with regard to underlying patterns called "culture standards". Culture standards are interpretative constructs that serve to organise critical incidents with regard to a common "core" and can also be linked to specific Chinese cultural traditions and historical background. Among nine identified culture standards THOMAS and SCHENK (1997) list "saving face", "social harmony", "hierarchy" and "bureaucracy" as relevant for Germans in China. Culture standards should not, however, be misunderstood as fixed attributes of Chinese culture. They are inherently and inextricably *relative* as they are derived from (e.g. German) accounts of what—and this rests heavily on own standards of what is being expected and considered normal and appropriate behaviour—is being experienced as problematical in the interaction. Obviously, interviews with Japanese participants would result in different reports and thus lead to different "culture standards". In the above example, extracted culture standards reflect what is difficult for Germans interacting with Chinese, and the concept allows (and even asks) for further differentiation as to the actual subgroups interacting (THOMAS and SCHENK [1996] present different sets of Chinese culture standards for German managers or students, and they also list German culture standards for Chinese). However, despite attempts at differentiation the concept of culture standards cannot escape a certain reification of "the cultures" in question, and it is doubtful if warnings to their relative validity are heeded when critical incidents are studied for training purposes. [4]

Results by THOMAS are in general accordance with findings of other authors in the field, who also report communication problems of Germans in China (NAGELS, 1996; PEILL-SCHÖLLER, 1994; SADER, 1999) or in other German-Chinese encounters (GÜNTNER, 1993, 1994). One of the recurrent themes is the inability to understand or apply the Chinese concept of "face". Typical complaints are that Chinese partners are overly concerned with saving face, and reports abound of Germans who suffered the consequences of not taking "face" into account. Problems are further exacerbated by the fact that "face" is an important concept in social relationships and everyday encounters in China as well as in Taiwan. That the phenomenon of social "face" is well known in both these societies is demonstrated by social scientist in Taiwan as well as in Hong Kong and mainland China (for an overview of the Chinese language literature see e.g. HSU, 1996). The abundance of Chinese expressions containing "lian" or "mianzi" (both Chinese for "face") demonstrates impressively the eminent position of this concept and supports the claim that "'face' is the most prevalent and important factor in understanding Chinese people and their everyday behaviour" (HSU, 1996, p.8). [5]

3. "Lian" and "Mianzi": Social "Face" in Chinese Society

Though the concept of "face" has long ago made its entry into Western social sciences (cf. GOFFMAN, 1955) its special characteristics in a Chinese context have prompted a lot of research by Chinese scholars and have made it an important topic in the emergent field of a Chinese indigenous psychology. "Face" has been associated with Western terms like "prestige" or "reputation" but is an even broader concept that can be defined as "the respectability and/or deference which a person can claim for himself from others" (HO, 1976 p.883) or simply "a positive public image" (HSU, 1996, p.71). There are two Chinese words translating to "face", *lian* and *mianzi*, that hold partly different connotations (HU, 1944). *Mianzi* is associated with prestige and status and refers to a reputation that rests on education, wealth, or social position and can be achieved through effort. *Lian*, on the other hand, is associated with moral integrity and social conduct and implies the respect for a righteous person, independent of his or her social position. A loss in *mianzi* does not automatically include a loss of *lian* (as in the case of an impoverished but righteous person), but it is almost impossible to keep *mianzi* once *lian* is lost. [6]

Recently, HSU (1996) argued that a distinction based on *moral* categories is not only partly inconsistent with HU's own examples but also lacks empirical support (referring to interviews and other material collected by HSU in Peking). Rather, HSU suggests, the use of *lian* and *mianzi* varies according to the severity of the incident or the amount of face that is being lost or gained. *Lian* refers to more "severe cases" (often including moral shortcomings) whereas *mianzi* signifies less important incidents. However, there are a lot of exceptions to this "rule of thumb" as the use of both words varies considerably between speakers. [7]

