23

Culture and Conflict: A study of a course focusing on the relationship between culture and conflict

Lisa ROGERS*

Abstract

Conflict is a term that has very negative connotations for many people. In Japan, a culture in which harmony and groups are highly valued, conflict represents an idea that is almost taboo it seems. Nonetheless, despite a dislike for bringing up topics that might cause conflict, it exists in most aspects of everyday life, even in Japan. With this concept in mind, a course was created at the request of a Japanese university to be taught in English, but as an elective lecture class. Even after leaving the original university the course was created for, the contents continued to be incorporated in similar courses taught at two other universities in Japan. This paper will examine the concepts of conflict as perceived by Japanese university students who took the course, the actual course goals of creating more awareness by Japanese students about culture and conflict, and the success or lack of success of the course.

Introduction

It has been said that in Japan one of the most important values is harmony. Most Japanese have been socialized to view harmony as the antithesis of conflict. Harmony is seen to be the lack of conflict. According to Chiba (2004), many Japanese values such as harmony, obedience, caring, sharing, and hard work, acceptance of status and acceptance of inequality were those expected from the people to sustain the social order from the period of Buddhism and dominance of

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* Instructor of English, Kwansei Gakuin University

the emperor for nearly 300 years (1603−1867). Under such contexts, qualities such as self-assertion, freedom of expression, initiatives and, most importantly, critical reasoning, inquiring minds and reflections were all considered dangerous and discouraged. (p.16.) In addition, Chiba (2004) explains that as part of acceptance of peace and democracy as a national policy shortly after World War II, values of harmony, social cohesiveness, *status quo* and stability came to dominate Japanese social life. Difference, uniqueness, diversity, heterogeneity, and change in general, came to be seen as values that disturbed social life. (p.25)

However, the Oxford online dictionary defines harmony as "the quality of forming a pleasing and consistent whole; the state of being in agreement or accord" ("harmony", 2012). Webster's New World College Dictionary defines harmony as "1. A combination of parts into a pleasing or orderly whole; congruity. 2. Agreement in feeling, action, ideas, interests, etc.; peaceable or friendly relations" ("harmony", 2010). None of these definitions of harmony include a lack of conflict. In fact, even when looking at antonyms for the word harmony, the term conflict is not given. According to Webster's New World College Dictionary, conflict is "a fight or struggle; sharp disagreement or opposition, as of interests or ideas/ emotional disturbance resulting from a clash of opposing impulses or from an inability to reconcile impulses with realistic or moral considerations" ("conflict", 2010). These definitions do not show that harmony is inevitably the absence of conflict. On the contrary, an argument could be made for including conflict as a way to preserve harmony in cases in which change is desired for continuous harmonious relations.

Some experts in the field of conflict resolution contend that culture plays virtually no part in conflict and resolving conflict. However, recently, an increasing number of experts have been focusing on connections between conflict and its management and culture. With this in mind, a course focusing on the relationship between culture and conflict and emphasizing the role of culture in interpersonal and intercultural conflicts; that is, conflict in which people belonging to different cultures are involved, was created.

Successful intercultural conflict management requires appropriate and effective communication in intercultural settings. In order to do this, it is necessary to use creativity, adaptability and flexibility and be knowledgeable and respectful of one's own worldviews, as well as those of others'. It is also necessary to use multiple approaches to deal with conflict. It is important to be aware of one's own cultural biases and one's own conflict behavioral patterns as well those of others so that the best strategies to use to manage conflict situations successfully can be chosen.

Knowing conflict management styles can help one understand one's behavior in conflict situations with members of different cultures as well as the behavior of

others. Although the conflict styles described in this text are one way of categorizing behavior in order to more closely examine it, this knowledge can be useful in keeping emotions from overwhelming us, and thus, prevent a conflict from possibly escalating into a dysfunctional conflict. Knowledge of different strategies for managing and resolving conflict can provide a variety of tools from which to choose strategies appropriate for the situation and the individual or group one is in conflict with. Thus, knowledge of conflict styles and strategies can help build more successful relations with others by making available multiple approaches in conflict situations.

