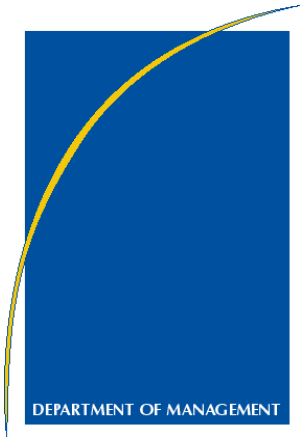

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION: INDIVIDUALISM AND COLLECTIVISM IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

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Abstract

In this research, we compare the conflict resolution preferences of one collectivist (Asian) and one individualist (Australian) sample. Respondents from a range of Asian countries and Australia completed both the Thomas-Kilmann MODE and Triandis INDCOL questionnaires. Preliminary analyses showed there to be no differences in the individualism and collectivism scores of the Asian countries in our sample, which we subsequently grouped together. Analyses showed that Asians preferred compromising and avoiding to collaborating and accommodating, which in turn were preferred to competing. Australians preferred compromising to accommodating and competing. Asians and Australians showed an equal preference for compromising, but Asians showed a stronger preference for compromising and avoiding than Australians did for any strategy. We conclude that whereas compromising and collaborating are functionally equivalent for Australians, compromising and avoiding are functionally equivalent for Asians. Individualists preferred avoiding and compromising to accommodating, whereas collectivists preferred all strategies to competing. Additionally, collectivists showed a stronger preference for collaborating, compromising and accommodating than individualists did for accommodating. Taken jointly, these results are consistent with the argument that for collectivists social cues provide additional normative information about the appropriateness of specific conflict resolution strategies whereas for individualists they do not.

As international business involves the interaction and transfer of people across national and cultural boundaries, an appreciation of the importance of cultural differences is a high priority. Our study focuses on cross-cultural differences between Australia and other nations in the Asia-Pacific region. Australia is located in the southwest of the Asia-Pacific region and has burgeoning intra-regional trade and societal links. It also has strong historical, cultural and trade links with European Union member states, particularly the United Kingdom. This combination of factors creates complex challenges for Australian multinational enterprises and the management of cross-cultural interactions (De Cieri & Dowling, 1997; Garnaut, Drysdale & Kunkel, 1994).

Culture refers to a set of shared values, norms and beliefs held by the members of a group, such as a nation or organization (Hofstede, 1994; Lewicki, Litterer, Minton & Saunders, 1994). Recognizing and understanding differences in cultural patterns provides individuals with a framework for interpreting the goals and behaviors of others (Hofstede, 1994). This is especially relevant when individuals are in conflict and must work towards common goals (Jönsson, 1990). Culture is likely to establish strong expectations about the type of relationship that will be created, the goals that the parties are working towards and how the conflict will be resolved. When such expectations are violated, individuals risk escalating the conflict (see Pinkley & Northcraft (1994) and Putnam & Holmer (1992) for similar arguments). Our paper focuses on cross-cultural differences in conflict resolution, in an Asia-Pacific context.

Cross-cultural and comparative research has endeavored to explore and explain cultural similarities and differences. The seminal research of Hofstede (1980) has inspired much of the cross-cultural research activity since 1980 and has been the dominant research paradigm in cross-cultural studies of national attitudes (Søndergaard, 1994). Based on a survey of over 60 countries, Hofstede concluded that significant differences in work-related values and attitudes are explained by national cultural differences, further identifying four primary dimensions for classifying such differences: individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity-femininity. Subsequent research by Hofstede and Bond (1988) identified a fifth dimension, which has become known as long-term/short-term orientation. Paralleling Hofstede's findings at the organizational level, analyses at the individual level have similarly identified and used the dimensions of individualism-collectivism and power distance (horizontal-vertical) for describing cultural differences (Triandis, 1995). Extensions of this research have spanned several areas of organizational behavior, including the processes of conflict resolution and negotiation.

