Conflict Management Styles across Cultures

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Globalization causes an increasing need for individuals to be effective across cultural borders, both within and outside their country of residence. Because companies increasingly operate on a global level, a growing number of employees are sent out to different countries for periods varying from short business trips to long-term expatriate assignments. Also in the local context, growing migration and refugee streams cause customers and clients to cover multiple cultural backgrounds.

Culture is defined as a society's characteristic profile with respect to values, norms, and behaviors. Gudykunst (1997) uses the metaphor of a "game" to represent interaction between individuals in a social environment, where culture is said to determine the "rules of the game being played." The way individuals tend to deal with conflict situations is one of the "rules" that may be affected by their cultural background. We all know stories about international business negotiations that fail because of mutual misunderstandings that make one party feel offended by the other, or because of a general lack of trust. Conflict refers to the tension between team members as a result of real or perceived differences (Thomas, 1992). Note that the word "differences" is already part of the definition of conflict, suggesting that where individuals of different cultural backgrounds meet, the probability of conflict is higher. As this entry will show, typical strategies for dealing with conflict also seem to differ across cultures. This lowers the chance that, when conflicts occur, they will be resolved in an effective way.

The literature distinguishes between different strategies in dealing with conflict, also termed conflict management styles. The behavior that individuals display in reaction to conflict is usually referred to as negotiation. Dual concern theory argues that negotiation strategies can be described on two dimensions: *concern for self* versus *concern for others* (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). The two dimensions result in four negotiation strategies that represent combinations of low and high on these dimensions. High concern for self as well as others is referred to as *integrating*; low concern for self combined with high concern for others as *obliging*; high concern for self and low concern for others as *dominating*; low concern for self and others as *avoiding*. Finally, a fifth style that represents a moderate concern for self combined with a moderate concern for others is referred to as *compromising*. In general, strategies that combine a concern for self with a concern for others (integrating and compromising) are considered most effective.

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It appears that the specific conflict management style that individuals are likely to choose differs across cultures: For example, avoidance is more commonly associated with Eastern cultures, whereas dominating behavior seems more prevalent in Western cultures (e.g., Ting-Toomey et al., 1991).

Below, this entry presents an overview of cultural dimensions which have been identified as influencing conflict management and negotiation strategies. However, for a deeper understanding of how cultural differences influence conflict outcomes in concrete situations, it is important to go beyond preferred negotiation strategies. It is necessary to also gain insight into the social and psychological processes that are at play when conflict occurs between members of different cultural groups. Therefore, the second part of the entry discusses research on the social psychological dynamics of intercultural conflicts.

Cultural variation in conflict management styles

The best-known framework for differentiating between cultures is that by Hofstede (2001). Not surprisingly, the majority of research concerning cultural differences in conflict management styles has made use of this framework as a basis for comparison. Outlined below is the reported influence on conflict management styles of four of Hofstede's cultural dimensions: *individualism/collectivism*, *power distance*, *masculinity/femininity*, and *uncertainty avoidance.* This is followed by a discussion about how conflict management styles may be affected by cultural differences in interpersonal contact, specifically the influence of *high-/low-context communication* and the importance of *face* in interactions (Adair & Brett, 2005; Doucet, Jehn, Weldon, Chen, & Wang, 2009).

Most studies on cultural differences in conflict styles have been related to the dimension *individualism/collectivism*, which Hofstede claims to be the core component of cultural variability. Individualist cultures emphasize the importance of the individual, while collectivist cultures emphasize the importance of groups and relationships with others. When relating this dimension to conflict, the main proposition is that in individualist cultures, there is a stronger focus on the dimension "concern for self," whereas collectivist cultures place more emphasis on the dimension "concern for others," thus influencing the preferred negotiation strategies of individuals. In one of the first studies on cultural variability in conflict management styles, Ting-Toomey and colleagues (1991) indeed showed that Americans make more use of the dominating style, whereas collectivist cultures such as Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Taiwanese make more use of the obliging/avoiding styles. A more recent study by Wang, Lin, Chan, and Shi (2005) surveyed a large number of expatriate managers in mainland China, and compared their preferred conflict management strategies with that of local Chinese managers. As predicted, their findings show a higher preference for competitive and dominant tactics among managers from individualist cultures, and more compromising or obliging conflict styles in those from collectivist cultures. More evidence is provided by Holt and DeVore (2005), who reviewed the literature on individualism/collectivism and conflict management styles, and analyzed the combined findings of 36 separate studies covering

a broad range of cultures and samples. The results of their meta-analysis confirm the above-mentioned distinction of concern for self and concern for others as important in explaining conflict management styles in different cultures. They concluded that, across the studies in their analysis, members of collectivist cultures tend to prefer avoiding and compromising, whereas those from individualist cultures use the dominating style more often.