Course Approach

As pointed out, however, only knowledge may not be enough in a conflict situation. Often at the point of conflict, emotions become so intense that it is impossible to stop and think about one's behaviors and perceptions and just fall back on behaviors, values and beliefs in which one was socialized. In order to be able to stop and think about the conflict situation and cultural factors in play, it is necessary to acquire skills, through training, by putting oneself in situations that are similar to conflict situations so that one may understand some of the possible options that are available and how to utilize them when needed. As in sports, the time to prepare is before the actual event. Once the game begins, once the conflict begins, it is much harder to control without the proper skills. Training is necessary, because only knowledge and theory are not sufficient.

Even though many people dislike and try to avoid conflict, especially intercultural conflict, it can have positive results if perceptions of conflict are changed. Conflict is part of everyday life. However, in general, humans are conservative and resist change, receiving comfort in the familiar. Transitions to new situations and new relationships are difficult because of the human tendency to unconsciously attempt to retain the past and past ties. Nevertheless, most change is at least partly the result of conflict. It may be social change or personal change. It may be political change or environmental change. Changing perceptions of conflict as something that is destructive can give conflict a chance to be constructive.

With the purpose of motivating students attending Japanese universities to become more aware of conflict as it relates to a Japanese context in particular, and to provide them with some skills that could be called upon during their lifetime in a variety of situations to manage conflict more successfully and improve relationships, a course was created at a Japanese university which has since been adapted to similar courses at other universities. In order to obtain this goal, basic conflict management knowledge as well as intercultural relations practical activities have

been incorporated into the courses. Unfortunately, two constraints of the class have been language ability limitations of students and time limitations of the Japanese university term. Since the course was originally to be conducted in English, and the course was for only one term consisting of fourteen to fifteen once-a-week classes, it was difficult to utilize a typical university-level textbook such as those used in many English-speaking countries. While there are English-language textbooks with content pertaining to intercultural relations, most have been unsuitable for a purely content lecture course, and when the curriculum for the course was developed, none included basic concepts of conflict as well as intercultural communications. Moreover, while the courses included a few native English speakers, most students were non-native English speakers who had various levels of English, from relatively low-level to near-native ability. Thus, it was necessary to create an original text for students to use for basic readings about intercultural relations and conflict. The result was an online textbook that has been utilized in three private Japanese universities in three different courses.

The aims of the course were as follows:

To create an awareness of culture and communication issues
To have students discuss various topics related to culture and conflict
To help students better communicate with people from other cultures
To help students better manage conflict

To accomplish these goals, an experiential approach utilizing various activities and group discussions was incorporated to help students become aware of issues that underlie cultural conflict. The content of the course covered the basic ideas of culture and conflict, cultural identity, and intercultural relations concepts such as values and beliefs and their roles in intercultural conflict. Discussions focused on conflicts that can occur when people from different cultures come together in international, domestic, and interpersonal relations. This course has also incorporated ways to prevent cultural conflict from escalating and negotiate conflict through use of activities and examinations of critical incidents and films. The course was divided into topics from the online text, including

Basic ideas of culture
Basic ideas of conflict
Categories and labels
Cultural identity
Stereotypes and perceptions
Cultural values and beliefs

Communication styles
Conflict management strategies
Conflict management styles

In the curriculum, the first concept students are introduced to is the idea of culture as something other than obvious cultural artifacts such as art, literature, architecture, and so on. Hammer's, (2003), description of culture are used to point out that "Culture is the learned and shared patterns of values, interpretations and behaviors of a group of people." (p.34). An awareness of the hidden dimensions of culture, including values and beliefs, perceptions, attitudes, norms, and communication styles is introduced and briefly examined. Categories and labels and their functions in creating human understanding of the surrounding world is also introduced so that students can experience and connect ideas of how they make meaning of the world as well as how categories and labels help and hinder human interactions. They are also used to highlight cultural identity groups, followed by an examination of students' own identity groups and how some groups are more salient than others. At this point, a brief look at perceptions of categories and labels and how interpersonal conflict can be caused by differing perceptions is done. Documentaries such as Reggie Life's "Doubles" (Life, 1995), and a documentary about Sanshin musician Higa, Byron produced by Okinawa Terebi, (Yamakawa & Miyagi, 2002), are shown to examine how an individual's cultural identity group affiliation can be in conflict with how others see them as members of entirely different groups. Students see clearly how these types of conflicts influence the way communication is carried out, and are able to realize the relationship between cultural identity, communication, and possible conflict.