The importance face gains as a regulating force in social interactions depends heavily on the quality of the relationship between the persons involved. Interactions with strangers, especially when one does not expect to see them again, as well as interactions within intimate relationships (such as between family members) involve just a minimum of concerns about "face". These relationships can, as HWANG (1987) points out, be described either as almost exclusively affective (as amongst family members) or as almost exclusively instrumental (such as between shop keeper and customer). Whenever a relationship involves both aspects it can be termed "mixed" and will have to consider "face" of all parties involved. [8]

Face is a *social phenomenon* and does not signify an individual attribute (though a general love for face or the neglect of face might be perceived as such). Face is thus negotiated between at least two interacting parties and can be lost or gained or saved on both sides. As BOND and HWANG (1986) point out this results in six possibilities as to the outcome of a person's (say A's) action: A loses face, A gains face, A saves face, A hurts B's face, A enhances B's face, or A saves B's face. In Chinese, all these aspects are semantically represented (and many more are too, cf. HSU, 1996) and are part of everyday conversation. The differentiation will prove a useful tool organising the empirical data presented below. [9]

4. Theoretical Positioning of the Study

Based on these findings "face" appears as a concept that is at the same time important for social interactions in China and—probably because of a lack of a similar concept—difficult for Germans to understand and apply. Germans transferring to a Chinese cultural environment, as Taiwan, will most likely be confronted with the Chinese concept of "face". The central hypothesis of the study presented is that by confrontation with "face" in the Taiwanese social environment, the understanding of the concept as well as face-related behaviour will undergo changes over time. These changes are understood as expression of a learning process that is accompanying and resulting from experiences in the host society, and will tentatively be called "intercultural learning". [10]

While the work presented here is implicitly founded on the results presented above, there are some aspects of this research that seem unfortunate. In particular, the marked tendency to reduce intercultural interactions to their problematical aspects does not appear very helpful. Evoking notions of the "inscrutable Chinese" obscures the fact that most intercultural encounters actually work quite well, even between Germans and Chinese. This lopsidedness of research might be explained by a greater urgency of coming to terms with problematical aspects than with non-problematical ones, but it certainly is supported by a view of cultures as monolithic blocks that "clash" in the interaction. Though sometimes profession, gender, sexual orientation or other criteria are being discussed as constituting collective practices that can be understood in cultural terms, "culture" is mostly being reduced to nationality and multiple cultural references tend to be ignored. Encounters are thus labelled intercultural when in fact they are inter-national and might actually involve persons who—despite different nationalities—operate on a cultural basis they share (as students, mountaineers or university lecturers). [11]

By undertaking the study I do not follow a cross-cultural approach but propagate a cultural psychological view on intercultural interactions: The main interest is not a cross-cultural comparison or an account of typical interaction problems but experiences of individual actors in a certain (here: foreign) cultural environment. While allowing for collective labels, such as "German" and "Taiwanese", these are used for convenience rather than claiming any explanatory power. It is not national categories that are at the centre of attention but *individual* life conditions, experiences and subjective explanations that—by force of their centre position—serve as a permanent point of reference for the investigation of how views on and knowledge about the Chinese concept of face change over time. [12]

The general view underlying this work is that people are not passive recipients of cultural influence or as such representatives of a fixed cultural entity but are human actors who in relation to diverse (sub-) cultural backgrounds and by way of social exchange create meaning, enlarge their competencies and possess a potential for reflection of their own experiences. [13]

The empirical part of the study thus concentrates on (a) narratives of Germans in Taiwan relating to their general experiences in the foreign environment, and (b) reports about specific experiences with the Chinese concept of "face". A learning process is documented by use of a "structure formation technique", a method developed in the context of the "research program subjective theories". [14]

5. Structure Formation Technique and the Research Program Subjective Theories

The focus of this study is not on different customs and traditions but on the *individual view* of and experiences in the foreign environment, with a special focus on face-related incidents. Insofar as these views, explanations or judgements are *subjective* (instead of objective or scientifically validated), the *research program subjective theories* (RPST) is used here as general framework for the research design (for a concise introduction into the RPST see GROEBEN & SCHEELE, 2001; also DANN, 1992; GROEBEN, WAHL, SCHLEE & SCHEELE, 1988). [15]

