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Relational challenges in an intercultural volunteer program in Jordan: Views from Chinese participants

Zhaohui Tian and Troy McConachy
Department of Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, UK

Abstract
Research on international volunteer programs has paid little attention to participants' own situated understandings of intercultural communication experiences in a short-term international volunteer context. The paper reports on a qualitative investigation into the experiences of Chinese participants in a short-term international volunteering program in an elementary school in Jordan which involved co-teaching the English language with partners from the U.S. It focuses on how participants interpreted the challenges of managing communication and building rapport with the children and their volunteer partners, with particular attention to the attribution of difficulties to perceived cultural differences. Findings show that participants struggled to interpret the significance of behaviour outside their usual cultural frames of reference and that frequent reliance on dichotomous framings of cultural difference created barriers to rapport.

Keywords: Volunteer, Jordan, Teaching, Intercultural, Relational
Word count = 9461 words including abstract, keywords and references

Introduction
Recently, many new types of intercultural programs and projects have emerged and gained popularity, including international collaborative work opportunities, service learning, internships and international volunteer programs (Annette, 2002; Devereux, 2008; Ettorre, 2000; Jackson & Adarlo, 2016; Jones et al., 2011; Lough, 2011; Lupi & Batey, 2009; Pence & Macgillivray, 2008; Rehberg, 2005; Sherraden et al., 2008; Tonkin & Quiroga, 2004; Willard-Holt, 2001). Such programs are particularly popular amongst internationally minded young people who aim to gain experience living and working abroad, whilst making a contribution to the improvement of social conditions. In the last decade, research on intercultural communication in volunteer contexts has begun to
accumulate, frequently exploring issues such as volunteer management (Vantilborgh et al., 2011), volunteer tourism (Everingham, 2015), volunteering and intercultural competence (Lough, 2011; Yashima, 2010), and the impact of volunteering on the host country (Sherraden et al., 2008). The study of volunteer work “has assumed its rightful place at the core of the social sciences” (Wilson, 2012, p. 176).

Much of the research on international volunteering programs from an intercultural angle has tended to be located within the positivist paradigm, reflecting the strong interest amongst researchers and other stakeholders in measuring intercultural development, understanding the variables that influence development and showing that participation in such programs is in fact conducive to development (e.g., Lough, 2011; Lough et al., 2014). This focus on evidencing intercultural development is understandable given the significant investment of resources required to sustain international volunteering programs and that their efficacy depends to a large extent on whether participants can effectively collaborate with each other towards program goals. However, we would argue that the negotiation of intercultural relations within non-profit contexts deserves more attention as a phenomenon in its own right, separate from the agenda of identifying gains in intercultural competence development. Specifically, we argue for the need to examine the role that participants’ situated understandings of behaviours and experiences of intercultural communication in the local context play in the construction of positive intercultural relations within volunteer programs. This is in line with recent perspectives on intercultural relations which emphasize the importance of understanding how individuals’ attribution of meaning to actions and events interface with evaluative judgments of self and other that impact on rapport (e.g., Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2016, 2021; Spencer-Oatey & Xing, 2019).

In this paper, we report on an investigation into the experiences of Chinese participants in a rather unique international volunteering program in an elementary school in Jordan which involved co-teaching the English language with university students from the U.S. We examine participants’ perceptions of the challenges to building rapport with local schoolchildren and their teaching partners, and how they made sense of these challenges.

The context for the study
The context for this study is an international volunteer program in Jordan which places volunteers (typically university students) from China and the U.S. in local primary schools to teach English in pairs. Although the program is ostensibly centered on English language teaching, the primary aim of the program as articulated by the organizer is to make a difference in students’ lives through English language education and relationship building. The program emphasizes interaction between volunteers and local children inside and outside the classroom, which means there are opportunities for relating to each other both in relatively structured and unstructured environments. In terms of classroom learning, volunteers are required to collaboratively plan and implement daily English language classes over a three-week period, aided by a local interpreter who interprets between English and Jordanian Arabic for students. Whilst such a pairing of Chinese and U.S. participants might lend itself to a power imbalance due to the potential for the latter to be seen as “native speakers”, it was an expectation of the program that Chinese and U.S. participants would cooperate as equals. Mechanisms such as equal division of teaching hours and allocation of different materials to each member of the teaching pair are in place to ensure equality. The general idea is that each volunteer would have a chance to take the lead with teaching a segment of a lesson while the other member of the pair mixed with students and facilitated learning. Thus, a significant amount of collaboration is required between volunteers from the two nationality groups, both in terms of planning and implementation of teaching.

It is important to point out that the children who participated in this program were not only local Jordanian children but also Syrian refugee children, who had been in exile for various periods of time. Some of these children were not yet enrolled in formal schooling, and therefore this free summer program was a rare opportunity to experience learning in a classroom environment and social interactions with a mix of students and international instructors. It turned out, however, that students’ participation in the program was not always carefully monitored, and student numbers varied on a daily basis.

