



The impact of relational holism on conflict management styles in collegueship and friendship: A cross-cultural study

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates cultural differences in conflict management styles between the U.S. and South Korea ($n_{US} = 157$, $n_{KOR} = 146$). Predictions deduced from the theory of relational holism were consistent with the data. In managing conflicts, Americans preferred styles associated with low concern for others (i.e., competing, avoiding), whereas Koreans preferred styles requiring high concern for others (i.e., collaborating, accommodating). This pattern remained consistent among friends and colleagues, except that Americans tended to accommodate much less with colleagues than with friends. The current evidence enhances the internal/external validity of the theory of relational holism.

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Accelerated globalization is motivating many industries to expand trading partners across the globe. Reports from the U.S. Census Bureau (2009) indicate that, as of January 2009, the amount of international transactions surpassed 50% of the entire U.S. commercial transactions. Employees with diverse ethnic backgrounds commingle in both public and private sectors, and intercultural communication in the work environment may lead to intercultural conflicts at times. Researchers find intercultural conflicts harder to resolve than intracultural conflicts because the former involves encounters involving culturally different value systems and culturally different ways of managing conflicts (Adler & Elmhurst, 2008).

Studies have been devoted to understanding cultural differences in conflict management styles, but have documented inconsistent findings presumably due to adopting different theoretical perspectives. Studies primarily find that Westerners prefer confrontational conflict management styles (e.g., collaborating, competing) whereas Easterners favor non-confrontational conflict management styles (e.g., avoiding, compromising; Morris et al., 1998; Tang & Kirkbride, 1986; Ting-Toomey, 1988). Other scholars, however, point out the opposite is the case particularly when it comes to avoiding conflicts (Kim & Meyers, 2012; Lee & Rogan, 1991).

This present study proposes and tests predictions deduced from a recent theory, which explains cultural differences using an individualism–holism distinction (Lim & Giles, 2007; Nisbett, 2003; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). There are at least two important reasons for adopting this alternative perspective. First, the once-promising cultural theory of Individualism–Collectivism (IND–COL) has been producing inconsistent findings in recent studies. Results from a meta-analysis by Oyserman, Coon, and Kimmelmeier (2002) demonstrate that Americans are as collectivistic as Koreans and Japanese and, at national level, IND and COL remain independent of one another, challenging the existing view that the two cultural tendencies correlate inversely (Triandis, 1989). The inconsistent findings in studies of conflict management styles may be attributable to such conceptual problems of IND–COL. Second, the alternative approach, the individualism–holism distinction, has been gaining substantial support from more recent studies (see for a comprehensive review Nisbett, 2003). In a recent study by Lim, Kim, and Kim (2011), relational holism constituted the dimension where cultural differences between the U.S. and South Korea appear maximal with $\eta^2 = 43$.

1. Holism and relationship concern

Holism refers to a worldview identifying humans as parts of various holistic entities such as family, friendship, or workplace, who strive to act in unison with companion parts within the whole (Lim & Giles, 2007). This perspective is conceptually similar to that of General Systems Theory which moves the focus of inquiry from separated individual units to mutual influences exchanged among

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parts comprising a whole (Bertalanffy, 1968). Scholars concur that East Asian culture is holistic in nature and attribute the holistic tendency to the persistent influence of traditional teachings of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. These teachings commonly view the universe as an organic whole composed of mutually interdependent parts rather than an aggregate of discrete mechanistic elements (Moemeka, 1998; Nisbett, 2003; Nisbett et al., 2001; Tucker, 2002).

East Asian holism, in particular, seems deeply imbedded in the disciplines of Confucianism, which emphasizes the fulfillment of role-bound duties assigned by the relational whole, whether it be a marriage, family, or friendship. Being a responsible, strict, yet generous father, for example, precedes in importance being a universally decent man (King, 1985). This perspective considers individuals as role bearers rather than independent social entities and is believed to have spread to the neighboring countries, albeit with variations (Munro, 1985). Accordingly, studies have documented repeatedly that East Asians self-describe in terms of relational roles more frequently than Europeans (Cousins, 1989; Cross, Kanagawa, Markus, & Kitayama, 1995; Kashima et al., 2004; Markus & Kitayama, 1998) and, compared to Europeans, East Asians are more likely to communicate as an incumbent of a particular role (DeVos, 1973; Lebra, 1976; Lim, Allen, Burrell, & Kim, 2007).

Individualism, the Western worldview, constitutes the conceptual opposite of holism. In individualistic culture, separated objects, rather than the connections amongst the objects, receive more perceptual and cognitive attention (Nisbett, 2003). Individuals are perceived as unique-different entities maintaining identities independent of assigned social roles (Lim et al., 2007). Children learn to value the importance of forming a separate, internally integrated whole, which contrasts “both against other such wholes and against a social and natural background” (Geertz, 1975, p. 48). Values such as independence, pursuit of individual goals, or acting out of internal motivation are often prioritized over other values such as maintaining relational harmony or being other-oriented (Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1998; Triandis, 1995).

