Effects of taking conflict personally on conflict management styles across cultures

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Eun joo Kim [a], Ayano Yamaguchi [b], Min-Sun Kim [c,*], Akira Miyahara [d]

[a] Yonsei University, 134 Shinchon, Seodaemun, Seoul 120-749, Republic of Korea
[b] College of Foreign Studies, Reitaku University, 2-1-1 Hikarigaoka, Kashiwa-shi, Chiba-ken 277-8686, Japan
[c] University of Hawaii at Manoa, Department of Communicology, 2560 Campus Rd., George Hall 326, Honolulu, HI 96822, United States
[d] Seinan Gakuin University, Japan

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ABSTRACT

The concept of taking conflict personally is largely underexplored by dominant conflict literature. The purpose of this study was to test the cross-cultural predictions of the associations between self-construal, the tendency to personalize conflict, and subsequent outcome variables such as negative feelings of being criticized and motivation to improve. The participants were 457 undergraduates, of which 185 were studying in Japan, and 272 were studying in the United States. The results indicated the significant negative relation between independent self-construal and taking conflict personally. On the contrary, interdependent self and taking conflict personally showed positive relation. In turn, taking conflict personally indicated positive relation with participants' conflict management style, such as motivation to improve one's own behaviors. Discussion of these results and their implications is provided.

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1. Introduction

Conflict is a struggle between communicating parties because of the perception of incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others while achieving goals (Wilmot & Hocker, 2001). It reflects our existing beliefs and attitudes on the issue in question; influences our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors; and shapes our life space. In the field of interpersonal communication, scholars have long been interested in the phenomenon of interpersonal conflict, especially questions regarding why conflict occurs, how people handle it, and how to intervene in conflict (Miller & Roloff, 2014; Roloff & Soule, 2002; Wilmot & Hocker, 2001).

Most of the literature has been dedicated to the study of conflict management styles (Hample & Dallinger, 1995; Wilmot & Hocker, 2001) and their implication for relational outcomes. Recently, some studies have focused on people's preferences for conflict management styles (Kim, 2002, for review) and subsequent relational outcomes (Comstock & Buller, 1991). Several studies have shown that the way in which people handle conflict affects their relational outcomes: the quality of a relationship is determined by how constructively or destructively communicative parties handle conflict situations (Comstock & Strzyzewski, 1990; Gottman, 1994).

Effective management of conflict leads to positive relational outcomes and contributes to a general sense of satisfaction and well-being (Comstock & Buller, 1991). The personal experience of conflict, however, has received relatively less scholarly attention (Hample & Dallinger, 1995), and our understanding of interpersonal conflict is limited, especially regarding the issues of why and how people personalize conflict and what meanings they attribute to it. Investigating the ways in which people personalize conflict by taking criticism personally would help us with gaining further insights into what conflict really means to people in their everyday life.

The purpose of this study is to examine the cultural underpinnings of the effects of taking—or not taking—conflict personally on conflict management styles, such as negative feelings of being criticized and motivation to improve. Relying on the independence–interdependence theory of cultural self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1994), we would argue that taking conflict personally may not always be directly linked to conflict management styles in cultures that privilege *independence,* because such a perception can compromise the ever-important sense of the self as independent. In contrast, taking conflict personally is likely to be beneficial in cultures that privilege *interdependence.* To investigate this cross-cultural prediction of taking conflict personally, we

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 808 956 8317; fax: +1 808 956 3947.
  E-mail addresses: ctl-kej@yonsei.ac.kr (E.j. Kim), ayamag13@reitaku-u.ac.jp (A. Yamaguchi), kmin@hawaii.edu (M.-S. Kim), miyahara@seinan-gu.ac.jp (A. Miyahara).

examined the conflict management styles of college students from the two different cultures: Japan and United States.

In the present study, we proposed the conceptual model exploring the relationship between self-construal and conflict management styles mediated by taking conflict personally. Using Structural Equation Modeling, we tested the conceptual model and discussed implications for future research.

1.1. Self-construal

Self-construal was originally developed to explain cultural differences in behaviors and attitudes at individual levels. The central difference between the two self-construals is the belief one maintains regarding how the self is related to others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Markus and Kitayama identified self-construal as independent and interdependent. People with independent self-construal see themselves as separate from others. On the contrary, people with interdependent self-construal see themselves as connected with others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1994).

The independent individual strives to achieve uniqueness and self-actualization, and to express one's own unique strengths (Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). Demonstrating one's uniqueness is a critical basis of self-esteem. The cognitive consequences of independent self-construal are "low context-sensitivity, separation and differentiation." The affective consequences of independent self-construal are "prefer socially disengaging emotions" (Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing, 2011). In contrast, the interdependent individual is motivated to fit in and adjust themselves to the expectations and needs of others in a relationship (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1994; Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2002). Demonstrating one's ability to fit into the group is the fundamental basis of self-esteem (Cross, Hardin, & Gercek-Swing, 2011). Norasakkunkit and Kalick showed the positive relationship between fear of negative evaluation and interdependent self-construal. In contrast, independent self-construal showed negative relationship between them.

