

**Perception and Management of Conflict:  
A Comparison of Taiwanese and US Business Employees**

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**Abstract**

This paper reports the results of a comparative study on conflict and conflict resolution styles between 318 Taiwanese and 245 US business employees. The study vicariously presents four conflict scenarios in a business setting to the respondents and asks them to choose the preferred solution among a set of structured choices, allowing the researchers to measure and compare the conflict resolution styles of the samples. The results suggest that with regard to potential conflicts, US respondents are more likely to perceive the existence of such conflict in each scenario. The results further suggest that the Taiwanese sample is more likely to use indirect, “non-confrontation” style of conflict management and its US American counterpart, a direct, “solution” style. No significant difference was found in the use of a “control” style of conflict management.

**Introduction**

The ability to cope with conflict emerges as an essential skill in our daily lives as interpersonal conflicts are inevitable in our interaction with others. Conflict management in organizations inspires particular concern for the modern business manager. One of the most dramatic and significant characteristics of contemporary organizations has been the rapid and sustained growth of international interactions, particularly in international trade. As multinational corporations and organizations mushroom, conflict management inescapably takes on a new intercultural dimension. Cultural differences and

their impact on human behavior have become an important consideration in today's global interactions. Specifically, the Chinese diaspora requires scholarly attention for an understanding of the manner in which Chinese communicate in organizational conflict episodes.

The conceptualization and theories of conflict and conflict management are basically developed from a Western, or more specifically Anglo-American, point of view. Researchers have begun recently to consider the critical role of Asian values in intercultural conflict situations (Chen & Chung, 1994; Deng, 1992; Gabrenya & Hwang, 1996; Gudykunst, Gao, Schmidt, Nishida, Bond, Leung, Wang, & Barraclough, 1992; Hwang, 1997; Ma, 1992; Ting-Toomey, 1994; Ting-Toomey, Gao, Trubisky, Yang, Kim, Lin, & Nishida, 1991; Trubisky, Ting-Toomey, & Lin, 1991). The present study explores the influence of culture on the conflict management styles of business employees. Specifically, the study compares the Taiwanese with U.S. American employees in terms of how they manage conflicts within their own cultural groups. The study explores the manner in which culture influences people's management of conflict in two ways. First, can a common perception of conflict between members of two different cultures be established? And, second, what are the relationships between cultural characteristics and conflict management styles of members of the Taiwanese and U.S. American cultures?

### **An Examination of Culture**

Numerous definitions of culture reflect a diversity of perspectives. In the broadest sense, culture is seen as the human-made part of the environment (Herkovits, 1955), an all-encompassing notion implying that culture is everything. Triandis and Albert (1987) single out an important ingredient of culture as the reflection of "shared meanings, norms, and values" (p. 266). Keesing (1974) sees culture as a system of knowledge enabling communication with others and interpretation of their behavior. Hecht, Andersen, and Ribeau (1989) offer the following definition of culture after synthesizing the work of other scholars: ". . . the manifold ways of perceiving and organizing the world that are held in common by a group of people and passed on interpersonally and intergenerationally" (p. 163). Knutson (1994) identifies six characteristics common to the points of view taken by several researchers:

First of all, culture is *learned* through our interaction with other members of our culture. Human beings are not born with culture. Second, culture provides rules for appropriate and acceptable behavior in the form of values, beliefs, and norms. Cultures identify desirable

behavior for their members. Third, culture provides a means of organizing and classifying our environment in distinctive ways. Culture structures daily life. Fourth, culture gives meaning and reality to one's existence. It provides a way of "seeing" the world. Fifth, culture is transmitted and passed on from generation to generation giving consistency and tradition to the group. Cultural change takes place relatively slowly. Sixth, the common code of culture is language as employed in rituals, education, institutions, politics, religion, and myths designed to condition people (p. 3).

The primary purpose of cross-cultural communication studies is to investigate the influence of cultural characteristics on communication behavior. Three theoretical frameworks were employed in this study: Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) Cultural Value Orientations; Hall's (1976) High-Low Context Dimension; and, Hofstede's (1980a, 1980b, 1983, 1991) National Culture Dimensions.

Researchers can use the five common problems identified by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) as the foundation for cross-cultural comparison. Table 1 displays the five common problems and the value orientations pertaining to them. Although Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck do not specifically apply value orientations to the communication or conflict management process, their observations can assist in the study of human interactions. For instance, Cronen and Shuter (1983) indicate that a "doing" culture may put a high priority on group member output and speed of task completion. A "being" culture, to the contrary, places a low priority on these items. Similarly, a "doing" culture encourages its members to be aggressive in pursuing their goals, while a "being" culture does not encourage aggressiveness. By the same token, cultures reflecting a "mastery over nature" orientation may show an active and insistent communication behavior in adopting a confrontational conflict management style. Cultures with a "subjugation to nature" or a "harmony with nature" orientation may show passive and responsive communication behaviors while encouraging an avoiding conflict management style.

Hall (1976) clarifies the relationship between communication and culture through his development of a continuum ranging from high- to low-context. Hall (1976) contends:

A high-context (HC) communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the

message. A low-context (LC) communication is just the opposite. . . .  
 The mass of the information is vested in the explicit code (p. 91).

While no culture exists at either end of the continuum, the U.S. American culture falls toward the low-context end. In contrast, most Asian cultures, including Taiwan, fall toward the high end. Okabe (1983) explains that the U.S. American tendency to use explicit words is the culture's most noteworthy communication characteristic. Ting-Toomey (1998) relates Hall's notion of context directly to communication behavior by observing, "Direct verbal communication is a low-context way of communicating; responsive communication is a high-context way of communicating" (p. 404). Knutson, Hwang, and Vivatananukul's (1995) comparison of Thai and U.S. American cultural norms governing interpersonal communication behaviors demonstrates the utility of Hall's contextual continuum.

Hofstede (1980a, 1980b, 1983, 1985, 1991) sets forth four dimensions of cultural variability from a cross-cultural study of work-related value patterns in a multinational corporation. His four dimensions of national culture are: Individualism-Collectivism; Power Distance; Uncertainty Avoidance; and Masculinity-Femininity.

