INTERPRETATIONS AND ANXIETY DURING INITIAL ENCOUNTERS IN A FORMAL BUSINESS NETWORKING SETTING

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ABSTRACT

Many business professionals explore opportunities to develop relationships with others in their industry during coordinated business networking functions to potentially increase their clientele and strengthen their presence in their respective industry. This study analyzes initial interactions among business professionals during a business networking function utilizing symbolic interactionism and the theory of anxiety/uncertainty management. Both theories have been separately implemented in an abundance of theses over several decades to analyze the nature and implications with interpersonal communication among strangers; however, there is a significant lack of research dedicated to how strangers engage during initial business interactions at networking functions. This study aimed to determine whether strangers during business networking functions interact differently based on professional objectives and time constraints, than general stranger interactions. Empirical data was gathered from 128 participants during the business networking function through participant-observation ethnographic field research and 42 of those participants also participated in an electronic-based survey, from which data was analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The study’s findings indicate that individuals attending business networking functions may experience less anxiety and more assertiveness when interacting with strangers during the function due to the structure and predetermined goal of attendees at the function. Some general behavioral patterns associated with the participants’ gender, culture, and organizational hierarchy also emerged, providing scholars new directions to potentially conduct further specific research on interpersonal interactions with strangers during business networking functions.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Importance of the Study

Many business professionals explore opportunities to develop relationships with others in their industry on an ongoing basis to potentially increase their clientele and strengthen their presence in the industry. The term “business networking” is often used to describe this process of developing direct and indirect relationships with other business professionals with whom they have no prior interactions with, to “create and support a competitive advantage in business” (de Klerk & Kroon, 2008, p. 25). While business professionals are potentially (consciously or subconsciously) expanding and contracting their network of professional relationships with every interpersonal interaction, from purchasing a cup of coffee to riding on the train, designated business networking functions; often hosted by industry associations, are an attractive venue for business professionals to proactively meet many other business-minded professionals. These business networking functions typically have duration from about 30 minutes to several hours per event. The goal for most people attending these functions is to interact with as many potential clients and like-minded professionals as possible and to eventually turn these interactions into productive business relationships.

There has been an abundance of previous scholarly research conducted and theories (such as symbolic interactionism and anxiety/uncertainty management) implemented to analyze the intricacies of interpersonal communication during initial interactions with strangers. However, there is currently a significant lack of research dedicated to how people engage during initial business interactions at networking functions. There is an important need for this research, to analyze the impact of the
business context aspect of the interaction, and the possible affect of time constraints (duration of the interaction during the event) for strangers to develop a business relationship within the networking function environment.

This thesis will utilize the sociological symbolic interactionism and psychological anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM) theories to help measure the techniques and methods individuals use during initial interactions during a business networking function. The results of this thesis will be important for business professionals and the managers sending their constituents to attend the networking functions, to identify the patterns other professionals may utilize to strengthen rapport and build relationships during the initial interactions. Other scholars studying symbolic interactionism and AUM theories will also find great value in the results of this thesis study as it analyzes the theories in a more specific context, which may support or challenge the theories’ previous assumptions.

Statement of the Problem

Effective interpersonal communication is vital to the success of most businesses. For an organization to succeed, grow, and adapt, its employees must sell the organization’s product or vision to potential clients or investors, and to have the opportunity to sell, employees must first develop a relationship with the potential client. All potential clients are initially strangers. Therefore, it is essential for employees to concentrate on how to convert these strangers into potential clients. One of the most effective ways to accomplishing this is by developing a rapport or common bond with the stranger by reducing uncertainties through small talk (Pullin, 2010).
Most organizations emphasize the importance of its employees to develop effective interpersonal communication skills internally and externally. Internally, there is often a significant focus on organizational communication and how employees can communicate effectively and cooperate with others within the organization for the betterment of the functionality of the organization. Externally, organizations focus on sales training and educate employees on how to make telephone sales calls and execute presentations. Many organizations encourage or demand employees to develop potential clients through face-to-face networking as well in order to have a better chance at developing a rapport during the initial interaction than over the phone. But interacting with strangers face-to-face in a business atmosphere is much different than making a cold-call telephone pitch.

There is a lack of importance by many organizations placed on how employees should interact with strangers face-to-face in order to establish a business relationship and develop potential clients. Misinterpreting signs or failing to establish a rapport with the stranger can result in a failed interaction and a missed opportunity to develop a business relationship. This study focuses on identifying (through research, observation and surveys) how strangers interpret different signs and meanings and reduce anxiety to establish rapport with other strangers face-to-face during business networking functions. The results of this study could help employees have an improved chance of success interacting with different strangers at future business networking functions.

**Definition of Terms Used**

**Stranger:** An individual whom another individual has no prior information about nor has ever interacted with.
Anxiety: For the purposes of this study, this term should be defined as an individual’s feeling of uneasiness generally through lack of knowledge or the lack of a connection with another individual(s).

Business Professional: An individual whose occupation is specialized within a corporate industry but is not that of a trade.

Business Networking: When an individual interacts with another individual(s) for the purpose of developing a relationship beneficial to the individual’s business motives.

Business Networking Function: A predetermined event, usually hosted by a business association or media outlet, designed to bring together like-minded business professionals with the intent to interact and build relationships for business endeavors.

Five-Point Likert-Type Scale Survey: Named after psychologist Rensis Likert, it is a tool used to measure various psychological feelings (levels of agreement for this particular study) consisting of five options of agreement for each item.

Item (Likert): A statement on a Likert-type scale survey in which the participant indicates his or her personal level of agreement with through five distinct options.

Organization of Remaining Chapters

This thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter two reviews the literature on the field of study and the two theories being implemented in this study, and will identify the hypotheses to be tested. Chapter three provides the scope of the study and will provide an in-depth explanation of the methodology used to gather the data. Chapter four presents the data gathered in the study and discusses the study’s findings based on the data and in
comparison to the hypotheses and previous research. Chapter five provides a summary of this thesis, discusses limitations of the study, and provides recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review focuses on two theories; symbolic interactionism and anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM). The sociological theory of symbolic interactionism and its role within the communication of business professionals during a business networking function will be the foundational theory analyzed by the ethnographic methodology conducted in this study. AUM theory will supplement symbolic interactionism to provide insight on the psychological components within the interactive communication of strangers during business networking.

Philosophical Assumptions

Business networking is vital to the development and success of companies and business professionals. The globalization of the business world has placed growing pressure on business professionals to increase the amount and value of their relationships with other business professionals, with an emphasis of having a diverse (cultural, gender, hierarchal) network of business relationships to fulfill their professional multi-faceted growth goals. Professionals attend coordinated “business networking events” to proactively maximize their potential of adding like-minded business professionals to their network of business relationships. But according to Pullin (2010), business communication and etiquette have their own set of unwritten rules and contexts, which may make successfully interacting with and developing business relationships with strangers in an atmosphere where those in attendance are attempting to interact with as many people as possible more complex. However, Bardia (2010) notes that business communication is a lot less formal than yesteryear and the key to successful business
relationships is the same with developing a relationship with any stranger, which is to build rapport.

This study assumes that although interpersonal business communication may be less formal than during previous decades, there is an inherent difference between interacting and building a business relationship with a stranger in a business setting than developing a social relationship with a stranger in an unstructured setting, due to the financial and professional advancement motives involved with business networking and lack of personal social interest in the stranger. Building a business relationship with a stranger requires the involved individuals to establish a rapport with the other, but achieving this rapport may take more skill and conscious effort than gaining rapport with a stranger outside of the business context.

Since the inception into their respective fields of sociology and psychology, symbolic interactionism and AUM theories have been implemented, analyzed, and tweaked in numerous studies on interpersonal communication by numerous scholars. And while there is no notable record of these theories being used within studies on building professional relationships specifically during business networking functions, each theory is comprised of multiple components largely concentrated on analyzing perception and anxiety that will guide the researcher during this study in gathering data from the sociological and psychological perspective of the interacting business professionals, which in turn will help the researcher determine whether the study’s assumptions are supported, unsupported, or need further analysis.

**Ethical Assumptions**
This study is important for other scholars and business professionals attending business networking functions because it provides an insight into the thoughts, perceptions, and feelings individuals during these functions experience. Gathering sensitive data on such emotions is extremely valuable, yet also extremely delicate. Beyond the data and results, this study is valuable to other researchers because it acknowledges and obeys ethical guidelines of not jeopardizing or influencing the safety, the anonymity, or the character of the individuals involved, and attempts to avoid disrupting the natural interactive communication among the participants. The key toward ensuring the researcher avoids any unethical actions or measurements is by first having a firm grasp on the two theories that will guide the interacting and data gathering during this study.

**Theoretical Basis**

Due to the complex nature of symbolic interactionism and AUM, the fundamental components of each theory will be explained in this section, to further enhance the understanding and application of each from other scholars within the flow of the literature section.

**Symbolic Interactionism**

Influenced by American philosophers George Herbert Mead and John Dewey, Herbert Blumer first coined the term *symbolic interactionism* in 1937. The theory is comprised of three basic premises:

1. Human beings act toward things based on the meanings they hold for them.
2. The meanings are generated by the “social interaction” one has with another person.
3. The meanings are modified through the interpretation of the person encountering them (Blumer, 1969).

Blumer (1969) included another six “root images” or basic ideas to these premises: social life is a group activity and should be studied that way; a group or society is individuals interacting with each other; the social world is comprised of physical, social, and abstract objects; each individual is a possessor of their self; human nature is to interpret the world and not react to it; and people’s lives and actions are interlinked.

Blumer’s theory essentially contends that things have different values and different meanings to different people depending on how they are interpreted by each person. While symbolic interactionism theory has become one of the foundational sociological theories within interpersonal interaction, anxiety/uncertainty management theory may be viewed as its psychological counterpart in regards to developing relationships from initial interpersonal interactions.

**Anxiety/Uncertainty Management**

In 1985 William B. Gudykunst expanded on Charles R. Berger’s uncertainty reduction theory (URT) in his model of uncertainty reduction in intercultural encounters (Gudykunst, 1985). This model would lead to the formal development of the theory of anxiety/uncertainty management (AUM), which Gudykunst coined in 1993 (Gudykunst, 1993). AUM theory is comprised of 49 total axioms; “statements that imply direct causal links among variables” (Gudykunst, 1993, p. 35), which are designed to examine a wide array of individual psychological responses within interpersonal communication. The 49 axioms are grouped into five primary categories: motivation; knowledge; skills;
uncertainty, anxiety, and effective communication; and cultural variability, with most having multiple sets of sub categories.

