

# A Personality Approach to Japanese Preference of Avoidance in Conflict: Neuroticism and Its Interaction with the Situation

著者	KOMATSU Sakura, OHBUCHI Ken-ichi
journal or publication title	Tohoku psychologica folia
volume	68
page range	7-16
year	2010-03-31
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10097/54669">http://hdl.handle.net/10097/54669</a>

# A Personality Approach to Japanese Preference of Avoidance in Conflict: Neuroticism and Its Interaction with the Situation<sup>1</sup>

SAKURA KOMATSU (小松さくら)<sup>2</sup>  
(*Doshisha University*)

KEN-ICHI OHBUCHI (大淵憲一)<sup>3</sup>  
(*Tohoku University*)

Research has indicated Japanese' preference of avoidance in interpersonal conflicts. We attempted to examine its psychological mechanism in terms of personality determinants. Specifically, we predicted that neurotic Japanese would be more likely to take avoidance than non-neurotic ones. Assuming that the effects of personality are moderated by situational variable, we made two alternative hypotheses: the effects would be observed only when the conflict was moderate and they would be observed only when it was intense. Completing the Japanese version of NEO-PI-R, 147 Japanese students rated their conflicts with friends in terms of strategies and anger, which we regarded as an index of the intensity of conflicts. The results supported the first and third hypotheses, but not the second. We interpreted that neurotic individuals avoid conflict because of their fear to social rejection and the fear leads to avoidance when conflict is intense and so a certain level of anxiety is evoked.

**Key words:** interpersonal conflicts, personality, neuroticism, Japanese

## Introduction

Interpersonal conflict occurs when an individual perceives that the other prevents him or her from attaining some goal. Conflict makes people unpleasant, so they want to avoid it. But conflict with others is inevitable as long as individuals have different views or values. Therefore it is important to know how people manage conflicts because conflict resolution influences people's social adaptation and well-being to a large extent.

Research has demonstrated cultural differences in conflict resolution behaviors. In a cross-cultural study Leung found that Americans preferred confrontational strategies more than Hong Kong Chinese (Leung & Lind, 1986), and in another study, he confirmed that cultural individualists preferred confrontational approaches to conflict resolution, whereas collectivists chose collaborative strategies to keep social harmony (Leung, Au, Fernandez-Dols, & Iwawaki, 1993).

- 
- 1 This article was presented at 22nd Annual International Association for Conflict Management Conference (2009)
  - 2 Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sakura Komatsu, Department of Psychology, Doshisha University, Karasuma Imadegawa, Kamigyo-ku, Kyoto 602-8580, Japan E-mail address: eli3502@mail2.doshisha.ac.jp (Sakura Komatsu).  
Telephone number : +81-75-251-4095 Fax number : +81-75-251-3077
  - 3 Department of Psychology, Graduate School of Arts and Letters, Tohoku University, 27-1, Kawauchi, Aoba-ku, Sendai 980-8576, Japan

In a study using Japanese participants, however, Ohbuchi and Takahashi (1994) found that avoidance was their typical response to interpersonal conflicts. Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Matsumoto, Yokochi, Pan, Takai, and Wilcox (2001) compared conflict resolution strategies between two cultural collectivistic groups, Japanese and Chinese, and found that Japanese chose to keep an appearance of composure even in conflict situations more often than Chinese. These findings suggest that avoidance is a predominant conflict style among Japanese. Of course, all Japanese do not choose avoidance, however, and instead, there should be individual differences in the preference of avoidance among them. It is a main concern of the present study to explore personality variables of this conflict style.

Researchers have attempted to identify factors which determine conflict resolution strategies. They include gender, interpersonal relationships, culture, and conflict issues (Ohbuchi, Chiba, & Fukushima, 1996; Ohbuchi & Kitanaka, 1991). Personality also affects people's motivational, cognitive, and affective processes of conflict resolution strategy (Laursen & Collins, 1994; Ohbuchi & Kojima, 1999). People having different personality tendencies may have different motivations, and so they choose different conflict strategies because they value or seek different outcomes in the conflict resolution. And, people having different cognitive tendencies may differently interpret the same conflict situation, which in turn leads them to choose different strategies (Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Hair, 1996). For example, Chanin and Schneer (1984) found that individuals who prefer logical thinking tend to choose competing strategies for conflict resolution.