Table 1  
 Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) Cultural Problems and Value Orientations

Cultural Problem	Value Orientation
1. What is the nature of human beings?	1. Evil, good and evil, evil.
2. What is the relationship between human beings and nature?	2. Subjugation to nature, harmony with nature, mastery over nature
3. What is the orientation of human beings towards time?	3. Past time, present time, future time.
4. What is the human orientation to activity?	4. Being, becoming, doing.
5. What is the relationship of humans to each other?	5. Lineality, collaterality, individuality.

Hofstede (1985) sees individualism as reflecting "a preference for a loosely knit social framework in society in which individuals are supposed to take care of themselves and their immediate families only" (p. 348). Collectivism, on the other hand, is seen by Hofstede as ". . . a preference for a tightly knit social framework in which individuals can expect their relatives,

clan, or other in-group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" (p. 348). In other words, group interest has priority over personal interest in collective cultures. Individualist cultures, in contrast, value individual interest and personal goals. Because of its power in explaining cultural differences, Hofstede's individualism-collectivism dimension has emerged as the major standard in determining cultural variability (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988).

Power Distance indicates "the extent to which a society accepts the fact that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally" (Hofstede, 1980a, p. 45). Individuals from high power cultures accept power as a legitimate part of society. High power societies value obedience, conformity, close and directed supervision, and fear of disagreement with superiors. Low power distance cultures, in contrast, value participative and cooperative management, equality, independence, legitimate and expert power, and the display of reward.

Hofstede (1985) sees uncertainty avoidance as "the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity, which leads them to support beliefs promising certainty and to maintain institutions protecting conformity" (p. 347-348). Cultures high in uncertainty avoidance display a greater need for consensus and formal rules, lower tolerance for deviant ideas and behaviors, resistance to change, and to contain conflict by avoiding competition and aggression. Low uncertainty avoidance cultures are more willing to accept dissident ideas and deviant behaviors, and to contain conflict through constructive fair play (Hofstede, 1980b).

Hofstede's (1985) masculinity-femininity dimension can be seen in terms of the dichotomy between assertiveness and nurturing. Masculine cultures are assertive; feminine cultures are nurturing. Masculine cultures prefer ". . . achievement, heroism assertiveness, and material success; as opposed to femininity, a preference for relationships, modesty, caring for the weak, and concern with the quality of life" (Hofstede, 1985, p. 348).

Realizing that his theory was developed from a Western point of view, Hofstede (1991) compared his initial dimensions with those generated by research on the Chinese value system. This comparison revealed a dimension unrecognized in the Western research, Confucian dynamism or the "long-term versus short-term orientation in life" (p. 167). Three of Hofstede's initial dimensions were found generalizable to Eastern cultures: individualism-collectivism; power distance; and, masculinity-femininity.

The individualism-collectivism dimension has been empirically supported and found to be robust in cross-cultural comparisons. Several studies have

confirmed its utility as a powerful predictor of cultural variations (Bond, Leung, & Wan, 1982; Bond, Wan, Leung, & Giacalone, 1985; Gudykunst, Yoon, and Nishida, 1987; Ho, 1979; Knutson, 1996a, 1996b; Triandis, Brislin, and Hui, 1988; Trubisky, Ting-Toomey, & Lin, 1991). Hofstede's continuing pattern of research (Hofstede 1980a, 1991; Hofstede & Bond, 1984; Hofstede & Spangenberg, 1987) displays the dimension to be generalizable across cultures, particularly to the Chinese cultures, although it was generated from a Western perspective. Furthermore, the largest diversity between Taiwan and the United States appeared on the Individualism-Collectivism dimension (Hofstede, 1980b, 1983, 1985, 1991). Taiwan emerged as a collective culture, displaying a low individualism score of 17. The United States was categorized as an individualistic culture with the highest score of 91. Therefore, this study employs the individualism-collectivism dimension as the key independent variable.

Additionally, comparing Hall's high- and low-context dimension with Hofstede's Individualism-Collectivism dimension, Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) observe, "all cultures Hall labels as low-context are individualistic, given Hofstede's score, and all of the cultures Hall labels as high-context are collectivistic in Hofstede's schema" (p. 44). Deng (1992) confirms that Hofstede's individualism-collectivism dimension and Hall's (1976) low- and high-context distinction are isomorphic; both dimensions imply similar cultural variations in human behavior. For example, individualistic, low-context cultures indicate a preference for direct and overt communication style, confrontational and aggressive behaviors, a clear self identification, and a priority of personal interest and achievement. Collectivist, high-context cultures manifest a preference for indirect and covert communication style, an obedient and conforming behavior, a clear group identification, and a priority for group interest and harmony. Ting-Toomey (1998) observes, "Individualism is expressed in interpersonal conflict through the strong assertion of personal opinions, the revealing of personal emotions, and personal accountability for any conflict problem or mistake. Collectivism is manifested in interpersonal conflict through the representation of collective opinions or ideas, the restraint of personal emotional expressions, and group accountability . . . for the conflict problem" (p. 403).

### **Conflict and Communication**

Culture imposes its characteristics on language to influence the communication process. The notion of linguistic relativity as proclaimed by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Carroll, 1956) suggests that language directs

social cognitive processes in the interpretation of environment. In other words, social cognitive process transfers the impact of culture to communication behavior. Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) see conflict management style as part of the social cognitive process, an intermediate variable between culture and individuals' communication behavior. Variations across cultures will thus imply a difference of conflict management styles among people from various cultural backgrounds. Putnam and Wilson (1982) recognize the critical role of communication in conflict resolution. They declared "conflict styles are actually communi-cative behaviors" (p. 630). As support for this assertion, they cited Simons' (1974) observation that communication is "the means by which conflicts get socially defined, the instrument through which influence is exercised" (p. 3). Therefore, they defined conflict strategies as "communicative behaviors, both verbal and nonverbal, that provide a means for handling conflicts" (Putnam & Wilson, 1982, p. 633). The conflict measurement instrument they developed, the Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI), focuses on individuals' communication performance in conflicts. With regard to the close relationship between communication and conflict management, several cultural characteristics play significant roles.

Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) isolate four stylistic modes of verbal communication: direct versus indirect style; elaborate versus succinct style; personal versus contextual style; and, instrumental versus affective style. The direct-indirect mode refers to "the extent speakers reveal their intentions through explicit verbal communication" (p. 100). The elaborate-succinct mode deals with the "quality of talk" (p. 105) which values the use of rich and expressive words, exact and precise words, or understatements. The personal-contextual dimension concerns whether language usage enhances a sense of "I" identity or the sense of "role" identity (p. 109). Finally, the instrumental-affective dimension discriminates language usage as "receiver-oriented" or "sender-oriented" and "goal-oriented" or "process-oriented" (p. 212). The elaborate-succinct and personal-contextual styles relate to dimensions other than individualism-collectivism.

The elaborate-succinct mode relates closely to Hofstede's (1991) notion of uncertainty avoidance. Asian cultures tend to use a succinct style, while U.S. Americans display elaborate communication forms (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). The personal-contextual style relates to Hofstede's (1991) power distance dimension. Gudykunst and Toomey (1988) point out that "a person-oriented language stresses informality and symmetrical power relationships, while a . . . contextual-oriented language emphasizes formality

and asymmetrical power relationships” (p. 109-110). Since the U.S. American culture displays a relatively low power distance, they prefer the personal style. The Chinese, on the other hand, favor a more contextual communication style attributable to the Chinese culture’s relatively high power distance.

The remaining two styles, direct-indirect and instrumental-affective, are closely related to the individualism-collectivism continuum. Individualist cultures tend to be direct, while collective cultures are inclined to display a more indirect communication style. The direct verbal style refers to messages that embody speakers’ true intentions in terms of their wants, needs, and desires in the discourse process. The indirect style, on the other hand, refers to messages that camouflage the speakers’ true intentions. The U.S. American individualistic cultural value leads to the goal of openness, an objective best achieved through the use of precise and direct language behavior. The Chinese collective value orientation, on the other hand, constrains people from speaking boldly in preference for a more harmonious and indirect language style. Yum (1985) suggests that the Confucian legacy of consideration for others and the concern for proper human relationships contribute to communication patterns designed to preserve one another’s face. Bond and Hwang (1986) describe “face” as an image of self-developed in appreciation of approved social attributes. The notion of face leads to what Chan (1998) describes as the Chinese tendency during conflict episodes to developing a bond of friendship by giving face, behaviors involving an emphasis on “. . . the importance of mutual respect, cooperation, and an enduring and deep friendship” (p. 85). Consequently, the Chinese use more situational attributions during interpersonal conflict. As Ting-Toomey (1998) observes, “Individualists tend to hold the person accountable for the conflict; collectivists tend to emphasize the context that contributes to the conflict” (p. 409). Indirect communication helps to prevent the embarrassment of rejection by the other personas well as disagreement among partners in the Chinese culture.

The tendency of Chinese people in conflict situations to use the indirect style is mitigated somewhat by the concepts of in-groups and out-groups. Triandis (1995) defines an in-group as a collection of people “about whose welfare a person is concerned, with whom that person is willing to cooperate without demanding equitable returns, and separation from whom leads to anxiety” (p. 9). Out-groups, on the other hand, are seen as groups of people “. . . with which one has something to divide, perhaps unequally, or are harmful in some way, groups that disagree on valued attributes” (p. 9). Gudykunst, Yoon, and Nishida (1987) report that members of collectivistic

cultures have more difficulty communicating with out-groups than in-groups, while members of individualistic cultures make no clear distinction between the two groups. In addition, people from collectivistic cultures would have difficulty in expressing themselves directly in conflict episodes because their verbal expression is a function of the target audience, the situation, and the desire to preserve harmony. Ting-Toomey (1998) uses the equity and communal norms of conflict interaction in clarifying the relationship for collectives between in-groups and out-groups. The equity norm places emphasis on individual rewards in resolving conflicts, while the communal norm requires consideration of in-group expectations. Individualists prefer use of the equity norm, while collectivists favor the communal norm. Leung and Iwawaki (1988) suggest that the importance of the conflict influences the selection of the preferred norm. If the conflict is important, both individualists and collectivists will follow the equity norm when competing with out-group members. When the conflict is not seen as important, however, collectivists prefer the communal norm with both in- and out-groups.

In all, research maintains that people from collectivistic cultures use indirect communication styles in contrast to people from individualistic cultures who prefer a direct style of interaction. When this distinction is applied to conflict episodes, collectivists typically avoid addressing the disagreement directly. Instead, they may use written forms such as letters or memos to communicate, or they may turn to a third party for mediation. The use of direct communication for the collectivists in conflict episodes presents difficulties, especially when in-groups are involved. Individualists, on the contrary, prefer “talking things out” since their preference for the direct style values self-expression.

The instrumental style is goal-oriented in verbal exchange, and the affective style is process-oriented. Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988) observe that the instrumental style relies heavily on the digital level to accomplish objectives. The affective style is receiver-oriented; frequently “. . . what is not said is as important as what is being said” (p. 114). Affective intuition is used to infer and interpret the hidden implications of the verbal messages. The implicit meaning contained in the affective communication style corresponds with Hall’s high- and low-context dimension and displays the concurrent variation between the individualistic and collectivistic cultures. The conduct of conflict communication for the Chinese, therefore, is shaped more through human relationships than the specific content of the various messages. With respect to business negotiations, for example, Chan (1998) observes that “. . . special attention must be paid to the Chinese notion of

friendship” (p. 85). Further, Chang and Holt (1991) provide an analysis of Chinese communication styles in their study of *yuan*”. They argue that “. . . Yuan is a cooperating cause, the concurrent occasion of an event as distinguished from its proximate cause. It is the circumstantial, conditioning, or secondary cause, in contrast with the direct or fundamental cause” (p. 34). *Yuan* refers to the contextual factors contributing to the occurrence of events and relationships, an ambiguous, multi-factorial, even fatal condition beyond human control. Gao (1998) likens the Chinese implicit communication to the Western conceptualization of self in a relational context. Gao (1998) describes the Chinese implicit message as one in which everything is not revealed, “. . . but leaves the ‘unspoken’ to the listeners” (p. 170). The cautious ambiguity characteristic of Chinese communication represents an effort to create and maintain harmony. Conflicts are not caused by communication difficulties, but rather disruptions in social equanimity. The Chinese affective style seeks to establish *guanxi*, a term Chan (1998) describes as “a term meaning relationship and suggesting also mutual benefit” (p. 84). Butterfield (1982) views *guanxi* as “lubricant” for Chinese life, “a social magnetic field in which all Chinese move, keenly aware of those people with whom they have connections and those they don’t” (p. 44). *Guanxi* operates as the foundation of Chinese social interaction and leads to *mientze*. Ting-Toomey (1988) describes *mientze* as the image projected on oneself in a relationship network or the favorable fulfillment of altruistic character. These observations combine to explain the Chinese regard for interpersonal relationships as something beyond one’s total control. Consequently, communication plays only the part that fosters a contextual condition designed to foster relationships. Hence, the Chinese tend to adopt a process-oriented communication style emphasizing the implicit, contextual, and affective aspects of a conflict episode.