The first 15 axioms are linked with the individual desire of motivation. Within motivation, Gudykunst (1993) sub-categorizes the axioms: 1-6, needs; 7-9, self-conceptions; 10-12, social bonds; and 13-14, attraction. Axioms 16-30 are associated with knowledge: 16, multiple perspectives; 17-18, alternative interpretations; 19-24, expectations; 25-29, similarities and differences; and 30, shared networks. Axioms 31-38 are grouped within skills and abilities: 31, create new categories; 32, tolerate ambiguity; 33, empathize; 34, adapt communication; 35-37, gather and use appropriate information; and 38, accommodate behavior. Axiom 39 is not grouped with any other axioms and identifies an individual’s uncertainty, anxiety, and effective communication. Axioms 40-49 analyze cultural variability: 40-47, basic and superficial causes; 48-49, managing uncertainty and anxiety (1993).

AUM theory and its 49 axioms provide a wide spectrum of psychological assumption related to how individuals perceived and attempt to reduce anxiety during initial interactions with a strangers. All 49 axioms do not pertain to every communicative interaction; however, many axioms can often be interlinked within a given interaction. The 49 axioms were not designed by Gudykunst to provide absolute truths but rather to provide signposts for further theoretical development and expand the scope of how researchers analyze an individual’s psychological behaviors when encountering and building a relationship with strangers.

Symbolic interactionism and AUM theory were designed by formative scholars for measuring different perspectives of interpersonal communication. However, both
Interpreting business networking

Theories focus on the values and perceptions that emerge during interpersonal communication. Utilizing the social and psychological theories will provide the researcher with a better understanding of which consistencies and inconsistencies will most likely be prevalent during interpersonal communication with strangers during business networking, to develop and then test hypotheses within the study. But before the researcher can begin the methodology and data gathering process for this study it is paramount to first have a deep understanding of the literature associated with business communication and symbolic interactionism and AUM theories. This will provide further understanding on how the theories relate to business communication, how other scholars have implemented the theories into their own studies, to identify and avoid possible setbacks other scholars encountered, and to recognize further potential and development of each theory as suggested by other scholars.

The Literature

Business Communication and Rapport

The globalization of the business world forced many organizations to change their business strategy and internal culture, which led to organizations realizing the importance of building trust and rapport and the “value of this for companies in sharing knowledge” (Pullin, 2010, p. 456). Pullin (2010) opined that the little communication training employees received at the majority of organizations had been that of how to formulate and deliver formal presentations and not about how to initiate communication with a stranger and develop it into a relationship. In order for an organization to extend its global reach, its employees had to expand their network of business relationships. These relationships are built through establishing rapport and according to Pullin (2010), the
more employees became skilled at building rapport externally with strangers in business settings, the more proficient employees became at establishing rapport internally, which resulted in better teamwork and organizational harmony, which was essential during the corporate culture change.

Business communication is designed to help a business grow and achieve predetermined goals (Shelby, 1993). This motivation for individuals to help their business while at business networking events, affects the psychological intent of each interaction and may strain or facilitate the ability to build rapport. Therefore, “business networking” provides a different element to interacting with strangers than interacting with strangers outside of the business context (1993).

The Nature of Business Networking

Business professionals value networking as they create a “competitive advantage” in the business world (de Klerk & Kroon, 2008). Thomas Clark (2009) notes that in a typical situation in which someone hires another person for a job, either the hirer or the applicant were introduced to each other through two to three networking efforts. Frank Sonnenberg provides a working definition of business networking as, business professionals voluntarily giving up themselves and their information in effort to help others, which in turn will ultimately help themselves (Melé, 2010). There are ethical concerns with this type of networking though due to the possibility of participants within a networking interaction withholding or providing misleading information to another (2010, p. 493) in order to retrieve valuable information from the other and gain that competitive advantage. Nevertheless, businesses often promote the act of networking with other business professionals to their employees to expand their network of
professional contacts, and although, according to William Byham (2010), business networks (a group of people who have shared business contacts) are increasingly maintained through cyberspace, physical interaction at some point, especially during the beginning of the relationship, is integral to maintain the contacts within the network.

To build these business relationships, business professionals often attend business networking functions. These functions are most commonly hosted by an organization or an association and are promoted to either a general or a specific (i.e., accountants, small business owners, industry specific) business audience. Participants attend these networking functions in an attempt to increase their business relationships in volume and value (Melé, 2010). Consequently, to better understand the nature of business networking, it is necessary to understand the sociological and psychological components of interpersonal interaction.

Symbols, Meanings, and Interpretations

Symbolic interactionism focuses on the meanings people associate with different symbols or things and asserts that these meanings are generated through interpretations. Blumer (1969) distinguishes that the root of this process of analyzing symbols and the meanings people have for these symbols begins with the process of social interaction itself, between two or more people. Social interaction should not be limited in definition by the interaction of attitudes and beliefs of people; it is more vital to symbolic interactionism in that it “forms human conduct instead of being merely a means or setting for the expression or release of human conduct” (Blumer, 1969, p. 108). According to Mead, people create meaning in their lives through social interaction with other people (Kronick & Thomas, 2008, p. 117).
Mead’s developmental analysis of social interaction (Blumer, 1969) produced two contrasting spectra; “the conversation of gestures” and “the use of significant symbols”, from which Blumer named the former “non-symbolic interaction” and the latter “symbolic interaction” (Blumer, 1969, p. 108). Meltzer (Musolf, 2008) illustrates this division through an example originally told by Mead in which he said dogs do not interpret meaning from gestures and instead respond directly to stimuli, while humans do respond to intentions and meanings of gestures. Blumer (1969) does not use the comparison of dogs’ ability to interpret gestures versus humans’ but remains within the human species and succinctly identifies non-symbolic interaction as responding to a communication message or symbol with pure reflex or without interpretation, while symbolic interaction develops once the person interprets the symbol (p. 108).

According to Berger, Duval, Luckmann, Mead, Melzer, and Wicklund, R. (1990), Mead believes it is important to understand the use of the term symbol and its representation. Unlike a sign, which marks a uniform representation, a symbol’s meaning is arbitrary. “The symbol stands for something only because people have agreed and learned that it should do so” (Berger et al., 1990, p. 191). Since symbols’ meanings are arbitrary, the focus of the study of symbolic interactionism then is to try to develop or identify patterns of how different people interpret symbols differently. This has led symbolic interactionism to be subjected to criticism.

According to Dennis and Martin (2007), scholars, including Closer and Meltzer, argue that symbolic interactionism does not support nor recognize social structure and according to Musolf, only a new wave of direction and thinking on behalf of interactionists will even allow the potential to “address the macrosociological concerns of
power, inequality, and social structure” (Dennis & Martin, 2007, p. 287). Blumer’s work on symbolic interactionism was not designed to separate the social structures or realism from idealism but rather to emphasize to other scholars that social structures cannot be concrete based on the nature of human beings, which is that “structural sociology is irredeemably subjective, as it inevitably requires analysts to impose their own definitions of reality onto the social world where they are investigating” (Dennis & Martin, 2007, p. 288).

Kronick and Thomas (2008) further defend symbolic interactionism stating that critics who argue that symbolic interactionism opposes the realism of social structure misunderstand the concept of symbolic interactionism, as reality is defined as reality based on interpretations by the people interacting in a situation. One’s realism is not defined merely by their psychological perception; their psychological perception is defined by their social interaction with others from which the symbols are interpreted (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic interactionism is based on a pragmatic view that people are also symbols and cannot be defined by one realist view (1969). For example, a person may be labeled as a father, but to other people, that same person is labeled as a boss, and other people may view the same person as a businessman. Blumer (1969) contends that this interpretation of giving meaning to people or things based on their interaction with that person or thing is the essence of symbolic interactionism.

**Uncertainty and the Birth of AUM**

Symbolic interactionism is important to recognize and study in terms of how people determine meanings of their interactions with other people. This sociological construct is inherently influenced by and a leading actor of the psychological component
involved when two strangers attempt to develop a relationship. Interactions are shaped by how the people involved act to each other. Berger and Calabrese (1975) argue that during initial interactions the primary concern for the involved people is to reduce uncertainty. Berger (1979) provided three general strategies people use during initial interactions with strangers to reduce uncertainty: passive, active, and interactive. As Gudykunst (1985) expanded on Berger’s URT, he realized that “attributional confidence” (opposite of uncertainty) was dependant on various factors, including cultural associations such as Hall’s concept of high- and low-context cultures and Hofstede’s work on uncertainty avoidance. After his initial model on interpersonal uncertainty and applying gender, cultural, and social factors, Gudykunst (1985) determined that uncertainty alone isn’t enough to effectively study initial interactions; he found that uncertainty led to anxiety and thus added anxiety as a primary component to develop his AUM theory.

As the basis for his AUM theory, Gudykunst (1993) used the definition coined by Berger and Calabrese for uncertainty; “our inability to predict and explain our own and others’ behavior” (Gudykunst, 1993, p. 39) and included Stephan and Stephan’s definition of anxiety; “the feeling of being uneasy, tense, worried, or apprehensive about what might happen” (Gudykunst, 1993, p. 39). Stephan and Stephan (1985) associate anxiety with one’s anticipation of negative consequences. This anxiety may impact a person’s interaction within a group, as they may be “worried about feeling incompetent, confused, or not in control” (Stephan & Stephan, 1985, p. 159). Duronto, Nakayama and Nishida (2005) assert that if the anxiety one feels is too high, an individual will lack motivation to proactively interact with others and are much more likely to attempt to avoid interaction altogether.
Managing Uncertainty and Anxiety

The key for individuals to reduce their anxiety and thus have a greater likelihood of a successful interaction is to first try and reduce uncertainty in a given situation. Gudykunst and Nishida (1984) developed four hypotheses to examine uncertainty reduction techniques. The first hypothesis proposed that the degree of attitude similarity between strangers “influences one’s selection of uncertainty reduction strategies, attributional confidence, attraction, and nonverbal expressiveness in initial interactions” (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984, p. 24). The second hypothesis replaced attitude similarity with cultural similarity, the third hypothesis substitutes in the variable culture (where people are from) and the fourth hypothesis includes the level of self-monitoring (1984).

Gudykunst & Nishida’s (1984) findings concluded that attitude similarities influenced attraction to the other person but did not increase the intent to reduce uncertainty. Contrastingly, cultural similarity did influence the intent for one to reduce uncertainty yet did not demonstrate an increase toward attraction. Duronto et al. (2005) suggest there is a direct correlation between cultural similarity and reduced anxiety. Findings for Gudykunst & Nishida’s (1984) third hypothesis, on one’s geographical culture, specifically between people from Japan and the United States, did not produce significant specific results, however according to Gudykunst and Nishida it is apparent that there are differences between people from Japan and the United States in terms of variables associated with uncertainty reduction. Boster and Lee (1991) suggest individuals report less attributional confidence with people from other cultures. Results to the final hypothesis (Gudykunst & Nishida 1984) concluded that self-monitoring had a significant influence on all tested variables; attraction, attributional confidence, and intent.
to display nonverbal expressions. Although there were no universal truths that emerged from Gudykunst and Nishida’s research regarding how people reduce their uncertainty during initial interactions with strangers, multiple new possible studies emerged (1984), which were later researched further by Gudykunst and other scholars.

