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## **Intercultural Sensitivity and Conflict Management Styles in Cross-Cultural Organizational Situations**

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## **Intercultural Sensitivity and Conflict Management Styles in Cross-Cultural Organizational Situations**

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Increased cultural diversity in work places has aroused considerable attention to conflict management and intercultural sensitivity. However, few studies have investigated these two concepts together. The present study aims to bridge the gap in this line of research with an examination between intercultural sensitivity and conflict management styles in a hypothetical cross-cultural organizational situation. The results from 253 participants indicate that significantly positive and negative relationships exist among the dimensions of the two concepts. Limitations and directions for future research are discussed as well.

With the rapid development of technology, increasing social mobility, globalization of economy, and the emergence of cultural diversity, intercultural human contact at both individual and organizational levels is increasing (Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Chen, 2005). The wide-ranged expansion of human contacts on the one hand calls for people's sensitivity to cultural diversity; on the other hand, the expansion inevitably has caused and will continue to generate more conflicts in different situations. Conflict management and intercultural sensitivity have thus received considerable attention in the past decades (e.g., Blake & Mouton, 1964; Chen & Starosta, 1997b; Morrill & Thomas, 1992; Rahim, 1983; Sternberg & Soriano, 1984; Triandis, 2006).

Conflict has been acknowledged as an important aspect of modern management (Wilson & Jerrell, 1981). Despite the negative effect of conflict, it can achieve productive outcomes, if managed effectively, such as improved relationships (Van De Vliert, 1997), more effective task completion (Amason & Schweiger, 1997; Jehn, 1997), and more creative problem solving and innovation (Janis, 1972). As the multicultural work force has become a reality due to business globalization and migration, cross-cultural conflicts caused more attention than usual in today's organizations both domestically and globally.

Increased cultural diversity in different settings calls for abilities to adapt to the unfamiliar environment and to learn to work and live productively with people from different cultural backgrounds, which highlights the ability of intercultural sensitivity (Chen & Starosta, 1997a). Research showed a high percentage of failed expatriate assignments because of expatriate employees' inability to adapt to the host culture's social and business environment (Black & Mendenhall, 1990; Copeland & Griggs, 1985; Mendenhall & Oddou, 1985). It was also found that high intercultural sensitivity was associated with high intercultural communication competence, such as cross-cultural adjustment, task effectiveness during overseas assignments, and healthy interpersonal relationships with culturally different individuals (Bhawuk & Brislin, 1992; Hammer, Bennett, & Wiseman, 2003; Kapoor, Konsky, & Drager, 2000).

Based on the importance of being effective in conflict management and sensitive to cultural differences, many organizations have promoted various training programs to improve

both employees' cultural sensitivity and conflict management skills, aiming at reducing stress, enhancing relationships and improving job performance (Amason & Schweiger, 1997; Brislin & Yoshida, 1994; Jehn, 1997). It was hoped that with these training programs, employees can increase their awareness and understanding to cultural difference and effectively deal with culture-related work conflicts. However, few studies have investigated these two concepts as related. In order to bridge the gap in this line of research, the purpose of this study then was to examine the potential relationship between intercultural sensitivity and conflict management styles in a cross-cultural organizational context.

## Literature Review

### *Conflict Management Styles*

Numerous researchers have attempted to study people's behaviors in conflict situations, and to identify the most effective and most constructive approaches to deal with conflicts. Rahim and Bonoma (1979) categorized conflict styles into two basic dimensions: concern for self and concern for others. These two dimensions result in five distinct behavioral conflict management strategies: integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising.

Integrating refers to high concern for both self and others. This strategy involves efforts to reach an integrative solution meeting both parties' needs. Obliging represents low concern for self and high concern for others, which is associated with attempting to satisfy the needs of the other party while sacrificing one's own needs. Dominating refers to high concern for self and low concern for others. When using this style, an individual attempts to achieve one's own needs without considering the other's needs. Avoiding is a style in which one has low concern for both self and others. With avoidance, the problem has not been discussed or dealt with, thus fails to satisfy one's own needs as well as the other party's needs. Finally, compromising has moderate levels of concern for both self and others. This style involves searching for an intermediate position by each party giving in a little to reach a mutually acceptable decision. Compromisers partially meet each side's needs, but not all of them.