Tang and Kirkbride (1986) use Thomas-Kilmann’s MODE instrument to examine the communication styles displayed by Chinese and British managers in Hong Kong during conflict episodes. Chinese executives favor the less assertive “compromise” and “avoidance” styles in handling conflicts. On the other hand, the British managers exhibit a preference for the more assertive “collaboration” and “competing” styles. Later, Kirkbride, Tang, and Westwood (1991) extend this survey to business students in Hong Kong and report similar results. Trubisky, Ting-Toomey, and Lin (1991) examine Chinese students in Taiwan with respect to five specific conflict styles: dominating; obliging; avoiding; integrating; and compro-mising. They ascertain that the Taiwanese students used the obliging and avoiding styles

more than their United States counterparts. Although parts of this study were inconsistent with the researchers' predictions, the results do indicate a preference for the non-confrontation consistent with the affective style. Leung (1987) notice that Chinese subjects prefer bargaining and mediation to a larger extent than the individualistic U.S. American subjects. Leung (1987) concludes, "Collectivists prefer non-binding methods of dispute resolution . . . and individualists prefer in a method that results in win-lose outcomes, such as adjudication; and collectivists in general do not prefer an adversary procedure over an inquisitional procedure" (p. 900).

In summary, research shows consistently that Chinese cultural values strongly suggest a tendency for Chinese to avoid and compromise in conflict situations. They prefer mediation and bargaining when involved in conflict management and resolution. The U.S. Americans, on the other hand, find greater value in competing and direct negotiation. These differences are clearly attributable to the variations in the two groups' respective cultural values.

### **Chinese and US American Cultural Values**

Confucianism and Taoism are the two major philosophies that formulate the Chinese value system (Becker, 1986; Bond & Hwang, 1986; Cheng, 1986; Hwang, 1998). Based on these two philosophies and a body of empirical work pertaining to Chinese values, Kirkbride, Tang, and Westwood (1991) extract five fundamental values possessed by the Chinese: harmony; conformity; contextualism; *guanxi*; and face. Although perhaps over-simplified, they believe that these values are the ". . . key themes which depict core aspects of Chinese value orientations and psychological processes and which are relevant to conflict and negotiation" (p. 367). More recently, Leung and Tjosvold (1998) offer a similar set of Chinese fundamental values.

Harmony for the Chinese emphasizes the maintenance of the collectivity and the continuation of amicable relationships. Lau's (1979) translation of the Confucian Analects describes the pursuit of the middle course between the extremes as the way to keep a state of balance and equilibrium in life. The Chinese make special efforts to avoid antagonisms that unsettle the group or place individuals in confrontation with the group. As Hwang (1997-8) points out, ". . . social action should follow the demand of rites (propriety) no matter what kind of decision he or she has made" (p. 20). The value of harmony typically leads Chinese to the avoidance of conflict and, when avoidance is impossible, to the search for compromise.

Conformity refers to the modification of behaviors in ways that follow the rules of decorum that structure Chinese interpersonal relationships into hierarchical dualities. Ho (1979) maintains that the Chinese emphasize the unity of the individual with collectivity. Selflessness, discipline, unity of purpose and action, and collective creativity are encouraged. Because of the overwhelming concern with collectivity, the Chinese tend to avoid confrontation for fear of disturbing interpersonal relationships and human interdependence. Chu and Ju (1993) report that most Chinese prefer avoidance and other indirect strategies to deal with conflict situations.

Contextualism refers to a high degree of sensitivity to the interactors' social backgrounds and the social setting of interpersonal interactions. Chinese people tend to relate a particular issue or event to the situational "total" and the context in which events occur. This unwillingness to separate specifics from the totality makes it difficult for the Chinese to deal with particular issues in isolation. Often when conflicts emerge, there may be a tendency to diffuse them by locating the issues in terms of the wider scheme of things. This process is integrated with the search for harmony by seeing issues as part of a united whole.

*Guanxi* designates the condition and intensity of an on-going personal connection between parties. The concern of *guanxi* makes the Chinese more aware of the continuing long-term relationship with parties, a condition Yang (1989) describes as social connections binding all people together with web-like ties. Consequently, the Chinese typically seek mutually satisfying compromises or accommodation in conflict episodes in order to open the door for the improvement of *guanxi*. Ting-Toomey (1998) implies a connection between *guanxi* and communicative adaptability: "By mindfully observing what is going on in the intercultural conflict situation, both parties may modify their nonverbal and/or verbal behavior to achieve more synchronized interaction" (p. 413).

The concept of face emerges as the most critical of the Chinese cultural values (Hwang, 1987). The dynamics of facework are visible at almost any time and place in the Chinese society. Brunner and Wang (1988) describe the influence of face as a reciprocal relationship of respect and deference by each party in reference to the other. This reciprocal relationship becomes even more profound in relation to others in a social network. Because of the concern for face, Chinese tend to adopt moderate strategies in conflict situations in order to save the other's face as well as to protect one's own face.

In summary, Chinese cultural values influence Chinese to prefer harmonious relationships. Conflict is seen as a disturbing event, one to be

handled with care, concern, and propriety. For the Chinese, conflict episodes should be characterized by a relationship-oriented approach and a need for connection and approval. Indirect styles are preferred in managing conflicts.