Throughout all the axioms and hypothesis, one theme emerged consistently through Gudykunst and his fellow researcher’s studies, that when members of one group communicate with other groups they experience higher levels of anxiety (Duronto et al., 2005). Anxiety is essentially the emotional equivalent to uncertainty (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001). Gudykunst (1993) believes anxiety is particularly important to understand though due to what he refers to as minimum and maximum thresholds; (Gudykunst & Nishida, 2001) minimum thresholds indicate the lowest level of anxiety necessary in order to keep the individual interested in communicating with the other, and the maximum threshold is the highest level of anxiety an individual can experience and feel comfortable enough to still be able to communicate with the stranger. An individual’s anxiety should be within the minimum and maximum thresholds when interacting with a stranger to expect to build a successful relationship (2001).

**Intergroup Anxiety**

Gudykunst (1993) proposes that intergroup anxiety is equally as important to understand due to many factors including one’s self-image and consequent self esteem within a group. This self-image can negatively be affected and thus create heightened anxiety if an individual is of a lower status (Stephan & Stephan, 1985) than others in the group or are associated with a non-dominant culture within the group (1985). Conversely, this overt anxiety and self-awareness can lead to an individual having an ethnocentric
view of their associated group. “When we are highly anxious, we, therefore, try to make our own group look good in comparison to other groups” (Gudykunst, 1993, p. 63). Once an individual views his or her group as being superior to others there is increased anxiety when interacting with other groups, which the individual will associate as being inferior (Stephan & Stephan, 1985).

**Mindfulness and Competence**

Gudykunst’s (1993) AUM theory proposes that an individual’s degree of *mindfulness* could determine levels of uncertainty and anxiety individuals have when encountering strangers during initial interactions. Gudykunst identifies Langer’s three “qualities of mindfulness”; creation of new categories, openness to new information, and awareness to more than one perspective (Gudykunst, 1993, pp. 41-42). These categories of mindfulness are essential for an individual to rid any ethnocentricity. Langer (1989) postulates that openness to new information will help lead to expanded or new perspectives, and “once we become mindfully aware of views other than our own, we start to realize that there are as many different views as there are different observers” (Langer, 1984, p. 68).

Being mindful helps manage uncertainty and anxiety (Gudykunst, 1993, p. 43), while Spitzberg’s and Cupach’s (Gudykunst, 1993) three components of competence; *motivation, knowledge, and skills*, are essential to not only the individual’s perceived competence but also to how the individual is perceived by others. “Motivation refers to our desire to communicate appropriately and effectively” (Gudykunst, 1993, p. 44), and according to Turner’s theory of motivation (1993), certain “needs” motivate individuals. Gudykunst’s first axiom with AUM is based on Turner’s theory and proposes that “an
increase in our need for a sense of group inclusion will produce an increase in our anxiety” (Gudykunst, 1993, p. 45). This axiom can be directly related to the study of whether individuals feel the need for group inclusion during business networking.

An individual’s level of knowledge may also be important when studying initial interactions with strangers during a business networking function because it determines one’s awareness of what is necessary to communicate effectively (Gudykunst, 1993). Knowledge incorporates similar properties as mindfulness in that knowledge can lead to an understanding of other perspectives (1993) from one’s own. According to Langer (Gudykunst, 1993), once an individual is able to gain the knowledge they seek, understanding can occur, but only if the person is mindful. Knowledge also leads to shared networks of members within groups; axiom 30 proposes that an increase in shared networks will produce a decrease in anxiety and an increase in the ability to reduce uncertainty (1993).

The third component of competence; *skills*, may have the most impact in communicating effectively during initial interactions with strangers because an individual’s skills to adapt their communication, to tolerate ambiguity, and to gather necessary information about others can be “directly related to managing anxiety and reducing uncertainty” (Gudykunst, 30, p. 59). Skills are also necessary for an individual to determine when not to adapt their communication, tolerate ambiguity, and gather information in an effort to establish uniqueness and character (Gudykunst, 1993).

**Literature Review Summary**

Since the inception of each, scholars have tested and analyzed symbolic interactionism and AUM theory many times over from a wide range of views and
disciplines. The sociological components of symbolic interactionism along with the psychology of AUM theory applies fittingly to be used in conjunction with each other to analyze the culture of business networking (the atmosphere and groups of people) as well as the internalized thoughts and perceptions held by the individual and to what degree he or she feels comfortable or is successful in establishing business relationships.

There is criticism surrounding both theories: symbolic interactionism for its lack of acknowledgement of social structures; AUM theory, although not widely criticized, it lacks concrete results and uniform application. However, both theories’ elasticity and lack of structured rules allows for scholars to utilize them to penetrate new possible social or psychological constructs within communication, especially in relation to specific communication settings such as with business networking functions. Networking and increasing business relationships is an integral component in organizational and personal professional development (Clark, 2009), however, until now there has not been any specific theoretical research dedicated to examining the interpersonal and internal dynamics within initial interactions at business networking functions.

The results of this thesis will be important for business professionals and the managers sending their constituents to attend the networking functions, to identify the patterns other professionals may utilize to strengthen rapport and build relationships during the initial interactions. Other scholars studying symbolic interactionism and AUM theory will also find great value in the results of this thesis study as it analyzes both theories in a more specific context, which may support and challenge the theories’ axioms.

Hypotheses
This research has provided extensive information on the importance of business communication leading to successful business relationships, how individuals may interpret symbols and generate meaning differently from others, and individuals are less likely to establish relationships with strangers the more anxious or uncertain they feel. Due to the importance individuals place on establishing relationships during networking functions and the cultural and organizational hierarchal differences that will be prevalent during most business networking functions, this study will utilize the research and will apply symbolic interactionism and AUM theory to try and identify prevailing patterns in sociological and psychological behavior during business networking functions and will specifically aim to determine the validity of the following three hypotheses.

H1: Individuals are more likely to initiate interaction with other individuals that appear to be from a similar cultural background to avoid misinterpretation of symbols and reduce anxiety of being different.

H2: Individuals who are below or in a lower managerial level within their organization will experience increased anxiety interacting with upper level managers due to lack of business and organizational knowledge.

H3: Individuals are more comfortable interacting with strangers on a one-on-one basis than in groups consisting of two or more people due to increased anxiety and greater likelihood of misinterpreting the group’s symbols.
CHAPTER 3: SCOPE & METHODOLOGY

Scope

Extensive research has been conducted on the social and psychological intricacies involved within interpersonal communication between strangers, specifically in regards to how the communicative interaction between two or more persons commences and develops throughout the relationship. However, there is a lack of research dedicated to how two or more strangers initiate communication and develop relationships within a setting that is designed to promote communicating with strangers. This study focuses on the initial interaction between business professionals during an event that is designed primarily to provide business professionals a platform to network with and build business relationships with other business professionals.

Since participants at these business networking events typically aim to establish as many “legitimate” relationships during the duration of the event, which usually last a couple hours, the scope of this study further focuses on how the strangers attempt to establish a bond within the first three minutes of each interaction and how they end each interaction in an effort to best ensure successful follow-up interactions leading to relationship building.

Methodology

This thesis employs a triangulation (Neuman, 2006) strategy of using two methods; qualitative ethnography and a combination of qualitative and quantitative survey research, to gather and interpret data. According to Guba and Lincoln (1985) triangulation is essential in qualitative research for the researcher to establish credibility of the study. The triangulation of ethnography and survey research is also particularly
applicable for this thesis given the cultural and demographical elements that will be analyzed.

**Ethnography**

Ethnography is the primary research method used in this thesis because it provided the researcher with an opportunity to “study social action in all its complexity” (Manning, 2009, p. 760), including analyzing the various symbols and interpretations associated with symbolic interaction during interpersonal communication. According to Neuman (2009), “moving from what is heard or observed to what is meant is at the center of ethnography” (Neuman, 2009, p. 381). Ethnography is important to this study because it provided the researcher the opportunity to study the culture and community (2009) of the business networking event. Data collected from the community perspective may help the researcher in coding data when analyzing data from the individual and small group perspectives.

To gather the most comprehensive qualitative data from participants in this study, the researcher engaged participants through field research using the “participant-as-observer” role (Gold, 1958). As a result, the participants in the study were aware of the researcher’s intent on gathering data; however, the researcher attempted to minimize personal participation as much as possible in order to best not disturb the natural interaction among the strangers. While the participant-as-observer role may have influenced the nature of how the strangers interacted with each other upon learning of the researcher’s intent, this role was the best option for the researcher in this study because it came close to studying the participants in an uninfluenced natural state and also suffices ethical concerns regarding the participants’ involvement (1958).
Sampling

The participants of this research were chosen by the researcher through theoretical sampling (Neuman, 2009). Since the researcher is interested in gathering interpersonal communication data from business professionals interacting with strangers during an event that promotes business networking, the research was conducted during the San Diego’s Business Mixer & Expo. This event was a general business four-hour networking event with approximately 250 attendees. The researcher participated as participant-as-observer in a total of 51 group (two, three, or four persons excluding the researcher) interactions, totaling 128 participants that were chosen at random. The researcher limited observing group sizes to four persons to avoid having one or two large group interactions without having the opportunity to observe other groups of similar size for comparing data.

Gathering data

The researcher primarily stood in the left-center of the main networking room, which also had exhibitor stations and a small food buffet station, where the majority of the event attendees were interacting. The study is interested in how strangers initiate interactions, so the researcher would wait until two or more persons would greet each other and would quickly note the initial greeting and the involved individuals on a three-inch by five-inch note pad. This initial notation would serve to identify the different individuals involved, by jotting down brief descriptions of each person’s appearance and what type of greeting (verbal or non-verbal) each demonstrated. At this point, the researcher would engage the interaction by walking to the vicinity where the individuals were and waited for the proper opportunity to introduce himself. If the individuals were
engaged in communicating and not acknowledging the researcher’s presence, the researcher would take mental notes of the interaction to write down later. Within about 15 to 30 seconds (so that the researcher’s presence did not appear awkward), the researcher would introduce himself to the individuals by extending his hand for a formal handshake, stating his name and briefly stating that his purpose for attending the event was to observe business networking communication in its natural element for the generation of data to be implemented in a collegiate thesis study. The researcher would first ask the individuals whether they had met the other individual(s) in the group. If they responded “Yes”, then the researcher would politely move on to another group. Otherwise, if the answer was no, indicating the interaction was amongst strangers, the researcher would then ask the individuals if they would approve of him observing them and that if they provided him permission he would not disclose any names or physical descriptions of the individuals within the thesis, providing them with anonymity. After explaining the purpose for engaging the interaction and obtaining verbal permission to continue observing the interaction, the interaction would continue with little further interaction from the researcher.