Ting-Toomey (1988) argued in her development of face-negotiation theory that face is an explanatory mechanism for conflict behavior in different cultural groups. The theory proposed three variables, including cultural, individual-level, and situational, that influence a person's selection of one set of face concerns over others. Subsequently, the selection of different sets of face concerns influences the use of various facework and conflict strategies in social encounters.

Ting-Toomey (2006) further indicated that "conflict style" is a culturally grounded concept, which shows that culture plays an influential role in an individual's preference of conflict styles. People in the same culture would understand and accept each other's approach in dealing with conflict much easier than those from different cultures. Studies have revealed that organizational problems increased in the culturally diverse workplace because of the workers' differences in cultural values, attitudes, and work styles (e.g., Chan & Goto, 2003; Leung & Chan, 1999; Saucedo, 2003).

In spite of strong support for cultural influence on conflict style preference, other studies as well presented inconsistent results. For example, Drake (1995) reported that when Americans and Taiwanese negotiated together inter-culturally, they did not necessarily adhere

to conflict styles predicted by cultural variables. Instead, personality and situational concerns greatly affected their selection of conflict strategies. Thomas (1977) and Putnam and Wilson (1982) also contended that people make contingent rather than habitual responses in different conflict situations. However, other researchers argued against the contingency theory. As Sternberg and Soriano (1984) reported, individuals were quite consistent in their modes of conflict resolution, both within and across content domains. It was criticized that the emphasis of the situational influence on conflict style selection fails to acknowledge that not everybody is flexible enough to use the best style for a particular situation (Antonioni, 1998; Bell & Blakeney, 1977).

Personality is another important factor that may influence the choice of conflict styles. Terhune (1970) mentioned that participants who exhibit personality attributes such as aggressiveness, dominance, authoritarianism, and suspiciousness tended to escalate a conflict, while those who exhibit personality attributes such as egalitarianism, trust, and open-mindedness tended to mitigate conflict. Sternberg and Soriano (1984) also assessed that people's preferred conflict styles could be predicted from personality and intellectual factors.

The inconsistent results demonstrated that various factors might work together to influence a person's preference of conflict strategy. The selection of conflict management styles can be influenced by culture, personality, situation and some other factors. As culturally sensitive people are conscious to differences concerning these factors, they may also be more sensitive to intercultural conflicts than low sensitive people. As a result, people having different intercultural sensitivity levels may resort to different strategies in dealing with conflicts in intercultural communication. The multiple-faceted nature of conflict not only widens this line of research, but also leads to our consideration of the possible influence of a person's intercultural sensitivity on his/her communicative orientation towards conflicts.

### *Intercultural Sensitivity*

Although research on intercultural sensitivity has been significantly increased in recent years, the concept still suffers from ambiguous conceptualization. For example, Chen (2007) and Chen and Starosta (1996) criticized that previous studies on intercultural sensitivity inappropriately mixed three related but separate concepts: intercultural sensitivity, intercultural awareness and intercultural communication competence.

According to Chen and Starosta (2000), intercultural communication competence is an umbrella concept that consists of a person's cognitive, affective, and behavioral abilities in the process of intercultural communication. Intercultural sensitivity is the affective aspect of intercultural communication competence, referring to "an individual's ability to develop a positive emotion towards understanding and appreciating cultural differences that promotes appropriate and effective behavior in intercultural communication" (Chen & Starosta, 1997a, p. 5). Intercultural sensitivity is associated with a person's emotions toward intercultural encounters (Triandis, 1977). Chen and Starosta further concluded that an inter-culturally sensitive individual must possess six personal attributes: self-esteem; self-monitoring, open-mindedness, empathy, interaction involvement, and suspending judgment.

Self-esteem refers to a person's ability to express an optimistic outlook and confidence in intercultural interaction (Chen & Starosta, 1997a). The way an individual feels about oneself has a crucial influence on his/her communication with others. Kipnis (1976) and Tedeschi

(1990) found that low self-esteem individuals have a higher tendency than high self-esteem individuals to resort to harsh strategies, such as coercion and legitimacy, in social interactions. In related research on self-confidence, Instone, Major, and Bunker (1983) reported that individuals who have high self-confidence are more likely to use influence attempts and less coercive strategies than those subjects who have low self-confidence.