The research program subjective theories is grounded in the view of human beings as self-reflective and (potentially) rational actors. People are believed to hold their own theories about the "why" and "how" of their environment and to regulate their actions accordingly. The RPST shows connections to humanistic thinking as well as to action theory and is thematically related to research on implicit personality theories and attribution theory. *Subjective theories* are defined as complex and relatively stable cognitions about the self and the world around that imply an argumentational structure. They serve different functions that reach from general orientation, the explanation of past events, or the prediction of future events to action control. Subjective theories are understood to be analogous to scientific theories in structure as well as in function, but lack the latter's inter-subjectivity and explicitness. Because subjective theories must enable fast reactions they are not subject to long discussions or evaluations and lack the coherence scientific theories possess (GROEBEN et al. 1988). [16]

Subjective theories can be verbally explicated and reconstructed by way of dialogue between researcher and participant. Expressing the underlying humanistic view, the role of the participant in this dialogue is that of an equal partner who actively participates in the research process. The usual procedure in reconstructing subjective theories is a two-step research design, starting with a semi-standardized interview on the contents of the subjective theories in question which is followed by a visualisation of the theory structure on paper (topics are virtually unlimited and may range from concepts of irony (SCHEELE & GROEBEN, 1988), trust (FLICK, 1989), second language learning (KALLENBACH, 1996), or immigrant integration (LUMMER, 1994). The latter is achieved by way of introducing a set of representational rules, such as the Heidelberger Strukturlegetechnik (Heidelberg structure formation technique, SCHEELE & GROEBEN, 1988) or others (for an overview of methods used to reconstruct subjective theories cf. DANN, 1992; SCHEELE, 1992). In between both steps, the interviewer usually transcribes the interview data and prepares

suggestions concerning the visualisation. The final draft of the visualisation, however, requires agreement (dialogue-consensus) between researcher and participant, thus ensuring an optimal accuracy of the graphic representation as well as an optimal understanding of the participants' view by the researcher ("communicative validation", GROEBEN et al., 1988). Finally, empirical proof that observable behaviour does in fact follow the subjective theory serves as "explanatory validation" (GROEBEN et al., 1988). [17]

The RPST has met with considerable criticism which is directed mainly at the rationalistic and intentionalistic action model underlying the concept "subjective theories" (STRAUB, 2001). People are obviously not rational actors at all times, and current action theories have taken this into account (STRAUB & WERBIK, 1999). It is thus not surprising that correlations between observable behaviour and explicated theories tend to be weak—a problem that is mainly ignored because in practice explanatory validation is usually omitted. Research on subjective theories has in fact, as STEINKE (1998) observes, rather focussed on everyday *knowledge* and mostly ignored observable behaviour. (Classroom studies as those conducted by WAHL, SCHLEE, KRAUTH & MURECK (1983) are notable exceptions). [18]

Some scholars (e.g. FLICK, 1989; KALLENBACH, 1996) have stressed the point that subjective theories are constructed rather than *reconstructed* in dialogue, and even validated structures do not represent fixed psychic entities. A view of subjective theories as existing independently of the dialogue which aims at their (re-) construction appears problematical. Closely related to these observations are fundamental problems of validation (concerning both communicative and explanatory validation) that cannot easily be overcome. Among these are the dependence of the resulting theory structure on the dialogue situation, interviewer-interviewee relationship, or the interviewee's verbal expressiveness and motivation. Dialogue consensus implies that explanations not accepted by the interview partner are omitted from the final structure, though these might hold explanatory power even if the interviewee fails to see this (STRAUB, 2001). Explanatory validation is especially problematical because it is considered indispensable (it is in fact constituent part of the "narrow conceptualisation of subjective theories", GROEBEN & SCHEELE, 2001) but is hardly ever achieved, nor even attempted by most scholars in the field. The probable explanation for this incongruity is that only actions very limited in scope can be successfully related to explicated theory structures at all (such as those investigated by WAHL et al.). Most topics that are studied under the label of "subjective theories" are much more complex and will not easily and directly translate to specific observable actions. More fundamentally, it is doubtful if a correlation between observable behaviour and explicated theory structure holds validating power at all: This claim rests on the assumptions that a) observable behaviour can be proven to be *causally linked* to the subjective theory and b) that subjective theories not translating to action are invalid. Both assumptions appear highly questionable (STEINKE, 1998; STRAUB, 2001). [19]