Research on cross-cultural variations in conflict resolution strategies (Fisher 1980; Tse, Francis & Walls, 1994; Tung, 1984) has found that people of different cultures use significantly different conflict resolution strategies. These differences are reflected in whether they adopt a deductive or an inductive approach to negotiations (Salacuse, 1988), their interpretation of conflict resolution processes (Leung, Au, Fernandez-Dols & Iwawaki, 1992; Leung, Bond, Carment, Krishnan, & Liebrand, 1990; Lewicki et al., 1994) and the extent to which they focus on relationship or task concerns. In this research we focus on this last point and assess the impact of culture on preferences with regard to conflict resolution styles that differ along two dimensions, concern for self and concern for other (Pruitt, 1983; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). How people weight these dimensions influences their choice between five strategies. A collaborating style is based on integrating and problem solving, with the aim of maximizing joint outcomes. In comparison, a competing style reflects little concern for others' goals while an accommodating style involves the sacrifice of one's own concerns to satisfy the concerns of others. Compromising falls midway between these strategies and reflects a moderate concern for one's own and the other party's outcomes that frequently translates into a "split the difference" approach. Finally, an avoiding strategy is characterized by inaction: the immediate onset of conflict is avoided and the parties wait until there is a better time to try and overcome the conflict. Much of the extant literature on cross-cultural conflict resolution is based on the assumption that cultures differ in the extent to which they value individual or group outcomes (Leung, 1997); that is, whether they are individualists or collectivists, respectively. In our cross-cultural study of conflict resolution, we focus on this distinction. It is considered to be one of the most important and useful dimensions by researchers of culture and cultural variability (Elsayed-Ekhouly & Buda, 1996; Kagitcibasi & Berry, 1989) and provides a key dimension in studies of conflict resolution (e.g., Leung, 1997).

Collectivism describes societies in which people are integrated into strong, cohesive and loyal ingroups (Hofstede, 1994). Collectivist cultures value group goals and outcomes over those of the individual and define themselves in terms of their group membership (Triandis, 1995). As a result, they are willing to make sacrifices for their ingroup (Weldon & Jehn, 1995). For collectivists, maintaining social relationships is highly valued (Ting-Toomey, 1988) and harmony often takes precedence over task

accomplishment and personal desires (Weldon & Jehn, 1995). Consequently, collectivists strive to minimize disruption (Chew & Lim, 1995; Goldenberg, 1988) and allow group goals to dominate individual goals (Weldon & Jehn, 1995). Importantly, collectivists show more concern about attaining the other party's goals than about attaining their own goals (Lewicki et al., 1994). Not surprisingly, collectivism is correlated with cooperation (Carnevale, Probst, Hsueh & Triandis, 1996; Ting-Toomey, 1988). This preference for cooperation does not, however, lead to collaboration. Instead, people from collectivist cultures are more likely to use an avoiding or accommodating style to manage conflicts (Rahim, 1992). Consistent with this argument, several authors have reported a preference for accommodation and avoiding on the part of collectivists (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Trubisky, Ting-Toomey & Lin, 1991).

On the other hand, *individualism* describes societies in which the ties between individuals are loose (Elsayed-Ekhouly & Buda, 1996). Individualist cultures value individual needs and interests over those of the group. They seek to differentiate themselves from others (e.g., Triandis, 1995; Trompenaars, 1993; Weldon & Jehn, 1995) and emphasize personal outcomes over relationships (Triandis, 1995; Weldon & Jehn, 1995). Individualists are likely to value their own perspective (Lewicki et al., 1994), to place personal goals ahead of group goals (Carnevale et al., 1996), to display the fixed-pie bias (Tjosvold, 1996) and to make concessions (compromising) only when necessary to reach an agreement (Carnevale et al., 1996). These factors are all characteristic of a competing negotiation style and, consistent with this, Rahim (1992) found that individualists were more likely to adopt a competing or dominating style in conflicts. Research shows that at least some individualists tend to be authoritative, autocratic and in a hurry to make a deal (Goldenberg, 1988). They are more self-assertive and self-reliant and show a preference for getting down to the task and the 'bottom line' as soon as possible (Goldman, 1991; Tse, Lee, Vertinsky & Wehrung, 1988).