Among other personality variables, we focused on Big Five personality dimensions, that is, Five Factor Model of personality. It measures people's relatively enduring five traits in emotional, interpersonal, experiential, attitudinal, and motivational domains (McCrae & John, 1992). Researchers have expected that FFM includes personality dimensions closely related to the selection of conflict resolution strategies.

Among the five dimensions, agreeableness is the one that is most relevant to conflict coping (Jensen-Campbell, Gleason, Adams, & Malcolm, 2003; Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2001; Jensen-Campbell, Graziano, & Hair, 1996). Agreeable persons are generally cooperative and they have motivations to maintain positive relationships with others. Consistent with its conceptualization, Graziano et al. (1996) found that individuals having high scores on agreeableness tended to select collaborative strategies, while individuals low on agreeableness tended to select non-collaborative ones.

Researches suggested that neuroticism is related to avoidance style (Antonioni, 1998; Kato, 2003; Komatsu & Ohbuchi, 2008). Neurotic individuals are nervous, emotionally unstable, likely to feel negative emotions such as fear and anxiety, and tend to be depressive. As compared with non-neurotic ones, they tend to more selectively attend to negative aspects of experiences and to more strongly respond to them. As consistent with the concept of this trait, Gunthert, Cohen, and Armeli (1999) found neurotic participants felt more negative emotions with interpersonal conflicts.

It takes a high level of cognitive activities to actively cope with conflicts, whether it is confrontation or collaboration. For active coping, individuals must analyze the causes and other aspects of the conflict, calculate costs and benefits of alternative strategies, and predict responses of both the other party and the audience. However, it may be difficult for neurotic individuals

since they are restricted of cognitive capacities by high levels of negative emotions. From this line of reasoning, we predicted that neurotic participants would take passive strategies such as avoidance, not active ones, to cope with interpersonal conflicts (*Hypothesis 1*).

Although a personality variable influences an individual's responses in a situation, some researchers believe that its effects are moderated by situational variables (Mischel, 1977). Especially, Mischel (1977) postulate that personality variables are more able to predict individuals' social behaviors when relevant situational variables are weak than when they are strong. In the strong situations in which there are distinct norms or contexts that explicitly orient individuals' behaviors, individual differences in behaviors may not appear. For example, most people may stop at a crossing when a traffic signal is red. In the weak situations having no such norms or contexts, on the other hand, individuals may regard that a variety of behaviors are acceptable as appropriate, and so they may choose behavioral alternatives consistent with their own personality inclinations.

Empirical research has provided evidence supporting the theory. Barrick and Mount (1993) found that workers who are high in conscientiousness and extraversion made higher levels of performance when they were assigned to autonomous jobs (not strictly supervised, relatively unstructured, and allowed to do at one's own pace) than when they were assigned to non-autonomous jobs. In a study on interpersonal conflict, also, Park and Antonioni (2007) found that participants high in agreeableness more frequently chose collaborative strategies than those low in agreeableness when the other party were not collaborative, that is, the relevant situational variable (the other party's collaboration) was weak.

According to the theory and research above, it is assumed that neurotic individuals attend to anxiety-evoking cues of the experience that non-neurotic individuals would not perceive, and thereby they make neurotic responses to it. Therefore, differences in responses to interpersonal conflicts between neurotic and non-neurotic individuals may be distinctly observed when a relevant situational variable is weak.

However, Ohbuchi and Fukushima (1997) provided the opposite evidence, that is, personality variables influence individuals' responses, instead, when a relevant situational variable is powerful. They made participants exposed to an interpersonal conflict that was caused by the other party's unreasonable request. In their experiment, a personality variable was trait aggressiveness and a situational variable was politeness of the other party's behavioral manner. The results showed that aggressive participants increased hostile responses only when the other party behaved in an impolite manner, that is, when the conflict was intense. They interpreted that a certain level of situational variable is necessary to evoke individual differences in responses to the situation. Applying their theory to neuroticism, it is assumed that neurotic individuals may respond more strongly to the anxiety-evoking cues of a situation than non-neurotic ones even though both perceive the cues.