The work presented here follows the general trend of making use of the proposed methods to analyse and graphically present everyday knowledge without following the specific assumptions of the research program subjective theories. In the present context, subjective theories are understood to be lay theories (in the sense of lay explanations) with no particular claim as to their relatedness to scientific theories. Subjective theories are believed to be bi-directionally linked to actions and experiences, prestructuring actual behaviour (though not being the direct or even only cause for a certain action) and being altered according to general experiences and concrete actional outcomes. Analysing subjective theories therefore promises to be fruitful for documenting a change in knowledge structure resulting from new experiences in a foreign environment, an assumption that is also shared by BENDER-SZYMANSKI & HESSE (1993) who investigated the change of subjective theory structures of young teachers after teaching in multicultural classrooms (also BENDER-SZYMANSKI, LUEKEN & THIELE, 1995; HESSE, 1995). Subjective theories in the present context are extended to include individual beliefs about social representations, as for example social representations of the concept of "face" in Taiwan. [20]

6. Research Design and Preliminary Results

6.1 Research design and time frame

Between 1998 and 2000 60 qualitative interviews with German students, managers and technical experts were conducted in Taiwan. According to the longitudinal design, each of the 15 interview partners was interviewed twice shortly after his or her arrival and then again after six months and one year of stay respectively. The second interview was conducted two to three weeks after the first and served mainly to reconstruct the subjective theory structure on "face". Each interview (except the second) consisted of a lengthy "narrative" part that concentrated on general experiences in Taiwan, and a second part that—by use of structured questions—explored experiences with the Chinese concept of face.

What	When	Narrative part concentrating on	Subjective theory part concentrating on
Interview 1	1-3 months after arrival	Reasons for being in Taiwan; expectations for the stay; current situation (in terms of job position, family life, living arrangement, etc.)	Semi-standardized interview on 'face'
Interview 2	2-3 weeks after first interview		Reconstructing subjective theory
Interview 3	6-9 months after arrival	Current life situation—important changes since last interview	(New) experiences with the Chinese concept of face; Revising the theory structure
Interview 4	12 to 15 months after arrival	Current life situation—important changes since last interview	(New) experiences with the Chinese concept of face; Revising the theory structure

Table 1: Overview of longitudinal research design [21]

6.2 Participants

Sampling aimed at diversity, especially concerning possibly important criteria, such as Chinese language skills, age or marital status. All interview partners were German native speakers who intended to stay in Taiwan for at least one year (either to study Mandarin, work, or both) and were significantly involved with Taiwanese friends, colleagues, room mates or others during their stay. Six interviewees held working visas and nine interviewees had student status. While students tended to be younger than professionals and had less income, there was otherwise a considerable overlap of both groups: Many of the students spent a considerable amount of time working and were thus confronted with very much the same challenges as the group of "expatriate managers". Four students were enrolled in sinology (Chinese language and literature) classes at their home university, others studied law, economics, engineering or had just finished high school and not yet started university. Professionals included in the sample held managerial positions, worked as technical advisors or university instructors. [22]

6.3 Methods used: interview and structure formation technique

Using the framework of "subjective theories" in a longitudinal study on intercultural learning during an overseas stay can be considered an innovative approach and shall thus be discussed in more detail. (A presentation of the narrative part of the interviews is omitted here.) Based on the Heidelberg structure formation technique, a set of interview questions and rules for

representing the theory structure were developed. Adjusting the method to the specific topic at hand consisted mainly in a considerable reduction of complexity, both in terms of questions and representational rules. Because interview partners usually had very little experience with the Chinese concept of "face" when they first arrived in Taiwan, questions were kept very open at the beginning and only narrowed down when interview partners provided more detailed observations or comments. [23]

In order to structure the multi-faceted semantic field, a differentiation was made according to the outcome of actions (face gained or face lost) and the person concerned (self or other). Corresponding expressions that were used in the interviews are a) to lose face, b) to gain face, c) to hurt the other person's face, d) to give the other person face. Because "saving face" is mainly achieved by *avoiding* everything that could result in a loss of face (on either side) and was therefore unlikely to generate additional information, I did not specifically ask about this alternative. Only when interview partners mentioned face being "saved" were comments included in the subjective theory structure.

