

The Determinants of Conflict Management Among Chinese and Americans

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Abstract

This study investigated the determinants of conflict management through a comparison of 50 Americans and 48 Chinese students who reflected low-context and high-context cultures respectively. The results, based on in-depth interviews, indicated differences and similarities among factors pertaining to conflict management in the two groups.

Introduction

A number of studies have examined conflict management from different cultural perspectives. For example, Hall (1976) identified two types of cultural contexts influencing the way people handle conflict: high-context and low-context cultures. Low-context cultures tend to emphasize "I." and value "individual orientations, overt communication codes, and maintain a heterogeneous normative structure with low cultural demand/low cultural constraint characteristics;" while high-context cultures tend to emphasize "we" and value "group-identity orientation, covert communication codes, and maintain a homogeneous normative structure with high cultural demand/high cultural constraint characteristics" (Ting-Toomey , 1985, p. 76).

Ting-Toomey further indicated that low-context cultures feature several characteristics in a conflict situation: (1) individuals perceive the causes of conflict as instrumental, (2) conflicts occur when a person's normative expectations of the situation are violated, (3) individuals assume a confrontational, direct attitude toward conflicts, and (4) the tendency of individuals to use factual-inductive or axiomatic-deductive styles of conflict management. In contrast, in high-context cultures: (1) individuals perceive the causes of conflict as expressive, (2) conflicts occur when collective or cultural normative expectations of the situation are violated, (3) individuals assume a non-confrontational, indirect attitude toward conflicts, and (4) they use affective-intuitive style of conflict management. Leung's (1988) study has identified the United States as a low-context culture, and China as a high-context culture.

Hsu (1953) examined the influence of culture on conflict and indicated that Chinese are more situation-centered and emotion-constrained, while Americans are more individual-centered and emotion-displayed. Nomura and Barnlund (1983) reported that the Japanese tend to show less dissatisfaction than Americans. Research by Ma (1990, 1992) consistently showed that North Americans are more explicit than Chinese in conflict situations. Chua and Gudykunst (1987) and Ting-Toomey (1988) found that low-context members tend to adopt direct and confrontation conflict styles, as opposed to indirect and avoidance styles adopted by high-context members. Ting-Toomey, Trubisky, and Nishida (1989) also found that Americans tend to use a dominating style, an integrating style, and a compromising style to a greater extent than the Japanese, and the Japanese use an avoidance style more than Americans. Other scholars have provided similar findings and concluded that the use of confrontation versus non-confrontation conflict style reflects a major difference in communication style between Chinese and Americans (Knutson, Hwang, & Deng, forthcoming; Lindin, 1974; Peng, He, & Zhu, forthcoming; Schneider, 1985; Wolfson & Norden, 1984; Yang, 1978). Although differences of conflict management between Western and Eastern people were attributed to cultural differences (Becker, 1986; Oliver, 1961; Yum, 1988), most studies in this line of research have

focused on the differences of conflict management styles rather than the identification of causes for managing the conflict. This study therefore aimed to examine the determinants of conflict management in high-context and low-context cultures.

The Determinants of Conflict Management

Previous literature suggested that six factors might affect conflict management: face, inter-relation, seniority, power, credibility, and severity of the conflict (Chen & Starosta, 1997-8; Chung, 1996; Hwang, 1987, 1997-8). "Face" refers to the projected image of a person's self in a relationship network (Ting-Toomey, 1988). It represents an individual's social position and prestige gained from the successful performance of one or more specific social roles that are well recognized by other members in the society (Hu, 1944). Orientation to the use of face work reflects the conflict style a person selects. According to Ting-Toomey (1988), low-context cultures emphasize self-face concern and negative-face need. In contrast, high-context cultures emphasize other-face concern and positive-face need.

Jia (1997-8) and Hwang (1987) indicated that in the Chinese society face management is a power game often played by Chinese people. It is not only an important way to show off one's power, but also a method to manipulate "the allocator's choices of allocating resources to one's benefit" (p. 962). Losing one's face is to injure one's self-esteem which will result in emotional uneasiness or a serious conflict. Thus, in the Chinese society one has to utilize every kind of method to "earn face" (Chu, 1983), and to enhance another's face (Chiao, 1981). Lastly, Silin (1976) pointed out that Chinese frequently use the method to manage a modern social organization, and Chen and Xiao (1993) and Pye (1982) indicated that giving face is the key to successful negotiation with Chinese in business.

"Inter-relation" refers to the relationship between the two parties. The relationship may be as friends, family, supervisor/subordinate, or coworkers along with many other relationships. Waggenpack and Hensley (1989) indicated that college students prefer to establish relationships with those who show less argumentativeness and

aggressiveness in conflict situations. Chen and Starosta (1997-8), and Leung (1988) confirmed that Chinese are more likely to pursue a conflict with a stranger than with a friend. According to Chiao (1982), Jacobs (1979), Hwang (1987, 1997-8), and Yang (1982), maintaining a proper relationship is a way for Chinese to avoid serious conflicts and embarrassing encounters. Further study by Chang and Holt (1991) indicated that inter-relation is not only a tool used to avoid conflicts, but also as a social resource such as resolving conflicts among people. In other words, inter-relations are "potential power in persuasion, influence, and control" (Chung, 1991, p. 9).