There appear to be inconsistencies in empirical findings regarding when a personality variable becomes salient in shaping conflict responses. In this study, therefore, we made alternative hypotheses on this issue. According to the weak situation theory, we predicted that neurotic participants would take avoidance more frequently than non-neurotic ones when the

intensity of interpersonal conflicts was low (*Hypothesis 2*). According to the strong situation theory, on the other hand, we predicted that neurotic participants would take avoidance more frequently than non-neurotic ones when the intensity of interpersonal conflicts was high (*Hypothesis 3*).

## Method

### *Participants*

One hundred and forty-seven Japanese university students (60 males and 87 females) participated in this study. Their mean age was 19.8 ( $SD = 1.6$ ).

### *Procedures*

In the questionnaire, we defined interpersonal conflict as interpersonal situations in which the actions or goals of one person interfere with those of another. We provided the participants with the definition, as well as examples of conflicts such as “being denigrated, troubles over money or lending and borrowing, an opposition in interests, and disagreement in opinions.” Then we asked the participants to describe their personal conflicts with their friends of same sex.

*Anger.* We measured the level of anger that participants felt in the conflict episodes as an index of intensity of conflict. We asked them to participants to answer a question “How strongly he or she felt angry in the episodes?” by rating on a 7-point scale ranging from 0 (*Not at all*) to 6 (*Very strongly*).

*Resolution strategies.* Then we administered the Interpersonal Conflict Style Scale (ICSS; Ohbuchi, 2005) to the participants. It consists of 28 items designed to measure 7 different styles (assertion, aggression, negotiation, appeasement, rejection, compliance, and avoidance). We asked the participants to answer what they did for resolution of the conflicts by rating on a 7-point scale ranging from 0 (*Not at all*) to 6 (*Definitely*).

*Personality.* Costa and McCrae (1992) developed the NEO-PI-R scale to measure FFM personality dimensions, which is applicable to a wide range of samples from adolescents to the old. We administered the Japanese version of NEO-PI-R (Shimonaka, Nakazato, Gondo, & Takayama, 1999) to our participants for measuring neuroticism. They rated 48 items on a 5-point scale ranging from 0 to 4.

## Results

### *The Interpersonal Conflict Style Scale (ICSS)*

First, we performed factor analysis of interpersonal conflict styles using the seven strategies scores as variables. Table 1 shows the results of factor analysis. Varimax rotation provided three factors, with the cumulative contributions being 69.6%. On the first factor, appeasement, negotiation, and compliance had high loadings, so we interpreted it as collaborative styles. On the second factor, assertion and aggression had high loadings, and then we regarded it as confrontational styles. On the third factor, rejection and avoidance had high loadings, suggesting avoidance. Cronbach's alpha was .78, .84, and .55 respectively.

**Table 1** Factor Structure of ICSS

	F1	F2	F3
F1: Collaborative styles			
appeasement	0.88		
negotiation	0.77		
compliance	0.62		
F2: Confrontational styles			
assertion		0.95	
aggression		0.79	
F3: Avoidance			
avoidance			0.78
rejection			0.65
cumulative contributions	28.11	53.19	69.63

We computed the factor scores by simply averaging the strategies that had high loadings on each dimension. Table 2 shows means and standard deviations of each gender on these scores, indicating that female participants were significantly higher on avoidance than male participants,  $F(144, 1) = 6.14, p < .05$ .

**Table 2** Mean(SD) of ICSS

	Male	Female	Total
Collaborative	2.04(1.29)	1.87(1.27)	1.96(1.29)
Confrontational	1.51(1.37)	1.25(2.03)	1.36(1.18)
Avoidance	1.65(1.07)	2.13(1.18)	1.94(1.15)

### *Neuroticism and Anger*

Table 3 also shows means and standard deviations of each gender on neuroticism and anger, showing that females were significantly higher score on neuroticism,  $F(144, 1) = 5.94, p < .05$ .