During the interaction, the researcher would categorize each participant by the way they greeted the other and the degree to which each was verbally and non-verbally (hand gestures and physical signposts) interacting. The researcher assigned a value of 1 through 5 separately for verbal and non-verbal communication, for each participant. One was designated as the lowest value and 5 was the highest value. After the first four interactions, the researcher also noticed that the top three discussed topics were: business, the networking event itself, and social and political issues. The researcher assigned a
value of 1, 2, or 3 to the level each topic was discussed, or how the researcher perceived the value of each topic during the interaction. A value of 1 was assigned to the topic of least significance and a value of 3 represented the topic of greatest significance. The researcher assigned these values for the previous four interactions and every interaction thereafter.

Due to the duration (four hours) of the San Diego’s Business Mixer & Networking event and that the researcher was hoping to observe and gather data on a minimum of 50 interactions, the researcher limited each interaction he would observe and participate in to three minutes. The researcher kept a small digital stop watch (muted) inside the small notepad and when the duration reached three minutes, he would wait for the proper opportunity to engage the participants. The researcher would thank the participants for their time and ask them if they would mind providing the researcher with the one culture they most identify with and their position or management level within their organization. The researcher would also ask the field research participants whether they would be willing to participate in a web-based survey that would be about 20 questions long and emailed to them within two weeks. If the participants agreed to participate in the survey as well, the researcher would take their business card and make a notation on the notepad. Upon exiting each interaction, the researcher would also take approximately one minute to write down the topic and verbal/non-verbal values and any other pertinent information from the interaction. The researcher would then look for another interaction to begin and start the process again.

Survey Research
To expand on the data retrieved from the ethnographic field research, surveys were administered to the field research participants whom indicated they would like to participate in the survey. The surveys were web-based because they incurred no costs for the researcher, were fast to create and faster to code compared to paper surveys, and considering the participants are business professionals and provided the researcher with their email address, electronic surveys were the likely preferred method of answering surveys for the participants. The surveys were delivered via email to participants eight days following the San Diego’s Business Mixer & Networking Event. The survey (Appendix A) followed a five-point Likert-type scale format (Betts & Hartley, 2010) in order for the researcher to provide participants the opportunity to represent their level of agreement with each statement, which would help the researcher identify patterns and themes for each statement and the subjects discussed in the survey as a whole. Although much of the survey responses will be coded quantitatively, the researcher also constructed the questions so that they were “partially open” (Neuman, 2009, p. 288), which allowed participants to provide additional thoughts or details for each question within a text box. These open responses could provide the researcher will valuable qualitative data to apply to and analyze the thesis’ hypotheses.

Validity

Measurement Validity

Validity is used by researchers to measure whether an indicator is true or “valid for a particular purpose and definition” (Neuman, 2009, p. 192). Hammersley, as noted by Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008), believes that validity, along with relevance, are the most important components of an ethnographic study. Specific validity is important for
the researcher to define in this thesis because something that may be valid for one group of people but may not be valid for the other. To help determine validity of the survey research, the data from the survey was generated through the online survey tool used to create and distribute the surveys; Kwik Surveys. Kwik Surveys provided the researcher with comprehensive data which could be viewed and analyzed either per item (total participant data for each item) or per participant (every item response from the selected participant).

For the purposes of this thesis to test the qualitative and quantitative data, the researcher will use a type of measurement validity; “how well an empirical indicator and the conceptual definition of the construct that the indicator is supposed to measure ‘fit’ together” (Neuman, 2009, p. 1922). Within the construct of measurement validity, the researcher will focus on achieving construct validity, which is typically applied during research with multiple indicators (2009) such as this one. Construct validity is comprised of two specific measures: convergent validity and discriminant validity.

**Convergent validity**

The researcher will concentrate on achieving convergent validity, as it “applies when multiple indicators converge or are associated with one another” (Neuman, 2009, p. 194). Given the multiple components of culture, gender, and professional titles being analyzed during the ethnography and surveys, the researcher will be focused on identifying constructs that converge with other constructs and the resulting data in order to test the study’s hypotheses and identify and develop new areas for further study.

**Discriminant Validity**
The researcher will also be aware of the possible emergence of discriminant validity; “the indicators of one construct hang together or converge, but also are negatively associated with opposing constructs” (Neuman, 2009, p. 194). Identifying constructs that do not fit to form valid statements will provide the researcher further insight on how the rest of the data should be coded and could provide suggestions for further research.

**Dependability**

Validity is often associated with and dependant on the researcher’s ability to demonstrate reliability of the study’s resulting data. According to Neuman (2009), reliability is necessary for data to be valid, although it is not necessarily the other way around. However, Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008) state that while reliability is unobjectionably valued in quantitative research (which will serve purposeful while coding the survey data in this thesis), qualitative researchers are divided on whether reliability is a valuable measurement when coding qualitative observational data since no two observations are identical, nor are they expected to be identical. According to Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008), to establish trustworthiness to the reader of this thesis, it is necessary for the researcher to strive to establish dependability; logical documentation of the research and data, transferability; the similarity or likeliness of the current data compared to previous research, credibility; the efficiency of the data compared to the researcher’s findings, and conformability; “linking the findings and interpretations to the data in ways that can be easily understood by others” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, p. 294). “The idea of dependability… emphasizes the need for the researcher to account for the ever-changing context within which research occurs” (Trochim, 2006, Qualitative
Validity). The researcher will take into account different variables from different group interactions when coding the ethnographic field research data to determine the level of dependability of the data.

**Ethical Considerations**

As discussed in the field research section of this chapter, the researcher has an ethical responsibility while gathering and analyzing data and must also convey this ethical responsibility to the research participants. The researcher must provide anonymity, informed consent and avoid bringing forth any harm to participants as a result of the research (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). This is especially true when distributing surveys. According to principles 6.06 through 6.20 of the APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, the researcher must follow all ethical standards within the APA manual while conducting research with “humans and animals” and failure to do so “can be grounds for rejecting a manuscript for publication or for retraction of a published article” (American Psychological Association, 2001, p. 355).
CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY

Introduction

This study analyzed group social and individual psychological perceptions and relationship-building methods among strangers interacting in a business networking setting. This study had particular interest in identifying culture, gender, and organizational hierarchy patterns that emerged from the data collected. This chapter provides the qualitative and quantitative data results from the ethnographic and field research methods utilized in this study. The implications of the data in this chapter will be further discussed in the study’s findings next chapter.

Data Analysis

As mentioned in chapter 3, both methods (ethnography and surveys) the researcher used to gather data were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively.

Field Research

The researcher gathered qualitative ethnographic field research data during the San Diego’s Business Mixer & Expo event from 51 total group interactions, totaling 128 participants—31 of the groups consisted of 2 individuals; 14 of the groups included 3 individuals; and 6 of the groups consisted of 4 individuals—the researcher as participant-as-observer is excluded from these totals.

The researcher was prepared to retrieve vast data from this research and as a result decided to separate the data based on group size and then categorize the results by the constructs: gender, cultural affiliation, and business title (organizational hierarchy). The researcher recorded several qualitative observations for each interaction, some of the most notable of which will be provided in the results section. Additionally, to maintain
structure and have a better opportunity to code and analyze the empirical data once it was retrieved, the researcher decided to assign quantitative values to each participant based on greeting style, topics discussed, and level of verbal and non-verbal participation.

Greetings are represented in the below data tables as whether the participant(s) initiated the interaction with a demonstrative non-verbal greeting such as a handshake or nod. The researcher assigned a value of 1, no non-verbal greeting; 2, participated in the non-verbal greeting; or 3, initiated the non-verbal greeting for each participant. Interactions in which there was a non-verbal greeting do not necessarily have a value of 3 assigned to one of the participants if the researcher could not easily decipher who initiated the greeting. In such cases, a value of 2 was given to multiple participants.

The topics categories were dissected by three types of commonly discussed topics; business, the actual networking event (such as “There’s a lot of people here today, huh?”), and political or special issues. Each group was qualitatively assigned a value of 1, 2, or 3 for each topic type to represent the level of frequency or importance that each topic was discussed during the interaction. A value of 1 indicates the group discussed that particular topic the least, a value of 3 indicated the topic was discussed the most or was the most common issue used to develop a common bond with the stranger during the interaction.

The third component of data analysis in the below tables is verbal and non-verbal interaction. Each participant was qualitatively assigned a whole number value of 1 through 5 to indicate their level of verbal and non-verbal communication within the interaction. A value of 1 indicates the participant demonstrated very little verbal or non-
verbal communication, while a value of 5 indicates the highest level of verbal or non-verbal communication.

The different values for each component from each participant were transferred from the researcher’s notepad, which was used to capture the data during the observation stage, to an Excel spreadsheet for organization. Depending on which component and construct was being analyzed during the results process, the values on the Excel spreadsheet were then entered into a standard deviation calculator to compute the mean and standard deviation of the sets of values.

This resulted in clusters of data that were applied within the results section to help support qualitative observations of the different behavior patterns of the participants based on the three constructs of gender, cultural affiliation, and organizational hierarchy. Since the items on the Likert-type scale survey were created from the initial quantitative and qualitative clusters of data from the field research, these clusters of data served as the primary data when determining the study’s findings.

**Survey Research**

The secondary qualitative data was generated from the partially-open questions included in the Likert-type scale survey. A total of 7 out of the 20 items on the survey provided participants the opportunity to include additional data through open responses. Out of the 294 (7 partially-open items multiplied by the 42 total survey participants) potential partially-open item responses, 58 were completed. All 58 responses were available for the researcher to examine online within the Kwik Survey tool. Since the 58 total responses cover several different items on survey and thus is a small amount for conducting statistical analyses, the researcher chose to analyze the results qualitatively
and did not categorize the responses based on the same quantitative structure as the field research. The data from the open responses were later applied to determine validity based on the primary data of the field research.

The bulk of the survey research was analyzed quantitatively. Each of the 42 survey participants marked a multiple choice value for all 20 multiple choice items on the survey, even though every item response was voluntary and the participant could skip any item and still complete the survey, resulting in a total of 840 item responses. Each of the 840 responses were collected and stored by the Kwik Survey electronic survey tool. The online, electronic storage of the data provided the researcher with organized data to determine results by examining total participant results of agreement (Agree, Disagree, etc.) per item on the survey or by analyzing all item responses per participant. The latter was useful for the researcher to determine any patterns or deviations based on the item responses per participant gender or culture.