Another important aspect of the context is that participants are required to participate in intercultural training prior to commencement of the program, though there are clear differences in the training requirements according to nationality. Chinese participants were required to complete 2 hours of intercultural training per week over a 11-week period before traveling to Jordan. The curriculum delivered in China was revised and
implemented by a cooperating university staff member based on his course on cultural differences. Whilst it is often suggested that intercultural training should be designed on the basis of careful needs analysis (e.g., Fowler & Blohm, 2004), the intercultural training provided to the Chinese participants was typical of the rather generic models of intercultural training that are heavily focused on national level cultural differences, such as differences in values and communication styles according to the highly popularized (but also highly critiqued) work of authors such as Hofstede (2001) and Hall (1976) etc. (see Appendix 1 for an overview of the training). The bulk of the weekly training consisted of practical English language training, complemented by lectures, discussions, and critical incident analysis around topics such as individualism and collectivism, orientations towards time and space, high context and low context communication styles, and attitudes to hierarchy. Thus, of importance to this study is that participants were socialized into the practice of analyzing and reflecting on intercultural communication with explicit reference to cultural dichotomies, which may have been consequential for how they interpreted their experiences in Jordan. In the final week of the course, extra time was devoted to providing specific cultural knowledge about Jordan and relevant norms for behaviour in this context. Participants were also given opportunities to do some micro-teaching with peers and receive feedback.

Somewhat unusually, U.S. participants were not required to complete intercultural training in the U.S. However, prior to arrival in Jordan, the Chinese and U.S. participants met in Turkey for one week of joint intercultural training and teambuilding. This training was designed and implemented by a partner organization specializing in teacher placement and intercultural training. Priority was given to safety and security considerations due to the close proximity of the school to the Syrian border. Specific behavioural norms and taboos – particularly pertaining to gender – were also addressed. Some Arabic was taught, and important sociocultural skills such as expressing disagreement without being offensive was advised to use for the cooperation between Chinese participants and their American counterparts.

Having described the context of the study, we now move to a review of the relevant literature on managing intercultural relations in nonprofit contexts and the theoretical perspective of this study.
Review of the literature

It is only relatively recently that scholarship on communication in the nonprofit sector has come to adopt an intercultural lens and to specifically consider the management of relations (Chen et al., 2015). Many studies that look at rapport-related issues tend to focus on organizational or inter-organizational communication, highlighting the importance of identity issues and power relations. Murphy & Dixon’s (2012) study of a six-year international partnership between a U.S. academic institution and a Kenyan NGO to promote HIV/AIDS education highlighted the importance of understanding how (lack of) rapport amongst individuals impacts on the effectiveness of collaboration and the overall robustness of performance. They particularly argue for attention to the ways that issues of social identity and power relationships come to the fore in collaborative engagement across cultural boundaries, pointing to “frictions” that emerge around the politics of knowledge, language, and identity. In the context of inter-organizational collaboration, Hansen & Millburn (2015) used Membership Categorization Analysis to examine the ways that individuals of different backgrounds discursively constructed and negotiated their cultural identities in meetings, highlighting the particular salience of national identity in self-identification practices. Chen & Collier (2012) also look at the discursive construction of cultural identity within interviews of staff at two NPOs in the U.S from a critical perspective. Their study uncovered some of the identity-related challenges experienced by NGO workers in terms of how cultural avowals and ascriptions function to limit the potential for agency amongst minoritized workers.

These studies highlight that the ways in which individuals attribute social and cultural identities to self and other has a significant impact on how individuals’ behaviours are interpreted and whether individuals are able to build more intimate interpersonal connections across perceived group boundaries. Importantly, they also highlight that the ways in which group-based categorizations tend to become salient in intercultural collaborations often serves to (re)construct unequal power relations.

In contrast to the studies above which tend to look at longer term collaborations in non-profit contexts, there is little research that employs a qualitative approach to take a deeper look at how individuals in short-term international volunteering programs perceive the challenges of managing communication and interpersonal relations. The
research that does exist tends to be centered on the experiences of university students from North America. For example, Pence & Macgillivray (2008) investigated how teacher trainees from the U.S. engaged with a short-term international field experience at a private international high school in Rome. They highlighted that participants’ teaching experiences in this context led to meaningful personal transformations for some participants, but also revealed relational difficulties stemming from the need to negotiate (conflicting) parental expectations and around the curriculum and learning environment. Jackson and Adarlo (2016) conducted a discourse analysis of open-ended questions in their surveys to US volunteers teaching in Yunnan, China. These volunteers experienced intercultural challenges in relation to teaching practices, reporting frustration that their attempts to implement student-centered learning were not necessarily valued as they expected. This led to a sense of despondency, as participants felt hindered in their ability to bring about meaningful learning experiences for their students and creating closer classroom relations.