Our research assesses the relationship between culture and individuals' conflict resolution preferences. Specifically, we consider differences between the conflict resolution preferences of one collectivist (Asian) and one individualist (Australian) cultural group. In doing so, we seek to address a gap in the conflict resolution literature. To date, research in this area has explored differences between U.S. and Japanese, Asian, South American and European styles of negotiating, and includes more fine-grained analyses of differences between Asian countries (e.g., Drake, 1995; Elsayed-Ekhouly & Buda, 1996; Graham & Sano, 1989; Natlandsmyr & Rognes, 1995; Tse et al., 1994). The common assumption is that, as the US and Australia are highly similar in several classificatory schemes, such research will generalize to negotiations between Australians and Asians (Ronen & Kraut, 1977). Outside of the conflict resolution literature, several researchers have found both strong similarities and differences between the work-related values in the US and Australia (Dowling & Nagel, 1986; Jenner, 1982; McGaughey, Iverson & De Cieri, 1997), raising questions about the accuracy of generalizations with regard to their behavior in cross-cultural negotiations. Furthermore, there are no direct comparisons of Asian and Australian conflict resolution preferences. Such comparisons are particularly important, given the increasing level and complexity of Australian-Asian trade relations (Garnaut et al., 1994).

In this research, we examine whether there are differences in the preferred negotiating styles of Australians and Asians. Although it is well recognized that "Asian" cultures differ among themselves (Hofstede & Bond, 1988), we treat Asian countries as a group in this research. We do so because, despite their differences, as a group Asian countries differ markedly from Australia in Hofstede's (1980) classificatory scheme. Consequently, we expect Asians to show more collectivist than individualist tendencies; and, conversely, we expect Australians to show more individualist than collectivist tendencies (Hypothesis 1). Based on this assumption, we draw on past research to predict that Asians will show a preference for avoiding and accommodating, whereas Australians will show a preference for competing and compromising (Hypothesis 2).

METHOD

Participants

The survey was distributed to 378 second year undergraduate students at Melbourne University, Australia, in April 1997. Usable responses were received from 192 students, giving a response rate of 51%. For the purposes of this research, students from countries other than Australia or Asia were excluded from further analyses. We also excluded any Asian countries with 5 or fewer respondents. Demographic data are shown in Table 1.

Procedure

Participants completed three questionnaires. After providing demographic information, they completed the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict MODE instrument, which measures a person's preference for and use of the five modes of handling conflicts: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding and accommodating ($0.60 < \alpha < 0.81$; Chew & Lim, 1995; Kilmann & Thomas, 1977). They also completed the INDCOL questionnaire, which enables the classification of individuals along two dimensions, individualism-collectivism and horizontal-vertical ($\alpha = 0.71$; Singelis Triandis, Bhawuk & Gelfand, 1995). The first dimension captures the extent to which individuals focus on their own or group goals, respectively; the second on the extent to which individuals show a low or high regard for status. Although respondents receive four scores (vertical individualism, horizontal individualism, vertical collectivism and horizontal collectivism), in this research we consider only the individualism-collectivism dimension.

Table 1: Summary of Demographic Information

	Frequency	Percent (%)
AGE (n=191)		
18	12	6.3
19	63	33.0
20	44	23.0
21	35	18.3
22	21	11.0
23-28	12	6.3
> 28-39	4	2.1
SEX (n=191)		
Male	99	51.8
Female	92	48.2
BIRTHPLACE (n=189)		
Australia	96	50.0
Asia		
Singapore	12	6.3
Hong Kong	11	5.7
Malaysia	38	19.8
Vietnam	8	4.2
Other	22	11.5
INDCOL CLASSIFICATION (n=149)		
Australia		
Individualist	53	35.6
Collectivist	36	25.2
Asia		
Individualist	25	16.8
Collectivist	35	23.5
CONFLICT RESOLUTION STYLES (n=138)		
Australia		
Competing	25	18.1
Collaborating	14	10.1
Compromising	17	12.3
Avoiding	14	10.1
Accommodating	15	10.9
Asia		
Competing	6	4.3
Collaborating	4	2.9
Compromising	17	12.3
Avoiding	16	11.6
Accommodating	10	7.2