Individualism is the primary characteristic of U.S. American cultural values. Althen (1988) points out that “the most important thing to understand about Americans is . . . their devotion to individualism” (p. 4). Knutson (1994) describes the importance of U.S. Americans’ self-identity, a condition “determined by personal achievement and [a belief that] the world is subject to human domination and control” (p. 14). The concept of the individual self is an integral assumption of U.S. American culture, a deeply held value so ingrained that U.S. Americans seldom question its validity or use. The distinction between self and other is one of the great dichotomies found in U.S. American culture. From early childhood, U.S. Americans are taught to be autonomous. This self-centeredness is manifested by the belief that each person should decide for him or herself, develop individual options, have personal possessions, and view the world from a “self” orientation (Hsu, 1970). Consequently, even on occasions that require cooperation, U.S. Americans pursue their own personal goals. Individualism is the center of U.S. American life. Every act has for its motivation the achievement needs of the actor.

U.S. Americans value respect for privacy, equality, informality, an orientation toward change and progress, the goodness of humanity, materialism, and assertiveness (Knutson, 1994). This collection of values leads to the adoption of competition as the primary method to pursue one’s own interest. U.S. Americans believe that fairness and equity should prevail in conflict episodes, but people should do their best to get what they want. Direct confrontation guides actions in conflict episodes, a belief that problems are best faced head on. Personal relationships are characterized by equality, informality, impermanence, and a lack of commitment. Relationships are not typically primary factors in the U.S. American pursuit of goals. In conflict situations, “. . . getting down to task-oriented concerns with a ‘do it yourself’ attitude probably best describes U.S. American values in action” (Knutson, 1994, p. 16).

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

Perceptions of people vary across cultures in ways unique to their respective cultures. The first research question in this study seeks to determine whether both the Chinese and the U.S. Americans perceive conflict similarly. Conflict situations were created and these scenarios form the basis

for the analysis of conflict behavior. Therefore, the first research question is: *Do Chinese and U.S. Americans have a similar perception of conflict in the four different conflict situations generated for this study?*

Since the concern for personal relationships is a major characteristic of the collectivistic cultures, a determination was necessary as to how members of these cultures handled conflict in different interpersonal contexts. Knutson, Lashbrook, and Heemer (1976) describe three identifiable variables detectable in conflict episodes: substantive, affective, and procedural. Their research, based on an extensive survey of U.S. American samples, located the existence of interpersonal (affective) aspects in all conflict situations, implying that the relationship concern is not independent from conflict management for U.S. Americans. Several studies have analyzed conflict through the use of two dimensions: content and relationship (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Fisher & Ury, 1981; Hocker & Wilmot, 1991), however this research failed to determine whether these two dimensions were either accurate or exhaustive. Therefore, the second research questions asks: *Are affective and substantive elements of interpersonal conflict closely related in both the Chinese and U.S. American cultures?*

Given the variations in cultural values between the Chinese and the U.S. Americans on the power and status of people involved in conflict, it became necessary to examine the impact of power on conflict management. For example, Bond, Wan, Leung, and Giacalone's (1985) research implies that power status influences Chinese responses to verbal insults, but not U.S. Americans. The final research question, therefore, seeks an answer to: *Does the power status of a conflict party contribute to different conflict management styles between the Chinese and the U.S. Americans?*

In view of the analyses of Chinese and U.S. American cultural values as well as the results of the empirical studies reported above, three hypotheses were tested in this study:

- H1: U.S. Americans will use a control-oriented communication style more than the Taiwanese in conflict management;
- H2: U.S. Americans will use a solution-oriented communication style more than the Taiwanese in conflict management;
- H3: The Taiwanese will use a non-confrontation-oriented style more than the U.S. Americans in conflict management.

### **Method**

Five conflict management instruments served as important resources in

the development of our current measurement tool: Conflict Management Survey, or CMS (Hall, 1973); Conflict Mode Survey, or MODE (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974); Conflict Management Message Style, or CMMS (Ross & DeWine, 1988); Organizational Conflict Inventory, or ROCE-II (Rhim, 1983), and Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument, or OCCI (Putnam & Wilson, 1982). Hall's CMS instrument allows the respondents to choose their preferred conflict management style in five different contexts: personal; interpersonal; small group; intergroup; and, overall contexts. Thomas and Kilmann's MODE asks individuals to choose one of the two styles they usually adopt in conflict situations, assertiveness or cooperation. Rhim's ROCE-II contains 35 Likert-type items to measure five major types of conflict management style when the conflict involves a boss, subordinate, or a peer: integrating; dominating; obliging; avoiding; and, compromising. Ross and DeWine's CMMS focuses on the type of messages used to manage conflict: self-oriented; issue-oriented, and other-oriented. The instrument contains 18 Likert-type items, with 6 items reflecting each of the three styles used in conflict situations. Putnam and Wilson's OCCI uses four hypothetical conflict episodes to elicit responses recorded on seven-point Likert scales.

These five instruments share a similar feature: the use of general statements to yield responses without contextual anchorage. Their failure to provide specific conflict situations to elicit responses creates difficulties in the determination of whether the respondents hold similar ideas about a particular conflict situation. In a cross-cultural study, particularly among situation-oriented Chinese respondents, this "mind gap" may be problematic. Further, the general nature of the statements typically taps the preference of ideal conflict management style rather than approximating one's real behavioral choices.

### **The Instrument**

To avoid these instrumentation problems, the present study sampled business employees in the United States of America and Taiwan. Four scenarios were constructed to reflect conflict situations in business organizations.\* The first scenario concerns a conflict of shared job responsibility between two equals. The second conflict scenario describes a conflict of job assignments between two individuals of unequal power status. The third scenario involves a matter of unethical and illegal professional conduct between two individuals of unequal power status and close interpersonal relations. The fourth scenario portrays a conflict between two department heads of equal power who must represent and protect their

respective departmental interests. In addition to these personal conflicts, the four scenarios allowed an assessment of power distance and official responsibility in conflict management style.

To answer the research questions and test the hypotheses, the respondents in both the Chinese and U.S. American samples were asked to indicate whether each scenario constituted a conflict situation and, if so, to indicate the degree of the conflict's intensity. For those who felt that conflict existed in the scenarios, they were asked to choose their preferred conflict resolution strategy from six alternatives. These practical strategies were generated in a preliminary study conducted in both cultures to insure natural conditions. This instrument construction allowed comparison of the three conflict management styles preferred in the two cultures: non-confrontational; solution-oriented; and, controlling. Non-confrontational conflict management refers to verbal or nonverbal strategies used to avoid disagreement, downplay controversy, sidestep issues, or use mediators to avoid direct conflict. The solution-oriented style of conflict management designates direct verbal communication about the situation aimed at finding a solution to the conflict. The controlling style of conflict is defined as addressing the disagreement and the opposing party directly, arguing for one's position persistently, and taking control of the interaction through the use of verbal and nonverbal messages to emphasize demands.