Whilst the studies immediately above have not aimed to investigate relational concerns as their main area of focus, the findings have nevertheless helped to pinpoint divergent expectations between international volunteers and local stakeholders as a source of frustration, difficulty, and a potential barrier to deepening relations. One issue to consider here is that short-term volunteer programs – by virtue of their relatively short duration – place significant adaptive demands on individuals in terms of coming to understand local expectations, interpreting the meaning of behaviours, and building up opportunities for intercultural dialogue, all of which can be considered important for building rapport with others in a new cultural context (Ward et al., 2001). If participants are able to become attuned to local expectations and reflexively monitor their own cognitive and affective responses to difference, they will be better able to align their interpretative and behavioural responses with the new reality (Ward et al., 2001). This, in turn, can be considered conducive to establishing common ground with local stakeholders and other co-participants and building rapport. An additional issue here is that international volunteers are often focused on the change that they would like to create in the local environment within the limited time they have, which may work against the adoption of a self-reflexive attitude. In the worst cases, the inability of individuals to
realize their altruistic sentiments leads to ethnocentric judgments that only alienate them from others (Chang et al., 2012; Jackson & Adarlo, 2016). It is for this reason that it is important to understand in more detail how short-term volunteers perceive their experiences of intercultural communication and how the potential for developing rapport is enabled or constrained by the ways that volunteers make sense of these experiences.

**Theoretical perspective**

Our examination of participants’ interpretations of challenges to rapport is informed by recent theoretical perspectives in the field of intercultural relations that emphasise how individuals’ situated attribution of meaning and evaluative judgments of self and others impact on rapport in intercultural settings (e.g., Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2016, 2021; Spencer-Oatey & Xing, 2019). Evaluations typically entail the interpretation of behavior in context and the placement of “persons or relationships into certain valenced categories according to some kind of perceived normative scale or frame of reference” (Kádár & Haugh, 2013, p. 61), often through the application of moralized adjectives such as appropriate/inappropriate, fair/unfair, normal/strange, orderly/disorderly to instances of behavior or an individual’s whole character etc. Evaluations of behaviors (and people) are situated judgments in the sense that they depend on assumptions about contexts, actions, interactions, rights and obligations, and normative behavior that become activated in specific situations. Although it cannot necessarily be assumed that individuals from the same national background will automatically assess behavior in exactly the same way, the interpretative strategies brought to bear on behavior in a particular context will inevitably be influenced by the stock of normative knowledge, schemas, values, and beliefs that individuals have developed in the process of cultural socialization within different social groups – what Spencer-Oatey & Kádár (2021, p.5) refer to as “cultural patterning”. They explain:

Social group memberships and socialization lead to cultural identities and cultural patterning, which in turn influence or frame the bases on which participants make evaluative judgments of other individuals and their behavior (p.5).
Spencer-Oatey & Kádár (2021) argue that the potential for relations to be enhanced or harmed is largely dependent on the evaluative judgments that are generated when (communicative) behaviours breach an individual’s normalcy threshold. That is, when behaviors challenge individuals’ assumptions about appropriate behaviour beyond the normalcy threshold shaped by their cultural experiences, there is greater likelihood that evaluations of behaviours will be converted into negative interpersonal evaluations of individuals or even entire cultural groups.

As also highlighted in studies discussed in the previous section (e.g., Chen & Collier, 2012; Murphy & Dixon, 2012), the evaluation of behaviour and the broader interpretation of relational challenges in intercultural communication tends to be strongly influenced by social and intergroup cognition, meaning that the perceived group affiliations and social identity characteristics of interlocutors often has an impact on how individuals assign meaning to behaviour (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021). It is important to note, however, that attributions of cultural difference do not necessarily accord with actual differences. As Kim (2009) points out, “categorical cognitive behaviour constrains intercultural communication as it creates self-fulfilling prophecies, prompting us to see behaviour that confirms our expectations even when it is absent” (p. 55). In fact, it is common for individuals to draw on oversimplified notions of cultural difference in order to attribute responsibility for interactional difficulties or lack of success to the cultural characteristics of other groups (Dervin, 2011). Stereotypes about group characteristics function as ready-made explanations for difficulties, the explanation being that the “other” is irreconcilably different to “us”. These explanations tend to come into play in intercultural situations where individuals wish to rationalise their own communicative choices or judgments of the other by attributing these to an underlying characteristic or fundamental moral concern shared by members of one’s own social or cultural group (Ladegaard, 2011).

In an educational context such as the one examined in this study, the ways in which individuals interpret and evaluate behaviour can be assumed to have an impact on how they continue to interact with students and colleagues and whether or not attempts are made to understand and move beyond (perceived) cultural differences. Thus, in this study, our aim is to understand how participants’ situated interpretations and evaluations of behaviour during the volunteering program were intertwined with their perceptions of
difficulty in managing rapport with the local children and their US counterparts. Given the potential impact of intergroup perceptions and identity categorizations on the attribution of meaning and evaluation of actions and people, we pay close attention to the ways that participants mobilize notions of cultural difference to make sense of perceived relational challenges and rationalize a sense of success or failure in interactions.

The Study
In framing this study, we established two broad research questions which would allow us to tap into Chinese participants’ understandings of their own experiences of relating with the children and with their U.S counterparts within the context of teaching activity and social interactions.