RESULTS

Preliminary Data Analysis

Although past research has suggested that, within Asia, there is some variance in conflict resolution preferences (Goldenberg, 1988; Goldman, 1991; Kirkbride & Tang, 1994; Tung, 1984), our hypotheses treat these countries as a group. To determine whether this assumption is justified, we tested for differences between the Asian countries included in this survey. A series of ANOVAs showed that the Asian countries did not differ in either their individualism, $F(3,59)=0.62$, ns, or collectivism scores, $F(3,59)=2.7$, ns.

Next, we tested Hypothesis 1. To do this, we classified respondents as either individualists or collectivists, based on their highest INDCOL score. Analysis confirmed our hypothesis. As can be seen in Table 1, Australians are more likely to report individualist values, whereas Asians are more likely to report collectivist values, $\chi^2(1)=4.59$, $p < .05$. However, given the relatively large number of Australians who were classified as collectivists (see Table 1), we retain individualism-collectivism as a separate variable in subsequent analyses.

Analysis of Conflict Resolution Preferences

Data were analyzed in a 2 (birthplace: Asia versus Australia) x 2 (culture: individualism versus collectivism) x 5 (conflict resolution strategy: avoiding, accommodating, compromising, collaborating and competing) analysis of variance, with repeated measures for conflict resolution strategy. The results show a significant main effect for those conflict resolution strategies, Wilks' $\lambda(4,141)=8.27$, $p\leq0.001$, indicating that certain conflict styles are more strongly preferred independent of the effects of individualism-collectivism or birthplace. This main effect was qualified by an interaction between conflict resolution strategy and birthplace (Asia or Australia), Wilks' $\lambda(4,141)=2.49$, $p\leq0.05$; and, by an interaction between conflict resolution strategies and culture (individualism or collectivism), Wilks' $\lambda(4,141)=6.17$, $p\leq0.001$. The three-way interaction between conflict resolution strategy, birthplace and culture was not significant, Wilks' $\lambda(4,141)=0.57$, $p\leq0.001$, n.s.

A series of post hoc comparisons, shown in Tables 2a and 2b, allowed us to examine these effects in more detail. Turning to the birthplace-conflict resolution preference interaction (Table 2a), Neuman-Keuls tests showed that Asians have a significantly weaker preference for competing than either Australians or Asians have for any other strategy. Within the Asian group, respondents also showed a stronger preference for compromising and avoiding than for accommodating and collaborating. In comparison, within the Australian group, respondents showed a much stronger preference for compromising than for accommodating and competing. Across birthplaces, Asians showed a stronger preference for avoiding and compromising than Australians did for avoiding, accommodating and competing. Additionally, Asians showed a stronger preference for compromising than Australians did for collaborating.

Table 2a: Average scores on Thomas-Kilmann Conflict MODE as a function of birthplace

	Competing	Collaborating	Compromising	Avoiding	Accommodating
Australia	5.67_{b}	$6.18_{b\ c\ d}$	$6.56_{c\ d\ e}$	$5.82_{b\ c}$	5.56_{b}
Asia	4.34_{a}	$5.81_{b\ c}$	$6.99_{d\ e}$	$6.85_{d\ e}$	$5.97_{b\ c}$

Note: Means with different subscripts are significantly different.

Table 2b: Average scores on Thomas-Kilmann Conflict MODE as a function of individualism-collectivism

	Competing	Collaborating	Compromising	Avoiding	Accommodating
Individualist	$5.96_{b\ c}$	$5.94_{b\ c}$	6.44_{c}	6.23_{c}	5.13_{b}
Collectivist	3.87_{a}	$5.90_{b\ c}$	7.03_{c}	$6.36_{b\ c}$	6.71_{c}

Note: Means with different subscripts are significantly different.