	Self	Other person
Face lost	To lose face	To hurt the other person's face
Face gained	To gain face	To give the other person face

Table 2: Differentiation of face-related semantic [24]

Interview questions were grouped around these four topics and asked for personal experiences or observations concerning face-related situations, actions and reactions. Apart from reports of face-related situations that were asked for in open questions, questions on actions/antecedents and reactions/outcomes implied a temporal or even causal order that later on served to structure the visualisation of the subjective theory. All questions were explicitly directed at experiences in Taiwan or at perceived Taiwanese social norms. An overview of the questions will show the general outline of the interview on "face":

1. What do you think does the following expression mean in the Taiwanese setting: to (lose face, gain face, hurt someone else's face, give someone else face?)
2. While in Taiwan, have you ever been in a situation where you or someone else (lost face, gained face, hurt someone else's face, gave someone else face)?
3. What did you do/did that person do that resulted in (losing face, gaining face, hurting someone else's face, giving someone else face)? What other possibilities exist for (losing face, gaining face, hurting someone else's face, giving someone else face)?
4. What did you do/did that person do after face was (lost, gained, hurt, given)? What other possibilities are there in this situation? [25]

The analysis of the interview transcripts resulted in a first draft of the subjective theory structure that was introduced to and discussed with the interview partner during the second meeting. During this dialogue new aspects that were not discussed during the first interview were usually introduced and also included in the subjective theory structure. In order to arrive at a visualisation, representational rules were introduced to link contents of the theory structure. As proposed in other structure formation techniques, important concepts or observations were written down on coloured cards that were then linked by symbols representing the logical relation between both cards. Relations were mainly represented by a simple arrow (= leads to/results in) or indicated *examples* for or *aims* of actions (a complete list of used relations is attached below). According to the rules used, the sentence "when she got loud and angry at him, she definitely lost face" was represented as follows:

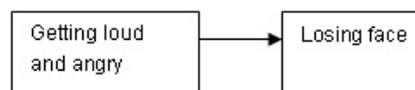


Table 3: Example demonstrating representational rules [26]

Because the aim was to get as full a picture of each participant's understanding of "face" as possible, many examples were included and original wording was used wherever possible. The general aim was to arrive at a point where reduction made the structure as simple as necessary while leaving it as "rich" (in terms of meaning) as possible. [27]

After dialogue-consensus was reached, the resulting visualisation served as a basis for renegotiation during the consecutive interviews. During interviews 3 and 4, the discussion on "face" was introduced by questions concerning any situation that might have struck the interview partner as "face"-related since the last interview. Starting from these comments the subjective theory structure was partly altered and corrected (according to the new standpoint or insights) until again dialogue-consensus was reached. [28]

6.4 Results

All interview partners—even those with no prior experiences in cross-cultural encounters with Chinese—could somehow relate to the topic "face" and held subjective theories on "face" in a Chinese setting. Many interview partners presented elaborate subjective theories just after arrival, though these mostly related to earlier experiences with Chinese in Mainland China or Germany. Subjective theories were structured around the four distinct sub-themes "losing face", "having/gaining face", "hurting someone else's face" and "giving face" that each occupied a quarter of the resulting representation. Definitions of what constitutes "face" in Taiwan were always noted down at the centre of the theory structure. Each sub-theme was embedded in various antecedents-outcome relations as an example will show:

