



# The role of culture and relational context in interpersonal conflict: Do Turks and Canadians use different conflict management strategies?

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## Abstract

This study explored cultural differences in conflict management strategies within the context of same-sex friendships, opposite-sex friendships, and romantic relationships. About 114 Turkish and 135 Canadian university students completed a conflict management measure. Results showed that overall, romantic relationships involved a more extensive use of conflict management strategies than did opposite-sex friendships, with same-sex friendships falling in-between the two. Cultural differences emerged, however, in the types of conflict management strategies chosen: Turks reported refraining from conflict, postponing conflict, and employing persuasion to a greater extent than did Canadians, whereas Canadians were more likely to compromise, appeal to third-party assistance, and give priority to the other party in the conflict. Moreover, Canadians tended to vary their strategies depending on the type of relationship, whereas Turks did not. Regardless of culture, men were more likely to refrain, give priority to, and give in to their same-sex friends than romantic partners, whereas women were more likely to use persuasion with their romantic partners compared to their same-sex friends. Although cultural and gender influences on conflict management within different types of relationships is provided, the type of relationship seems to be a more promising indicator of preferred conflict management strategies.

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## 1. Introduction

In the past few decades, there has been a considerable amount of research on conflict and conflict management within intimate relationships (Braiker & Kelley, 1979; Cahn, 1992; Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Conflict has been conceptualized at many different levels, from subtle non-verbal behaviours that take place in specific interaction episodes to a general expressed dissatisfaction about one's relationship. Interpersonal conflict deserves special attention with respect to its influence on relationship satisfaction and relationship quality, as it is assumed to be inevitable in personal relationships due to the goal discrepancies that arise between the parties (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). Given this inevitability, it is important to examine how conflict is managed. Conflict management involves the strategies that are used to deal with disagreements, ranging from avoidance to direct confrontation. Several typologies of conflict management have been proposed in the realms of intimate relationships (e.g. Canary & Cupach, 1988; Kurdek, 1995) and workplace relationships (e.g. Rahim, 1983). Conflict management in friendships has not received equivalent attention in adulthood to the extent that it has received for that of children and adolescents, perhaps because marital relationships overshadow friendships in terms of importance and prevalence in adulthood (Adams & Blieszner, 1994).

There has been considerable research on intercultural or cross-cultural differences in conflict management styles (e.g. Holt & DeVore, 2005), yet studies tend to focus more on organizational settings than on close interpersonal relationships (i.e., romantic relationships and friendships). The purpose of the current study was to compare the conflict management preferences of young adults from different cultural backgrounds (Canada and Turkey) across friendships and romantic relationships. A second purpose was to examine the influence of gender on conflict management across cultures as well as across different relationships.

Culture is an influential factor in how relationships are conceptualized and in how people choose to manage conflict in their relationships. Culture provides the social norms and rules that regulate and guide interpersonal behaviours, and it can also have an influence through values, self-construals, and relational orientations of individuals (Fiske, Kitayama, Markus, & Nisbett, 1998; Goodwin, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Thus, culture may influence perceptions of appropriate modes of communication, face maintenance concerns, and strategies for managing conflict (e.g., Gudykunst & Matsumoto, 1996; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003).

Various contextual factors within different kinds of close relationships, such as the presence or absence of romantic or sexual involvement, the gender composition, and the power structure can also influence how people manage their conflicts. The typical "demand-withdrawal" pattern that is often found in distressed marriages signifies the consistent gender differences in conflict communication behaviours, yet other contextual factors such as gendered power relations or being the party seeking change may also be important (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990). These contextual factors may operate differently in friendships as opposed to romantic relationships, as the former are typically characterized by a more egalitarian power structure, an absence of romantic or sexual involvement (see Afifi & Faulkner, 2000, for a different perspective), and less interdependence between parties. Thus, romantic relationships, same-sex friendships and opposite-sex friendships become fruitful ground for comparing the effects of gender and relational context on conflict management.

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