A somewhat different pattern emerged for the culture-conflict resolution preference interaction (Table 2b). Collectivists have a significantly weaker preference for competing than individualists and collectivists have for any other strategy. Individualists have a stronger preference for avoiding and compromising than they do for accommodating; similarly, collectivists have stronger preference for compromising, collaborating and accommodating than individualists do for accommodating.

Supplementary Data Analysis

Because the conflict resolution preferences of Asians and Australians did not map directly onto the conflict resolution preferences of collectivists and individualists, we undertook some additional analyses. First, for the participants who identified Asia as their birthplace, we considered whether INDCOL scores or conflict resolution preferences were influenced by the number of years that they had spent in Australia. As can be seen in Table 3, there was a significant shift from collectivism to individualism as the number of years in Australia increased, $\chi^2(4)= 15.75$, $p < .005$. No effect was observed for conflict resolution style, $\chi^2(16)= 15.81$, ns. Second, we considered the possibility that respondents who had classified themselves as Australian nonetheless had Asian parents and that this exerted some influence on their INDCOL scores. However, with only 4 exceptions, the parents of this group were born in Australia.

Table 3: Asian sample: Individualism-collectivism as a function of the number of years in Australia

	Years in Australia				
	< 1	1 - 2	3 - 4	5 – 10	> 10
Individualist	5	3	2	5	10
Collectivist	3	4	19	5	4

DISCUSSION

Drawing on existing classification schemes, we predicted that Asians would tend towards collectivist values whereas Australians would tend towards individualistic values. This hypothesis was supported. However, subsequent analyses showed that, as Asian respondents spent more time in Australia, they were more likely to report individualistic rather than collectivist values. This pattern implies that Asian values shift as a result of their experiences in a more individualistic culture. It not only mirrors the well known behavioral assimilation effects reported by Kelley and Stahelski (1970ab), but is consistent with more recent research demonstrating the greater behavioral adaptability of collectivists (Chatman & Barsade, 1995; Triandis, 1989).

Based on the argument that Asians value group harmony and avoid conflict to preserve relationships, we also predicted that Asians would prefer avoiding and accommodating strategies. We obtained partial support for this hypothesis: in our sample, Asians showed a strong preference for avoidance and compromise over accommodation and collaboration which, in turn, were preferred to competing. Although we did not predict a preference for compromise, this finding is consistent with past research (Chew & Lim, 1995) and with the argument that, for Asians, social pressures lead to less aggression and emotion in conflict situations. The clear differentiation of preferences into three groups raises the possibility that (a) within groups, strategies are functionally equivalent and (b) that the groupings are progressively less suited to achieving the conflict resolution goals of Asians.

With regard to Australians, we drew on the body of existing literature analyzing conflict resolution preferences and negotiating styles observed in another individualistic country, the USA. We again obtained partial support for our hypothesis, with Australians reporting a stronger preference for compromise than for accommodation and competition. It appears that Australians are predisposed to "splitting the difference". This preference for a moderate level of cooperation may well be the result of the Australian emphasis placed on egalitarianism (McGaughey et al., 1997) which leads to concessions only when necessary to reach an agreement (see Carnevale et al., 1996, for similar arguments). However, we also note that none of these strategies (compromise, accommodation, and competition) were differentiated from collaboration and avoidance. This finding suggests that, for Australians, compromise, collaboration

and avoidance are of comparable value, as are accommodation, competition, collaboration and avoidance. It further implies that the use of collaboration and avoidance may be especially sensitive to contextual cues. Finally, contrary to predictions, Australians did not show a strong preference for competing. These results reinforce our earlier comments about the possibility that all individualistic countries do not behave in a uniform manner and point to the need for cross-cultural comparisons within the group of individualistic nations. More generally, these results suggest that whereas birthplace (Australia) may clearly identify an individual's least and most preferred conflict resolution styles other factors (for example, context) will determine more fine-grained distinctions across otherwise equally preferred strategies.