Self-monitoring is a person's ability to consciously regulate behavior in response to situational constraints and to implement a conversationally competent behavior. High self-monitors have the ability to adjust their behavior to fit the situation. Self-monitoring has been considered to be relevant to organizational conflict. Caldwell and O'Reilly (1982) found that people high in self-monitoring will experience a lower incidence of interpersonal conflict than people low in self-monitoring. Baron (1989) also pointed out that high self-monitors reported higher preferences than low self-monitors for relatively conciliatory conflict resolution modes, such as collaboration and compromise.

Open-mindedness is a person's ability to openly and appropriately explain oneself and to accept other's explanations. Open-minded persons are more willing to consider and integrate another person's ideas than narrow-minded individuals. Researchers found that open-minded people may prefer adaptive and flexible approaches to conflict resolution with consideration of the opponent's views. For example, Moberg (2001) reported that open-minded persons tend to compromise and address conflict directly in conflict situations.

Empathy refers to a person's ability to project oneself into another person's point of view in order to adopt different roles as required by different situations. It is the ability of putting oneself in another person's shoes. According to Hakansson and Montgomery (2003), an empathic person is able to understand other persons' feelings and desires, sense others' emotions, and perceive similarity between self and others. As an empathic person has the ability to perceive and understand another person's situation, the empathizer can see the situation from a new angle, which certainly will play an important role when conflict exists.

Interaction involvement refers to a person's ability to perceive the topic and situation in order to initiate and terminate an intercultural interaction fluently and appropriately. Highly involved individuals are sensitive and attentive to self, other, and the circumstances, and, thus, can respond to the situation accordingly. High-involved persons are more effective at face-work than low-involved persons. On the other hand, according to Cegala (1981), low-involved individuals tend to feel withdrawn or distanced from interactions, because they often focus on "the world of inner, private experience" or are "preoccupied with other thoughts or goals" (p. 113).

Finally, suspending judgment refers to a person's ability to avoid rash judgment about the inputs of others and to foster a feeling of enjoyment of cultural differences. People tend to judge a person, object, or issue based on their present knowledge of the target, which, however, often leads to limited or biased judgment, especially when the important information of the target is missing (Anderson, 1981; Johnson, 1987). People who recognize the absence of relevant information when making judgments tend to make less extreme evaluations and are ready to alter a judgment as additional information becomes available (Jaccard & Wood, 1988; Yates, Jagacinski, & Faber, 1978). Generally speaking, a non-judgmental person will not be easily involved in preconceived beliefs and attitudes or be preoccupied with self and one's own culture.

The above literature review reveals a potential relationship between intercultural

sensitivity and conflict management styles. It was then the purpose of this study to explore this possibility by examining the relationship among different dimensions of the two concepts. A hypothetical cross-cultural organizational situation was designed for the purpose of observation.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants in this study were undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory communication course at a medium-sized northeastern university in the United States. A total of 253 students, 80 males and 173 females, were recruited from intact classes with their agreement to participate in the survey. These participants had diverse study fields and programs in the university. The average age for participants was 18.8 years.

### *Procedure*

Survey method was adopted in the present study. Permissions were obtained from both course instructors and students. Students were told that participation was completely voluntary. An alternative assignment was offered to students who chose not to participate. All students in twelve sections, except one who was under 18 years of age, volunteered for participation. The survey was conducted during regular class meeting time.

### *Measures*

Two instruments were used in this study. The 24-item Intercultural Sensitivity Scale (ISS) developed by Chen and Starosta (2000) was used to test participants' sensitivity levels. The scale was comprised of five factors: interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment, and interaction attentiveness. Interaction engagement is concerned with participants' feeling of participation in intercultural interaction; respect for cultural differences is related to participants' orientation towards or tolerance to their counterparts' culture and opinion; interaction confidence tests how confident participants felt in the intercultural contexts; interaction enjoyment deals with participants' reaction, positive or negative, towards intercultural communication; and interaction attentiveness is related to participants' effort to understand the ongoing process of intercultural communication. The overall scale and all the five factors had high internal consistency with .86 reliability coefficient separately. All 24 items were randomly ordered in this study.