"Seniority" plays an important role in the social interaction of Eastern societies. Although the aged receive respect in most human societies, compared to Western society, people in the East show much more respect for the elder. The aged enjoy a high status in Japan (Carmichael, 1991), and seniority is a major determinant for status and authority in Japanese organizations (Nishiyama, 1971). Bond and Hwang (1986) and Chen and Chung (1997) specified that the Confucian tradition accords the senior member of a relationship a wide range of prerogatives and power. In a case analysis of the conflict between two factions of a ruling party in the 1990 Taiwanese presidential election campaign, Chung (1991) reported that seniority and inter-relation are the most discernible characters for the recruitment of mediators. The eight statesmen who served as conflict mediators in the case were between 78 and 92 years old.

"Power" refers to the control of resources valued by other party. According to Folger and Poole (1984), the power one exerts sustains moves and countermoves of the participants in conflict situations. Although the emphasis of power resources varies in different cultures, what is similar in most cultures is that power is the determinant of conflict styles individuals will select. Americans consider the control of material resources such as money and information to be a source of power (Nadler, Nadler, and Broome, 1985), the Japanese associate power with seniority (Prosser, 1978), and Chinese use power as a dominant way to require foreigners to negotiate (Pye, 1982) or to gain compliance in decision making process (Chen, 1997b). In all these

situations power is believed to be an influencing factor in a conflict situation.

"Credibility" refers to the degree of trust one person has for another. Trust may have a significant impact on the communication process. Deutsch (1968) found that perceived trust increases the amount of interpersonal communication. Griffin (1967) reported that an increase of trust produces changes in interpersonal relationships, including control over the interaction process and the increasing acceptance of others' influence. In particular, the degree of trust among people may determine whether the persons adopt a cooperative or competitive stance in negotiations or conflict situations (Chen, 1997a; Nadler, Nadler, & Broome, 1985).

"Severity of the conflict" refers to the size of the potential gain or loss in a conflict. Leung (1988) indicated that people are more likely to pursue a dispute when a high stake is involved. The size of loss in a dispute significantly affects an individual's likelihood of pursuing the conflict (Chen, 1997a). A similar argument was also reported by Gladwin and Walter (1980) regarding the effect of the severity involved in conflict resolution strategies in multinational corporations.

These six factors, then, are deemed important for examining conflict management in both low-context and high-context cultures. Because the emphasis on each factor may vary in different cultural contexts, it was hypothesized that significant differences exist among Chinese and Americans in terms of the six factors. In addition to the hypothesis, this study as well examined whether differences exist among Chinese and Americans regarding the way they resolve the conflict and elements that affect the conflict management in the hypothetical conflict situation. Gender difference was also investigated.

Method

Data were collected by interviewing subjects from the two nations. The format of the interview was semi-structured which allowed the interviewers to use follow-up and probing questions. The

definitions of all the concepts were clearly explained before the questions were posed. The following are three sample questions:

- (1) If you were the leader in this situation, what would you do? (The question was given after the interviewee asked to read a hypothetical conflict situation)
- (2) If you were the leader in this situation, what would be the major factors that affect the way you manage the conflict?
- (3) Would you please rate the following questions on a 1 to 7 scale with 1 representing "not at all," 4 "not decided," and 7 representing "very much?" First, does the concept "face" affect the way you manage the conflict (followed by inter-relation, seniority, power, credibility, and severity of the conflict)?

Participants and Procedure

Ninety-eight students in a midsize northeastern public university were recruited for the purpose of this study. Fifty of them were American students (M = 24, F = 26) with a mean age of 26.83. Forty-eight were Chinese students (M = 25, F = 23) with a mean age of 28.62. Two trained research assistants, including an American and a Chinese, conducted the interviews; the American assistant interviewed the American students in English. The Chinese assistant interviewed Chinese students by using both English and Mandarin whenever the situation required bilingualism. Each participant was interviewed individually, and each interview lasted from 30 to 75 minutes with an average of 40 minutes.

Although the interviewers took notes in the interview, except for those who disagreed, the interviews were also taped and confidentiality and anonymity were assured to all subjects. All the interviews were completed within two months. To solicit subjects' responses on conflict management, Baxter's (1984) hypothetical scenario was adopted in this study with a slight revision. Participants were asked to describe what they would do and what would affect their way to manage the conflict if they were in the scenario. A 2 by 2 factorial design was used to test the nation and gender differences.

Results

MANOVA was used to examine the effect of nation and gender on the six factors. MANOVA produced a significant main effect for nation [$F(4,44) = 2.95, p < .05$]. The results of univariate tests indicated that Americans substantially scored higher on the factor of severity of the conflict than Chinese in the conflict situation, and Chinese scored significantly higher than Americans on the factors of seniority and face (see Table 1). Although the univariate tests also showed that male scored significantly higher than female on the factor of power, the multivariate tests do not reveal a significant main effect for gender.