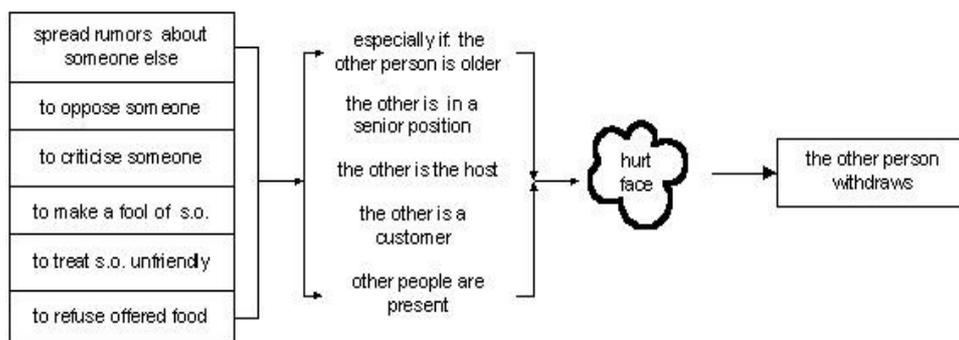


Table 4: Part of a subjective theory structure on "face"[29]

All interview partners made amendments during all interviews, and usually these were preceded by extensive discussion. Changes resulted in a growing complexity of theory structures that consisted in a further elaboration of already present theory parts (by additional examples) as well as in completely new insights that were added to the structure. Taking a closer look at theory structures, there are apparent disparities between the four sub-themes: While all interview partners had an understanding of "losing face" or "hurting face", there was considerable uncertainty about the expressions "giving face" and "having face/gaining face" during the first interview. This does not come as a surprise considering that the latter expressions cannot easily be translated to German and were unknown even to those informants who had some fluency in Chinese. Even during later interviews there was an uneasiness in some interview partners concerning these expressions, and during the final interview some interviewees still had only vague ideas concerning the idea of "enhancing face". [30]

Another trend concerning the nature of changes is a growing negative undertone that can be noticed in many theory structures. This is especially visible because first comments on "face" are neutral or even positive in tone and mostly concern Chinese politeness or fear of losing face. Only during later interviews do "power games" (HWANG, 1987) enter the stage as interview partners realise that giving, not giving or even attacking face serves a purpose in interactions and often aims at individual advantages rather than the other person's well-being. "Face" is then seen as an asset that can be traded against favours, promotions, material or other advantages, or (by way of denying, or even attacking face) as a means for socially isolating opponents. Attitudes towards this instrumental aspect of "face" differ decidedly between interview partners and sometimes result in vehement rejection of "joining the game". These differences can only be understood when interpreting them in the light of each interview partner's world view, living conditions, and so on that were narrated during the first part of each interview. (Actually, in the present context subjective theory structures are quite uninterpretable without both, an extensive narrative by the interview partner and thorough familiarity of the interviewer/researcher with the living situation in Taiwan as "comparative horizons" (STRAUB, 1999).) Acknowledging the instrumental aspect of face (the power aspect) is independent of negative or

positive judgements. This results in four possibilities for subjective theories that shall be listed here with additional quotes from the interviews for illustration:

	Positive attitude	Negative attitude
Power aspect acknowledged	Joining in the face game opens up possibilities	The concern for face leads to psychological war; leads to psychosomatic complaints
Not acknowledged	"Face" relates to respect of the other person	Face relates to a concern for the outer appearance only

Table 5: Four attitudes towards "face" [31]

Most informants became aware of the power aspect of "face" during some time of their stay. Those three that did not were students that were not likely to be involved in power games by others. While this result indicates a relatedness of cognitive structures to personal *experience*, other factors need to be taken into account. Some of the students participating in the study became very adept at identifying and handling power-related incidents even though their general living conditions did not differ much from that of their fellow students. Personal factors, such as social perceptiveness or a certain affinity to the "Taiwanese way" of handling social interactions need therefore be explored. Interestingly, but maybe not unexpected, those informants who were involved with or interested in managing tasks developed a more elaborate understanding of the instrumental or manipulative aspects of "face" than those involved with a background in the humanities (sinology students or German lecturers). [32]