This naturally leads to an introduction to conflict. Conflict is introduced as a disagreement between interacting people who are attempting to obtain the same goal, object, and so on while viewing the other as obstructing their attempts to attain that goal (Rogers, 2010). In other words, cultural conflict can be seen as a disagreement between people with different cultures who are interacting, and experiencing emotional frustration when perceiving such things as incompatibility of values, beliefs, goals, scarce resources, or needs, (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). While three basic types of conflict are introduced, 1) natural resources, involving such resources as land and water; 2) conflict over needs, such as security and respect; and 3) conflicts of values, beliefs, and norms, it is the third type of conflict that defines cultural conflict most strongly. Because values, beliefs, and norms fall into the category of hidden culture, they are extremely difficult to change due to the fact that many people are unaware of their own as well as those of others. Unawareness means that they are difficult to change. Moreover, it is often only due

to a clash of values, beliefs, or norms that people discover there are different aspects other than their own. This unawareness coupled with a difficulty to change them in a conflict situation makes a conflict difficult to manage and can even cause it to escalate into something more violent and dangerous. However, not all conflict escalates into violent conflict. Conflict is the key to social and personal transformation. Augsburger, (1992), explains that conflict is a crisis that forces us to recognize that we live with multiple realities, or worldviews, and occurs when others force us to see that what we assumed and took for granted is not universal.

After introducing the basic ideas of culture and conflict, focus is placed on cultural aspects that most commonly play a part in the causes and management of conflict. These include values and beliefs, perceptions, and communication styles, as well as conflict management styles and conflict strategies.

Values are defined as something that is desirable or worthy and thought to be important. Barnlund, (1985) and Ting-Toomey and Oetzel, (2001), point out that cultural values, such as group harmony and individual competitiveness, can provide a motive for desired goals in a conflict. Thus, understanding cultural values can help to explain why people behave the way they do, particularly in a conflict situation. Because values and beliefs are learned during socialization and are grounded in cultural identity groups related to aspects such as religion, language, and traditions, connections developed during socialization form a powerful and emotional cohesiveness that binds members of a culture together (Kimmel, 2000). These values and beliefs are so much a part of an individual that they are rarely thought about until some interaction, often producing some sort of conflict, causes an awareness that there is a difference of value or belief. However, this consciousness, that there are different values and beliefs from our own, can cause a change in perceptions as well.

Perceptions are worldviews, or views of how the world should be. It is influenced unconsciously be values and beliefs. Behavior is strongly influenced by perceptions. An example might be an avoidance of things and people who are perceived to be bad. When perception of categories and labels are related, it can lead to stereotypes. Stereotypes are rigid perceptions and beliefs of the way all members of a cultural group are (Rogers, 2010). Every member of a particular cultural group is perceived to behave in the same way with the same values and beliefs. There is no room for exceptions. Perceptions that there are only two categories of people, Japanese or non-Japanese for instance, can lead to negative treatment of anyone viewed as a non-Japanese person. Furthermore, if all non-Japanese people are perceived to know nothing about Japanese culture or how to behave properly in Japanese society, a landlord may refuse to rent an apartment to non-Japanese people. It should be noted that not all stereotypes are negative. They

might also be positive or neutral. However, the underlying principal is the same. There is no perceived diversity within the cultural group.