The quantitative data from the survey items completed the triangulation process and was analyzed as supportive or unsupportive in relation to the primary data of the ethnographic field research for this study’s focus and overall results, opposed to being analyzed as independent results. Empirical data generated solely from the surveys are presented later in this chapter though as independent results could propel discussions for further research studies.

**Results of the study**

**Field Research**

The researcher studied a total of 31 group interactions consisting of two people, 14 groups involving three people, and six groups including four people—the researcher is
not included in these totals. The group interactions were analyzed by the three primary constructs the study is concerned with: gender, culture, and organizational hierarchy. Each construct’s results are segmented by either group size or group affiliation. Some qualitative observations beyond the quantitative data will be cited for most segments below followed by the comprehensive quantitative data.

The below tables for each construct further provide separate quantitative data based on three categories: greetings, discussion topics, and verbal/non-verbal communication rating. The three categories were chosen by the researcher to be represented as data values because they represent different levels of interaction and communication with strangers and provide the researcher the opportunity to better determine levels of anxiety or comfort among the strangers. Data within all three categories was coded based on the mean (average) score value and the standard deviation (SD) of each. The standard deviation represents the variation between values from all participants compared to the mean. A lower SD value indicates that total participants were closer to the mean value opposed to a higher SD value which indicates a wider range of participant values to the mean. Any SD value greater than 0.75 for greetings and topics (both are based off scale of 1-3) and greater than 1.00 for verbal/non-verbal communication (based off scale 1-5) indicates participant data across wide spectra and may suggest that the mean value is less representative of the participant sample as a whole. This information will help the researcher when determining overarching results for each of the study’s three constructs.

**Gender**
Females represented 75 out of the 124 (60 percent) total field research participants.

**Groups of two**

There were a total of 35 (56 percent) female and 27 (44 percent) male participants in groups of two people. The researcher qualitatively observed that females appeared to be more active and energized than males. Females were more verbal than males and during interactions involving one female and one male, the female tended to lead the conversations. The nature of interactions involving two females or one female and one male had the feel of a sales pitch more than a general interaction, in that after a couple exchanges of pleasantries females were asking more direct questions about the other’s business and providing positive points about their personal business more than males. Males interacted more casually in groups involving two males—told more stories and laughed more than groups involving two females. Males had a much higher tendency than females to glance around the room during their interactions with their same gender.

Table 1.1 demonstrates the total results of groups of two people based on gender coded quantitatively. The data within table 1.1 suggests that females are more likely than males to engage in an interaction with a non-verbal greeting gesture. Out of the 13 interactions involving one male and one female participant, a total of eight interactions were clearly initiated through a non-verbal greeting; six (75 percent) of which were initiated by females.

The data also indicates that females are more likely to discuss business topics and least likely to discuss social issues with other female strangers, while interactions between two males suggests a greater likelihood at discussing social issues and least
likely to discuss the actual networking event. And the interactions between one male and
one female resulted in discussing the networking event being most likely and business
topics being least likely discussed.

Regarding the level of verbal and non-verbal communication, males and females
demonstrated opposite trends, with males scoring a slightly higher non-verbal rating but
with females scoring a significantly higher verbal rating. Interactions involving male and
female resulted in a slightly above average verbal rating and slightly below non-verbal
rating.

Table 1.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender (Groups)</th>
<th>Greeting: non-verbal (SD)</th>
<th>Business (SD)</th>
<th>Networking event (SD)</th>
<th>Social/political issues (SD)</th>
<th>Verbal rating avg. (SD)</th>
<th>Non-verbal rating avg. (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male/Female (13)</td>
<td>2.15 (0.69)</td>
<td>1.62 (0.74)</td>
<td>2.31 (0.72)</td>
<td>2.08 (0.83)</td>
<td>3.15 (1.03)</td>
<td>2.85 (1.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Males (7)</td>
<td>1.71 (0.76)</td>
<td>1.86 (0.64)</td>
<td>1.71 (0.88)</td>
<td>2.43 (0.77)</td>
<td>2.57 (0.73)</td>
<td>3.29 (0.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Females (11)</td>
<td>2.22 (0.83)</td>
<td>2.45 (0.66)</td>
<td>2.09 (0.67)</td>
<td>1.45 (0.80)</td>
<td>3.91 (0.79)</td>
<td>3.09 (0.67)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Groups of three

There were a total of 25 (60 percent) females and 17 (40 percent) males that
participated in interactions involving three people. The most notable observation from the
majority of the interactions was that the discussions were more focused on providing
information about each individual’s business rather than discussing other issues that may
have provided a greater likelihood of establishing rapport. During one of the interactions
involving three females, it was apparent that two of the females had a mutual interest in
the other’s business endeavors within the insurance industry, while the third individual
was employed in the food catering industry. Sensing the lack of connection with the two others, the third female exited the group interaction within the first two minutes.

Table 1.2 provides quantitative results based on gender within groups involving three people. The sample sizes for each group dynamic are smaller than groups of two people but data indicates that females within groups of three people are more likely than males to engage in a non-verbal greeting.

Regarding discussion topics, interactions involving three males and interactions involving three females provided identical results, with the highest value associated with business topics and the lowest value associated with social issues. Groups involving two females and one male also generated values in that same order, while the one group involving two males and one female resulted in social issues and the networking event as the respective highest and lowest values.

Interactions with three males and the interaction with two males and one female resulted in higher non-verbal over verbal ratings, while interactions with three females and the interactions with three females and one male resulted in higher verbal over non-verbal ratings.

Table 1.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender (Groups)</th>
<th>Greeting: non-verbal (SD)</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Verbal rating avg. (SD)</th>
<th>Non-verbal rating avg. (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 Males (4)</td>
<td>1.67 (0.65)</td>
<td>2.50 (0.50)</td>
<td>2.00 (0.71)</td>
<td>1.50 (0.87)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Females (6)</td>
<td>2.22 (0.73)</td>
<td>2.50 (0.50)</td>
<td>2.00 (0.82)</td>
<td>1.50 (0.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Females/1 Male (3)</td>
<td>2.67 (0.50)</td>
<td>2.66 (0.47)</td>
<td>2.33 (0.47)</td>
<td>1.00 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Groups of four

There were a total of 14 females (70 percent) and 6 males (30 percent) that were observed in groups of four individuals. This sample size is the smallest of the three group sizes and the data holds little value since only one of the group constructs (four females) was analyzed multiple times. Nonetheless, two of the three group interactions involving all four females were less focused on discussing business like the interactions involving all females in groups of three, and discussions were more directed toward surface issues such as the weather and the networking event in general, such as “It’s been a pretty good turnout this year” and “Is this your first time coming to this event?”

Quantitative data in Table 1.3 indicates that the group of four males utilized a non-verbal gesture with a greater likelihood than the groups of four females. The groups of four females received the highest value of discussing the networking event and the lowest value of discussing business, while the group of four male participants received the highest topic value for business and lowest for the networking event.

The groups of four females received the highest verbal rating of 3.66 but also one of the lowest non-verbal ratings 2.50. The interaction of the four males resulted in the lowest verbal rating of 2.50 but also the second highest non-verbal rating of 2.85.

Table 1.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender (Groups)</th>
<th>Greeting: non-verbal (SD)</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Verbal rating avg. (SD)</th>
<th>Non-verbal rating avg. (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 Males/ 1 Female (1)</td>
<td>1.33 (0.58)</td>
<td>2.00 (0.00)</td>
<td>1.00 (0.00)</td>
<td>3.00 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The data in the table represents the average and standard deviation for each category.*
According to overall results based on gender, females engage strangers more formally with a standard handshake or noticeable acknowledging facial expression than males. This was evident during most group interactions, especially where there were multiple instances of same group size to compare. Females also appeared to initiate these formal greetings during interactions with males more than males did with females, by extending the hand out for a handshake or making the first nod or facial expression.

Females also appeared to discuss business-related issues and steer conversations toward business topics more than males, however, data suggests that business topics were least discussed during groups of four females. Males discussed social and political issues the most during one-on-one interactions with other males but the value of topic trends involving males interacting with females and in larger group sizes are inconclusive between business and political issues, although the networking event/surface issues were discussed the least.

Females scored the highest verbal ratings and dictated the level of verbal interaction in most groups with males. Males cored significantly lower verbal ratings than females but significantly higher non-verbal ratings than females. Males scored a higher non-verbal over verbal rating in most interactions and utilized non-verbal expressions to
convey simple messages such as agreement/disagreement as well as to emphasize verbal messages more than females. Overall, group size did not impact verbal/non-verbal interaction.

**Culture**

There were six primary cultures that participants claimed to be most affiliated with; African American, Asian, American, Latin American, European, and Middle Eastern. The individual’s culture was recorded when the researcher asked each participant to define the culture they most associated with prior to the researcher departing from the given interaction. Americans represented 56 (45 percent) of the total participants during the networking function and while interactions involving Americans varied greatly, yet fairly consistently, the participants with the most uniformity in behavioral patterns during interactions were Middle Eastern. Although Middle Eastern participants represented a very small (five percent) sample of the participants, their actions should not be ignored in this study. Every Middle Eastern participant was very verbal during interactions, with a rating over three; however, they were by far the most expressive participants overall in terms of non-verbal communication. During an interaction involving one American and two Middle Eastern males (the only interaction involving two Middle Eastern participants) there was a simple formal greeting in the form of a head nod, yet throughout the interaction it appeared to the researcher that the non-verbal communication was the leading indicator for each back-and-forth message, especially in regards to the Middle Eastern participants. It appeared that the Middle Eastern participants were watching and reacting to non-verbal cues more than listening to verbiage. This was not observed during any other interactions.
According to quantitatively coded data in Table 2, Latin American participants demonstrated the lowest percentage of non-verbal greeting gestures, with African and African American participants using non-verbal greeting gestures less than the other three cultures. The culture interacting with a non-verbal greeting gesture at the highest percentage was European, followed by Middle Eastern and Asian.

Participants associated with Asian culture received the highest average value for discussing business topics during interactions and was the only culture to have business as their topic with the highest value. Latin American participants received the highest value for discussing the networking event. African American and American cultures also discussed the networking event more than the other topics. Middle Eastern participants generated the highest value for discussing social issues and European participants’ average value for discussing social issues was their highest among the three topics and was only .10 less than Middle Eastern participants and with a slightly less standard deviation.

The highest verbal interaction rating was registered by American participants, with Middle Eastern and Latin American participants also generating above-average ratings. Middle Eastern participants also generated the highest non-verbal rating, followed by Latin American, American, and European as the other cultures with above-average non-verbal ratings. African American and Asian participants each had higher verbal than non-verbal ratings, but neither generated a rating score above 3.00 for either category.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Greeting:</th>
<th>Topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Verbal | Non-verbal |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cultural results were further analyzed by the select few of their interactions with only participants of their same culture. The sample sizes are very limited for most participant cultures, so the data will not be presented in a table or chart—American/American groups were observed 14 times, Latin American/Latin American groups were observed five times, and no other culture was observed interacting with its similar culture more than twice. However, some notable quantitative data did emerge from the observations, and although the sample sizes are too limited to warrant significant value, the data could be used for support during the discussion stage later in this chapter.

