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## Motives of and Responses to Anger in Conflict Situations: A Cross-Cultural Analysis

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Contrary to a naive expectation, an association between anger and aggression is not strong. In our analysis of the cross-cultural data (Germany, USA, Hong Kong, and Japan) on reported anger experiences, a correlation between felt anger and aggressive responses was .23. Instead, anger influenced different types of responses, that is, it prompted avoidance, assertion, and aggression. We assumed that how people react to anger situation is determined by culture and it is mediated by the motives evoked in the situation. Anger is a subjective sign that an individual encounters an undesirable situation and he/she is evoked of multiple motives to change the situation. Assuming five different motives involved in anger experiences (punishment, self-interests, identity, justice, and relationship maintenance), we found unique combinations of these motives characterizing each type of responses, and some cultural differences regarding the combinations.

**Key Words:** Anger, Aggression, Motive, Culture, Conflict Resolution

### Introduction

A cognitive approach to emotion has amplified our understanding of anger in both theoretical and empirical perspectives (Frijda, 1988; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). It has been found that anger is an emotional reaction to the perceived injustice (Averill, 1983; Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990) and the behavioral responses to anger-evoking stimuli are mediated by the cognitive appraisals on responsibility and norm violation (Ferguson & Rule, 1983; Ohbuchi, Tamura, Quigley, Tedeschi, Madi, Bond, & Mummendey, in press; Weiner, 1995).

On the other hand, the motivational aspect of anger has not been fully explicated. People believe that anger instigates aggression, but there is some evidence against this naive belief. Analyzing anger episodes reported by people, Averill (1983) found that they often engage in non-aggressive behaviors such as calming activities or talking with instigators. The fact that different classes of responses occur following anger suggests that anger involves different kinds of motivations. The purpose of this study was to analyze the motivational processes involved in anger from a cross-cultural perspective.

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A typical situation by which people is activated of anger is a social conflict. It usually involves anger-evoking events such as frustration, harm, interference, or injustice. Researchers have been interested in behavioral coping that people engage in to resolve conflicts and found different types of behavioral coping such as aggression, assertion, conciliation, and avoidance (Ohbuchi and Tedeschi, 1997; Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994; Van de Vliert, 1997). Assertion is to assert one's justifiability or to make a demand; aggression is to criticize, threat, or harm the other; conciliation is to appease the other or compromise; and avoidance is to avoid a direct confrontation with the other.

Ohbuchi and Tedeschi (1997) assumed that people are activated of multiple goals in conflict situations, which in turn determine their behavioral responses to the conflict. Even when they are initially concerned with personal matters, other kinds of concerns additionally activated in the process of conflict resolution. In the conflict situations, people are generally concerned with three classes of issues: (1) personal motives including protection of self-interests and identities; (2) social motives: restoration of social justice, maintenance of social order, or punishment; (3) interpersonal motives: maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Analyzing the episodes of interpersonal conflicts, Ohbuchi and Tedeschi (1997) found that the motives for punishment and justice instigated assertion and aggression, the motive for interpersonal relationships prompted conciliation and appeasement, and the motive for personal identity induced avoidance.

If conflict evokes anger and it motivates different classes of responses, the relationship between anger and responses may be mediated by the multiple motives activated in the conflict situation. On this assumption, we constructed the following hypotheses. Since it was established by past research that anger is evoked by unjustified disturbance or violation of norms, we predicted that anger would be positively associated both the personal motives (self-interests and identity) and the social motives (punishment and justice) (*Hypothesis 1*), and these motives would prompt confrontational responses (assertion and aggression) (*Hypothesis 2*). Since we assumed that anger reduces consideration for relationships, we predicted that anger would be negatively associated with the interpersonal motive (maintenance for interpersonal relationships) (*Hypothesis 3*), and this motive would prompt non-confrontational responses (conciliation) (*Hypothesis 4*).