Not only is an understanding of the role of perception important, but an understanding of one's own values and beliefs is necessary for successful communication to occur as well. In order to avoid negative perceptions of people who have different values and beliefs, it is necessary to prevent oneself from feeling threatened by adapting and understanding one's own values and beliefs. Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001), assert that understanding not only one's own, but others' cultural values and beliefs is a starting point for understanding oneself, conflict, and culture in order to manage intercultural conflict. Moreover, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), claim it is necessary to comprehend how people rank values in order to understand the role values play in conflict. Members of two very different cultures may both value human life, ideology, and family highly, but if one member ranks ideology as most important and human life as the lowest value among his or her most important five values, while the member of another culture ranks human life highest and ideology as lowest on the same scale of 5 most important values, there could be a conflict in a situation in which they must interact and choose whether to sacrifice their own life for the cause or give up on the cause in order to stay alive. Both members' behavior would reflect their ranking of their values, because in this case, the ranking becomes more important than the values.

Another important factor in conflict situations is communication styles, which are often closely related to values. For instance, the values of collectivism and individualism, (the importance placed on the group versus the importance placed on the individual), influence the way members that strongly hold these values communicate with others. Two communication styles they influence are high-context and low-context communication styles. Context refers to the amount of meaning that is contained around the actual messages being sent. (Hall, 1976). Members of high-context cultures generally have more shared meaning and use fewer words to explain things, while members of low-context cultures tend to be more direct and include more meanings in words, gestures, and so on. Despite the fact that most of the cultures placing a higher value on the group and that are collectivist prefer to use indirect communication styles as opposed to those who have individualistic values and tend to use more direct, low-context communication styles, no culture is completely one-hundred percent low-context or high-context all the time. They simply prefer to use one communication style more often than the other. It is a flexible scale, not an absolute one. In conflict situations, this can manifest itself in the way a conflict is attempted to be resolved. Members of collectivistic, high-context cultures tend to prefer to use third party negotiators and other indirect methods of conflict management. In contrast, members of individualistic, low-

context cultures often prefer to confront the conflicting person or group directly, often face-to-face. In fact, if someone using a high-context approach attempted an indirect approach to solving a conflict, an individual who prefers a low-context approach might perceive that person to be weak since he or she could not confront the problem in a brave direct manner.

Another aspect of communication styles which often plays a role in conflict is power distance. Power distance refers to the degree to which less powerful members of a culture expect and accept that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede, 1997). In large power distance cultures, inequalities are expected and accepted, and less powerful members are expected to be dependent on more powerful members of a culture, whether it is the national culture, family, or so on. Communication styles are often reflected in body language, use of honorific and very polite forms of language, and seating arrangements as well as other aspects of daily life. In small power distance cultures, everyone is expected to have equal rights, regardless of background, gender, age, or status. Inequalities in a society should be minimized if not eliminated. Behavior shown by this communication style might include using familiar names without titles, everyone sitting together with no thought to age or gender, or special facilities to allow physically disabled people to enjoy the same experiences able-bodied people enjoy. Power distance can influence conflict by causing it if someone from a small power distance culture appears to act too familiarly with someone from a large power distance culture or vice versa. It might also cause a conflict to escalate in a situation where a very young representative, though highly competent, is chosen to mediate a conflict with an important business partner who is more large power distance oriented. The large power distance partner may perceive the young representative as proof that the other company does not place importance on the existing conflict and two companies' relationship, and may even stop negotiations completely.

Tools to Manage Conflict

Because conflict in life is inevitable, it is necessary to not only examine the causes of conflict and escalation by looking at values and beliefs, perceptions, and communication styles. It is also imperative to look at ways to manage conflict. This can be done by making students aware of conflict management strategies and intercultural conflict styles. Bennett, (1995), describes five strategies that are often used in intercultural conflict situations, **1) denial or suppression, 2) power or authority, 3) third-person intermediary, 4) group consensus, and 5) direct discussion.** Denial or suppression is a strategy in which a person tries to manage a problem by ignoring or even denying one exists. Harmony is preserved superficially

by minimizing problems. The second strategy, power or authority, is the use of power to enforce a solution. A person or group in a position of authority or power, uses majority rule, or persuasive minority rule to settle a conflict. Third-person intermediary is when a third person is asked to act as a go-between to mediate the conflict. The group consensus strategy is when a group is used to share and discuss ideas about resolving a conflict to come to a decision. In this strategy, all those involved in the conflict agree upon the decision. The final strategy is the direct discussion strategy and entails face-to-face conflict negotiation. Those in conflict talk openly about perceptions and feelings regarding the problem as well as possible solutions to the problem.