As well as these intra-national differences, our analysis identified a small number of international differences. Several of the patterns that we observed are best considered in light of Leung et al.'s (1990, 1992) finding that cultures vary in the goals that identical strategies are believed to serve. For example, although Asians and Australians were equally willing to compromise, they were not equally willing to avoid conflict. Also, although Australians did not differentiate between compromise and collaboration, the Asian preference for compromise was stronger than both the Asia and Australian preference for collaboration. Recalling our argument that Asians value harmony whereas Australians emphasize personal goals, we propose that compromise may serve either goal: because it minimizes conflict it may preserve relationships or it may prevent a cycle of escalating conflict in which individuals fail to achieve any outcomes. Avoidance, however, does not serve both goals equally; while it may serve to preserve a relationship within a cooperative context, it is more likely to signal powerlessness and to encourage exploitation within an individualistic context. Conversely, because collaboration requires an element of contentiousness, it is likely to be viewed as damaging to relationships by Asians but as a safeguard against exploitation by Australians. In summary, we conclude that compromise may serve the goals of both groups equally well; we further conclude that whereas compromise and collaboration are functionally equivalent for Australians, compromise and avoidance are functionally equivalent for Asians.

We based our predictions about the conflict resolution preferences of Asians and Australians on their classification as collectivist and individualist, respectively. Our analysis showed that individualism-collectivism influenced conflict resolution style, independent of cultural background. These findings suggest that whereas personal goals (as determined by individualism-collectivism) serve to rule out strategies inconsistent with those goals, birthplace provides the context for differentiating among otherwise equal strategies. This argument is consistent with two findings. First, both Australians and individualists show limited differentiation in their preference for conflict resolution strategies. However, the level of differentiation is relatively stable across the two classifications, implying that when people focus on their own goals social context has limited utility in shaping strategic preferences. Second, in marked contrast to Asians, collectivists show no differentiation beyond an aversion for competition. We conclude that for individuals who value group goals, culture provides additional strong normative information about the appropriateness of particular conflict resolution styles and results in the clear ordering of preferences that we observed in our Asian sample. Consequently, in the absence of normative information, collectivists do not form strong preferences; however, when such information is available, we observe

highly systematic ordering of conflict resolution preferences. Overall, these findings show that while the individualism-collectivism distinction is able to capture some of the cultural differences on conflict resolution styles, culture exercises a separate and unique influence on these preferences.

Clearly, this study represents a first step in understanding how Asians and Australians differ in their conflict resolution preferences. Although we found differences between these groups, we note several limitations to our study. First, the use of self-report questionnaires does not allow for the highly dynamic nature of conflict resolution. Parties to a conflict obtain information from a variety of sources including non-verbal cues, feedback from the other party, whether negotiations and dealings are a once off occurrence or part of an on-going relationship and the impact of the external environment (Adler, 1991). A useful next step would be to analyze the behavior of these groups in actual negotiations. Given the tendency of cooperatively motivated individuals to adopt matching strategies, observing actual negotiations is especially important in the present context. Second, based on our analysis, we grouped all Asian countries together. However, as we noted, these countries represent at least six or seven major Asian cultures and hundreds of subcultures (Carr-Ruffino, 1996; Cavusgil & Das, 1997). Consequently, future research should attempt a more fine-grained comparison between Australia and the Asian countries.

The challenges of globalization and the complexity of cultural differences mean that international negotiation skills will be of increasing relevance and importance for international management and cross-cultural interactions in general (Kremenyuk, 1991). Understanding how culture shapes the goals and strategic preferences of negotiators is critical to resolving such disputes. Despite these limitations, our research furthers understanding of how culture influences conflict resolution preferences. In particular, for the first time, we provide a comparison between the preferences of Australians and Asians. In the same way that authors have cautioned against treating Asian countries as a homogeneous group, our results caution against treating all ‘Anglo’, and even all industrialized, societies in that manner. More importantly, our results suggest that the dimensions of individualism and collectivism do not translate directly into country-specific differences in conflict resolution. Our study highlights the need for future research to consider how other cultural dimensions and contextual factors influence conflict resolution styles.

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