To examine the above hypotheses, in this study, we analyzed the conflict episodes reported by participants from different four countries (two Western and two Asian countries, that is, U.S., Germany, Japan, and Hong Kong). We were especially concerned with whether the relationships between anger, motives, and responses in conflict situations differed across cultures or not, though we did not made specific prediction regarding cultural differences.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants were 884 university students from 4 countries (327 males, 545 females, and 12 unidentified; mean age 20.22): 310 Americans (133 males, 170 females, and 7 unidentified; mean age 18.50), 221 Germans (37 males, 183 females, and 1 unidentified; mean age 22.36),

208 Japanese (99 males, 106 females, and 3 unidentified; mean age 21.16), and 145 Hong Kong Chinese (58 males, 86 females, and 1 unidentified; mean age 19.27).

### *Reported Conflict Episodes and Measures*

Defining interpersonal conflict as an opposition with others, we asked the participants to recall an experience within the past two years, in which they had been disturbed by someone. Then we asked them to rate the episodes in terms of angry feelings, motives, and responses.

First, we asked the participants to indicate how strongly they felt angry in the episodes by rating the two items in Table 1 on a 7-point scale ranging from "Not at all" (1) to "Very strongly" (7). We constructed 8 items to measure the five classes of responses; they were physical and

**Table 1** The Items Used in the Study.

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Angry feeling	
	How much rage did you feel because of the incident?
	How angry were you at the other person?
Responses to anger experiences	
Physical aggression	
	I physically attacked the other person.
Verbal aggression	
	I criticized the other person.
	I verbally attacked the person.
Assertion	
	I demanded the person make up for what they had done.
	I asked for an apology from the person.
Conciliation	
	I tried to calm down the other person.
	I tried to bargain or compromise with the person.
Avoidance	
	I tried to get away from the person and avoid him or her in the future.
Motives involved in anger experiences	
Self-interests	
	I wanted to stop the other person from doing what (s)he was doing.
	I wanted to protect myself and or the people with me.
Punishment	
	I wanted to punish the other person for his or her negative actions.
	I wanted revenge.
Justice	
	I wanted to restore justice.
Identity	
	I wanted to restore my honor, social face, or reputation.
	I wanted to restore my self-esteem or social pride.
Relationship	
	I wanted to maintain a good relationship with the other person.
	I wanted to work out a compromise with the other person.

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verbal aggression, assertion, conciliation, and avoidance. In the measurement of responses, we asked the participants to indicate how they responded in the conflict situations by rating the 8 items in Table 1 on a 7 point scale ranging from "Not at all" (1) to "Very strongly" (7). And, we constructed 9 items to measure five motives: they were protection of self-interests, punishment, restoration of justice, protection of identity, and maintenance of relationship. In order to measure these motives, we asked the participants to indicate the reason why they responded the way they did in the situation by rating each of the 9 items on a-7 point scale ranging from "Not at all" (1) to "Definitely" (7).

## Results and Discussion

### *Interpersonal Conflicts and Anger.*

Only 9 participants (1 % of the participants) answered "Not at all" for both of the two items to measure angry feeling. It means that almost all participants reported that they felt anger to some degree in the conflict situations. As we assumed, therefore, this indicates a strong association between anger and interpersonal conflict.

### *Factor Analysis of Responses to Conflict*

We computed the scores of each response class by averaging the items. In order to examine a structure of responses to conflict situations, we factor-analyzed the responses separately in each cultural group by principal component analysis followed by varimax rotation. The results (Table 2) show that the almost identical three dimensions were found in every group: they were aggression, conciliation, and avoidance. Only a cultural difference was found with regard to

**Table 2** Factor Analysis of Responses in the Four Cultural Groups

	USA			Germany		
	1	2	3	2	1	3
P. aggression	.517		-.581	.532		
V. aggression	.883			.864		
Assertion	.435	.635			.785	
Conciliation		.890			.830	
Avoidance			.798			.861
	Japan			Hong Kong		
	1	2	3	1	3	2
P. aggression	.716			.788		
V. aggression	.803			.755		
Assertion	.759			.758		
Conciliation		.950			.983	
Avoidance			.968			.982

Notes. Loadings smaller than  $\pm .4$  are eliminated from this table.

assertion. It showed a high loading on the aggressive dimension among the Japanese and Hong Kong groups, suggesting that the Asian people regarded this type of response as a type of aggression. On the other hand, the American and Germany participants regarded assertion as a similar to conciliation, suggesting that assertion is a non-aggressive and problem solving behavior for the Western people. Consistent with the present finding, the cross-cultural research on conflict resolution (Ohbuchi, 1998) has found that cultural collectivists such as Asian people view active styles of conflict resolution such as assertion as risky and undesirable, while these are reasonable and rational attempts for cultural individualists.