Table 1. National and Sex Differences on the Six Factors

Factors	Nation		Gender	
	American (N = 50)	Chinese (48)	Male (49)	Female (49)
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Severity	*6.22 (.99)	5.56 (.83)	6.12 (.97)	5.67 (1.63)
Credibility	5.28 (1.34)	5.02 (1.65)	5.18 (1.34)	5.12 (1.65)
Relation	5.12 (1.46)	5.19 (1.57)	5.06 (1.37)	5.25 (1.65)
Power	4.14 (1.82)	4.40 (1.69)	*4.61 (1.66)	3.91 (1.80)
Seniority	*3.76 (1.59)	4.52 (1.84)	4.08 (1.70)	4.18 (1.82)
Face	*3.44 (1.73)	4.23 (1.80)	3.76 (1.85)	3.90 (1.77)

Note. * $p < .05$.

Table 1 also indicates the rank order of the six factors. The results revealed a great similarity of rank order between the two groups. Nevertheless, Americans scored high on severity of conflict, credibility, and inter-relation, medium on power, seniority, and face. The Chinese

scored high on severity of conflict, inter-relation, and credibility, and medium on seniority, power, and face. The mean scores as well indicate that the six factors show an impact on the conflict management for the two groups.

Participants' answers were analyzed to examine the differences among Chinese and Americans on the way they resolved the conflict and elements that affect the conflict management in the hypothetical situation. Table 2 reports the order of the five methods used most often by the groups. The results revealed that both groups emphasized the importance of giving assistance to their counterparts in order to complete the job. However, Americans more focused on giving help by themselves, while Chinese more focused on searching for help from group members. This indicates that the Chinese tended to be more group oriented in the conflict situation.

Table 2. Methods Subjects Used to Resolve the Conflict

Americans	Chinese
1. Explain	1. Members' Assistance
2. My Assistance	2. My Assistance
3. Members' Assistance	3. Explain Situation
4. Discuss with Professor	4. Give Low Grade
5. Ask to Re-do	

Table 3 reports the elements that affect participants' management of the conflict in the hypothetical conflict situation. The results demonstrated that Americans showed a less authoritarian tendency in the conflict situation, and both groups used a dominating style when their counterparts showed negative or uncooperative attitudes or behaviors toward the assignment. Group interests were also a factor influencing the decision of using a dominating style in both groups.

Table 3. Elements That Affect Conflict Management

Americans	Chinese
1. Time Constraint	1. My Authority
2. Don't Care the Project	2. I'm Right
3. Grade on the Line	3. Affect Group Interest
4. Poor Performance	4. Grade on the Line
5. Lack of Cooperation	5. Lack of Cooperation
6. Negative Attitude	6. Poor Performance
7. Laziness	7. Don't Care the Project
8. Refuse to Re-do	8. Time Constraint
9. Frustrated/Angry	9. Lose My Face
10. Members Don't Help	10. Negative Attitude
11. Affect Group Interest	11. Members Don't Help
12. My Authority	12. Not Trustworthy

Discussion

This study investigated Chinese and Americans regarding how they manage a conflict. Several implications can be drawn from the results. First, Chinese scored significantly higher than Americans on face and seniority, while Americans scored significantly higher than Chinese on severity of conflict. The findings were consistent with the distinctions between people of low-context and high-context cultures, and with research on the differences between Chinese and American cultural values (Chen, 1992; Hwang, 1987, 1997-8; Stewart, 1972; Yum, 1988).

The results also showed that Chinese were more likely to use an authoritarian style to manage the conflict when they were empowered. When Chinese perceived that they had the legitimate authority, they tended to use a dominating style to manage the conflict. The results were consistent with Meade and Whittaker's (1967) findings that Chinese students were more authoritarian than American students. According to Wen (1988), the integration of power and authoritarianism in the Chinese culture originated from Confucius' idea of the hierarchical structure of sex, age, and generation.

Second, the universal nature of perceptions and feelings was shown in conflict situations. Although both groups of participants showed significant differences in three of the six factors, the results indicated an overwhelming similarity in the rank order of the six variables. According to Schwartz (1990) and Schwartz and Sagiv (1995), the dichotomous classification of cultural orientation is often misleading. The dichotomy implicitly leads people to believe that the two cultural values are in polar opposition to one another. Schwartz has argued that many universal values such as achievement, security, and hedonism are emphasized in both kinds of culture. The similarity found in the two groups in the conflict management indicated that people of different cultures might share similar values.

Finally, two considerations for future research should be noticed when interpreting the results of this kind of study. First, the personal biases of participants towards a positive presentation of self might affect the results. The Chinese emphasis on face work, for instance, might cause the problem. Second, the length of time Chinese interviewees stayed in the United States might also affect the results. Those who have been in the United States for long periods might have been acculturated in a degree that would significantly influence their response patterns.

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