1. How did Chinese participants interpret relational challenges from their interactions with students?

2. How did Chinese participants interpret relational challenges from their interactions with U.S. partners?

Data collection and analysis
In line with our priority to understand participants’ understandings of their own experiences, a qualitative research design was chosen, as this allows for detailed attention to the “meanings, descriptions, values and characteristics of people and things” (Grbich, 2007, p. 26). The first author -- a Chinese national who speaks fluent Chinese -- carried out semi-structured one-to-one interviews with 14 former Chinese instructors in the program. In line with the qualitative approach, interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended questions to allow the researcher to elicit opinions and probe deeper perceptions (Creswell, 2014). Interview questions focused on relational challenges that participants had encountered inside or outside the classroom, how participants had experienced the classroom teaching and preparation, and whether they had been conscious of their own responses to any cultural differences. All interviews were conducted online using WeChat or FaceTime, which meant that face-to-face contact was established for most of the interviews, with the exception of a small number of
participants who preferred a voice call. All interviews were conducted in Chinese and lasted between 20 minutes and 1 hour.

The first author contacted all 15 volunteers who took part in this intercultural volunteer program in 2015 and 2016, and 14 agreed to be interviewed (see Appendix 2). All participants were of Chinese nationality, aged from 22 to 31, including 13 full-time university students and 1 full-time teacher of Chinese as a foreign language. 10 of them were female; and 4 were male. They all had higher education backgrounds, and 5 people were English majors at the time. 3 of them had previous overseas experiences, either international volunteering or overseas education, and all of them had had former contact with North Americans. Within the data analysis, participants are referred to as P1-P14.

All interviews were fully transcribed verbatim and then analyzed with a bottom-up coding method to identify the aspects of volunteer experience that participants framed in terms of difficulties or challenges (Creswell, 2014). Following Saldaña (2016), we utilized a view of qualitative coding in terms of “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 4). In the first cycle of coding, the first author carefully listened to the recorded interviews, and then coded by hand using In Vivo and initial coding methods. These initial codes related to “language barriers”, “cultural behaviours”, “discipline”, “emotion”, “teaching”, “unequal power” and “teamwork”. Through several iterations of coding, codes were compared, refined, and then condensed into larger thematic groupings which became the main themes for understanding the data set and structuring the analysis presented in this paper around “relational challenges” (Saldaña, 2016). Participant comments which were representative of the main themes were translated from Chinese to English after the second round of coding. The second author then audited the coding process and confirmed that the consistency of the data supported the main themes.

**Findings**

In this section, we present the results of the study in terms of the focus in the research questions on the experience of relational challenges with the students and U.S. partners respectively. The first challenge that has been divided into three sub-themes relates to the...
difficulty participants reported in interpreting student behaviour inside and outside the classroom, rationalizing obstacles and making their behaviour interpretable for the students. The second challenge has two sub-themes that report the negotiation of teamwork management and power differentials with co-teachers from the U.S. contingent.

The challenges of interpreting student behaviour and building rapport with students

Interpreting “disorderly” behaviour
One of the main challenges that Chinese participants perceived constrained the development of rapport with the children was the difficulty in interpreting student behaviour inside and outside the classroom, particularly behaviour that represented what participants saw as “disorderly” or rough behaviour. It turned out that many participants had difficulty discerning standards for appropriate and inappropriate behaviour amongst students in the local context, which led to indecision about how to best intervene when problems appeared to surface. This became particularly difficult in instances when children’s’ classroom behaviour diverged from participants’ own implicit expectations.

Extract 1

What I couldn’t understand in the beginning was…when they do things, they would rush out altogether, to get it together. For example, when [they were] drawing, coloring, and [they needed to] get a crayon, and then everyone would go in the front to grab the crayon… (P8)

As exemplified by P8’s comment, children’s competition for use of classroom resources was a source of surprise for most Chinese participants, whose starting point assumption had been that students would naturally line up for resources and share them around. Participants drew on their own role schemas for classroom behaviour that involved teacher control and student orderliness (for role schemas, see Nishida, 1999). It is worth mentioning that although participants didn’t appear to judge the children for such behaviours, such episodes did trigger evaluative processes that led participants to reflect on the causes of such behaviours. Having evaluated the classroom environment and student behaviour as “disorderly”, participants came to consider that some children in the
classroom may not have had consistent educational opportunities or may have had to fight for access to resources in order to survive. Although all participants expressed a very strong desire to relate to children positively, they struggled with their dual positioning as someone wanting to “help” and someone needing to “instruct”. That is, they wanted to be understanding of students’ circumstances, but nevertheless felt that their perceived need to establish order impacted on the development of closeness. This tension surfaced in participant commentary in relation to experiences outside the classroom as well.

Extract 2

After the first day of teaching, I was feeling very negative, [I] thought I was there to, to help those children, to bring them joy, and let them feel love, especial to the Syrian children. When I arrived, however, in the first day, when [I was] being with the children, [I] found they would fight with each other, the first minute they hugged, [like] brothers, then the next minute they could pick up a stone throwing at each other just because of a swing. Then I felt, how is it possible for me to change them? With only 3 weeks, can I really change their lives (P1).