**Table 3** Mean(SD) of Neuroticism and Anger

	Male	Female	Total
Neuroticism	115.89(20.63)	124.18(19.25)	120.83(20.16)
Anger	4.13(1.56)	4.04(1.71)	4.08(1.64)

Table 4 shows correlations of anger, neuroticism and ICSS. Anger was positively related with confrontational style. Neuroticism was positively associated with avoidance.

**Table 4** Correlations of Anger, Neuroticism, and ICSS

	Anger	Neuroticism	Collaborative	Confrontational	Avoidance
Anger	—	.05	-.10	.42**	.10
Neuroticism			-.11	.04	.19*
Collaborative				.05†	.24**
Confrontational					.01
Avoidance					

\*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$ ; † $p < .10$

### *ICSS and Personality*

To examine the effects of anger and neuroticism on three conflict style dimensions, we performed hierarchical multiple regression analysis using anger, neuroticism and their interaction as independent variables and avoidance factor as a dependent variable. Table 5 shows that a main effect of neuroticism was significant, but its interaction with anger was also significant.

**Table 5** Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Avoidance by Anger, Neuroticism, and Their Interaction

	$\beta$	R <sup>2</sup>	$\Delta R^2$
Step 1			
Anger	.10		
Neuroticism	.19*		
		.05	.03*
Step 2			
Anger	-.01		
Neuroticism	.00		
Anger $\times$ Neuroticism	.27**		
		.07	.05*

\*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$

In order to examine the interaction effect, we divided participants into 4 groups by crossing two levels of anger and neuroticism based on medians (4.00 and 121.00, respectively). As figure 1 shows, neurotic participants took avoidance more frequently than non-neurotic participants only when they felt strong anger. When their anger was weak, however, neuroticism did not affect avoidance.

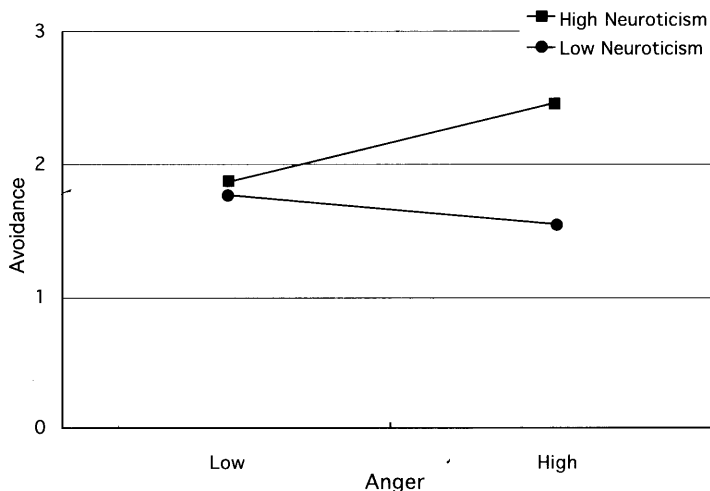


Figure 1. Avoidance as a Function of the Anger × Neuroticism.

Further, we performed separate multiple regression analysis using anger and neuroticism as independent variables and each of collaborative and confrontational styles as a dependent variable. Table 6 shows that anger significantly increased the use of confrontational styles.

**Table 6** Regression Analysis of Collaborative and Confrontational Styles by Anger and Neuroticism

	Collaborative	Confrontational
Anger	-.09	.41**
Neuroticism	-.10	.02
R <sup>2</sup>	.01	.16**

\*\* $p < .01$

## Discussion

The present study indicated that, as we predicted in Hypothesis 1, a personality variable, neuroticism, is positively related to this conflict style among Japanese. As compared with male ones, avoidance was more often taken by female participants, who are also observed to be more neurotic than male ones. It has been also established that collectivists, especially Japanese, prefer avoidance in conflict situations (Oetzel et al., 2001). Further, research in cross-cultural study of personality indicates that Japanese are generally more neurotic than western people (Matsumoto, 2006; Schmitt, Allik, McCrae, & Benet-Martínez et al., 2007).