To tap the pattern of choice of the three conflict management styles, respondents were asked to choose one of six conflict management strategies for each of the four conflict scenarios. For instance, in Case 1, a conflict involving shared work responsibility, the scenario reads:

You and Mr. Smith, both software engineers in a computer company, have worked as a team designing programs since January, 1995, the time when this company hired you. As a new employee, you want to perform well both on the job and in your relationship with colleagues in order to impress your boss. On the contrary, your partner, Mr. Smith, a three-year employee of the company and a lazy person with little motivation, does just enough work to get by and frequently misses deadlines. As a result, you have been taking most responsibility for group projects and often work extra hours. In the meantime, Mr. Smith seems comfortable with this unfair division of responsibility and takes advantage of you.

For those who perceive the scenario as having a potential conflict, the six conflict management strategies for the respondents to choose are:

1. I will report this situation to our supervisor and ask that the three of us meet to arrange a fair division of work.

2. I will talk to Mr. Smith directly about this unfair situation and tell him, "I am not going to take this anymore. You should do your share of work."
3. I will talk to Mr. Smith privately, explain my concerns, and ask him to take more responsibility in completing our tasks.
4. I will simply slow down my schedule and force my partner to take more responsibility.
5. I will file a request upward for transfer to another team.
6. I will not let this bother me, and I will do nothing to change the situation.

In this study, choosing the first or any of the last three options is operationally defined as using a non-confrontational style. In selecting Option 1, respondents choose to go through a mediator instead of handling the problems themselves. In choosing Options 4, 5, and 6, respondents simply resist passively, ignoring or avoiding the conflict rather than confronting the colleague directly (Option 2) or seeking a solution to the problem (Option 3). Respondents selecting Option 2 are operationally defined as engaging in a control-oriented style of conflict management, while those who select Option 3 are operationally defined as employing a solution-oriented conflict management style. Cases 2, 3, and 4 use the same procedure of measurement to determine the style of conflict management chosen.

### **The Samples**

The convenience sample of a total of 245 U.S. American and 318 Taiwanese Chinese business employees generated the data for this study. Male employees made up 46.7% of the U.S. American sample; the Taiwanese sample had 55.2% male respondents. The average age of the U.S. American sample ( 40.1 years) was slightly higher than the Taiwanese sample (36.2 years). Within the U.S. American sample, 40.7% had a college degree compared to 36.6% of the Taiwanese sample. As expected, more than half of the U.S. American sample identified themselves as Christian and more than half of the Taiwanese sample were Buddhists/Taoists. The top three industries/businesses represented in the U.S. American sample were manufacturing (38.4% of the sample), service (29.4%), and trade (14.2%). Within the Taiwanese sample, 33.5% were employed in trade, 24.4% in manufacturing, and 18.5% in communication/transportation. In terms of job classification, 5.1% of the U.S. American sample identified themselves as business executives, 17.8% as middle managers, 22% as supervisors/low level managers, and 55.1% were average workers. Within the Taiwanese sample, 0.4% identified themselves as high executives, 8.1% came from middle management, 25.8% were supervisors/low level managers, and 68.7% were

average workers.

## Results

### Research Questions

Research Question 1 asks: Do Chinese and U.S. Americans have a similar perception of conflict in the four different conflict situations generated for this study? To answer this research question, the respondents were asked to read each scenario and answer the question, "Under the circumstances described above, do you feel that you are experiencing a conflict with Mr. \_\_\_\_\_?" Their answers were tabulated and are displayed in Table 2 Table indicating that a majority of respondents in both samples perceive conflict in all scenarios. The U.S. Americans perceive conflict more frequently than the Taiwanese. Among those who could not decide or did not see the existence of conflict, Taiwanese respondents consistently outnumbered the U.S. Americans. The data suggest that Chinese respondents are more likely to ignore or play down conflicts.

Research Question 2 asks: *Are affective and substantive elements of interpersonal conflict closely related in both the Chinese and American cultures?* Knutson, Lashbrook, & Heemer (1976) suggest that affective and substantive aspects of conflict are not independent of each other in Anglo-American conflict management. That is, intense substantive disagreements are likely to result in interpersonal disharmony and distance in the Anglo-American cultures. The current study extends the investigation of this relationship to the Chinese culture. To answer this research question, respondents were asked to respond to two 5-point Likert scales. Those who perceived the scenario as having conflict were first asked to indicate the intensity of the conflict by responding to the statement, "My conflict with Mr. Smith is: \_\_\_\_\_." The range of responses to this item was from "extremely intense" (1) to "not intense at all" (5). Next, they were asked whether they could still maintain a pleasant relationship with the conflicting party by reacting to the statement, "Regardless of this conflict, I could still have a pleasant relationship with Mr. Smith." The range of responses to this item was from "strongly agree" (1) to "strongly disagree" (5). The first statement was intended to be a measure of the cognitive, substantive aspect of the conflict. The second statement was used as a measurement of the affective aspect of the conflict. A significant, negative correlation between answers to these two statements suggests that the more intense the conflict, the more likely that a cordial personal relationship would be impossible. A significant,

positive correlation suggests that the respondents would maintain a pleasant personal relationship in spite of a highly substantive conflict with the other party. Table 3 displays the results of these correlational analyses.

Table 2. Perceptions of Conflict in Each Scenario by Culture

	Have Conflict	Have No Conflict	Undecided	Total	X <sup>2</sup>
<b>Case 1</b>					
US (N=245)	93.9%	5.3%	0.8%	100%	14.171
Taiwan (N=319)	84.0%	11.3%	4.7%	100%	p<.05
<b>Case 2</b>					
US (N=245)	91.8%	4.9%	3.3%	100%	15.282
Taiwan (N=318)	80.2%	13.5%	6.3%	100%	p<.05
<b>Case 3</b>					
US (N=245)	97.6%	1.6%	0.8%	100%	12.075
Taiwan (N=317)	90.2%	6.6%	3.2%	100%	p<.05
<b>Case 4</b>					
US (N=245)	91.7%	5.4%	2.9%	100%	4.839
Taiwan (N=316)	85.8%	9.8%	4.4%	100%	n.s.