The non-verbal greeting value for Americans interacting with other Americans (nine groups of two, four groups of three and one group of four) was 1.76 with a standard deviation of 0.65. This was comparable to the greeting value for all American participants, at 1.84 with a standard deviation of 0.63. Regarding discussion topics,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(participants)</th>
<th>non-verbal (SD)</th>
<th>Business (SD)</th>
<th>Networking event (SD)</th>
<th>Social/political issues (SD)</th>
<th>rating avg. (SD)</th>
<th>rating avg. (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American (7)</td>
<td>1.86 (0.69)</td>
<td>2.00 (0.76)</td>
<td>2.29 (0.69)</td>
<td>1.71 (0.88)</td>
<td>2.86 (0.78)</td>
<td>2.43 (0.90)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian (22)</td>
<td>2.00 (0.53)</td>
<td>2.55 (0.58)</td>
<td>2.05 (0.97)</td>
<td>1.41 (0.65)</td>
<td>2.72 (0.97)</td>
<td>2.55 (1.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American (56)</td>
<td>1.84 (0.63)</td>
<td>2.02 (0.80)</td>
<td>2.04 (0.83)</td>
<td>1.95 (0.84)</td>
<td>3.48 (1.13)</td>
<td>3.09 (1.25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin American (18)</td>
<td>1.78 (0.65)</td>
<td>2.17 (0.62)</td>
<td>2.44 (0.70)</td>
<td>1.39 (0.78)</td>
<td>3.06 (1.16)</td>
<td>3.28 (1.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European (15)</td>
<td>2.20 (0.77)</td>
<td>2.07 (1.39)</td>
<td>2.07 (0.70)</td>
<td>2.40 (0.83)</td>
<td>2.33 (1.05)</td>
<td>3.07 (1.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Eastern (6)</td>
<td>2.17 (0.75)</td>
<td>2.00 (0.89)</td>
<td>1.50 (0.55)</td>
<td>2.50 (0.84)</td>
<td>3.33 (1.03)</td>
<td>3.83 (0.98)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
American participants discussed each of the three topics at relatively equal frequency, and Asian participants (two groups of two) received the highest value for business topics, which supports Table 2 for total Asian participants. Latin American participants (three groups of two and two groups of three) discussed the networking event most frequently, and European, Middle Eastern, and African American participants discussed social issues amongst each other most frequently. Asians were the only culture to score each a verbal and non-verbal rating of less than 3.00, while all other cultures, excluding American participants in groups of three, scored higher verbal and non-verbal ratings when communicating in groups with strangers from their similar culture compared to interacting with outside cultures.

**Organizational hierarchy**

For the purposes of this study, organizational hierarchy was separated by four categories; non-management (NM), entry-level management (ELM), mid-level management (MLM), and executive (includes small business owners and entrepreneurs) management (EXM)—the researcher asked each participant which category they most associated with prior to the researcher exiting the interaction. The quantitative data below in Table 3.1 is very useful for this section, particularly because there was a fairly comparable amount of representation for each category.

Lower-level employees (NM and ELM) engaged strangers with a non-verbal greeting at a lower percentage than upper management (MLM and EXM) employees. There was not a significant variance in topics discussed by organizational hierarchy, but business topics were discussed more frequently by upper management and social issues were discussed more by lower-level employees. The variance between employee
hierarchy for verbal and non-verbal ratings was also slight; however, only upper management scored above a 3.00 verbal rating, while all employee levels generated higher non-verbal ratings than their verbal ratings.

**Table 3.1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business Level (participants)</th>
<th>Greeting: non-verbal (SD)</th>
<th>Business (SD)</th>
<th>Networking event (SD)</th>
<th>Social/political issues (SD)</th>
<th>Verbal rating avg. (SD)</th>
<th>Non-verbal rating avg. (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NM (18)</td>
<td>1.78 (0.73)</td>
<td>1.83 (0.79)</td>
<td>2.00 (0.84)</td>
<td>2.17 (0.86)</td>
<td>2.83 (0.86)</td>
<td>3.11 (0.96)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELM (28)</td>
<td>1.86 (0.71)</td>
<td>1.86 (0.76)</td>
<td>2.14 (0.76)</td>
<td>2.00 (0.72)</td>
<td>2.86 (0.89)</td>
<td>3.07 (1.02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLM (44)</td>
<td>2.05 (0.71)</td>
<td>2.05 (0.89)</td>
<td>2.07 (0.85)</td>
<td>1.91 (0.74)</td>
<td>3.02 (0.95)</td>
<td>3.09 (0.94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXM (38)</td>
<td>1.97 (0.68)</td>
<td>2.16 (0.86)</td>
<td>1.92 (0.82)</td>
<td>1.92 (0.78)</td>
<td>3.08 (0.67)</td>
<td>3.24 (0.88)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NM employees’ interactions with management level participants are coded in Table 3.2 below. While the majority of NM employees appeared to be focused on selling services, such as food catering or mobile car detailing, they demonstrated a low level of formal greetings and discussed their personal business motives during interactions very infrequently, usually waiting for the other individual(s) to inquire about their services first.

With the exception of the one interaction including one NM and two MLM, the below quantitative data indicates that NM employees increase their likelihood of engaging in non-verbal greeting gestures in one-on-one interactions with strangers holding higher management positions. Business was the most discussed topic during the interaction involving 2 NM/1EM, networking topics was the highest value among interactions of 1 NM/1 EM and 1 NM/2 MLM, and social issues was the topic with the
highest value among 1 NM/1 ELM and 1 NM/1 MLM interactions. Overall verbal and non-verbal ratings indicate that NM employees have higher ratings for each when communicating one-on-one with ELM and MLM employees with the exception of the verbal rating for the two interactions of 2 NM/1 EM.

Table 3.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business Level (Groups)</th>
<th>Greeting: non-verbal (SD)</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Verbal rating avg. (SD)</th>
<th>Non-verbal rating avg. (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Business Networking event (SD)</td>
<td>Social/political issues (SD)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 NM/1 ELM (3)</td>
<td>1.50 (0.84)</td>
<td>1.33 (0.58)</td>
<td>2.00 (1.00)</td>
<td>2.67 (0.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 NM/1 MLM (6)</td>
<td>1.83 (0.72)</td>
<td>2.00 (0.89)</td>
<td>1.67 (0.82)</td>
<td>2.33 (0.82)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 NM/1 EM (4)</td>
<td>2.38 (0.52)</td>
<td>1.50 (1.00)</td>
<td>2.75 (0.50)</td>
<td>1.75 (0.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 NM/2 MLM (1)</td>
<td>1.00 (0.00)</td>
<td>1.00 (0.00)</td>
<td>3.00 (0.00)</td>
<td>2.00 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 NM/1 EM (2)</td>
<td>1.67 (0.82)</td>
<td>2.50 (0.71)</td>
<td>1.50 (0.71)</td>
<td>2.00 (1.41)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.3 provides quantitative data on ELM interactions with other organizational hierarchy levels. There were a total of eight one-on-one interactions between ELM and EXM. Notable qualitative observations beyond the below data emerged during these interactions, as the researcher noticed that ELM appeared to proactively seek out and approach EXM during half of the interactions. EXMs may have been more recognizable to ELMs due to a generally more mature appearance. During one such interaction, the researcher noticed an ELM standing approximately 10 feet behind an EXM, who was interacting with a couple other individuals (non-participants), for about 30 seconds until the ELM had the appropriate opportunity to engage with the EXM. However, once the interaction began, the ELM did not lead the majority of the
Interpreting business networking

conversations and did not appear comfortable during the interaction. ELMs were observed to be more uneasy than EXMs during their one-on-one interactions.

Quantitative data in Table 3.3 indicates that non-verbal greetings appear to increase as ELM interacts with higher levels of management. The variance of business topics discussed does not provide any concrete patterns. Data demonstrates that the highest verbal and non-verbal ratings occur during one-on-one interactions with NM and when 2 ELMs are involved in interactions with upper management.

Table 3.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Business Level (Groups)</th>
<th>Greeting: non-verbal (SD)</th>
<th>Topics</th>
<th>Verbal rating avg. (SD)</th>
<th>Non-verbal rating avg. (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 ELM/1 NM (3)</td>
<td>1.50 (0.84)</td>
<td>1.33 (0.58)</td>
<td>2.00 (1.00)</td>
<td>2.67 (0.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 ELM/1 MLM (5)</td>
<td>1.70 (0.67)</td>
<td>2.00 (1.00)</td>
<td>2.20 (0.84)</td>
<td>1.80 (0.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 ELM/1 EM (8)</td>
<td>2.06 (0.77)</td>
<td>2.00 (0.93)</td>
<td>1.88 (0.83)</td>
<td>2.13 (0.83)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 ELM/2 MLM (3)</td>
<td>1.44 (0.73)</td>
<td>1.67 (0.58)</td>
<td>2.33 (1.15)</td>
<td>2.00 (1.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 ELM/2 EM (2)</td>
<td>1.50 (0.55)</td>
<td>1.50 (0.71)</td>
<td>2.50 (0.71)</td>
<td>2.00 (1.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 ELM/MLM/2 EM (1)</td>
<td>2.25 (0.50)</td>
<td>1.00 (0.00)</td>
<td>3.00 (0.00)</td>
<td>2.00 (0.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 ELM/1 EM (2)</td>
<td>2.17 (0.41)</td>
<td>2.25 (0.50)</td>
<td>2.25 (0.96)</td>
<td>1.50 (1.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 ELM/MLM/1 EM (1)</td>
<td>2.50 (0.58)</td>
<td>2.00 (0.00)</td>
<td>2.00 (1.41)</td>
<td>2.00 (1.41)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Survey Research

Partially-open responses
A total of 17 different participants provided partially-open responses on the Likert-type scale survey. Nine of the participants were female. Fifteen participants marked their culture as Caucasian and two marked Asian on item 20. The complete list of survey items are found on Appendix A.

Items 2 and 4 were associated with the participants’ feeling of anxiety when first interacting with strangers during the San Diego’s Business Mixer & Expo. Items 10 and 13 identify the participants’ reaction to establishing a common bond with the stranger. And items 17 and 18 provide additional information about the participants’ experience of interactions during the networking event and in general. A summary of partially-open responses are listed on Table 4. Responses column is representative of participant(s) actual responses.