Because of such a cultural difference in the structure of responses, we treated assertion as a discrete class of response in the following analysis.

### *Responses to Conflict Situation*

In order to eliminate the influence of cultural response tendencies (e.g., the individualists generally rated all the items higher than the collectivists), we transformed the raw scores of the items into the standardized scores within each participant, and then computed the scores of each response class by averaging the standardized scores of the items. Figure 1 shows the means of four response classes in the four cultural groups. We tested the scores by ANOVA in which country, gender, and response class were independent variables. Contrary to a naive expectation that anger instigates aggression, a dominant response to conflict situations was avoidance in every cultural group,  $F(3, 2586) = 185.96, p < .01$ , in spite of that almost all participants felt anger in these situations. A significant interaction of culture  $\times$  response class,  $F(9, 2588) = 6.73, p < .01$ , means that, as compared with the Americans and Germans, the Japanese and Hong Kong Chinese were more likely to engage in avoidance and conciliation and less likely to engage in aggression. The Americans were most likely to engage in assertion and the Hong Kong Chinese were least likely to engage in it. The present results are consistent with the past cross-cultural

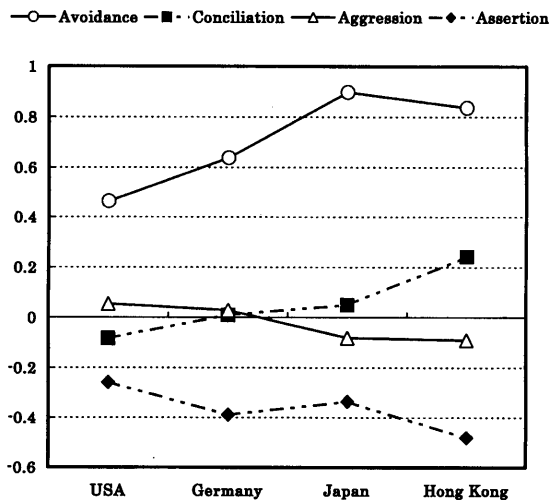


Figure 1. Responses to Anger in Conflict Situations.

findings that Western people relatively prefer active strategies for conflict resolution, while Asian people prefer passive ones (Goldman, 1994; Ohbuchi, Fukushima, & Tedeschi, 1999; Trubiskey, Ting-Toomey, & Lin, 1991).

*Motives involved in anger*

Figure 2 represents the means of standardized scores of motives involved in anger. The personal motives (personal interests and identity) were generally high in every cultural group, while the other motives remarkably varied across the groups. The concern for justice was highest in the Japanese group and lowest in the American and Hong Kong groups,  $F(3, 878) = 29.45, p < .01$ . The concern for relationship was highest in the Hong Kong group and lowest in the American group,  $F(3, 879) = 26.45, p < .01$ . The pattern of punishment was opposite to that of relationship, that is, the concern for punishment was highest in the American group and lowest in the Hong Kong group,  $F(3, 880) = 47.42, p < .01$ . It can be seen in this table that the Japanese people were most concerned with the maintenance of social order in conflict situations, and the Hong Kong participants' main concern in conflict situations was, instead, the maintenance of interpersonal relationships. The American participants were concerned with personal issues, and the German participants were concerned with both personal and social issues.