P1’s comment is representative of the fact that the Chinese participants in this program saw their mission not primarily as teaching language per se, but rather in broader terms of “making a difference” in the lives of the children. This goal of “making a difference” was explicit in recruitment messaging for the program and was highly salient in the interviews, indicating that participants saw their mission in these terms. Volunteering programs are, in essence, tailored towards helping others, and are frequently propelled by discourses pitched to potential volunteers that they may be able to bring about some kind of change, even within a short amount of time (Ganesh & McAllum, 2009; Rehberg, 2005). In this sense, international volunteering presents the opportunity for participants to express their own benevolence, but achieving this aim ultimately depends on the “cooperation” of those one is there to help.

As exemplified by P1, when participants in this study struggled to understand the interpersonal dynamics at play amongst the children and what their behaviours towards each other symbolized, it made it difficult for them to make judgments about the appropriateness of behaviour. This not only led to indecision about when and how to intervene, but it also undermined participants’ confidence in their ability to relate to the
children in a positive way and actualize their own motivations for joining the program. This was complicated by the fact that participants were aware that some of the children were Syrian refugees and may have been suffering from traumas experienced in their home country. Some participants came to feel ill-prepared to cope with such complexity.

**Negative comparison in the face of frustration**

One factor that seemed to contribute to a sense of disillusionment amongst Chinese participants was the perception that the U.S. volunteers were much better at dealing with behavioural issues. This perception was common amongst participants, represented by the comment from P10 below.

Extract 3

In terms of teaching, there were some differences. Maybe when they were growing up, maybe, their [the American participants] teachers may not, or seldom scold them severely. Or, like Chinese teachers, [their teachers may not] give students corporal punishments, and so on. They may find it hard, hard to imagine. For them, they are more tolerant with students’ naughtiness and trouble-making (laughs). Maybe that’s how they were when they grew up. And then for the Chinese students, I mean for the Chinese adults, when the children are being naughty and messing around, they may find [the children] annoying. After a long time, especially after a long time, you will be annoyed. You may want to use some, use some effective measures, right? Use some sternly measures to make the children quiet (laughs). (P10)

As above, the expectation that children should behave in a more orderly way was widely shared, but this expectation and participants’ own experiences of being educated in a strictly regulated classroom environment was interpreted as constraining their ability to deal with “naughty” behaviour. This interpretive strategy was sustained by the belief that the relative skill demonstrated by U.S. participants was due to growing up in a less structured environment and thus having more tolerance for the unexpected. Thus, it can be seen that the Chinese participants drew on stereotypical assumptions about U.S. education and socialization practices as a resource for making sense of their own
circumstances and rationalizing a sense of failure (Ladegaard, 2011). In Spencer-Oatey & Kadar’s (2021) terms, the Chinese participants saw themselves as having a lower normalcy threshold due to their “strict” upbringing.

**Making goodwill interpretable**

Within the data, the challenge of effectively relating to the children was not limited to disciplinary issues, but also surfaced in participants’ attempts to bond with students in a more informal way. Below, P6 explains how an attempt to introduce a foreign cultural artifact to the children ended up producing unexpected results.

Extract 4

[I] think keeping other countries’ currency is, er, a, thing worth remembering. Then, er, then I wanted to give them [the Chinese currency]. Er then, I never thought the result would be bad. There’s a child in our class, he didn’t want that, didn’t want that coin, you know. He said, “I just want the note”. Then [I] told him those are the same, but he just didn’t believe…Then in my heart, actually [I] felt very sad. This was a way to show my love, but he didn’t understand. And because of this, they were hurt too. I was really sorry. (P6)

In an attempt to create rapport with the children, P6 has taken the strategy of giving each student a coin or a note (each of the same value, given out in random order), but this gesture has been rejected by one student who has expressed a preference for a note. It appeared that this student’s cultural understanding of “money” attributed higher value to notes rather than coins, and thus the receipt of a coin seemingly triggered an evaluation of “unfairness”. This is clearly a disappointing episode for P6, who has assumed that symbolic value of the gift as a gesture of affection would be recognized by the student and that it would be received unconditionally. For P6, this cultural mismatch manifested as a breach of her expectations and an apparent clash in interactional goals which undermined attempts to create rapport. What was intended as a rapport-enhancing act became one which eventually diminished rapport (Spencer-Oatey & Kadar, 2021).

This particular episode highlights one of the fundamental needs (and difficulties) in an intercultural volunteering context – ensuring that goodwill is interpretable to others.
As was also discussed in relation to Extract 1, altruistic sentiments are at the heart of the volunteering experience, but whether or not such sentiments become recognized by others is clearly dependent on the cultural interpretation of the actions, words and symbols that mediate the communication of goodwill (Leroux & Saba, 2015). In situations such as this, when volunteers feel that their own altruistic sentiments or expressions of goodwill are constrained or fail to be recognized, it not only presents emotional challenges but also impacts on the potential for creating rapport across cultural boundaries (Batson et al., 2003).

Despite often being unsure as to how best interpret student behaviour, and sometimes experiencing frustration due to the constraints on communicating one’s positive intentions through language, participants nevertheless retained their desire to communicate on a deeper level.