Negative attitudes towards the power aspect of face need to be seen in connection to individual beliefs in open communication and honesty (and the belief that a concern for "face" will lead to impression management and dishonesty). A concern for "face" was further seen as opposed to reaching optimal or even acceptable solutions for work-related problems. Negative attitudes can also be understood in the larger context of a generally problematical transition period (two families that brought kindergarten-aged children reported extreme difficulties during their first months in Taiwan). As might be expected, Chinese language skills correlate with positive attitudes, probably because they enable friendships and generally smoothen social encounters with locals. Interestingly, however, they do not explain differences in complexity of subjective theory structures which leads to the conclusion that Chinese language skills are no guarantee to better understand face-related incidents. [33]

Differences in complexity of theory structures can, however, be explained in relation to certain attitudes or learning strategies. Obviously, informants who continued to include new facets at each interview would produce a more complex theory structure in the end (and these would always be more elaborate than any subjective theory during interview 1). Participants who arrived at early solutions about "how things work in Taiwan" were not likely to reconsider their first

impressions and only moderately altered their subjective theory structure over time. This strategy cannot be linked to different aims for the stay as all interview partners expressed the wish to "broaden their horizon" and to "learn about the local culture" during interview 1. In her longitudinal study on American expatriate families in Geneva, HAOUR-KNIPE (2001) describes a similar phenomenon as "early closure" which turned out to be problematical for the long-term well-being of families in the foreign country. It must not be forgotten, however, that the present study focuses mainly on a single topic and that—for the above mentioned reasons—social rules concerning "face" might provoke special disapproval by some interview partners. Results can therefore not easily be generalised. [34]

7. Conclusion

Though the research program subjective theories is rightly subjected to some fundamental criticism, it still provides a general framework for and fruitful methods for analysing lay theories. As it has been shown, structure formation techniques can also be used in longitudinal studies for graphically representing changes in knowledge structures. In any case, an interpretation of theory structures will sometimes be difficult if no other background information on interview partners is available. A complementation of the use of structure formation techniques with other methods should therefore be considered. [35]

Changes in everyday knowledge probably occur at higher speed and are more profound during transition periods as the one studied. While changes in subjective theories can be regarded as one outcome of intercultural learning, there is no doubt that the latter encompasses much more than what could be represented by structure formation techniques. However, the use of a structure formation technique allows to study changes in contents as well as in structure of everyday knowledge and also allows conclusions regarding individual *learning strategies*. Appropriate learning strategies are an important meta-skill in intercultural encounters and could become an additional topic of intercultural training programs. [36]

Some of my informants expressed the view that discussing their subjective theories was interesting for them because it helped them organise their (culture) knowledge and monitor changes in a phase of life that they perceived as special and exciting. The method provoked focused reflection of a knowledge field that would otherwise have gone unnoticed, and a certain force of logical completion of the structure stimulated activity in order to find out about "missing parts" until the next interview. One informant, for example, reported during the interview that hurting someone else's face makes the other person withdraw, and wondered how to re-establish a good relationship. During the next interview he referred to his earlier problem and described how he found out a solution (giving presents to that person but not discussing the incident openly) and could now fill in a part of his subjective theory that he had perceived as missing. A use of a revised form of structure formation technique for intercultural coaching purposes is therefore feasible and should be further explored. [37]

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Author

Doris WEIDEMANN graduated from the department of psychology at Erlangen University in 1997 and is currently working on her PhD thesis titled "Learning about "face"—intercultural learning processes of Germans in Taiwan". Familiar with Taiwan from a previous stay she returned to the island in 1998 to conduct interviews for her dissertation project. After her return in 2000 she has been a fellow at the *Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities* in Essen, Germany. Her research interests are cultural and cross-cultural psychology, indigenous (Asian) psychology, intercultural communication, and organisational development.

Contact:

Doris Weidemann

Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut/Institute for
Advanced Studies in the Humanities
Goethestr. 31
45128 Essen, Germany

E-mail: Doris.Weidemann@gmx.net

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