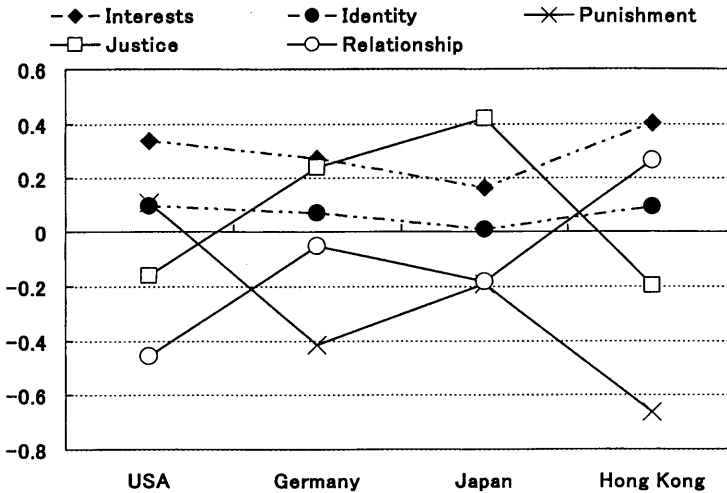


Figure 2. Motives Involved in Anger.

*Relationships between Anger, Motives, and Responses*

In order to test which responses anger motivated in the conflict situations, we attempted to compute partial correlations between anger and the responses controlling the influence of culture, which was introduced in the analysis as three dummy variables to distinguish the four countries. Correlations of anger and the responses were .23 ( $p < .01$ ) for aggression, .13 ( $p < .01$ ) for assertion, .21 ( $p < .01$ ) for avoidance, and .01 (*n.s.*) for conciliation. These correlations were generally low. It was also the case with aggression, contrary to a naïve expectation.

Then, in order to examine the relationships between anger, motives, and responses, we attempted path analysis using regression analysis. First, we conducted a series of regression analyses in which each of the five motives was a dependent variable and angry feeling and culture were independent variables. Figure 3 shows that angry feeling was positively associated with the motives for self-interests, punishment, justice, and identity, but negatively associated with the motive for relationship. It means that those who felt strong anger in conflict situations wanted to protect their self-interests and personal identities, to punish the other, and to restore justice, but they did not want to maintain the relationship with the other. These results were consistent with *Hypotheses 1 and 2* that predicted the association between anger and motives. Further, it is noted that the associations between anger and the motives for punishment and justice were higher than the associations between anger and the behavioral responses, suggesting that the relationships between anger and the responses were mediated by the motives evoked in conflict situations.

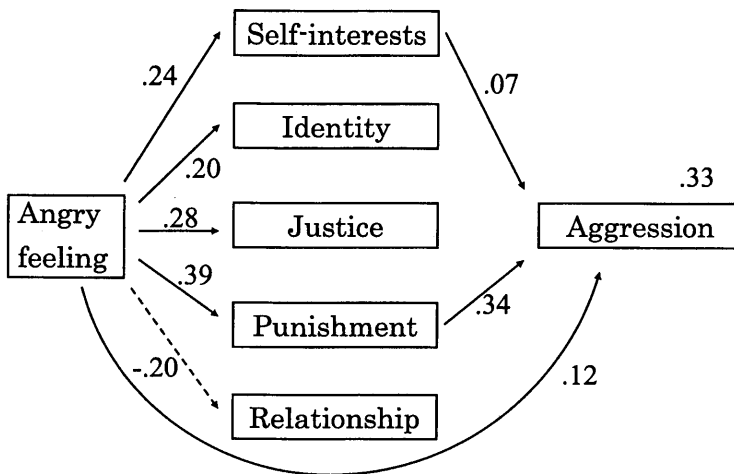


Figure 3. Path Analysis of Aggression

In order to examine whether the associations of anger and the motives differed between the cultural groups, we conducted hierarchical regression analysis including interactions of angry feeling by culture. The interaction effects were significant in the regression of the motives for punishment and for relationship ( $p < .05$ ). Estimation of regression coefficients ( $b$ ) by the Bohnstedt and Knoke method (1988) suggested that the positive association of anger and the motive for punishment was relatively low in the Hong Kong Chinese group and the negative association of anger and the motive for relationship was relatively low in the German group.

Then, we conducted a regression analysis in which aggression was a dependent variable and angry feeling, the five motives, and culture were independent variables. Figure 3 shows that the motives for punishment and self-interests significantly instigated aggression; particularly the effect of the motive for punishment was large. In order to examine cultural differences in these effects, we conducted hierarchical regression analyses in which the interactions of the motives and culture



were added to as independent variables. The interaction of the motive for punishment x culture was significant ( $p < .05$ ), suggesting that the positive association between the motive for punishment and aggression was particularly high in the German and Hong Kong Chinese groups.