Extract 5

I really wanted to talk to them, to build relationships, but first, just because the differences in language, we didn’t speak the same language, and indeed it was impossible to always have an interpreter around you…they [students] would also think, couldn’t speak to you clearly, they would use body languages…but I didn’t really understand their body languages [even though I] really wanted to build relationships, and could feel that they wanted to build relationship with us as well, to know us …you needed to use body language to express your like, or your love [but] it would be weak, just using body language. (P12)

This desire to communicate despite setbacks was sustained by the sense that the children also wanted to build relationships and were making active attempts of their own to communicate verbally and non-verbally. In fact, as is expressed by P12 above, it turned out that the language barrier and concomitant need to rely on non-verbal communication in many instances of communication outside the classroom, brought into salience the cultural variability of non-verbal signals (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013). The majority of the classroom teaching sessions had been supported by an interpreter, which may have shielded participants from the full experience of ambiguity and uncertainty of meaning,
which they then needed to deal with in a more direct sense in their informal interactions with students outside the classroom.

These interactions brought participants rich opportunities to observe the students and engage with them in play, whilst attempting to communicate positively through mostly non-verbal means. At times, participants became concerned that children’s play was too disorderly or rough and that they needed to intervene, realising themselves that it is difficult to discern the line between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour in a new cultural context (Spencer-Oatey & Kadar, 2021). This meant that participants were constantly negotiating the tension between their desire to build rapport with children and the perceived need to regulate inappropriate behaviour in their role as instructor, while themselves often being unsure how to interpret behaviour and how to make their own goodwill interpretable to students. Participants were conscious of the fact that behaviour they observed breached their own normalcy thresholds and gave rise to evaluations, but they appeared not to judge the children themselves as individuals or as a collective.

The challenges of managing rapport within the context of co-teaching

Negotiating the concept of cooperation

The notion of cooperation emerged as a major theme in the data, particularly in the context of the co-teaching with U.S. counterparts. This particular volunteer program necessitated a large amount of cooperation between participants, which naturally involved negotiating the nature of work to be done and the kinds of roles that respective individuals should play in order to achieve teaching aims. One participant from each nationality group was typically paired together to decide how teaching could be managed. As mentioned earlier in the paper, participants had been informed that it is in the spirit of the program that Chinese and U.S. participants should cooperate with each other in a spirit of equality. Whilst this may have aimed to minimise the power differential between the two groups in their roles as English language instructors, participants’ comments suggest that the cultural differences and unequal power distribution were perceived as influencing patterns of cooperation and management of rapport. This surfaced initially in Chinese participants’ perception that different levels of investment in planning and reflecting on co-teaching were experienced as a challenge.
Extract 6

Because I hadn’t worked with Westerners before, I wasn't sure of the, what was the degree of cooperation. Was it like, she just asked when she needed me, and I didn’t need to prepare anything. Er, maybe she was, thought that we were totally separated. [We] didn’t need to communicate something beforehand. The time when I needed you would be for the things that you were capable of, then you could help me. However, I think when Chinese are working together, we need to discuss with each other. You give me your teaching outline, and I know what are you going to teach, so that I can have an idea or a plan when you need my help. (P11)

Extract 7

They were more free, not restricted…that randomness. You wouldn’t see them after you finished class, they had their own plans, and then, er, the collective mind was relatively weak…Because, like what I have said, we might be more willing to do something together, but they may think “I want to do something by myself”. This difference was quite obvious…they had their own plans, then we just let them go. (P5)

As expressed by P11 and P5 above, there was a certain amount of anxiety amongst Chinese participants as to the best way to manage the goal of teaching planning and implementation, and there was the clear perception that collective planning would be a preferable way of achieving effective co-teaching. The Chinese participants in this program evaluated the U.S. participants as being “less willing” to invest in time spent together planning and reflecting on lessons, which they saw as being linked to a laid-back approach to planning, greater willingness to teach in a reactive way during the actual lessons, and an individualistic mindset that prioritizes own goals over team goals. In their interview comments, Chinese participants constructed a view of themselves as wanting to do things together, to function as a group and possibly to pursue a shared group goal. Contrastively, they positioned the U.S. participants as “carefree” and “individualistic”, with a low level of concern for group consensus or spending time bonding informally. In short, participants tended to draw dichotomous comparisons between “us” and “them” in
which the “other” was seen as diverging from “our” expectations. This represents an essentialist understanding of cultural difference (Holliday, 2010), which mirrors the significant focus on individualism and collectivism in the intercultural training program prior to the volunteering placement.

Interestingly, whilst essentialist accounts of cultural difference can be easily associated with “othering” (e.g., Dervin 2011), it appears that attributing perceived differences in attitudes towards cooperation to national cultural differences did not necessarily lead to strong evaluative judgments of the U.S. participants. Rather, perceiving the other as different due to their “culture” was associated with open-mindedness towards difference and deferred value judgment. By assuming that the U.S. participants just had a different style of cooperation and way to achieve teaching goals, they made the decision to respect perceived differences as a strategy for sustaining existing levels of rapport. What this meant, however, is that they tended not to engage in more explicit intercultural dialogue where mutual perceptions of cultural difference could be explored, negotiated, and potentially deconstructed. This lack of proactive dialogue appeared to constrain rapport when communicative challenges surfaced during planning meetings with U.S. counterparts, as discussed below.