Another of Hofstede's dimensions, *power distance*, refers to the degree to which members of a culture tend to accept the notion that power is distributed unequally. High power distance societies are characterized by an acceptance of hierarchy, whereas in low power distance societies, there is a stronger tendency to question authority. Volkema (2004) conducted a study on the acceptance of different negotiation behaviors among graduate students across a wide range of countries. He reported that respondents from high power distance cultures display lower acceptance of competitive bargaining tactics, such as exaggerating the opening demand or hiding one's bottom line. In another study, Van Oudenhoven, Mechelse, and De Dreu (1998) distributed a questionnaire among managers in different countries in the European Union, asking them about recent conflict with their colleagues, and the manner in which they handled these situations. When compared to respondents from high power distance cultures (e.g., Belgium), respondents from low power distance cultures (e.g., Denmark) reported more use of integrative and compromising conflict styles. Integrative conflict behaviors are aimed at maximizing joint outcomes rather than maximizing the outcomes for one party. These findings could be explained by the idea that in high power distance cultures, it is seen as more appropriate that one party comes out better than the other, and negotiation tactics are influenced accordingly. In low power distance cultures, negotiating parties may be less comfortable with such outcomes, and may therefore be more inclined to compromise.

Hofstede's dimension *masculinity/femininity* refers to the degree of role division between genders. In masculine countries there is a preference for men and women to behave in accordance with traditional gender roles, whereas in feminine cultures this preference is less pronounced. Leung and colleagues (1990) compared preferred conflict management strategies of Dutch and Canadian subjects, two nationalities that are similar in all Hofstede dimensions except masculinity/femininity (the Dutch scoring higher on the latter). The Canadian subjects preferred methods that are likely to heighten the confrontation and competitiveness between the disputants more than the Dutch subjects. On the other hand, the Dutch subjects preferred methods that allow compromises to be made. The study by Van Oudenhoven and colleagues (1998) mentioned above also reports that femininity is positively related to cooperative conflict management among coworkers (indicating high concern for others), and masculinity is related to competitive tactics (indicating high concern for self).

Finally, Hofstede's dimension *uncertainty avoidance* refers to the degree to which individuals tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity in life. Within cultures that are said to be highly uncertainty avoidant, such as Chinese and Japanese, security and predictability are valued more strongly, and social interactions tend to be governed by formal rules and guidelines. It appears that uncertainty avoidance does not directly relate to the preference for certain conflict management strategies (Van Oudenhoven

et al., 1998) in the way that the other dimensions do. However, it may influence the way in which the interactions between negotiating parties play out. In the global study by Volkema (2004) mentioned earlier, graduate students from uncertainty avoidant cultures were less likely to accept nonstandard negotiation techniques, such as collecting inappropriate information and influencing the other party's professional networks to gain concessions. These findings are in line with the notion that uncertainty avoidant cultures display a higher tendency to formalize interactions and a lower tolerance for deviant behavior. As a result, the conflict management behaviors of individuals from uncertainty avoidant cultures may be more rule-oriented as well.

As a note of caution with regard to the above, it should be emphasized that most studies on conflict management styles across cultures have focused on the distinction between individualism and collectivism (see also Holt & DeVore, 2005). The other reported relationships between Hofstede dimensions and conflict management are not well understood, and have yet to be firmly established by replication.