We repeated the same statistical procedures for the other responses. Figure 4 shows that the motives for punishment, justice, and relationship significantly prompted assertion. None of the interactions of the motives and culture was significant. Figure 5 shows that the motives for self-interests, justice, and relationship significantly encouraged conciliation, but the motive for

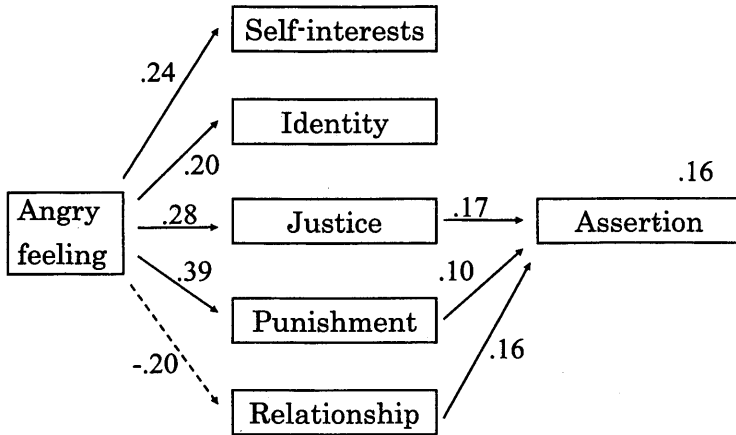


Figure 4. Path Analysis of Assertion

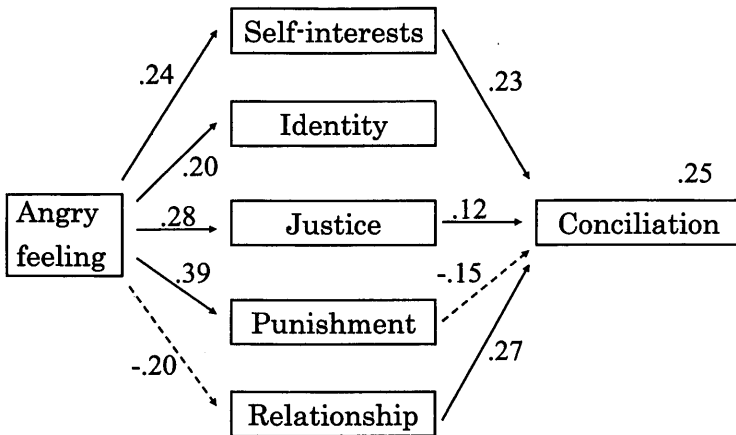


Figure 5. Path Analysis of Conciliation

punishment significantly suppressed conciliation. The significant interaction of the motive for punishment x culture ( $p < .05$ ) suggested that the association of the motive for punishment and conciliation was positive only in the Hong Kong Chinese group, but it was negative in the other cultural groups. The significant interaction of the motive for relationship x culture ( $p < .05$ ) means that the positive association of the motive for relationship and conciliation was particularly high in the German and Hong Kong Chinese groups. Figure 6 shows that the motives for

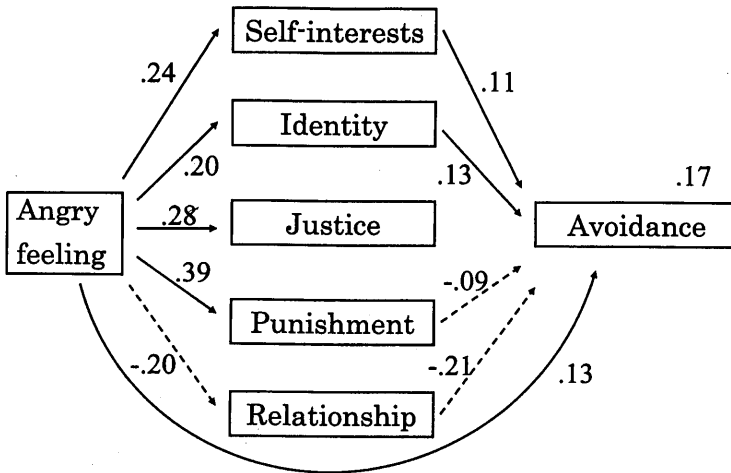


Figure 6. Path Analysis of Avoidance

self-interests and identity significantly prompted avoidance, but those for punishment and relationship significantly reduced avoidance. The significant interaction of punishment and culture ( $p < .05$ ) suggests that the negative association between the motive for relationship and avoidance was particularly high in the German group.