**Power differentials in communication**

The main communicative challenge mentioned by participants related to managing negotiations around what to teach and how to teach, exemplified by P12 below.

Extract 8

When preparing the class, even though people had their own parts…still there were some, needed to share tasks and plan together. People actually had different ideas…they [American partners] were more direct, or would say what they think…In this situation, [I was] even more bad at expressing my own ideas, then I would easily say, okay then, just following your ideas…First it would be the language issue…relatively [I] wouldn’t express my opinions directly, [I am] more implicit or tactful, but still wanted my ideas or opinions being accepted…then I would have a sense of accomplishment, or had a feeling of
being recognized. I would have a little bit less sense of loss...maybe sometimes [I was] trying to express my opinions...but when facing some difficulty, I would compromise or give up...so actually there were no breakthroughs...this feeling influenced the relationship between teachers a lot. (P12)

Overall, participants had a sense that it was difficult to match the speed and assertiveness with which their U.S. counterparts articulated their ideas, which meant that it was often difficult to disagree directly or to state an alternative idea. It turned out that Chinese participants felt a sense of frustration in communicating suggestions for teaching and that they would often allow for the ideas of others to dominate. As explained by P12 above, it was felt in some cases that this tendency to defer to the other led to a broader pattern of domination in communication between the two sides which began to impact on rapport (Pfeiffer, 2015). From her description, the typical dichotomy between “direct” Americans and “implicit” Chinese can also been seen. Again, the static cultural group image does not produce positive attempts to address their issues. Some Chinese participants did confess that their English is “not good enough” (P6, 10, 12, 14) and that they “felt like a child” (P14) or felt “dominated” (P7). Given such comments, it is difficult to ignore the potential role of ideologies of native speakerism in contributing to a power imbalance between the two groups (Holliday, 2015). Whilst this particular international volunteer program is fairly unique in the sense that it (ostensibly) positions Chinese and U.S. participants as equally legitimate English speakers and instructors, Chinese participants overwhelmingly attributed the challenges of communicating with U.S. colleagues to their own perceived deficits in terms of inferior English language ability or a propensity for being “indirect” due to being Chinese. Whilst an “indirect” communication style is not inherently problematic, it was positioned as such in participants’ interpretations of communicative challenges, suggesting the tendency to fall into a deficit perspective when comparing the linguistic and cultural attributes of the two groups.

Discussion and implications
The interview data reveal the main relational challenges reported by Chinese participants and how intergroup differentiation from their US counterparts was central to their understandings of their experiences to the point that even difficulties interacting with the local children were interpreted with negative comparison to the Americans (Ladegaard, 2011). Despite a strong desire to relate positively to the children, participants struggled to interpret the significance of the children’s behaviour, particularly when children appeared boisterous or behaved in an unexpected way. Whilst participants recognized that behaviour inside and outside the classroom crossed their own normalcy thresholds and diverged from their own role-based expectations (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021), the lack of relevant interpretative frame for understanding students’ behaviour proved to be a barrier to developing rapport with the students. This very quickly led to a sense of frustration and doubts as to whether participants could achieve their aim of “making a difference” (Ganesh & McAllum, 2009). Participants dealt with the cognitive and affective challenges generated by the fact that outcomes on the ground didn’t conform to their expectations by negatively comparing themselves with their U.S. counterparts, who they deemed to be more used to dealing with seemingly “naughty” student behaviour. Thus, there was a tendency to construct a dichotomous comparison between the U.S. participants and themselves at the group level as a way of rationalising their sense of frustration in this relational domain (Ladegaard, 2011).

Meanwhile, challenges in managing teamwork and interpersonal relations with U.S. counterparts also tended to be interpreted through a dichotomous lens whereby inherent cultural traits of the respective national groups were perceived to bring about different expectations vis-à-vis cooperation and communication style. In this study, Chinese participants appeared to expect cooperative behaviour such as high knowledge sharing, prioritization of group goals, and consensus-oriented communication (Keller & Loewenstein, 2011). Although they perceived that their counterparts might have different ways of doing things and made efforts to respect that, the attribution of perceived tendencies at the individual level to essential group characteristics seems to also have contributed to a sense of resignation amongst participants. That is, the tendency to see communication styles and attitudes towards cooperation as group-level characteristics may have led participants to view differences as insurmountable. In this sense,
attributional tendencies contributed to the crystallization of difference as a barrier to joint action and the deepening of rapport within the minds of individual participants. Interpersonal relations are seen primarily through the lens of “intergroup relations”, which are defined by “blocks” created by difference rather than “threads” that allow for mutual understanding (Amadasi & Holliday, 2017). One obvious negative consequence of this in this study is that it made it difficult for Chinese participants to assert themselves on an equal footing and sustain their status as legitimate users and instructors of English within this context. This, ultimately, limited the scope for developing rapport.

The above findings offer support for Spencer-Oatey & Kádár’s (2021) arguments concerning the interplay between cultural group identities, cultural patterning and evaluative judgments of self and other, and how this interplay can constrain the potential for rapport (Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021). When participants in this study struggled to interpret the significance of children’s behavior, they tended to fall into despair and attribute failure to their own collective characteristics. Similarly, when they encountered unexpected behavior or attitudes from their US counterparts, they tended to resort to explanations centered on national group identities and cultural characteristics. Whilst these strategies did not lead to overt conflict per se, it did appear to restrict the development of closer relations.