There were a couple of notable responses that occurred multiple times. In response to item 2: “If applicable, please explain some ways you try to reduce anxiety when interacting with a stranger”, two male Caucasians and one female Caucasian replied that one of the ways they use to reduce anxiety when interacting with a stranger at business networking events is by using humor and anecdotes. In response to item 17: “Please provide a few details about your most successful interaction during the San Diego's Business Mixer & Expo. (How was the greeting?/ Was there a bond?/ How did the conversation end?)”, one male Caucasian, two female Caucasians, and one female Asian provided similar responses of that interactions during networking events have a higher likelihood of success if you do not prejudge the stranger you are interacting with.

**Table 4**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Male/Female</th>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>#</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Introduce humor and anecdotes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Greet the stranger first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Greet the stranger first</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td></td>
<td>Adapt to whatever is most comfortable for the stranger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td></td>
<td>Adapt to whatever is most comfortable for the stranger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ask questions to identify similar experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Talk about the weather, current events, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ask questions to identify similar experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td></td>
<td>Ask questions to identify similar experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gut feeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Appearance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gut feeling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Appearance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td></td>
<td>Appearance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td></td>
<td>Introduced self, realized we were in similar businesses and exchanged business cards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Found common interests and agreed to meet again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td></td>
<td>Introduced self, realized we were in similar businesses and exchanged business cards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Found common interests and agreed to meet again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Most interactions can be successful if you are open and do not prejudge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td></td>
<td>Most successful interaction was with someone I didn’t expect to bond with and was when I was leaving walking to my car</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most interactions can be successful if you are open and do not prejudge 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>18</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
<th>Not enough legitimate business contacts this year 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Successful networking takes practice and the event is great practice because everyone is there for the same reason 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Networking is easier toward the end of the event 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>18</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Caucasian</th>
<th>Not enough legitimate business contacts this year 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Successful networking takes practice and the event is great practice because everyone is there for the same reason 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Networking is easier toward the end of the event 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 18 | 2 | Female | Asian | Networking is easier toward the end of the event 2 |

### Survey items

Out of the complete surveys, 42 participants (22 were female) and three cultures were represented; Caucasian (29 total participants/15 male), Asian (8 total participants/4 male), and Latin American (5 total participants/4 female). There were a total of 16 multiple choice items that participants chose a level of agreement with, ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree for each item. Each participant response was assigned a quantitative value based on level of agreement: Strongly Agree (1), Agree (2), Neutral (3), Disagree (4), and Strongly Disagree (5). Appendix A-1 provides the mean value results for each item in Appendix A.

The items were created to represent different types of categories the researcher wanted to learn more about based on the ethnographic field research during the San
Diego’s Business Mixer & Expo. The below bar charts (BC) provide mean results on level of agreement for each item cluster based on gender and culture. It is important to reemphasize that the Latin American male representation in the below charts is one participant.

**BC-1: Anxiety**

Item 1 - I experience anxiety when I first interact with a stranger during a business networking function.

Item 2 - I consciously search for a way to reduce my anxiety when interacting with a stranger.

**BC-2: Value of non-verbal greeting gestures**

Item 3 - I believe a stranger’s character can be determined through their non-verbal greeting gesture (i.e., handshakes, smile, nod, bow, etc.).

Item 4 - I feel uncomfortable when someone uses a gesture (handshakes, smile, nod, bow, etc.) to greet me that is different from the one I use more often.

**BC-3: Interactions based on gender**
Item 5- I always greet people the same regardless of their gender.

Item 6- I am more comfortable interacting with strangers from the same gender as mine.

BC-4: Interactions based on cultural background

Item 7- I always greet people the same regardless of their cultural background.

Item 8- I am more comfortable interacting with strangers from a similar cultural background as mine.

BC-5: Comfort based on group size

Item 9- I am more comfortable interacting with strangers on a one-on-one basis rather than in groups of three or more people.
BC-6: Establishing “common ground”

Item 10- I can establish a "common ground" and/or bond with a stranger usually within the first three minutes of interaction.

Item 11- I find it more difficult to establish a "common ground" and/or bond with someone from a different cultural background than with mine.

BC-7: Levels of networking success

Item 12- More than half of the conversations I had with strangers during the San Diego's Business Mixer & Expo were specifically related to my business endeavors.

Item 13- I purposely attempt to interact with strangers who I believe I will have the best chance at bonding with first.

Item 14- I know whether I will develop a business relationship (multiple interactions) by the end of my first interaction with a stranger.

Item 15- I will interact (back and forth communication) with at least 10% of the strangers I met at the San Diego's Business Mixer & Expo at least one more time within the next six months.
Item 16- I felt comfortable exiting the interactions I was a part of during San Diego’s Business Mixer & Expo.

Discussion

Several implications regarding initial interactions among business professionals during business networking functions can be drawn from the study’s results. The ethnographic research provided a wide spectrum of data but the researcher attempted to determine patterns and abnormalities during the participant-as-observer role, some of which were not discussed in the above results section but will be added to this discussion section. The results of the survey research are quantitative, with the exception of the partially-open responses, which were systematically coded and interpreted by the researcher by grouping similar responses to determine any relationships or patterns based on gender or culture. Further discussion of the above results will first be separated by the three constructs of gender, culture, and organizational hierarchy to follow the structure of the results, and further discussion of the study’s findings will be provided at the end of this section.

Gender
Qualitative results indicate that females are more likely than males to engage in and initiate a formal greeting, discuss business topics, and are more vocal during interactions with strangers. These results are consistent when comparing groups involving all females to all males, and groups involving both female and male. Qualitative analysis suggests that females were slightly more focused on establishing relationships based on business goals, while males concentrated slightly more on establishing an intellectual bond outside of business first, through discussing social and political issues before engaging in business discussions later in the interaction. Males were also less verbal but displayed more demonstrative non-verbal communication than females. These observations liken to symbolic interactionism in that each gender is more skilled or more comfortable in interpreting meanings and messages of strangers (Daley & Soloski, 1977) from the same gender utilizing a similar format. Qualitative analysis of gender responses to the partially-open responses do not support claims that females are more concerned than males with discussing business topics to establish rapport, as both genders indicated that discussing topics they believe they and the stranger know about is the best method to establish a bond and reduce anxiety—an urgency to discuss business during these initial interactions was not indicated.

In general; however, females appear more comfortable in straight-forward business conversations and interpreting meanings verbally, while males appear more comfortable establishing an intellectual bond with a stranger before discussing business and rely on non-verbal messages to convey level of importance and meaning with the other. Musolf (2008) could argue that these findings may be more supportive of Manis’ and Meltzer’s identification of “chance” rather than dependability since the data
generated many slight variations and was gathered at one place during one timeframe and
thus increasing the chance for similar results; however, it is the researcher’s view that the
above findings fall within symbolic interactionism in that the recognizable distinction
between male and female immediately established a connection and put the individual
“en rapport with their actions… and arouses instinctive reactions appropriate to these
social activities” (Berger et al., 1990, p. 193).

Quantitative results from the surveys provided several findings based on gender in
relation to business networking; however, based on the relatively small sample size, only
those findings supportive or unsupportive of observed data will be discussed. The survey
results from item 3 is unsupportive of the qualitative data in that it indicates that males
value the importance of physical greetings slightly more than females. Item 6 indicates
that females do not agree as much as males that interacting with strangers of the same
gender during business networking is more comfortable to them. Item 9 indicates that
males are more comfortable than females communicating with strangers one-on-one than
in larger groups. And item 14 provides slightly unsupportive results from the qualitative
results in that males agree more than females that they know by the end of an interaction
whether the interaction will develop into a successful business relationship.

Overall qualitative gender results suggest that business professionals appear to
increase their common bond and appear more comfortable when interacting with
strangers of the same gender during business networking, as they display a slightly
increased level of their overall individually displayed attributes, such as level of verbal or
non-verbal communication levels. However, quantitative data does not support these
assumptions. Although AUM provided background for the researcher, given the broad
reach of this study, the researcher was more concerned with identifying different business communication behaviors within gender during a typical business networking function for the immediate benefit of managers and business professionals attending future business networking functions and less concerned with dissecting the different variables that lead to these behaviors. Therefore, qualitative results cannot be directly compared to Gudykunst’s AUM theory and specifically axiom 42; “members of high masculine cultures experience greater uncertainty and anxiety when communicating with members of the opposite sex (in comparison to communicating with members of the same sex) than members of low masculine cultures” (Gudykunst, 1993, p. 67) since this study did not analyze the level (high or low) of masculinity with the culture each participant is associated with. The general principle within axiom 42, however, which assumes that individuals interacting with other individuals of their same sex experience less anxiety than interacting with individuals of the opposite sex, was mostly supportive during the field research portion of the study.

**Culture**

Qualitative results suggest that individuals do not experience a decrease of comfort and ease of establishing a bond when interacting with strangers from like cultures. Results indicated that European and Middle Eastern participants overwhelmingly increased their level of verbal and non-verbal communication when communicating with strangers affiliated with their same culture. And a total of five out of the six cultures participating in this study produced results indicating increased verbal and non-verbal communication when interacting with like cultures. Due to the lack of knowledge participants had of the other participants prior to their interactions outside of
their mutual goal to develop new business relationships, cultural identity largely served as a “shared network” during these interactions and thus qualitative data largely but not uniformly supports axiom 30 of AUM theory; “an increase in our shared networks will produce a decrease in our anxiety and an increase in our ability to reduce our predictive and explanatory uncertainty” (Gudykunst, 1993, p. 59).

Regarding this study’s specific concerns, qualitative data lends some support to H1 but lacks sufficient evidence on a wider spectrum, however, to suggest that individuals inherently experience a greater ease of communication and relationship-building with strangers from similar cultures over interacting with strangers from different cultures. Furthermore, quantitative results from item 11 on the survey indicate an overwhelming lack of agreement from the three participating cultures in the survey that it is more difficult to establish a common bond with a stranger from a different culture. Therefore, H1: *Individuals are more likely to initiate interaction with other individuals that appear to be from a similar cultural background to avoid misinterpretation of symbols and reduce anxiety of being different*, lacks sufficient support from the study’s results.

**Organizational Hierarchy**

Overall qualitative results indicate that NM participants display a lower rating of verbal and non-verbal communication when interacting one-on-one with EXM opposed to when interacting with ELM and MLM. The researcher noticed that NM employees demonstrated more confidence in their verbal tone and conveyed more meaning with their non-verbal gestures when interacting with ELM and MLM. NM communication was more responsive than proactive when interacting with EXM. NM
employees discussed more social and business issues with ELM and MLM, while NM discussed more about the networking event itself and appeared apprehensive discussing business issues with EXM. These results suggest that NM participants were more proactive and appeared more comfortable and confident when interacting with lower and mid-level management than with executive management. Qualitative results also found that ELM participants generated lower verbal and non-verbal ratings when interacting with upper management (MLM and EXM). There were no definitive patterns regarding ELM interactions and discussion topics however. Data suggests light support for H2: Individuals who are below or in a lower managerial level within their organization will experience increased anxiety interacting with upper level managers due to lack of business and organizational knowledge; however, it is not concrete evidence as it cannot be assumed that increased verbal or non-verbal communication and discussion of certain topics is related to levels of anxiety.