Another line of research has focused on the effects of cultural differences. Other researchers have focused on the effects of cultural differences in interpersonal interaction. In particular, the distinction between *high-* and *low-context communication* appears to have an impact on conflict management styles and negotiation strategies. In low-context communication cultures, the transfer of information between individuals is done mainly through language. The message is transferred verbally, and content is delivered in a direct and explicit manner. In short, people "say what they mean" and expect others to do the same. Conversely, in high-context communication cultures, a substantial amount of information is expected to be implicitly understood by the other party through contextual cues, such as nonverbal communication or nuances in the way certain phrases are used. Only a small part of the message is transferred explicitly through words. The success of high-context communication therefore depends on the existence of shared codes between communicating parties. Research has shown that this distinction also has an influence on negotiation and conflict management styles. Adair and Brett (2005) compared negotiation strategies of high-context dyads (e.g., from Russia, Japan) with those used by low-context (e.g., from Germany, Israel) and mixed-context (USA–Hong Kong and USA–Japan) dyads. Their results show that high-context negotiators use a much wider range of negotiating tactics, and focus not only on what is being said, but also on how it is being communicated. Furthermore, they reported that low-context negotiators are more likely to reciprocate direct offers by the other party. When an offer is made, it is seen as a cultural norm to respond with a bid of one's own, which is exemplary of a direct (low-context) communication style. High-context negotiators, on the other hand, are more likely to reciprocate the sharing of priority information—that is, which aspects of the conflict or outcomes they find most important. In high-context cultures, the sharing of such information is used as a means to indirectly steer the negotiation process toward a favorable outcome. It is expected that the other party understands the subtleties of the information-sharing, and will respond in a similar fashion.

As such, the distinction between high-/low-context communication may not affect the preferred conflict management style of the involved parties, but it will affect the way

in which the chosen style is communicated, and how information is shared during the negotiation process. Interestingly, the researchers in the Adair and Brett (2005) study did not find a difference in the overall effectiveness of the negotiation process, only in the processes through which an outcome is reached.

Finally, scholars have linked cultural differences in conflict management styles to the importance of *face* in interpersonal interactions. Saving face refers to a focus on avoiding embarrassment in social interactions, and can apply to both one's own face and that of the other (Ting-Toomey et al., 1991). Interestingly, the concept of face sheds new light on some of the cultural differences in conflict management styles reported above. As already mentioned, collectivist cultures tend to use avoidant styles more often than individualist cultures (Holt & Devore, 2005). However, it has been proposed that avoidance may not necessarily mean the same thing across cultures. Much Western conflict literature considers avoidant conflict strategies to be unproductive and undesirable, for not producing adequate conflict resolution. For example, Doucet and colleagues (2009) interviewed American and Chinese managers, and reported that among Americans, low concern for self in conflict management is associated with lack of confidence. However, in a similar study, Tjosvold and Sun (2002) showed that in East Asian cultures, avoidance may be seen as a desirable negotiation strategy, and they identified a wide range of motives for choosing this conflict management style. These motives, they explain, are often based on saving face of either conflict party, placing much emphasis on maintaining mutual relationships. In fact, respondents in their study even reported using avoidance as a tactic to gain information which was then used to influence the negotiation through a third party. As such, the differences between preferred conflict management styles between cultures may not only be a result of the degree of concern for self versus others that is common in that particular culture, but may also be influenced by how the different styles are judged in a specific social context. Since this context may vary widely between, and even within, cultures, conflict management styles may be even more dependent on the particular social context of a specific group than on measurable differences in conflict partners' positions on cultural dimensions (see Gudykunst, 1997).

Social psychological dynamics underlying intercultural conflict

So far, this entry has focused on cultural dimensions that may explain cultural differences in the use of conflict management styles or negotiation strategies. However, due to globalization and the increased tendency of individuals to interact across cultures, an important next question is how conflict management styles may play out in *inter*cultural settings. Specifically, this entry will examine how cultural differences underlying conflict issues and conflict behavior eventually impact the effectiveness of intercultural conflict resolution. Interestingly, research on cultural diversity in work groups usually suggests the same positive (innovation) and negative outcomes (low well-being, lack of cohesion) that are usually associated with conflict (e.g., Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). In fact, conflict seems an important mediator of both positive and negative outcomes of diversity. Whereas constructive conflict may foster creativity and

innovation, relational or identity-related conflicts cause negative feelings and disintegration (e.g., Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999).

Intercultural conflicts are less likely to evoke integrative conflict behaviors than intracultural conflicts. This is not surprising, since negotiators in an intercultural context face a number of psychological and behavioral challenges (e.g., Imai & Gelfand, 2010). In many cases, uncertainty and lack of control associated with interaction with individuals with different norms and behaviors are experienced as threatening. For example, in contemporary Europe with its increasing Muslim population, conflicts in a work context typically arise from different norms about drinking alcohol at receptions, shaking hands, taking time off during Ramadan, or wearing headscarves. Giving up traditions arouses anxiety among majority members and in negotiating these and related issues, they are inclined to protect their own cultural worldview against the cultural worldview of the other. As a result, negotiating parties may display a stronger concern for self, which results in more competitive and dominating conflict management styles. In addition, negative stereotypes of members from different cultural groups, particularly when they concern cultures that are very different from one's own, lower the chances that the views of one's conflict partner will be perceived as compatible with one's own view. This may result in lower concern for others, which reduces the likelihood of cooperative conflict management styles being used by either party.