In view of the challenges discussed in this paper, we wish to consider the role of intercultural training in shaping how volunteers interpret and evaluate their experiences. Intercultural training is widely seen as useful for helping individuals develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes for interpreting different cultural behaviours and meanings, and adjusting one’s own cognitive, affective and behavioural responses in an appropriate way (Kramer, 2017). Indeed, the Chinese participants had completed twelve weeks of intercultural training prior to the start of the program in Jordan, which was largely based on the presentation of cultural taxonomies (e.g., individualism/collectivism, high context/low context communication) applied at the national level. Although the participants in this study did not appear to be judgmental in relation to behaviour that crossed their normaley threshold, they did appear to have trouble interpreting experiences outside of relatively dichotomous framings of cultural difference based on nationality. Given the highly dynamic nature of cultural environments and intercultural interactions
in many international volunteering contexts, including the one in this study, we argue that it is important for intercultural training to move beyond cultural taxonomies and rather help trainees develop a repertoire for interpreting intercultural interactions that goes beyond attributing observed behavioural characteristics to group-level traits as the default.

In line with views of intercultural learning that emphasize processes of interpretation, reflection and mediation (e.g., McConachy, 2018), an important part of this is ensuring that participants are given opportunities to systematically observe communicative encounters in which unfamiliar non-verbal and verbal behaviours are present and then encouraged to reflect on the potential meaning of behaviours from multiple perspectives. This is not a process of explaining the “cause” of behaviours in terms of differences in values or communication styles. Rather, the aim is to encourage individuals to formulate personalized understandings of the behaviours and meanings that they encounter and to become more conscious of their own evaluations of difference (McConachy, 2018; Spencer-Oatey & Kádár, 2021). Even within such a process, there can be a tendency for the focus to remain on understanding the other as an “other” (Dervin, 2016). Thus, what is centrally important is that participants are supported to develop reflexive understandings of their own ways of perceiving situations and specific attributional tendencies (Author). Participants in this study were able to rationalize their difficulties, but they showed less ability to reflect on their own assumptions. As much as possible, it is preferable for participants to gain experience envisioning, observing, and reflecting on behaviours in contexts that are most similar to those that they will encounter. As was the case for the participants in this study, those who will be volunteering in educational contexts need to be attuned to the types of interactions specific to classrooms as well as the informal interactions likely to occur with students. Clearly, a part of this involves becoming familiarized with the normal classroom routines and any behavioural protocols to be followed inside and outside the classroom (Xu, 2015). Furthermore, at a fundamental level, participants in international volunteer contexts need to be encouraged to carefully consider their own goals and motivations, the potential for these to be different to others, and the ability to deepen rapport with others by avoiding falling back on easy cultural explanations. If intercultural training could be more aligned with these
pedagogical notions and suggestions, we believe it would constitute better training for international volunteers.

Conclusion

This paper has qualitatively examined the relational challenges as perceived by Chinese participants in an international volunteer program that involved teaching English to primary school students in Jordan. The design of the study provides an interpretative and non-Anglocentric perspective on intercultural experience which contributes to the growing research agenda that aims to understand the situated ways that participants in intercultural interaction interpret and evaluate behaviours and people in context and how this impacts on the potential for developing rapport.

In contrast to much of the existing research on dyadic scenarios in which perceptions of self and other primarily mediate the interpretation and evaluation of behaviour, the findings of this study expose the particularly seductive power of dichotomous notions of cultural difference and how individuals mobilize intergroup comparisons as an interpretative resource even for interactions with a third party. The fact that the Chinese participants aimed to legitimize their own sense of failure in interacting with the children by invoking the notion that US participants are naturally more adept at dealing with unpredictable behaviour brings a unique angle to the existing scholarship, as it shows how stereotypical intergroup comparisons with a third party are brought to bear on an interpretative problem. This is a phenomenon that deserves further scrutiny particularly in the context of collaborative ventures within and beyond the non-profit context that involve deliberately pairing up individuals from different nationality groups.

One main limitation of this study is that the perceptions of experiences presented in this paper are necessarily one-sided in the sense that U.S. counterparts were not given the opportunity to report their perceptions. It would also have been useful to triangulate data with voices from other stakeholders such as the children in order to shed light on their expectations concerning the program and the ways they see the relationships with each other and the volunteers. Other sources of data such as systematic classroom observations or analysis of communicative interactions would also contribute to understanding of the specificities of intercultural contact within this kind of international volunteer program.
and how stakeholders perceive it. In this sense, we call for more research in international volunteer contexts that brings into dialogue the respective views and potentially competing explanations from different groups of volunteers in order to generate further insight into the perception of intercultural experiences. This is crucial in order to identify the impact of frames of reference and cultural stereotypes of self and other on how experiences are interpreted, especially when unmet expectations are involved. Further research on the experiences of participants should also help bolster the empirical basis of intercultural training for intercultural volunteering so that it can be better tailored to the context and needs of participants.

References


