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*Chief among the virtues claimed by individualist philosophers is self-realization. Each person is viewed as having a unique set of talents and potentials. The translation of these potentials into actuality is considered the highest purpose to which one can devote one's life. The striving for self-realization is accompanied by a subjective sense of righteousness and personal well-being.*

## **Conflict Resolution: *Cultural Understanding Imperative***

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### **Introduction**

Cultural differences must be taken into consideration when resolving conflict because it contributes to how a person thinks and acts (Elmer, 1993). As a child growing up in various multi-cultural environments in California and New York, I was introduced to many different perspectives on life. These different perspectives were culturally produced and often resulted in conflict which I was not aware of at the time, but now looking back I can understand why the issues arose and how we could have resolved them some more peacefully than we did.

Gudykunst and Kim (1997) state that individualism-collectivism is a major dimension of cultural variability used to explain cross-cultural differences in communication across cultures. They further state that the communication differences that dominate individualistic and collectivistic cultures are contained in the context, making context understanding a needed quality when dealing with conflict resolution. In 1976, Hall stated that context is where the importance of the information of the conversation is placed which produces its meaning, thereby facilitating action (Palmer & Schoorman, 1998).

Westerners are often referred to as “low context” (direct) and the same follows in regard to conflict and resolution. Language in North America is direct and manifested through an active voice (Elmer, 1993). This type of approach separates the person from the issue which provides a false sense of freedom to criticize (Elmer, 1993). Contrarily, a majority of the rest of the world is more indirect or deemed “high context.” They view relationships as important to the nature, development, and resolution of the issue. They do not like directness because they believe it is disrespectful and cruel (Elmer, 1993). In those cultures, language and speech is passive where there is no real blame attributed to the person but rather the focus is on the situation itself.

Many failures in international cooperation and conflict resolution are related to cultural differences manifested through communication, or the lack thereof. Reversing this nonproductive interaction can be effected by establishing realistic, proper, and effective communication based on mutual cultural understanding and goodwill (Najafbagy, 2008). Global leaders should seek cultural understanding that focuses on individualism-collectivism along with context to ensure they know the perspectives of the parties involved when dealing with cross-cultural conflict resolution. “Extraordinary leaders — Gandhi and Churchill, Jack Welch and Bill Gates — have always lifted their gaze beyond their own borders to include the globe (Zweifel, 2003, p. 2).”

## **Individualism-Collectivism**

“What is it that people don’t even know they don’t know? That is culture (Zweifel, 2003, p. 38).” Many studies are continually being conducted concerning individualism and collectivism (“I/C”) as a culture-level variable, however recently it is being treated more as an individual-level variable (Rego & Cunha, 2007). Gudykunst and Kim (1997) state that I/C are the dimension with the clearest individual-level equivalents of cultural-level tendencies which make it a major cultural variability utilized to explain differences in cross-cultural communication and conflict resolution.

Individualistic people place a greater emphasis on self-interest and personal achievement; they are more inclined to compete, be assertive, and place little importance on group harmony (Rego & Cunha, 2007). Individualists may cooperate within a group, but mainly to the extent that such cooperation is instrumental to the attainment of individual goals that cannot be obtained by working alone, and where that cooperation is a means to accomplish individual interests and goals (Rego & Cunha, 2007). Individualistic cultures promote self-realization. Waterman (1984) stated that:

***Chief among the virtues claimed by individualist philosophers is self-realization. Each person is viewed as having a unique set of talents and potentials. The translation of these potentials into actuality is considered the highest purpose to which one can devote one’s life. The striving for self-realization is accompanied by a subjective sense of righteousness and personal well-being (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997, p. 56).***

In contrast, collectivistic cultures require individuals to fit into a group; the subordination of one’s personal objectives is forsaken for that of the collective’s welfare and the goals of the group to which they belong (Rego & Cunha, 2007). Collectivists are more passive and willing to cooperate, avoid conflict, and emphasize harmony (Rego & Cunha, 2007). The group’s

interests are placed ahead of personal goals as a paramount end to be attained (Elmer, 1993). Saleh & Gufwoli (1982) demonstrated this well in their depiction of a Kenyan culture:

*In Kenyan tribes nobody is an isolated individual. Rather, his or her uniqueness is a secondary fact... First, and foremost, he or she is several people's contemporary. His or her life is founded on these facts economically, socially and physically. In this system group activities are dominant, responsibility is shared and accountability is collective.... Because of the emphasis on collectivity, harmony and cooperation among the group tend to be emphasized more than individual function and responsibility (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997, p. 56).*

These cultural-level values are mediated through three characteristics: personality orientations, individual values, and self-construal. These characteristics influence the cultural individualism-collectivism which manifests itself through communication.