Western cultures tend to have higher level of independency. In contrast, Asian cultures have higher level of interdependency. In terms of interdependent self, some studies reported that East Asian people tended to show higher interdependent self-construal than Western people (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), while other studies reported no differences or even reversed results (Sato & Cameron, 1999), or challenged the validity of theoretical framework of self-construal (Matsumoto, 1999).

1.2. Taking conflict personally

According to Wallenfelsz and Hample (2010), taking conflict personally is both a stable personality trait and a temporary state. The tendency to take conflict personally can lead the nature of conflict interaction to become destructive. Hample and Dallinger (1995) defined taking conflict personally (TCP) as "a feeling of being personally engaged in a punishing life event. [The person] feels threatened, anxious, damaged, devalued, and insulted" (p. 306). Hample and Dallinger (1995) proposed that taking conflict personally predisposes a person to personalize conflict, experience stress during conflict, feel persecuted, and dislike interactions that engender conflict. The concept of taking conflict personally complements existing literature on conflict management styles to provide a fuller understanding of interpersonal conflict because it explains the personal experience of conflict, which is largely underexplored by dominant conflict literature. This concept allows researchers to explore what happens when people take conflict personally and why such a predisposition may be formed.

Miller and Roloff (2014) reported that taking conflict personally was positively related to avoidance and revenge motivations toward offenders. Also they found that these relationships were mediated by the positive link between rumination about relational transgression and residual hurt. Hample and Cionea (2010) reported the positive relationship between taking conflict personally and aggressiveness.

Hample (1999) has found that taking conflict personally is positively associated with an avoidant conflict management style, communication apprehension, low self-confidence, and low ego defense maturity. Therefore, it is noted that individuals prone to taking conflict personally find argumentation and criticism uncomfortable, feel anxious and ashamed when criticized, and become ego defensive in conflict situations. Conflict is perceived as repulsive and an obstacle to achieving goals. On the other hand, people less prone to taking conflict personally find it to be positive resource in the process of goal achievement and approach the conflictive situations. Hample (1999) states that the consequences of taking conflict personally can be detrimental. Not only does the inclination to do so prolong negative points in the aftermath of conflict but it also inhibits people from developing the ability "to manage conflict productively" and reduces their ability "to learn adaptive arguing behaviors for the future" (p. 194). Furthermore, taking conflict personally is related to relational dissatisfaction and mitigate against well-being and is a contributing factor to dysfunctional and physically aggressive relationships. Such negative consequences lead researchers to the conclusion that personalized conflict should be avoided wherever possible, and conflict "ought not to be taken personally" (p. 300, Hample & Dallinger, 1995).

In this study, we question whether conflict should not be taken personally and taking conflict personally is inherently aversive. Nearly every book that gives people advice on how to manage their personal or professional conflicts urges them not to take the conflicts personally. The very ubiquity of the advice is itself evidence that this emotional reaction is widespread and considered dysfunctional in the Western cultural context. We believe that such a claim is based on the more independent Western culture, where conflict is viewed as an extension of assertiveness and self-expression. Furthermore, objective reception of criticism (i.e., dissociation from the need to protect face) is viewed as desirable within that cultural context. In the following section, we argue that personalized conflict can be understood in different ways when these cultural assumptions are theorized differently.

1.3. Cultural variations in taking conflict personally

We speculate that the notion of taking conflict personally runs the risk of being a culturally insensitive concept (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1994). In Western culture, criticism is considered as constructive process for a reciprocal and respectful relationship, and Americans tend to prefer more active and aggressive defenses toward criticism. On the contrary, in eastern culture, people tend to be vulnerable to others' criticism and prefer more passive defense toward criticism (Nomura & Barnlund, 1983). Asian Americans show higher levels of fear of failure, performance-avoidance goals and anxiety than Anglo American students (Zusho, Pintrich, & Cortina, 2005).

Imposing such a Western understanding of criticism on other cultures, where social conformity for relational harmony is valued, can produce erroneous conclusions about their conceptualization of criticism, conflict, and as a result, the tendency to take conflict personally. For example, Japanese people with higher interdependence are much more sensitive to criticism than to compliments (Heine, Kitayama, & Lehman, 2001). The origin of this extraordinary sensitivity to criticism derives from the importance of correct behavior in their traditional system, since an essential part of proper behavior was to avoid being shamed and shaming others as a result of behaving in an unacceptable manner. Being shamed