**Group Interaction**

The study’s third hypothesis was developed from AUM theory’s axiom 5; “an increase in our sense of security will produce a decrease in our anxiety” (Gudykunst, 1993, p. 46). The researcher proposed that individuals would experience greater anxiety interacting in groups with multiple strangers than with just one since multiple strangers would most likely contribute to less knowledge and less security. However, total data suggests that the third hypothesis; H3: Individuals are more comfortable interacting with strangers on a one-on-one basis than in groups consisting of two or more people due to increased anxiety and greater likelihood of misinterpreting the group’s symbols, is unsupportive. The majority of qualitative data indicates that group interactions of more
than two participants did not demonstrate greater anxiety or less verbal/non-verbal levels of communication. Perhaps participants experienced a similar level of anxiety regardless of group size due to the structure of the business networking function. Although they were strangers, all attendees had a similar goal while at the event—to develop new business relationships. However, secondary quantitative data is slightly supportive of the hypothesis, with a mean average of 2.79 (indicating a slight level of agreement) in response to item 9: *I am more comfortable interacting with strangers on a one-on-one basis rather than in groups of three or more people.*
CHAPTER 5: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

Limitations of the Study

This study aimed to analyze the different ways in which business professionals interact with strangers during initial interactions at business networking events. While pertinent data was gathered, this study encountered three substantial limitations. The first substantial limitation of this study is that all participants were from one networking event representative of business professionals within one city. The event in this study was chosen because it was geared toward non-industry-specific business professionals and the scope of this study was focused on all business professionals; however, the majority of business networking events are industry-specific and combined with the relatively short time period permitted to conduct the study, the researcher was unable to gather data from multiple networking events. The inability to compare data from multiple events may limit the potential validity of the results.

The second limitation of this study was relative to the first, which was the lack of duration allowed to observe each group interaction. The researcher was limited to observe each group interaction for approximately three minutes in order to maximize the potential number of groups and participants during the four hour event. This time constraint limited gathering data that could have been significant in regards to establishing rapport and prohibited the researcher from observing how the interactions ended. Gathering qualitative data on how strangers end the interaction could have provided significant value to the study, especially in terms of analyzing the likelihood of follow-up interactions.
The third limitation of this study is a result of the disproportionate quantity of cultures represented in the study. One of the three primary constructs this study was focused on was culture and whether an individual’s cultural identity provided patterns in interacting with strangers from other or similar cultures. Forty-five percent of all participants in the study associated most with American culture and Middle Eastern and African American participants accounted for only five percent and six percent respectively of the participant sample. While there were six cultures represented in the study, two of them (American and Asian) accounted for 63 percent of all field research participants and 100 percent of the survey participants. The researcher did not have the resources, as a result of the random sample of attendees within the theoretical sample of attendees during the networking event, to gather data from a more evenly distributed mix of cultures; however, the lack of data gathered from four out of the six cultures represented limited the affect of the cultural comparison results.

Further Study Recommendations

This study’s results demonstrate the opportunity for several areas of further study. Each of the three constructs; gender, culture, and organizational hierarchy can be conducted as separate studies in relation to initial interactions during business networking functions. Focusing solely on one of the constructs is likely to provide a higher quantity of data for the researcher to then code, analyze and discuss, because the researcher will concentrate all data gathering efforts on that one construct. The researcher could also choose one of the multitudes of axioms within AUM theory, instead of the theory as a whole, to identify the validity of that axiom to the given study, which could also lead to a new specific assumption.
Ending Interactions

Additionally, further studies can focus more specifically on the ending of initial interactions with strangers during business networking functions. This current study can provide information on the greetings and beginning stages of the interaction for the researcher to use as comparison, but studying how the participants end initial interactions could provide pivotal data for the researcher in helping to identify exit strategies that would most likely lead to follow-up interactions leading to business relationships. This would require significant additional research in terms of time spent gathering data because the researcher would be unable to place a time limit on observing each interaction. Subsequently, this would most likely require the researcher to observe participants during multiple networking functions in order to gather data from a significant number of participants. It would be imperative for the researcher to either concentrate on gathering data during all non-industry-specific business networking functions or during functions dedicated to a specific industry, to ensure data can be appropriately compared. The researcher would also be best served to follow up with each participant after three months of initial observation to gather data on whether business relationships were established.

Conclusions

This study focused on identifying how individuals perceive meanings and cope with or reduce anxiety during initial interactions with other individuals at a business networking event. A non-industry-specific business networking event was chosen as the venue to observe individuals and gather data. Participants during the business networking function were selected based on when an interaction was initiated within the vicinity of
the researcher, providing an unbiased representation of the attendees at the function. The researcher gathered data from participants through field research assuming the participant-as-observer role during the business networking function and through electronic surveys administered to willing participants from the field research.

Although many of the findings of this study are inconclusive, they provide a few patterns that emerged based on gender, culture, and organizational hierarchy and were dissected by greeting mannerisms, discussion topics, and levels of verbal and non-verbal communication. These patterns are potentially useful for business managers to be conscious of in any industry sending constituents or themselves to a similar type of business networking function with the goal of developing new business relationships. The findings may also be applied by other scholars to various future research on business communication with strangers.

The most important result that emerged from this thesis; however, is that individuals generally acted slightly different during a structured business networking function than previous research studies and AUM theory would have indicated. Participants appeared to behave a certain way more due to the element of the business networking function than due to any specific gender, cultural or hierarchal affiliations.

The format of the business function provided attendees the opportunity to be more aggressive in their conversations in regards to qualifying whether the stranger would be a potential new business contact. If the initial interaction did not produce value, the individual would simply go on to the next stranger without much awkwardness since the function was designed for business people to try and develop new relationships but knowing that not all attendees would be good for their business. The element of the
structured business networking function provided these basic guidelines of what was expected, which provided attendees a greater opportunity to interpret messages and symbols from other attendees more efficiently and with more confidence.

Business networking functions systematically enhance an individual’s ability to be more assertive during interactions with strangers. This does not suggest that all individuals are assertive and have low anxiety during business networking functions though. There is no uniform rule or theory to identify how any given individual will feel or communicate during an interaction with a stranger during or outside of a business networking function. Every individual communicates a little differently from the other regardless of gender, culture, or organizational hierarchy. However, identifying those constructs could provide some assistance in understanding the way an individual greets you, speaks to you, and how the individual may interpret your messages.
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APPENDIX A (text version from online)

Please complete this 20 item survey as it is designed to better understand the various communication practices used by business professionals when interacting with strangers during networking settings.

Your responses are voluntary and confidential and your name will not be associated with the findings. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to and are free to stop taking the survey at any time.

Please read each question and rate your level of agreement with each statement by selecting the value that most closely represents your opinion.

You are also encouraged to provide additional comments to expand on or clarify responses when prompted at the end of certain questions. The survey should take between 10 and 12 minutes to complete.

Thank You for your participation.

This survey is being administered by Justin Hunter in order to gather information for his thesis project in relation to his Master's degree at Gonzaga University.

1. I experience anxiety when I first interact with a stranger during a business networking function.

☐ Strongly Agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neutral

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

2. I consciously search for a way to reduce my anxiety when interacting with a stranger.
If applicable, please explain some ways you try to reduce anxiety when interacting with a stranger.

3. I believe a stranger’s character can be determined through their non-verbal greeting gesture (i.e., handshakes, smile, nod, bow, etc.).

4. I feel uncomfortable when someone uses a gesture (handshakes, smile, nod, bow, etc.) to greet me that is different from the one I use more often.
5. I always greet people the same regardless of their gender.

- [ ] Strongly Agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Neutral
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly Disagree

6. I am more comfortable interacting with strangers from the same gender as mine.

- [ ] Strongly Agree
- [ ] Agree
- [ ] Neutral
- [ ] Disagree
- [ ] Strongly Disagree

7. I always greet people the same regardless of their cultural background.
8. I am more comfortable interacting with strangers from a similar cultural background as mine.

c. Strongly Agree
c. Agree
c. Neutral
c. Disagree
c. Strongly Disagree

9. I am more comfortable interacting with strangers on a one-on-one basis rather than in groups of three or more people.

c. Strongly Agree
c. Agree
c. Neutral
c. Disagree
c. Strongly Disagree
10. I can establish a "common ground" and/or bond with a stranger usually within the first three minutes of interaction.

☐ Strongly Agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neutral

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

If applicable, please explain some ways you establish a common ground

11. I find it more difficult to establish a "common ground" and/or bond with someone from a different cultural background than with mine.

☐ Strongly Agree

☐ Agree

☐ Neutral

☐ Disagree

☐ Strongly Disagree

12. More than half of the conversations I had with strangers during the San Diego’s Business Mixer & Expo were specifically related to my business endeavors.

☐ Strongly Agree
13. I purposely attempt to interact with strangers who I believe I will have the best chance at bonding with first.

☐ Strongly Agree
☐ Agree
☐ Neutral
☐ Disagree
☐ Strongly Disagree

If applicable, please explain how you determine which stranger you are more likely to establish a bond with prior to your first interaction.

14. I know whether I will develop a business relationship (multiple interactions) by the end of my first interaction with a stranger.

☐ Strongly Agree
☐ Agree
15. I will interact (back and forth communication) with at least 10% of the strangers I met at the San Diego's Business Mixer & Expo at least one more time within the next six months.

☐ Strongly Agree
☐ Agree
☐ Neutral
☐ Disagree
☐ Strongly Disagree

16. I felt comfortable exiting the interactions I was a part of during San Diego's Business Mixer & Expo.

☐ Strongly Agree
☐ Agree
☐ Neutral
☐ Disagree
☐ Strongly Disagree

17. Please provide a few details about your most successful interaction during the San Diego's Business Mixer & Expo. (How was the greeting?/ Was there a bond?/
18. Please provide any additional thoughts or comments you have regarding your interactions with strangers during the San Diego’s Business Mixer & Expo.

19. What is your gender?

☐ Male

☐ Female

☐ Transgender

20. How would you best describe your cultural background? (You may chose more than one)

☐ African American

☐ American Indian

☐ Asian

☐ Caucasian

☐ Latin American

☐ Pacific Islander

Other (Please explain)
This concludes the survey.
Thank you for your time. Your input is greatly appreciated.
APPENDIX A-1

Quantitative results from Appendix A based off total participants

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