In order to measure conflict management styles, a hypothetical scenario was developed. Participants were asked to finish questions of Rahim's Organizational Conflict Inventories II (ROCI-II) (1983) based on their possible responses to the specific conflict mentioned in the scenario.

The ROCI-II was slightly modified to fit the situation in this present study. Rahim's ROCI-II is an instrument to examine participants' behavioral orientation in conflict situations.

ROCI-II consists of 28 Likert-type items and has been widely used to compare group conflict styles (van de Vliert & Kabanoff, 1990). Each style is a factor, which consists of four to seven items respectively. Participants were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree.

ROCI-II has demonstrated consistent and satisfactory coefficient values in past studies with Cronbach's alpha coefficient ranged from .77 to .86 for integrating; .68 to .83 for obliging; .75 to .79 for dominating; .72 to .86 for avoiding; and .67 to .78 for compromising (e.g., Gross & Guerrero, 2000; King & Miles, 1990; Weider-Hatfiend, 1988; Womack, 1988).

In this study, both scales showed satisfactory overall reliability coefficients, with .89 for intercultural sensitivity and .82 for conflict management style. All the five factors of the conflict management style scale had Cronbach's alpha coefficients of .80 and above. The integrating style had a .85 coefficient alpha; the obliging style .80; the dominating style .85; the avoiding style .81; and the compromising style .84. Three of the five factors of intercultural sensitivity demonstrated good reliability with the alpha coefficients of .79 for respect for cultural differences, .72 for interaction confidence, and .78 for interaction engagement. The alpha coefficients of .57 for interaction enjoyment and .48 for interaction attentiveness were lower than the satisfactory level. As the total number of items directly influences a factor's reliability, it may be the reason that these two dimensions only consist of three items each. However, interaction attentiveness, referring to a person's ability of sensing and perceiving messages in interactions (Chen & Starosta, 2000), is a very important dimension in the concept of intercultural sensitivity. Without efforts to **understand** the ongoing interaction, a person would not be able to further participate and enjoy the process of interaction. Therefore, the researcher decided to keep these two factors in this study.

## Results

The primary research question for this study sought to find the relationship between dimensions of intercultural sensitivity and conflict management styles. In order to answer the research question, Pearson product-moment correlations were computed between the two concepts and their dimensions. The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Pearson Correlation Coefficients for Variables

| Variables  | All   | Integrate | Avoid  | Dominate | Oblige | Compromise |
|------------|-------|-----------|--------|----------|--------|------------|
| All        | .20*  | .48*      | -.25*  | -.23*    | .28*   | .43*       |
| Engage     | .19*  | .43*      | -.23*  | -.20*    | .24*   | .42*       |
| Respect    | .20*  | .48*      | -.16** | -.30*    | .26*   | .41*       |
| Confidence | .13   | .30*      | -.21*  | -.06     | .20*   | .18*       |
| Enjoyment  | .16** | .30*      | -.17*  | -.07     | .18*   | .28*       |
| Attention  | .01   | .23*      | -.23*  | -.18*    | .10    | .25*       |

\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*  $p < .05$ ;  $N=253$



The results showed a significant, positive relationship between a person's intercultural sensitivity and conflict management styles ( $r = .20$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Most dimensions of the two concepts also exhibited significant relationships with each other, either positively or negatively.

Interaction engagement was significantly and positively related with integrating style, obligation style, and compromising, while significantly and negatively related with avoiding and dominating. Similarly, respect for cultural differences correlated significantly and positively with integrating, obliging, and compromising, but negatively with avoiding and dominating. Interaction confidence had significant, positive relationships with integrating, obliging, and compromising, and negative relationships with avoiding.

Interaction enjoyment reported similar results with interaction confidence. Interaction enjoyment was significantly and positively associated with integrating, obliging, and compromising, while negatively related with avoiding. However, both interaction confidence and enjoyment did not show significant relationships with dominating style. Finally, interaction attentiveness showed a significant, positive relationship with integrating and compromising, and a negative relationship with avoiding and dominating. But it did not report significant relationship with obliging style.

