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Cultural Aspects of Conflict Management in International Construction

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ABSTRACT

The study examined cultural aspects of conflict behavior via independent and interdependent self-construals within the context of international construction. This was achieved by a questionnaire survey. Questionnaire data obtained from 65 participants working in a multinational joint venture project have demonstrated that a person's self concept can explain certain types of conflict management behavior. In a conflict situation, independent persons tend to use avoiding and compromising, whereas interdependent persons tend to use integrating.

Keywords: conflict management, culture, international construction

1. INTRODUCTION

As the movement towards the globalization of the construction industry continues, many firms are increasingly expanding, merging and forming cross-cultural strategic alliances. Yet, doing business across national boundaries requires interaction with people and their organizations nurtured in different cultural environments. It is therefore important to acknowledge the impact of cultural differences on attitudes and behaviors of people, when companies are to collaborate in multi-national organizations. Such comparisons are critical because there is considerable evidence of increasing internationalization and globalization in construction business.

This paper reports an exploratory study on the impact of culture on conflict management. More specifically, the purpose of the study is to examine the relationship between culture and conflict management styles within the context of international construction, taking a culture comparative perspective.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Culture and Self-Concept

Hofstede's (1980) culture dimensions are probably one of the best-known approaches to provide a set of measurable aspects of cultural diversity. Drawing on a large sample of 116,000 employees of IBM in 72 countries, he found five dimensions of culture to distinguish between these countries: individualism-collectivism (IC), power-distance (PD), masculinity-femininity (MF), uncertainty avoidance (UA), and long term orientation (LTO). (Hofstede, 1980, 2001). Among these dimensions, IC was described as perhaps the most important one and was used thereafter to explain a variety of differences between individuals (Triandis, 1995; Kapoor, S., Huhes P.C., Baldwin, J.R., Blue, J., 2003; Brew and Cairns, 2004, see among others). Through an examination of the literature, Markus' & Kitayama's (1991) independent and interdependent self-construals have been found to be better predictors of individual behavior than Hofstede's IC scores. (Gudykunst, W. B., Matsumoto, Y., Ting-Toomey, S., Nishida, T., Kim, K-S., & Heymen, S., 1996; Oetzel, 1998 see among others). Independent self-construal involves viewing oneself as a unique and independent person. The interdependent self-construal, on the other hand, involves the view of oneself as interrelated with other persons. In investigating the self-construals, independent self was found to correlate with cultural individualism, while interdependent self was found to relate to cultural collectivism (Gudykunst, W. B., Matsumoto, Y., Ting-Toomey, S., Nishida, T., Kim, K-S., & Heymen, S., 1996).

All persons are assumed to have independent and interdependent aspects of self, though differently weighted, depending on their cultural background (Gudykunst, W. B., Matsumoto, Y., Ting-Toomey, S., Nishida, T., Kim, K-S., & Heymen, S., 1996). This means that a person's self-concept is thus supposed to be a mediator for the cultural influences on conflict

management behavior.

2.2 Culture and Interpersonal Conflict Management Styles

Several studies have stated that a five style model of conflict management is a better and more appropriate conceptualization for explaining interpersonal conflict management phenomena (Rahim & Magner, 1994, 1995; Van de Vliert & Kabanoff, 1990). Henceforth, this study is also founded upon a five style typology of interpersonal conflict management styles.

Below the definitions of five interpersonal conflict management styles used in this research are provided. All of these definitions are based upon the dual concern model of Rahim & Bonoma (1979), which identifies interpersonal conflict management styles with respect to individuals' concerns for self and others.

Dominating: (high in self-concern, low in other-concern), which involves enforcing one's own interests, even at the expense of those of the other party;

Integrating: (high in both self-concern and other-concern), which involves the attempt to merge both parties' interests in order to reach a solution that satisfies both sides;

Compromising: (intermediate in both self-concern and other-concern), which involves a give and take approach in order to reach a midpoint agreement;

Avoiding: (low in both, self-concern and other-concern) which involves evading the conflict topic, the other conflict party or the situation altogether;

Obliging: (low in self-concern, high in other-concern) which involves an accommodation to the other's interest on the expense of one's own.

Investigating the relationship between self-construal and conflict management styles, Oetzel's (1998) survey data showed the independent self to be positively associated with dominating and the interdependent self with avoiding, obliging, integrating, and compromising styles. In addition, self was found to be a better predictor for conflict behavior than situation, which is in line with other findings (Oetzel, J., Ting-Toomey, S., Matsumoto, T., Yokochi, Y., Pan, X., Takai, J., Wilcox, R., 2000; Wolfradt, 1996 see among others).