Figure 1   Advantage and disadvantage of using intercultural communication conflict strategies (adapted from Bennett (1995))

Strategy	Advantages	Disadvantages
Denial or Suppression	Allows a cooling off period or lets time heal the problem, especially if the problem is not very important.	If the problem is very important, may allow the problem to build into a more serious situation that may be more difficult to solve.
Power or Authority	May be very effective when speed or efficiency is most important. Demonstrates the status of the party in authority.	Often a "win-lose" solution, and the party that loses the conflict may feel devalued and / or may want to take revenge in the future.
Third-party Intermediary	Allows the preservation of harmony on the surface while still addressing the conflict to manage it.	The conflict may become more complicated and confused if there are misinterpretations by the intermediary. Parties involved in the conflict may think their feelings are not sufficiently understood.
Group Consensus	The group may have more and better ideas for resolving the conflict than one individual. Agreement to a solution by all conflicting parties is a powerful, non-authoritarian influence on members involved in the conflict.	Usually takes a lot of time. The group may avoid facing the difficult issues and concentrate only on less important aspects of the conflict.
Direct Discussion	The conflict is clear and understood by all people involved in the conflict. Since all the conflict participant are involved in the solution, they all support it.	Individual involved in the conflict may not have the skills to participate in confrontation, and thus feel worse afterwards. There may not be enough time and commitment to use this strategy.

As with most actions, all of the strategies described by Bennett (1995) have advantages and disadvantages, which are summarized in Figure 1.

An examination of the conflict and cultural factors should be followed by choosing the strategy that is deemed to most likely succeed in de-escalating the conflict. For instance, in a conflict in which an expedient solution is required, a

power or authority strategy may be best because of its advantage of speediness. The key is to choose an appropriate strategy suitable for the conflict and cultures to which the conflicting members belong.

Another aspect of conflict that can benefit those who are aware of it is intercultural conflict styles. While there are several models of intercultural conflict styles, Mitchell Hammer's Intercultural Conflict Style model (2003 a, 2003 b) was used for the courses introducing culture and conflict. According to Hammer, (2003 a), "Intercultural conflict styles refers to a cultural group's preferred manner for dealing with disagreements and communicating emotion" (p.16). His model focuses on how low-context and high-context communication styles, in particular concepts of direct communication and indirect communication, work with how emotionally expressive or emotionally restrained conflicting participants are when they communicate in a conflict situation. These conflict styles, while preferred by people experiencing conflict, are both stable and changeable. Like Bennett's conflict management strategies (2003), it is an important factor in the approach members of different cultures take to manage conflicts and can cause a conflict to escalate or de-escalate, (Hammer, 2003, Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001).

In his model, Hammer (2003 a, 2003 b) identifies four intercultural conflict styles; the discussion style, engagement style, accommodation style and dynamic style. The discussion and engagement styles are more commonly used by members of low-context cultures who tend to use more direct communication approaches. The difference is the amount of emotion shown in a conflict situation. While the discussion style is characterized by direct communication and emotional restraint, showing little emotion, the engagement style uses direct communication and is more emotionally expressive. The remaining two conflict styles are characterized as using high-context and indirect communication styles. However, the accommodation style preference favors showing less emotion and the dynamic style individual prefers expressing emotion more openly.