These findings suggest that both female's and Japanese's preference may be caused, at least, partly by their high level of neuroticism. Neuroticism is a personality trait consisting of several mutually related motivational, cognitive, and affective characteristics. Considering that



avoidance is a response to interpersonal situations, we should focus on the interpersonal aspects of neuroticism. According to the personality theory of Big Five (Costa & McCrae, 1992), neurotic individuals tend to fear social exclusion and interpersonal rejection in social interactions. Cultural psychologists have regarded the collectivists, such as Japanese, have strong concerns for group harmony or for relationship maintenance (Hofstede, 2001). It is also characteristic of females. These lines of reasoning may suggest that neurotic individuals are strongly concerned about social acceptance, fearing social exclusion and thereby they are likely to take avoidance in conflict situations. In short, we interpret that avoidance in conflicts is motivated by neurotic individual's fear of rejection.

In this study, we examined two alternative hypotheses regarding the interaction of personality and situation. We attempted to examine the relationships between neuroticism and avoidance by focusing on the reported anger as an index of the intensity of conflicts, and the results supported *Hypothesis 3* based on the strong situation theory, but not *Hypothesis 2* based on the weak situation theory.

The weak situation theory postulates that a personality variable determines behavior when a related situational variable was weak. The theory emphasizes that by biasing cognitive processes, personality variables lead to an idiosyncratic interpretation of situation (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995), that is, neurotic individuals respond to anxiety-evoking cues of conflict situation that non-neurotic ones would not notice. However, the results did not support its prediction.

On the other hand, the strong situation theory postulates that the effects of personality variables on behavior become salient when a related situational variable was strong. It focuses on individual differences in behavioral and emotional response tendencies to the same stimulus. Neurotic individuals may feel stronger anxiety than non-neurotic ones even though both perceive anxiety-evoking cues of situation. The present results supported this hypothesis. We interpreted above that avoidance is motivated by neurotic individual's fear of rejection. In conflict situations, every participant may be motivated by multiple concerns such as self-interests, restoration of fairness, protection of face and maintenance of relationship (Ohbuchi & Tedeschi, 1997). Avoidance secures maintenance of relationship but sacrifices other concerns, so even neurotic individuals may have some hesitation in deciding avoidance. Thus, we interpreted that a certain level of fear is necessary for them to decide to take avoidance in conflict situations.

However, we should note that the intensity of conflict was measured by the level of anger in this study. Since conflict is a perceived interference or discord, it is necessary to take some subjective response as an index of the intensity of conflict. However, some may doubt validity of our examination of the hypotheses for a reason that the level of anger might have been affected by neuroticism. This possibility was discarded because there was no significant correlation between anger and neuroticism. But, in the future, we must replicate the present findings on the interaction of personality and situation by using other index of intensity of conflict.

## References

- Antonioni, D. (1998). Relationship between the big five personality factors and conflict management styles. *The International Journal of Conflict Management*, *9*, 336-355.
- Barrick, M. R., & Mount, M. K. (1993). Autonomy as a moderator of the relationships between the big five personality dimensions and job performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *78*, 111-118.
- Bolger, N., & Zuckerman, A. (1995). A framework for studying personality in the stress process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *69*, 890-902.
- Chanin, M. N., & Schneer, J. A. (1984). Manifest needs as personality predispositions to conflict-handling behavior. *Human Relations*, *40*, 575-590.
- Costa, P. T., Jr., & McCrae, R. R. (1992). *The Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R) and NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) professional manual*. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.
- Graziano, W. G., Jensen-Campbell, L. A., & Hair, E. C. (1996). Perceiving interpersonal conflict and reacting to it: The case for agreeableness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *70*, 820-835.
- Gunther, K. C., Cohen, L. H., & Armeli, S. (1999). The role of neuroticism in daily stress and coping. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *77*, 1087-1100.
- Hofstede, G. H. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Jensen-Campbell, L. A., Gleason, K. A., Adams, R., & Malcolm, K. T. (2003). Interpersonal conflict, agreeableness, and personality development. *Journal of Personality*, *71*, 1059-1085.
- Jensen-Campbell, L. A., & Graziano, W. G. (2001). Agreeableness as a moderator of interpersonal conflict. *Journal of Personality*, *69*, 323-362.
- Jensen-Campbell, L. A., Graziano, W. G., & Hair, E. C. (1996). Personality and relationships as moderators of interpersonal conflict in adolescence. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, *42*, 165-176.
- Kato, T. (2003). Styles of handling interpersonal conflict, personality, and mental health in undergraduate students. *Japanese Journal of Social Psychology*, *18*, 78-88. (in Japanese)
- Komatsu, S., & Ohbuchi, K. (2008). Relationship between Interpersonal Conflict Styles and Personality among Japanese undergraduate students [Abstract]. *Proceedings of the International Conference on Learning Competency*, Korea, 161.
- Laursen, B., & Collins, W. (1994). Interpersonal conflict during adolescence. *Psychological Bulletin*, *115*, 197-209.
- Leung, K., Au, Y-F., Fernandez-Dols, J. M., & Iwawaki, S. (1992). Preference for methods of conflict processing in two collectivist cultures. *International Journal of Psychology*, *27*, 195-209.
- Leung, K., & Lind, E. A. (1986). Procedural justice and culture: Effects of culture, gender, and investigator status on procedural preferences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *50*, 1134-1140.