Personal orientation is the effect of cultural I/C on communication mediated by our personalities (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). Triandis, et al (1985) propose that idiocentrism and allocentrism are the two personality orientations that are learned in I/C cultures: idiocentrism related to individualism and allocentrism related to collectivism (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). In the United States, the more idiocentric people are, the less sensitive they are to others' behaviors; however, the more idiocentric Japanese are, the less sensitive they are to others' behaviors, the less they pay attention to others' status characteristics, and the less concerned they are with socially acceptable behavior. This is also true in Chinese and English cultures as well (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997).

diocentric individuals in individualistic cultures believe it is natural to "do their own thing" and disregard the group's needs, while allocentric individuals are concerned about their "in-groups" (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). "Yamaguchi (1994) argued that collectivism at the individual level includes the tendency to give priority to the collective self over the private self, especially when the two are in conflict (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997, p. 61)." Additionally he found that the more collectivistic Japanese are, the more sensitive they are to others and the less they have a tendency to want to be unique; these tendencies extend to Korea and the United States as shown by Yamaguchi et al (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997).

The second influence is individual values, which are the core of our personalities; they help us to maintain and enhance our self-esteem (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). Our values play an important part of who we are and influence how we handle situations; however, they are not tied to specific situations (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). Values help to preserve interpersonal relationships, maintain harmony, minimize potential conflict, restore solidarity, and facilitate communication between levels of society (Elmer, 1993). Schwartz (1992) introduced 11 motivational domains of values whose interests can be individualistic, collectivistic, or mixed. They are self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, spirituality, benevolence, and universalism. He further suggested that the values of stimulation, hedonism, power, achievement, and self-direction serve individualism; the values of tradition, conformity, and benevolence serve the collective; and the values of security, universalism, and spirituality serves mixed interests (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). Although individuals can contain any combination of these values, one type will dominate. This is the case in the United States where although many subcultures are collectivistic, most still hold individualistic values (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997).

The third manner in which cultural I/C influence communication is through the way we see ourselves via self-construal (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). Self-construal is important because how persons conceive themselves is a determining factor to understanding behavior, which is characterized either as independent or interdependent. Gudykunst & Kim (1997) state that the independent construal of self dominates in individualistic cultures while the interdependent construal of self dominates in collectivistic cultures. This is supported by the individualistic culture's view of itself as a unique and independent entity and the collectivistic culture's view of itself as a part of an encompassing social relationship; one's behavior is determined, contingent on, and in support of, the larger in-group. Self-esteem is derived from the two perspectives: the individualistic is based on one's own abilities to succeed and prosper while collectivistic relies on the ability to adjust to others to maintain harmony in the social context (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). However, it is important to note that we all have both independent and interdependent self construal of self, and depending on the situation, one will be dominate and that is where the understanding is really required. "In other cultures, especially in Europe, people's first priority is not to express themselves but to understand (Zweifel, 2003, p. 62)."

## **Context**

Zweifel (2003, p. 24) states that "language is the house of being. It reflects cultural essence." According to Hall (1990), understanding a messages context is very important because it's in the context that the meaning is formulated (Palmer & Schoorman, 1998). And it is from that vantage point that a person relates the information that is the important part of communication. Palmer & Schoorman (1998) identify that the main difference and most critical distinction between "low" and "high" context communication is the location of the meaning within the text. In low-context communication, a majority of the information and meaning are contained in the message. The message is direct and active voice is used. Contrarily, in high-context communication, the information and meaning are embedded in the "information that surrounds the event; it is inextricably bound up with the meaning of that event." The message is indirect and the passive voice is used (Palmer & Schoorman, p. 325).

The United States is a low-context culture, where the meaning of a text is explicit and contained within the text; whereas Spain, India, and Japan are examples of high-context cultures where the meaning of the text is implicit and contained outside of the text and more focus is on the relationships formed because of the event (Palmer & Schoorman, 1998).