The relationship between communication styles and conflict was shown previously. However, emotion and how it is shown also plays a role in conflict. For those involved in conflict situations, conflict exists because something has triggered a stong emotion, which in turn creates a desire to do something, even if it means only thinking about it. How those emotions are expressed, whether by internalizing them or showing them openly, can influence the escalation or decline of a conflict. A person from an emotionally expressive culture might think someone who doesn't show emotion is not taking a conflict seriously. On the other hand, someone from an emotionally restrained culture might think someone who openly shows emotion is immature. These mistaken perceptions can then lead to actions that might cause negative reactions causing the conflict to escalate. Nevertheless, knowledge of

intercultural conflict styles can help one deal with conflicts successfully. Understanding one's own preferred conflict style and being able to recognize that of the person or group one is in conflict with can allow for the option of choosing the best style to use to obtain desired results. A compatible style could be used to placate the opposition to more easily negotiate a solution, or a very different style could be utilized to shock or meet the opposition's expectations in order to gain leverage or more easily negotiate a solution. Whichever the choice, the essential factor is that it is a choice that those in conflict situations can utilize if they have the knowledge and awareness.

Course Feedback

As the goals of the courses incorporating these concepts has been to utilize a student-centered approach in order for students to understand and be able to learn to incorporate what they learn from such a course to help their own relationships flourish, students were asked for their impressions. Due to the courses being conducted in English and possibly an aversion to a topic related to conflict, the number of students has varied from as few as four to as many as fifty over 7 years. This makes it difficult to give concrete statistics. However, overall, the majority of students were very satisfied with the course. All of them said that they would recommend the course to other students because the content was interesting and useful, and because they could actually experience new things in addition to gaining new knowledge. Of those who did the online readings, all found the online textbook readings to be useful and interesting, with only a few thinking it was a little difficult to understand. A few students especially liked the online format of the readings.

Of the topics covered in the course, all of the students commented that they were enjoyable, useful, or both. The most useful topics were conflict, perceptions, stereotypes, values and beliefs, and conflict styles. The most useful activities were the categories and labels, cultural context inventory, and Hammer's (2003 a, 2003 b) Intercultural Conflict Styles Inventory. The various surveys and activities seemed to provide more personal awareness, which seemed to appeal to students. Several students also commented that they liked the discussion, which was usually carried out after they had done a survey about themselves. In particular, several students might have found Hammer's Intercultural Conflict Styles Inventory interesting because not only does the inventory help one see his or her own preferred way of dealing with conflict, but also how to understand that of others and how others might behave as a result. For many of the students, who were in at least their second year of university and several who were looking for jobs, they might have seen knowing about intercultural conflict styles to be useful for when they started

working for a company. In contrast, while many students found the videos and cultural identity activities enjoyable, they seemed to have some difficulty relating ideas from other people's experiences with ideas they were learning about in the course. However, because even those who did not find these activities as enjoyable, virtually all did find the course topics to be useful and would recommend the course to other friends. As a result, the feedback by students shows that the course was relatively successful.

Conclusion

Due to the shortness of the course and the fact that some students had a limited English ability, only a brief introduction to the ideas of culture and conflict were included in the courses. Despite this, a knowledge and awareness of factors that influence cultural conflict were made available to students. From feedback received about the course and course topics, it can be said that the course was successful in its goal of creating awareness of culture and communication issues discussing various topics related to culture and conflict, and gaining tools to better communicate with people from other cultures and to better manage conflict.

It was expected that students who could increase their knowledge and awareness, as well as practice skills necessary for managing cultural conflict in the course would create more mindfulness and empathy, not mindlessness, among the students to assist them in viewing things from other people's points of view so that dynamic solutions to manage conflict together can be created. If this can be done successfully, many possible solutions can be created and the best one for a particular conflict situation can be chosen, resulting in building and maintaining better relations with others. This, without a doubt, is one of the ultimate goals of interactions with others.

While there is no guarantee that students from the course will remember and utilize what they learned in the course, it is hoped that they at least learned the benefits and inevitability of conflict as well as the necessity of being adaptable and flexible in order to successfully manage conflict. It is hoped that students realize that it is necessary to use multiple approaches to deal with conflict, which requires an awareness of one's own cultural tendencies. Finally, it is hoped that the students found enough motivation to continue to consider the benefits of learning more about cultural conflict in order to improve their skills at managing it in every aspects of their lives.

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