At the same time, there is evidence that constructive conflicts in diverse groups may enhance creativity and innovation. An intercultural context can enhance our *cognitive flexibility* by providing us with ideas that are new and different from our own and hence facilitate creative outcomes, thus increasing the likelihood of compromising strategies and favorable conflict outcomes (e.g., Van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007).

Confrontation with different cultural perspectives may also change conflict strategies *within* individuals. In a study on Koreans, European Americans, and Korean Americans, Kim-Jo, Benet-Martínez, and Ozer (2010) explored the role of acculturation and bicultural identity processes in interpersonal conflict resolution preferences. Koreans and European Americans differed in their conflict resolution styles in a manner congruent with individualism/collectivism theory mentioned above, with Koreans more strongly inclined to endorse the traditionally collective style of avoidance more and European Americans more strongly inclined to endorse the individualistic style of competing (cf. dominating). Korean Americans displayed a complex bicultural pattern of conflict resolution: They preferred "competing" more than Koreans and to a similar extent to European Americans, while also preferring "avoidance" more than both European Americans and Koreans. According to Jo and colleagues, this pattern suggests a successful internalization of conflict behaviors that are adaptive in the USA while maintaining important features of their traditional ethnic values (Kim-Jo et al., 2010).

Whether cultural differences result in destructive or constructive conflict behaviors may depend on individual difference variables. For example, a study by Imai and Gelfand (2010) showed that in negotiations between representatives of different cultures, cultural intelligence, defined as a person's capability to successfully adapt to new cultural settings, encouraged cooperative conflict behaviors. Alternatively, the group climate may also affect the occurrence and outcomes of intercultural conflict. For

instance, a study among employees in culturally diverse organizations has shown that an organizational climate which is characterized by appreciation of cultural differences also decreases the experience of intercultural conflict by cultural minority members and enhances positive work outcomes (Hofhuis, Van der Zee, & Otten, 2012).

Conclusions

This entry has discussed how different cultural dimensions have an impact on conflict strategies of members of different cultures. It mentioned that there is clear evidence for cultural differences between Eastern and Western cultures in the use of the different strategies, which are commonly ascribed to differences in the dimension of individualism/collectivism. Other cultural dimensions, such as power distance and masculinity/femininity, also seem to play a role. However, although the dominating conflict styles seem to be more prevalent in the West, this does not necessarily mean that Western cultures are higher on the dimension of "concern for self," whereas Eastern cultures are higher in "concern for others." Recent findings show that as a result of differences in interpersonal interaction, such as high-/low-context communication or the importance of face, appropriate behaviors that display concern for self are likely to be more indirect in Eastern cultures, particularly when they relate to individuals in lower power positions. More research is therefore necessary to gain further insights into different manifestations of both concerns in conflict behavior. Awareness training for international employees about cultural differences in conflict behavior may help prevent clashes that are unnecessary and can have disastrous consequences for business relationships.

Even in the absence of cultural differences in conflict strategies, intercultural conflicts may lead to different outcomes compared to monocultural conflicts. Threat provoked by confrontation with a different cultural worldview and negative stereotypes about different cultures may cause individuals to stress mutual differences rather than similarities and to respond to conflict with distributive behavior. This is not only destructive in the sense that it is harmful for mutual relationships and work satisfaction, it also prohibits the occurrence of positive conflict outcomes at work in terms of creativity and innovation. Training individuals in cultural intelligence or intercultural competencies may buffer destructive conflict outcomes and facilitate cognitive flexibility. Alternatively, organizational departments may try to create an open group climate in which differences are not only acknowledged and positively valued. Such a climate is not only helpful for intercultural conflicts at the local workplace, but is likely to translate into higher awareness and openness to differences in an international setting. In order to be effective in the current global marketplace, such an openness to differences seems to be an absolute necessity.

SEE ALSO: Cross-Cultural Competence; Cultural Diversity in Organizations; Intergroup Conflict and Reconciliation

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