*Motivations of Response to Conflict Situations*

Table 3 summaries the results of regression analysis. It represents each motive’s unique effects on responses in anger evoking conflict situations. In *Hypothesis 2*, we predicted that personal motives (self-interests and identity) and the social motives (punishment and justice)

**Table 3** Summary of Regression Analyses of Responses by Motives:  $\beta$

	Aggression	Assertion	Conciliation	Avoidance
Self-interests		.07	.23	.11
Identity				.13
Justice		.17	.12	
Punishment	.34	.10	-.15	-.09
Relationship maintenance		.16	.27	-.21

would prompt confrontational responses (assertion and aggression). This was partially supported in that aggression was instigated by the motives for self-interests and punishment and assertion was prompted by the motives for justice and punishment. Inconsistent with this prediction, however, the concern for identity was not uniquely associated with these confrontational responses and assertion was prompted by the concern for relationship. *Hypothesis 4* predicting that the

interpersonal motive (maintenance for interpersonal relationships) would prompt non-confrontational responses (conciliation) was also only partially supported. This motive did not only prompt conciliation but also prompt assertion. As a whole, the associations between motives and responses were more complicated than we expected, though our predictions were supported by the results.

The motive for self-interests increased different types of responses, suggesting that those who were concerned with self-interests attempted a variety of coping behavior in conflict situations, including both active and passive responses. In contrast, the motive for punishment had differential impacts on responses, that is, those who wanted to punish the other became confrontational and coercive, but refrained from peaceful responses. Considering a strong association between angry feeling and this motive, it is reasoned that the relationship between anger and aggression is mainly mediated by the motive for punishment.

Researchers have emphasized that justice is a potent motivational factor for aggression (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). For example, political leaders advocating military actions often assert that it is a fight for justice. In the present study, however, justice was found to motivate more benign and problem solving responses such as assertion and conciliation, rather than aggression. In this regard, it is noted that the motivational pattern of justice was very similar to that of the motive for relationship, which is also positively related to assertion and conciliation. Future research should focus more on the constructive roles of justice in conflict resolution.

Another interesting finding is obtained for avoidance. The motive for relationship decreased avoidance. It is consistent with a research finding on close relationship that avoidance or exit is associated with low commitment to relationships (e.g., Rusbult, Drigotas, & Verette, 1994). The present result suggests a role of anger in avoiding reaction to interpersonal conflict, that is, anger leads to such a passive and unconstructive way of response by reducing the concern for interpersonal relationships. It was further seen in this table that avoidance was increased by the concern for identity. In fact, this motive was most unique among others in that it prompted only avoidance. Avoidance is to keep a calm appearance by concealing anger. For those who value looking composed or rational, avoidance may be useful to make this type of impression. If an individual values personal identity or pride more than interpersonal relationships in conflict situation, he or she may choose exit from the relationship, not engaging in active attempts to resolve the conflict.

### *Cultural Differences*

The western participants were more oriented toward personal issues, while the Asian participants were relatively more concerned with social control and interpersonal relationships in conflict resolution. Another cultural difference was found in the preference in conflict style. To assert one's rights or justifiability is regarded by western people as an acceptable problem solving behavior, while it is aggression among Asian people. Instead, they prefer more passive and non-assertive styles of conflict resolution.

However, many inter-cultural similarities were found in the relationships between anger, motives, and responses. Most of the observed differences between the groups were the matter of

degree. A substantial difference in the motives was that the motive for punishment increased conciliation among the Hong Kong groups but decreased it in the other groups. It is also noted that they most often used conciliation among the other groups. These results seem to imply that the Hong Kong participants sometimes treated the others friendly even though they privately wanted to punish the other.

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