### Discussion

This study investigated the relationship between intercultural sensitivity and conflict management styles. Overall, the results display moderate relationships between the two concepts and among respective dimensions. An individual's sensitivity to cultural differences is reflected as an important factor that influences one's preference of particular style for handling conflict. Although no previous study has simultaneously examined these two concepts together, these results are consistent with related studies on conflict management and some components of personal attributes. The results also provide clear support for the argument that individuals do have more or less preferred styles of managing conflict (Sternberg & Soriano, 1984).

The results suggest that the more sensitive people perceive themselves to be, the more likely they are to use integrating and compromising strategies to manage conflict, and the less likely that they are to use avoiding and dominating styles. The results are consistent with the characteristics of intercultural sensitivity and each style of handling conflict.

Burke (1970) suggested that integrating was related to the effective management of conflict, while dominating and avoiding were regarded as ineffective strategies of managing conflict. It is understandable that integrating is the ideal way to manage conflict because of the maximum degree to which the style meets each party's needs. It allows a person to work with his/her counterpart in the interaction and to behave in ways that seem to concern and support the counterpart. The use of integrating style can also produce "mutual commitment to solutions" and add to "the relationship climate of trust and openness" (Greeff & de Bruyne, 2000, p. 330).

In contrast, dominating seems to reflect a person's only concern about self, and avoiding shows a person's poor confidence of their effectiveness in dealing with intercultural communication. Although compromising asks both parties to give up some needs to meet a midway resolution, a compromising style is better than not resolving the problem or letting

one party completely down. Therefore, compromising is also one of the favorite styles for sensitive persons in facing conflict situations. In other words, an inter-culturally sensitive person tries to get positive outcomes from intercultural interaction, both for self and others. The results strengthen Chen and Starosta's (2000) findings that inter-culturally sensitive persons are "more effective in intercultural interaction" (p. 12).

Previous studies reported that an individual who has attributes of higher self-monitoring, greater open-mindedness, and more interaction involvement is usually more aware of personal and social differences, and is more concerned with self and other's face-work (e.g., Baron, 1989; Moberg, 2001). Thus, such individuals are more willing to adopt integrating and compromising conflict strategies because these are the two ways that can satisfy both interactants' faces, though different in satisfactory degree.

In addition, as inter-culturally sensitive persons are able to perceive various stimuli in their surroundings and to stand in other people's shoes, they are highly aware of what is going on in the interaction, and can accept the existence of the differences. They like to take the challenges of dealing with cultural differences, and have high self-confidence in managing cultural interactions. Therefore, such persons are not likely to ignore other persons' needs, to leave the problem, or to use harsh strategies that may result in more tensions. While dominating certainly lets the other party feel intimidated and threatened, avoiding can also let people feel frustrated and less satisfied.

On the contrary, people who measure low in intercultural sensitivity usually experience greater anxiety, more frustration with differences, and less confidence in handling intercultural communication (Cegala, 1984; Cegala et al., 1982). They focus more on their inner world, rather than on other people and the ongoing interaction. They greatly base their judgments of differences on their established perceptions, and usually tend to reject these differences. So, it is not surprising to see these people either try to use harsh strategies such as dominating because they view all the differences as attacking and respond accordingly, or tend to avoid the problem because they are unsure of themselves, and avoiding is another way to protect their values and beliefs unaffected.

The positive relationship that appeared between intercultural sensitivity and obliging strategy is interesting. Very few studies have indicated the relationship between personal attributes and an obliging style. Although an obliging style meets the other person's needs, it also sacrifices one's own needs. Since inter-culturally sensitive people are concerned with both self's needs and other's needs, it seems they shouldn't neglect their own needs to just satisfy the other party. This seemingly contradictory result can be explained partially by considering a mediating variable of willingness to engage in sacrifice, or perhaps one's tendency towards altruism. Inter-culturally sensitive persons may resort to an obliging style when they do not need to give up too much of their personal needs, but can remain a harmonious relationship if they do give up something to satisfy other interactants.