As shown in Table 3, moderate, but significant, negative correlations were obtained between the two variables in all scenarios. Respondents from both cultures exhibited a general tendency to diminish an amicable personal relationship in the face of intensive substantive conflict. Except in Case 4, the negative correlations are generally lower in the Chinese sample. This result suggests that in the individualistic U.S. American culture, people coping with conflict episodes are more likely to assert independence, claim ownership of feelings, and reduce the importance of maintaining a pleasant interpersonal relationship. In the collective Chinese culture, overt face concerns and pleasant working relationships receive more value. Consequently, the Chinese are less likely to terminate a pleasant personal relationship in the work environment during conflict episodes.

Research Question 3 asks: *Does the power status of a conflict party contribute to different conflict management styles between the Chinese and U.S. Americans?* Among the four scenarios, Cases 1 and 4 involve parties of equal power status. Case 2 involves a party who is of lower power and Case 3

includes a person of higher power status. The preferred options for the scenarios are displayed in Table 4.

In Case 1, a scenario involving team workers with close, face-to-face daily interactions, both samples least preferred the confrontational, control style of conflict management (US=9.2%; Taiwan=7.8%). For the U.S. American sample, however, the solution-oriented style was most preferred (63.3%), followed by the non-confrontation-oriented style (27.5%). The Taiwanese Chinese sample preferred the indirect, non-confrontational style (51.9%) followed by the solution-oriented style (40.3%).

Table 3. Correlations between Conflict Intensity and Willingness to Maintain a Pleasant Interpersonal Relationship

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4
U.S. Sample	-.3810*	-.5438*	-.3860*	-.2502*
Taiwan Sample	-.2784*	-.3601*	-.2604*	-.2570*

P<.001\*

Table 4. Conflict Management Style by Culture

	Control	Non-Solution	Confrontation	X <sup>2</sup>
<b>Case 1</b>				
US (N=229)	9.2%	63.3%	27.5%	31.1346
Taiwan (N=268)	7.8%	40.3%	61.9%	p<.05
<b>Case 2</b>				
US (N=225)	46.2%	16.0%	37.8%	1.0283
Taiwan (N=256)	47.3%	18.8%	34.0%	n.s.
<b>Case 3</b>				
US (N=238)	11.8%	65.1%	23.1%	5.8379
Taiwan (N=285)	14.7%	54.7%	30.5%	n.s.
<b>Case 4</b>				
US (N=220)	60.0%	31.8%	8.2%	6.1840
Taiwan (N=270)	49.3%	38.1%	12.6%	p<.05

In Case 4, a situation where no close, face-to-face daily interaction is involved, the most preferred option for both samples was the direct, control-oriented style (US=60%; Taiwan=49.3%). The solution-oriented style was the second preferred conflict management style chosen by both samples (US=31.8%; Taiwan=38.1%). The indirect, non-confrontational style was the least popular for both samples (US=8.2%; Taiwan=12.6%). As department heads playing the role of group leader responsible for meeting productivity goals, customer needs, as well as subordinate morale, the respondents in Case 4 were much more willing to be assertive by requesting the conflicting party to address the problem equally and seek a solution.

In Case 2, the unequal power status scenario, a subordinate is represented in a conflict situation involving unreasonable job demands from a new boss. Interestingly, for both samples, the most popular option chosen was the control-oriented style (US=46.2%; Taiwan=47.3%). Indirect, non-confrontational style was the second choice for both samples (US=37.8%; Taiwan=34%). Fewer than 20% of both samples chose the solution-oriented style of conflict management. Since Chinese usually are found to defer to authorities, the high percentage of the Taiwanese sample choosing the control-oriented conflict management style was unexpected. Hwang (1997-8) argues, however:

In a power structure emphasizing the ‘principle of respecting the superior’, when the superior ignores feelings of the subordinates and insists on the execution of his will, the inferior may react to fight against him. Both parties “tear off their faces” and confront with open conflict (p. 30).

Case 3 represents a superior-subordinate conflict involving administrative and legal responsibilities as well as a close interpersonal relationship. Over half of the respondents in both samples chose the solution-oriented style (US=65.1%; Taiwan=54.7%), followed by the non-confrontational style (US=23.1%; Taiwan=30.5%). The least preferred option was the control-oriented style (US=11.8%; Taiwan=14.7%). In this case, the confrontational, control-oriented style was least preferred because respondents in both cultures may feel that as vertical in-group members (Hwang, 1997-8), this approach has the potential of destroying the life-long relationship. The milder solution-oriented style seemed to be the most sensible solution to the problem for the majority of respondents in so far as moral and legal responsibilities are concerned.

Judging from the diverse responses of both samples to scenarios involving equal and unequal power status, it seems that the measurement failed to assert the sole influence of power distance on conflict management style in both cultures. The data suggest that in cross-cultural studies, one should not ignore the role played by situational factors. Thus, the results generated from general Likert-type statements without situational anchors should be interpreted with caution.

### **Hypotheses**

Hypothesis 1 states that *U.S. Americans will use a control-oriented communication style more than the Taiwanese in conflict management*. As Table 4 displays, only a slightly higher percentage of the U.S. Americans than the Taiwanese selected the control-oriented conflict management style in Case 1. The Taiwanese displayed a slightly higher percentage than the U.S. Americans did for the control-oriented style in Cases 2 and 3. In Case 4, the U.S. Americans displayed a significantly higher preference for the control-oriented style than the Taiwanese did. In summary, no consistent pattern was found across all situations or scenarios. Our data fail to support the hypothesis that as members of an individualistic culture, U.S. Americans invariably are more likely to choose a control-oriented conflict management style than the Taiwanese Chinese, members of a collective culture, in all situations.