Hall (1976, p. 98) further states that: people raised in high-context systems expect more of others than do the participants in low-context systems. When talking about something that they have on their minds, a high-context individual will expect his [or her] interlocutor to know what's bothering him [or her], so that he [or she] doesn't have to be specific. The result is that he [or she] will talk around the point, in effect putting all the pieces in place except the crucial one. Placing it properly—this keystone—is the role of his [or her] interlocutor. (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997, p.65)

Context often manifests itself in cultural differences making it imperative for understanding, especially when dealing with conflict resolution. For example, a person from the United States, a low-context culture, often separates the message from the messenger allowing more freedom to criticize ideas, behaviors, and failures of others (Elmer, 1993). Although

this separation is not always distinctive, it is still allowed. Conversely, a person from Japan, a high-context culture, where person and action are interrelated, would not be able to separate the two and thereby see the person as being blamed along with the action which would be treated as a disgrace or public humiliation (Elmer, 1993). Personal information is not as important as group-based information in high-context cultures, whereas in low-context cultures, it is the basis for determining behavior (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997).

High-context communication can be characterized as being ambiguous, passive, indirect, and understated, with speakers who are sensitive to listeners and reserved in nature. Conversely, low-context communication can be characterized as being direct, open, explicit, precise, and consistent with one's feelings (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). These communication patterns are compatible with collectivism and individualism, respectively. "Singelis and Brown (1995) report that interdependent self construals are related to using high-context communication styles, while independent self construals are not related to using high-context communication styles (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997, p. 69)." Independent self construals correlate negatively to embarrassment and social anxiety, while seen positively influencing the use of dramatic communication in individualistic cultures (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997).

Although high and low-context cultures align respectively to collectivism and individualism, they are capable of being utilized by either culture depending on the situation. Remembering that one size does not fit all applies to these patterns as well. Not all members of an individualistic culture are individualists and not all collectivists are within a collectivistic culture (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997). Context is very important to cultural understanding but then again so too does the situation because it can dictate context usage. Therefore, leaders who desire to communicate globally must fully understand their context and that of their audience otherwise they might be misunderstood and thereby misrepresented among other things which can be disastrous, especially when formulating a new alliance. "...[I]t is essential to communicate, communicate, communicate (Zweifel, 2003, p. 55)."

## **Conclusion**

Many failures in international cooperation and conflict resolution are related to cultural differences manifested through miscommunication, which can be overcome by understanding. Cultural differences must be taken into consideration when resolving conflict because it contributes to how a person thinks and acts (Elmer, 1993).

Gudykunst and Kim (1997) hold that individualism-collectivism is a major dimension of cultural variability used to explain cross-cultural differences in communication across cultures. They further state that the communication differences that dominate individualistic and collectivistic cultures are contained in the context — making context understanding a needed quality when dealing with conflict resolution. The United States is the most recognized, low-context society — direct, active voice, explicit, individualistic culture. Conversely, Japan is the most recognized high-context setting — indirect, passive voice, implicit, collectivistic culture. And throughout the years, we have witnessed their respective conflicts, however they have effectively managed to resolve their conflicts and become two world powers that are continually working with and for each other in order to garner mutual respect and betterment.

The U.S. and Japan have found that understanding each other's culture was necessary to forge an alliance where each other's vested interests would be viewed and accounted for in

strategic management and operations. Through cultural understanding, they were able to leverage the strengths of each other; subsequently making each one better and more efficient. Their alliance provides global leaders of tomorrow an example of how understanding, accepting, and in some cases, adopting another's cultural attributes, can help improve a business, an organization, or even a country. "Understanding the other side is not merely nice and morally right; it is a strategic necessity (Zweifel, 2003, p. xvii)."

Christian leaders should seek a cultural understanding which focuses on the individualism-collectivism variable along with context to ensure they know the perspective of the parties involved when attempting to resolve cross-cultural conflict.

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## Author Biography

Livingston Tindal is a retired Senior Chief Petty Officer of the United States Navy who has led many great men and women in peace and wartime. He has traveled extensively and takes pride in empowering others wherever and whenever possible. He currently is employed as a Naval Training System Plans Program Manager for the Naval Education and Training Command. He is responsible for ensuring the life-cycle training and management for all acquisition purchases throughout the U.S. Navy. As a doctoral student of organizational leadership in Regent University's School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship, his interests include social entrepreneurship, strategic leadership, and leadership application and personal development.

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