To investigate the relationship between culture and conflict management styles, Ting-Toomey, S., Gao, G., Trubisky, P., Yang, Z., Kim, H. S., Lin, S. L., & Nishida, T., (1991) compared self-reports from Japanese, Chinese, South Korean, Taiwanese, and American students. Their findings show that American students used dominating behavior to a higher degree when compared to their predominantly collectivistic-oriented colleagues who employed more avoiding and obliging styles. The results concerning integrating and compromising were mixed.

Another research group studied the influence of IC on self-reported conflict management styles for

Anglo-American and Taiwanese students. Taiwanese subjects were found to use avoiding, obliging, integrating, and compromising styles more often than their American counterparts (Trubinsky, P., Ting-Toomey, S., & Lin, S. L., 1991).

To examine the relationship between culture and conflict management styles in an organizational setting, Elsayed-Ekhouly & Buda (1996) questioned employees in companies located in the Middle Eastern countries as well as in the United States. Their inventory data showed Middle Eastern executives to display more integrating and avoiding, while U.S. executives used more obliging, dominating and compromising styles.

Jordanian, Turkish and U.S. managers were interviewed by Kozan (1989) about their conflict behavior towards superiors, peers and subordinates. Regarding conflict management with peers, he found that managers of all three countries rather seem to avoid conflicts.

Wu, M. Y., Taylor, M., & Chen, M. J., (2001) has also demonstrated that IC tends to differentiate Americans from their Asian counterparts in their use of styles by comparing U.S. managers and managers from different Asian backgrounds, all working in Singapore.

In sum, a review of literature highlights that, individualists, or independent persons seem to prefer dominating style while collectivists or interdependent persons appear to use avoiding and obliging styles. Hamdorf (2002) argues that integrating and compromising are sources of various inconsistencies. The existing literature generates many inconsistent outcomes concerning integrating and compromising. Ting-Toomey & Kurogi (1998) suggest that a reconceptualization of these styles may be needed.

The present study will investigate cultural aspects of conflict management via independent and interdependent self-construals within the context of international construction. This was achieved by a questionnaire survey. It was hypothesized that the cultural variables of independent and interdependent self would have specific relationships with conflict behavior.

3. METHOD

3.1 Sample

The sample used in this study is composed of participants working in a multinational joint venture, which is carrying out the new international airport in the Libyan capital of Tripoli. The joint venture consists of Turkish TAV Airports Construction, Brazilian Odebrecht, and Jordanian Consolidated Contractors Company. The sample is identified through non-random methods and hence, is characteristically a convenience sample.

The sample in this study included 65 professionals from different countries. A complete list of the respondent's national backgrounds is shown in Table 1. Respondents in the sample ranged from managerial to non-managerial professionals. They were surveyed using the English version of the

questionnaire by the first author in Libya where the questionnaires were handled to all the respondents personally, and carried out face-to-face.

Table 1. Nationalities of the respondents in the sample

Countries	Citizens of this Country	
	N	%
Jordan	5	7.69
Libya	16	24.62
Egypt	3	4.62
Brazil	4	6.15
Portugal	6	9.23
Canada	1	1.54
Turkey	22	33.85
Azerbaijan	1	1.54
Venezuela	1	1.54
Spain	5	7.69
Germany	1	1.54

The sample group had a mean age of 32.34 years, and mean tenure at their present company was 2.14 years. In terms of gender, the population was made up primarily of men (71 percent male 29 percent female).

3.2 Research Variables

In order to measure independent and interdependent self-construal, a questionnaire by Gudykunst, W. B., Matsumoto, Y., Ting-Toomey, S., Nishida, T., Kim, K-S., & Heymen, S., (1996), consisting of twenty-nine items, was used:

- Independent self-construal was assessed by fifteen items, e.g., “I should decide my future on my own”.
- Interdependent self-construal was measured by fourteen items, e.g., “I consult with others before making important decisions”.

Items were assessed using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “fully disagree” (1) to “fully agree” (5). Cronbach’s alpha for the entire scale was .70, with .75 for the sub-scale of independent self and .68 for the sub-scale of interdependent self.

To identify respondents’ conflict management styles, Rahim’s Organizational Conflict Inventory – II (ROCI-II) was used. Answers were obtained on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from (1)

strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. The instrument is composed of seven items for integrating, four items for compromising, six items for avoiding, six items for obliging and five items for dominating style assessment. Individual responses to these items are averaged to create subscales for styles, where a higher score on a subscale refers to a greater use of that specific style by that specific respondent.

