

PROFILE INTERVIEW January 2002:

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Dr. Stella Ting-Toomey's Profile Interview by Susan Rinderle

SENIOR INTERCULTURALIST PROFILE: Dr. Stella Ting-Toomey

Stella Ting-Toomey is probably the only person who seems surprised that she is considered one of the top figures in the intercultural communication field, dismissing deserved compliments with a simple, "I'm just doing my job." An author and scholar who has been in the field for almost twenty years, Ting-Toomey is perhaps best known for her work on "mindfulness" and "facework" in cross-cultural communication, in particular her face-negotiation theory which deals with ways people negotiate their communication identities during interactions with each other. The theory and its central issues such as face-saving, face-losing, and face-honoring "resonate with diverse ethnic groups and cultural groups on a global level," she says. And while she continues to test and fine-tune the theory, she believes it's a perspective others can build on and extend.

Ting-Toomey herself is no stranger to facework or face negotiation. Born in Hong Kong, she came to the U.S. in the summer of 1972, to attend the University of Iowa. Her decision was based entirely on chance – she was accepted at three U.S. universities and as she had no idea how the three differed, she wrote each name on a piece of paper and had her then nine-year-old brother pick a name at random. Thus began a journey that took her from an all-white campus town in Iowa to Washington, New Jersey, Japan, Arizona, and, finally, Southern California. She is now one of the most prominent theorists in the field, a prolific author, professor at California State University at Fullerton (CSUF), partner in a twenty-five year intercultural marriage and mother to a biracial child.

Unlike many other interculturalists who were born in the U.S. and first faced with their "otherness" while abroad, Ting-Toomey's interest in the field sparked as an international student in the U.S. She studied mass communication as an undergraduate, which she enjoyed for being very intense, creative, fun and "hands-on," but found "deeper questions to be answered"

the more involved she got, and so decided to continue at the University of Iowa and try to address some of those questions during a Master's degree in communication theory. Later, as she reviewed the literature for her Ph.D. dissertation on conflict negotiation in marital relationships at the University of Washington, she found existing research to be "biased towards the individualistic Western way of managing intimate conflict." She could not relate to or identify with certain concepts then accepted as givens within that framework – for instance, the idea that confrontation or self-disclosure in conflict is desirable and healthy, and avoiding conflict is considered a negative conflict behavior. She turned her dissatisfaction with the existing body of research into a drive to develop new theories.

This drive and passion has led Ting-Toomey to author or co-edit thirteen books, most recently Managing Intercultural Conflict Effectively (co-authored with John Oetzel) and the frequently cited Communicating Across Cultures, and over sixty journal articles and book chapters. She was Assistant Professor at Rutgers University, tenured Associate Professor at Arizona State University, and has been an Associate Professor (1989) and Full Professor (1992) at CSUF since 1989. She has won several top-ranked awards for professional papers in international conferences and held many editorial positions with major journals in the field. She was awarded the Outstanding Achievement Award in Intercultural Studies by Ohio University in 1990. She was also awarded the International Communication Association's Intercultural Division Outstanding Leadership Award in 1995. She was the Co-Editor of the International & Intercultural Communication Annual from 1989 -1992. She served as the Book Review Editor for the International Journal of Intercultural Relations from 1991 -1998. She has been a frequent keynote speaker in major national and international conferences and a much sought-after intercultural trainer and consultant across the U.S. and in Europe and Asia. She has been elected or appointed to several positions in various professional associations, particularly International Communication Association and the National Communication Association. She is also a certified conflict mediator in the Fullerton community.

"Crossing boundaries" is what Ting-Toomey enjoys most about the field and her work. Part of boundary-crossing is taking advantage of the multidisciplinary nature of the field: "Whether teaching, researching, doing professional or volunteer services, I enjoy crossing boundaries and not limiting reading to one particular domain. The field is wide open." Ting-Toomey applies this to her research, which draws on and synthesizes perspectives from many fields such as anthropology, sociology, linguistics, ethnic studies, international management, international

education, cross-cultural psychology and ESL. She feels the current challenge for the field is to move beyond comparing different cultural patterns - and on to theoretical and practical understanding of the positive transformative energy or spirit *within and between* people of different cultural groups. She would like to move from focusing on cross-cultural comparative issues into integrative identity-negotiation competence issues. She queries, "How does one work out a sense of multiple self and use the dynamic tensions to bridge differences?"

Ting-Toomey says cultural differences are human differences and we all have multiple senses of self – the next step is to use theory to assist people to be comfortable with identity dialectics (e.g., individualistic and collectivistic tendencies) within themselves and with others. She raises the questions of: "How can we arrive at a stage where we are comfortable with our multifaceted self and also be able to channel this multifaceted self in a constructive way to relate to others?" "Instead of seeing identity dialectics as opposites, how can we learn to see the multiple facets of self as complementary?" She believes such questions and their examination can lead to improvements in a myriad of human interactions from interpersonal relationships to organizational behavior. She notes that many multiracial and biracial individuals are already adept at integrative identity negotiation due to their keen sense of mosaic selves. So beyond looking at how people understand and feel comfortable with their own and others' core identities, she would also like to examine how situational factors cue the different enactment of cultural and ethnic identities and how these are linked to different communication styles.

Ting-Toomey's advice to newcomers is concise: "Be prepared to work very hard and work with a sense of passion." She herself has kept 15-hour days for much of her career. She encourages students and interculturalists to be "ready to think and read across boundaries but have a clear focus on a particular intercultural theme with more depth." She believes that one must be broad and well-grounded in the field's research and theories to be an effective academic or interculturalist, yet focused on a particular theme to accomplish anything substantial. She encourages creativity, imagination and self discipline, but emphasizes caring about one's work, doing it for the love of it, and especially having fun. "Learn to play a little bit more," she suggests. "Learn to loosen up boundaries...Go a little bit farther; have a sense of daring. Take some risks. Once you're grounded, you can afford to be light-hearted."

Ting-Toomey lives in Fullerton close enough to walk to and from CSUF every day. She resides with her Irish American husband, Charles Toomey, and their son Adrian, who is a sixteen-year-old junior in high school. She counts herself fortunate to be living in a vibrant multicultural world, and to be able to teach, to mentor, and to write about intercultural issues simultaneously.

*** Note: For a more in-depth narrative by Ting-Toomey on her life and personal and professional journey, see: Ting-Toomey, Stella. (1997). *An Intercultural journey: The four seasons*. In M.H. Bond (Ed.), Working at the Interface of Cultures (pp. 202-215). New York: Routledge Publications.**

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The Profile author, Susan Rinderle, is a member of SIETAR, an intercultural communication consultant and trainer specializing in Mexico and Latin America, and a mediator. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area and can be reached at SR_Consulting@yahoo.com. Please contact her if you would like copies of earlier Senior Interculturalist Profiles.

Addendum: Ms. Susana Rinderle is now a graduate student at the Dept. of Communication & Journalism, University of New Mexico – 5/2003.