The premise that a more holistic worldview entails a greater role dependency leads to a conjecture that people enculturated in a more holistic culture should manifest a greater concern for relationship maintenance than people raised in a less holistic culture (i.e., an individualistic culture). The conjecture seems tenable for at least two reasons. First, holists' identities originate from the relational partner(s) assuming complementary roles within the whole because, as aforementioned, holists attain social significance only when performing assigned role functions. Identities of individualists, on the other hand, persist in the absence of relational counterpart(s) because individualists' identities originate independently of social roles. To the extent that this claim holds true, its corollary should be also true: Holists lose social identity in the absence of relational counterparts, whereas individualists' identities should remain relatively intact under the same condition.

Therefore, provided that the desire to attain social significance is pan-cultural, the business of relationship maintenance should be more important for holists than individualists. For holists, one's social existence necessitates the existence of relational counterpart(s), just as the existence of doctors is sustained or justified by the existence of patients. One loses identity or becomes socially insignificant in the absence of related others. Maintaining harmonious social relationships should thus constitute a fundamental means of securing one's social survival in holistic cultures. Individualists' identities, in contrast, remain relatively independent of assigned social roles and hence independent of related others. Failure to maintain relationships should thus pose less threat to one's social survival, resulting in a reduced concern for relationship maintenance in individualistic cultures. This reasoning accords with the Triandis' (1995) notion that East Asians (i.e., holists) tend

to pursue relational harmony for its own sake while Europeans (i.e., individualists) may maintain relationship out of concern for personal benefits.

Second, performing a role duty by definition constitutes a pro-social behavior because a social role in itself is a collection of injunctive norms (i.e., “*what one ought to do as a father*”) that society recommends for maintaining a particular relationship as well as the stability of society (Banton, 1965; Nadel, 1957; Pidocke, 1968). Thus, as the pressure for role norm conformity becomes more strongly internalized through enculturation, the higher the likelihood that the individual will try to behave according to the role norms, suppressing individualistic tendencies which might lead to socially undesirable actions in relationship. Assuming that holists, who grow to become ‘social role players,’ have experienced a greater internalization of role norms than their individualistic counterparts, whose identities and actions remain less bounded by social roles, a valid conjecture follows: Pro-social relationship behavior should occur with higher probability among holists than among individualists. To the extent that relationship concern can be considered as a form of pro-social relationship behavior, holists' relationship concern should thus surpass that of individualists.

2. Conflict management and culture

This study attempts to examine the predicted cultural differences in relationship concern in the domain of conflict management styles. Conflicts arise mostly when at least two interactants pursue mutually incompatible interests (Schneer & Chanin, 1987; Simons, 1972) and, in resolving conflicts, people tend to prefer using one conflict management style over the other depending on the underlying attitudinal or behavioral orientations (Callanan, Benzing, & Perri, 2006; Nicotera, 1994; Thomas, 1976; Ting-Toomey et al., 1991).

Among many different frameworks classifying conflict management styles (e.g., Gross & Guerrero, 2000; Lulofs & Cahn, 2000; Morris-Conley & Kern, 2003; Peterson, 1983; Sillars, 1980), the Thomas–Kilmann model has been most used presumably for its well-established validity (Thomas, 1992). The Thomas–Kilmann model categorizes conflict management styles into competing, avoiding, compromising, collaborating, and accommodating. These five overarching conflict management styles can be mapped out onto a two dimensional space created by a joint function of two theoretically orthogonal dimensions, namely, the concern for oneself and the concern for the counterpart (see Blake & Mouton, 1964; Thomas, 1976). Conceptually, competing arises from a combination of high concern for the self and low concern for the counterpart, avoiding from low concerns for the self and the counterpart, compromising from moderate concerns for the self and the counterpart, collaborating from high concerns for the self and the counterpart, and accommodating from a combination of low concern for the self and high concern for the counterpart.

Past literature indicates culturally different views of interpersonal conflict. In particular, it is widely accepted that individuals raised in Western cultures tend to perceive conflict as a means to resolve intra-personal uneasiness or relational discomforts (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995; Triandis, 1995). Easterners, on the contrary, are believed to find conflicts inherently destructive to interpersonal harmony and to the maintenance of the community. Conflict is thus considered to be something that should be averted irrespective of its predicted outcomes (Augsburger, 1992). This notion has received support from empirical findings that Westerners prefer more active modes of conflict management styles (e.g., competing, collaborating), while Easterners are more prone to avoid conflicts (Morris et al., 1998; Tang & Kirkbride, 1986; Ting-Toomey, 1988).

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