Hypothesis 2 states that *U.S. Americans will use a solution-oriented communication style more than the Taiwanese in conflict management*. The data from Cases 1 and 3 suggest that U.S. American respondents are more likely to use a solution-oriented style than the Taiwanese. In Case 3, even though the U.S. American sample shows a higher propensity to choose the solution-oriented style than the Taiwanese sample, the difference was not significant. In Cases 2 and 4, the differences between the two samples were negligible. The data do not support the hypothesis in all conflict situations.

Hypothesis 3 states that *the Taiwanese will use a non-confrontational-oriented style more than the U.S. Americans in conflict management*. In two out of four cases (1, & 4) the data supported this hypothesis.

### **Discussion**

Even though a majority of both samples perceived conflict in all four cases, significantly fewer Taiwanese Chinese viewed the existence of conflict in all scenarios. This finding is consistent with previous research reflecting the Chinese propensity to play down conflict and save face. The results

suggest the validity of the Chinese saying, “*da shi hwa hsio, hsio shi hwa wu*” (dissolve small conflicts, and play down the large ones).

The results also indicate that the Taiwanese Chinese respondents, though admitting that the intensity of substantive conflict diminishes the likelihood of a pleasant relationship with the conflicting party, were more likely than their U.S. American counterparts to ignore or tolerate substantive disagreement. The Taiwanese Chinese prefer to maintain a pleasant relationship in their interactions with conflicting parties. Even though substantive conflict clearly exists, The Taiwanese Chinese are more willing to maintain a friendly relationship. There appears to be strong support for the Chinese propensity of maintaining a positive face with all parties during a conflict episode. The U.S. Americans, on the other hand, emphasize self-face and are more willing to abandon personal relationships during conflict episodes. As Hwang (1997-8) observed in Chinese culture, if daily interactions among conflicting parties are unavoidable, people may be “. . . forced to keep the superficial harmony by following the social manners” (p. 31). Hwang (1997-8) further notes, “As a cultural idea of Confucianism, ‘politeness’ without any ingredient of ‘benevolence’ is called by the Chinese as ‘caring about other’s face superficially’ (*fuyen mientze*)” (p. 31).

The divergent patterns of conflict management strategies found in this study displayed no consistent difference between the U.S. Americans and the Taiwanese Chinese in conflict management style. The results suggest a much more complex relationship between culture and conflict management styles. Further studies are needed to gauge the interplay of culture and situational variables. It appears that in cross-cultural comparisons, cultural differences cannot be expected to serve as the sole predictor of stylistic differences in conflict communication behavior. Important situational variables such as organizational responsibilities, frequency of conflict episodes and daily face-to-face interactions, social status, and other environmental factors can all contribute to variations in conflict management style. Indeed, Triandis and Singelis (1998) report: “When an individual is presented with a scenario where one option is to maintain harmony and another to ‘tell it as it is’, the ‘correct’ response depends on where and with whom the interaction occurs” (p. 36). In the same vein, Hwang (1997-8) contends that within Chinese culture, conflict management styles vary greatly depending on the relations among the conflicting parties and the contexts involved. They can take the form of confrontation, forbearance, endurance, indirect communication, face saving, superficial compliance, and severance. Any of these conflict management strategies is likely, depending on the situation and the

relationships among the conflicting parties. For U.S. Americans, Noricks, et al. (1987) suggest that people over the age of 56 prefer a greater consideration of context to content in judging the personal attributes of others. Triandis and Singelis advise:

[The] . . . mixing of backgrounds and experiences is increasingly a reality of the modern world. It is therefore not enough to know the culture of the person with whom we are interacting. We need to know a good deal more, and take it into account when formulating our behavior. A more sophisticated approach is to temper cultural knowledge with demographic and life-experience information . . . (p. 36-37).

On the other hand, the samples used in our study may complicate the cross-cultural comparisons. Our samples differ on several demographic variables and may have affected the results. There were substantially more males in the Taiwanese sample (Taiwanese=55.2%; US=46.7%) than the U.S. American sample. The Taiwanese sample contained fewer business executives than the U.S. American sample (Taiwanese=0.4%; US=5.1%) and a greater percentage of the Taiwanese sample were average workers (Taiwanese=68.7%; US=55.1%). Substantial differences in the types of businesses represented were also observed. More of the Taiwanese were from the trade industry than the U.S. Americans (Taiwanese=33.5%; US=14.2%). The largest percentage of businesses represented in the U.S. American sample was manufacturing (38.4%); the Taiwanese reported a lower percentage of people representing the manufacturing category (24.4%). No Taiwanese were in the service business category, but 29.4% of the U.S. Americans were represented. There was no percentage reported in the communication/transportation category for the U.S. Americans, but 18.5% of the Taiwanese sample were in this category. These differences between the two samples may have contributed considerable variations within the cultures. Future studies should carefully control these situational and demographic variables.

The current study also suffers from other methodological limitations. The use of convenience, rather than random, samples further limits the generalizability of the findings. While the use of scenarios have mitigated the difficulties associated with interpreting data generated by traditional social scientific measurements—e.g., Likert scales, the scenarios might not be typical of conflicts in general. Perhaps a better approach would involve the creation of scenarios reflecting a longer history of repeated conflictual interactions. Further, even though efforts were made to increase functional equivalence of the four scenarios in both languages, they might not attain the

level of equivalence desired, thus creating confounding effects as Cai (1988) has suggested.

In reviewing this cross-cultural investigation, one should also be aware that even though the Taiwanese Chinese have often been categorized as members of a collective culture, they are experiencing swift and powerful social changes in the direction of democracy, market economy, and individualism. Given the current Taiwanese political campaign rhetoric and heated open social debates, sometimes within in-group members, in the pursuit of individual freedom and identity, social mobility, and societal redirection from the rule of man to the rule of law, meaningful and profound social changes appear to have taken place. Though the traditional Confucian tenet of respect for authority and harmony still exerts influence, it has most certainly been diminished. That is, the Taiwanese may be more individualistic than we previously thought.

The current study by no means should be taken as evidence that clear differences between truly individualistic and truly collectivistic cultures are impossible to locate. Rather, the study suggests that, insofar as cross-cultural studies of conflict management styles are concerned, the significant contribution of situational variables cannot be ignored. Conflict management in any culture takes on multi-faceted proportions and requires an emic perspective in order to obtain a better understanding of etic comparisons.

\* Copies of the conflict scenarios in both English and Chinese are available from the authors.

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