- Matsumoto, D. (2006). Are cultural differences in emotion regulation mediated by personality traits? *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *37*, 421-437.
- McCrae, R., & John, O. P. (1992). An introduction to the five-factor model and its applications. *Journal of Personality*, *60*, 175-215.
- Mischel, W. (1977). The interaction of person and situation. In D. Magnusson & N. S. Endler (Eds.), *Personality at the crossroad: Current issues in interactional psychology* (pp. 333-352). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Oetzel, J., Ting-Toomey, S., Matsumoto, T., Yokochi, Y., Pan, X., Takai, J., & Wilcox, R. (2001). Face and facework in conflict: a cross-cultural comparison of China, Germany, Japan, and the United States. *Communication Monographs*, *68*, 235-258.
- Ohbuchi, K. (2005). Passive Resolution Strategies for Interpersonal Conflicts: An Attempt of Development of a New Scale for Interpersonal Conflict Styles. *Annual Report of Arts and Letters, Tohoku University*, *55*, 78-92. (in Japanese)
- Ohbuchi, K., Chiba, S., & Fukushima, O. (1996). Mitigation of interpersonal conflicts: Politeness and time pressure. *Society for Personality and Social Psychology*, *22*, 1035-1042.
- Ohbuchi, K., & Fukushima, O. (1997). Personality and interpersonal conflict: Aggressiveness, self-monitoring, and situational variables. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, *8*, 99-113.
- Ohbuchi, K., & Kitanaka, T. (1991). Effectiveness of power strategies in interpersonal conflict among Japanese students. *The Journal of Social Psychology*, *131*, 791-805.
- Ohbuchi, K., & Kojima, K. (1999). Decision process of resolution strategies in interpersonal conflicts: Motivational and cognitive approaches. *Behavioral Science Research*, *38*, 19-28. (in Japanese)
- Ohbuchi, K., & Takahashi, Y. (1994). Cultural styles of conflict management in Japanese and Americans: Passivity, covertness, and effectiveness of strategies. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *24*, 1345-1366.
- Ohbuchi, K., & Tedeschi, J. T. (1997). Multiple goals and tactical behaviors in social conflicts. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *27*, 2177-2199.
- Park, H., & Antonioni, D. (2007). Personality, reciprocity, and strength of conflict resolution strategy. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *41*, 110-125.
- Schmitt, D. P., Allik, J. McCrae, R. R., & Benet-Martínez, V. et al. (2007). The geographic distribution of big five personality traits: Patterns and profiles of human self-description across 56 nations. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *38*, 173-212.
- Shimonaka, Y., Nakazato, K., Gondo, Y., & Takayama, M. (1999). *NEO-PI-R, NEO-FFI Manual for the Japanese Version*. Tokyo Shinri, Inc. (in Japanese)

(Received November 6, 2009)

(Accepted December 4, 2009)