Several researches have reported satisfactory test-retest and internal consistency reliabilities for ROCI-II (Rahim, 1983; Weider-Hatfield, 1988), and convergent and discriminant validities for the style subscales (Rahim & Magner, 1994, 1995; Van de Vliert & Kabanoff, 1990). In this research. In this research, reliabilities of the scales, measured by Cronbach's alpha were reasonably good, ranging from 0.67 to 0.71.

Culture, gender, age, tenure, and position were used as control variables, because of their potential predicting power on conflicting behavior. Culture, gender and position were included in the analysis as dummy variables.

3.3 Findings and Discussion

Correlation coefficients were computed in order to explore the relationship among the research variables. A summary of the findings is reported in Table 2. As seen from the table, independent persons are more likely to adopt avoiding and compromising styles in the context of construction. Interdependent persons, on the other hand, appear to use predominantly integrating style. These research findings are, however, only partly in line with the studies conducted by Oetzel, J., Ting-Toomey, S., Matsumoto, T., Yokochi, Y., Pan, X., Takai, J., Wilcox, R., (2000) and Hamdorf (2002). In their studies, the authors found that independent persons tend to express direct styles as well as integrating, whereas interdependent persons seem to prefer indirect styles as well as integrating.

It is also interesting to note that none of the control variables correlates with conflict management behavior.

Table 2. Pearson Correlations between control variables, self-construals and conflict behavior (n=64)

	Avoiding	Obliging	Dominating	Compromising	Integrating
Age	.056	-.001	.125	-.031	.001
Tenure	-.060	-.218	.052	-.154	-.015
Culture ^a	-.070	.087	.198	-.207	.157
Gender ^b	-.066	-.166	.043	.027	.011
Position ^c	-.170	.050	-.032	.169	-.087
Independent	.335**	0.036	0.29	.410**	.059
Interdep.	.118	.183	.161	.187	.383**

Notes: ** correlation is significant at the 0.01level (2-tailed)

^a Culture: 0 = Individualism, 1 = Collectivism (countries were coded according to Hofstede ,1980).;

^b Gender: 0 = masculine, 1 = feminine; ^c Position: 1= Managerial personnel , 2=Non-managerial personnel

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to further investigate the nature of the relationship between self-construals and conflict management strategies. In addition, the contextual factors such as culture, age, tenure, gender and position were also incorporated into the analysis as a control set mainly due to their well known effects on conflict behavior. As the results in Table 3 show, independent self-construal emerges as significant predictor of the conflict management behaviors of avoiding ($\beta=0.35$; $R^2=0.11$, $F=7.976$, $p<0.006$,) and compromising ($\beta=.41$, $R^2=0.168$, $F=12.731$, $p<.001$). Interdependent self-construal, on the other hand, appears to be strongly associated with integrating ($\beta=0.383$, $R^2=0.146$, $F=10.803$, $p<0.002$). The low exploratory power of the models reported might be due to other factors, which have not been subjected to detailed analysis here – such as organizational culture, personality and alike.

Table 3. Results of Multiple Regression Analyses

Dependent Variables	Independent Variables	Beta	R ²	F	p
Avoiding	Independent self-construal	.350	.112	7.976	.006
Compromising	Independent self-construal	.410	.168	12.731	.001
Integrating	Interdependent self-construal	.383	.146	10.803	.002

Furthermore, it can be said that neither of control variables have been crucial factors in explaining the respondents' conflict management style selection within this specific research sample. This confirms the findings of Oetzel (1998), who found that self-construal is a better predictor of conflict styles than cultural background.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study investigated cultural aspect of conflict management in a sample of international construct joint venture. Altogether the research findings have demonstrated that a person's self concept can explain certain types of conflict management behavior.

Specifically, self-concept seems to be good predictor for avoiding, compromising and integrating conflict behaviors in the construction context. In a conflict situation, independent persons tend to use avoiding and compromising styles, whereas interdependent persons tend to use integrating.

Implications of these findings should be viewed in the light of several caveats. First, our conclusions are obviously limited by this sample and the study context. Second, this research was solely conducted in English. This may lead to a distortion of data in that not every one attaches the same meaning to the questionnaire statements. It should also be noted that the majority of the participants in this study were members of the collectivist countries. Despite these caveats, the present study can make contribution to a better understanding of cultural aspect of conflict management in the context of international construction. It is recommended that this study be replicated in other samples of construction environment.

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