Another possible explanation is that, as inter-culturally sensitive persons are open to the difference, they are more willing to admit they "may be wrong or the issue is much more important to the other party", and thus, they are willing to "give up something with the hope of getting something in exchange from the other party when needed" (Rahim, 1985, p. 84).

In spite of the moderate relationships demonstrated among most dimensions, there are a few exceptions. No significant relationship between interaction confidence and a dominating strategy was shown. Previous studies reported controversial results on this issue as well. For

example, Instone, Major, and Bunker (1983) found that people who have high self-confidence are more likely to use influence attempts than coercive styles. However, Schwarzwald and Koslowsky (1999) found that people who have low self-esteem tend to use less harsh strategies than people with high self-esteem.

In this study the structure of the sample might also be a plausible explanation of the result for the lack of significant relationship between interaction confidence and dominating. If a sample includes a large numbers of low self-confident persons who are anxious in facing conflict and prefer coercive styles to protect their fragile inner world, the results may show a strong relationship between confidence and harsh strategies. Or, if a sample consists of mostly low self-confident persons who are unsure of themselves and do not have enough courage to face or resolve the conflict, the results may demonstrate a significant relationship between confidence and less harsh strategies. It is possible that the sample in this study consists of similar amounts of the above two different types of people, which may neutralize the results and indicate no significant relationship in the two variables.

In addition, interaction enjoyment was not significantly associated with dominating style; nor did interaction attentiveness reflect any connection with obliging. As interaction enjoyment and attentiveness only have three items and report relatively low reliability, it might be the reason that affects the results.

This study contributes to our understanding of the interplay between intercultural sensitivity and conflict management styles. It also demonstrates the complexity of the nature of conflict management. Various factors could influence a person's choice of conflict strategies, with intercultural sensitivity as one factor. More studies are needed to examine the two concepts.

The results of this study provide some potential implications for practitioners. The findings may encourage individuals to sense and perceive various stimuli in their surroundings and to adopt effective strategies when dealing with cultural differences. Organizations may begin to use intercultural sensitivity assessment to help make decisions, such as selecting employees for particular assignments, arranging team members to control conflicts in organizations, and designing training programs to create a better working environment and to improve productivity and effectiveness.

The results of this study may also contribute to the design and implementation of intercultural training programs. Generally speaking, intercultural training programs are aimed at helping trainees communicate more effectively, deal with the inevitable stresses accompanied with intercultural interaction, develop and maintain interpersonal relationships with people from different cultures, and accomplish various tasks in a new context or setting (Cushner & Landis, 1996). Gudykunst, Guzley, and Hammer (1996) further pointed out that intercultural training programs are to improve trainees' performance in specific intercultural situations. Brislin and Pedersen (1976) also suggested that cultural training, such as cultural awareness and sensitivity training "allow one to learn about himself [or herself] as preparation for interaction in any culture" (p. 6).

Despite the importance and the increasing interest in intercultural training programs, most such training is conducted without appropriate theory-driven guidance (Gudykunst, Guzley & Hammer, 1996). The present study may provide some knowledge in designing and evaluating a theory-based training program. Finally, the results could help individuals understand why and how their affective aspect towards cultural differences is associated with

a preference for a particular conflict management style, and how to adjust their ability to adapt to new cultures.

The present study also has limitations, which may provide opportunities for future research. The first limitation relates to the low alpha values obtained for the two factors of intercultural sensitivity. As mentions above, interaction enjoyment and interaction attentiveness did not achieve satisfactory reliability in this study. This limitation may influence the results of this study.

Another possible limitation of this study includes the particular sample employed and the measurement of conflict style. The convenience sample from university students may provide different results compared with real organizational employees. The conflict style preference measured by self-report with responses to scenario rather than by involvement in the real situation, or by observation of actual behavior, may also limit these results, although such paper-and-pencil survey is a better way to control the process and measure differences.

Overall, the results of this study provide some valuable information for our understanding and application of intercultural sensitivity and conflict management styles. The present study endeavors to shed some light on the relationship between these two important areas of interpersonal communication and organizational effectiveness. More studies are encouraged to examine how and why a person's intercultural sensitivity tend to influence one's selection of specific styles of conflict management.

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