Conflict Management in Japanese Organizations: Fairness or Collectivistic Values?

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In order to examine roles of fairness in conflict management in Japanese organization, we asked 154 employees of business organizations in Japan to rate their experiences of conflicts with their supervisors in terms of goals, tactics, and outcomes. The employees generally wanted to achieve collectivistic goals more strongly than individualistic goals, but a fairness goal, one of individualistic goals, increased confrontational tactics. Further, achievement of a fairness goal, one of individualistic goals, significantly determined their satisfaction with the outcomes of conflicts, but that of collectivistic goals did not. It suggests that Japanese organization employees concerned fairness in conflict management.

Key words: Conflict management, fairness, Japanese organization

Introduction

Fairness in Organizational Conflicts

Middle-class managers devote much time to conflict management among employees (Shapiro, 1993). Conflict management is an important function of organizations, one which determines their productivity, coherence, and stability. Recently, a concern for fairness in organizational conflict management has been raised among Western researchers and a number of findings have been obtained (Cropanzano & Randall, 1993). First, employees evaluate the processes of organizational conflict resolution in terms of fairness (Folger & Greenberg, 1985; Leung, Chiu, & Au, 1993). Karambaya and his colleagues found that when a supervisor listens to employees' complaints, the employees perceive the conflict resolution as fair (Karambaya & Brett, 1989; Karambaya, Brett, & Lytle, 1992). Second, employees evaluate the outcomes of

organizational conflict resolution in terms of fairness (Greenberg, 1993; Lind & Tyler, 1988). Lind and Lissak (1985) found that when employees perceived the outcome of conflict resolution as fair, they felt strong satisfaction with the outcomes and accepted them.   Third, the perception of fairness affects employees' attitudes toward and behaviors in organizations (Brett, Goldberg, & Ury, 1990; Gordon & Fryxell, 1993).   Fryxell and Gordon (1989) found that when employees perceived the grievance system as working fairly, they were satisfied with their organizations. In studies by Tyler, Degoey, and Smith (1996) and Moorman (1991), employees who perceived the organizational conflict resolution as fair showed strong commitment to their organizations and frequently engaged in organizational citizenship behaviors.

These findings were obtained with employees in Western organizations, however, it is unknown if the same is true in organizations from different cultural backgrounds.   Japanese organizations are quite different from Western organizations in a number of ways (Bellah, Madsen, Sulliva, Swider, & Tipton, 1985; James, 1993).   Japanese collectivism is clearly seen in the unique organizational management style which is characterized by employees' identification with the organization, close relationships among employees, and employees' orientation toward group performance (Hasegawa, 1986; Goldman, 1994).   Triandis (1995) argued that fairness is a primary value in individualistic cultures in which personal rights are respected, while it is subsidiary in collectivistic cultures in which social order or harmony is given a priority over personal achievement.   These cultural considerations made us predict that fairness would not be strongly involved in conflict resolution in Japanese organizations.

Multiple Goals and Fairness

In the multiple goals theory of conflict management (Fukushima & Ohbuchi, 1996; Ohbuchi & Tedeschi, 1997), it is assumed that participants in interpersonal conflicts pursue multiple goals in conflict resolution, and generally want to achieve social goals such as maintenance of relationships or restoration of fairness more strongly than resource goals.   Additionally, the goals activated determine which types of tactics the participants will choose for conflict resolution. These assumptions were supported by the findings provided by Ohbuchi and his colleagues. Using factor analysis, four kinds of social goals (relationship, fairness, power-hostility, and identity) and two kinds of resource goals (personal resource and economic resource) were identified.

Based on the multiple goals theory, in the present study, we attempted to examine fairness in Japanese organizational conflict resolution from three approaches.   The first approach was an analysis of goal orientations.   While fairness has been usually regarded as a value for the evaluation of processes and outcomes of conflict resolution, the multiple goals theory regarded it as a motivational factor which is activated in conflict situations.   Therefore, it is practical to examine how strongly participants want to achieve a fairness goal as compared with other goals. Ohbuchi and his colleagues found that the goal most strongly desired by American students in conflict resolution was fairness, while for Japanese students it was relationship maintenance (Fukushima & Ohbuchi, 1996; Ohbuchi, 1996; Ohbuchi & Tedeschi, 1997).

However, these studies focused on the goals involved in everyday interpersonal conflicts.

For the investigation of organizational conflicts, it seems necessary to re-categorize goals. In the present study, we assumed three collectivistic goals (relationship, group order, and group performance) and four individualistic goals (fairness, personal performance, personal identity, and power-hostility). Based on the cultural individualism-collectivism theory (Triandis, 1995), we predicted that Japanese employees would want to achieve collectivistic goals in organizational conflicts more strongly than individualistic goals (*Hypothesis 1*).

The second approach was an analysis of the influence of goals on tactical choice. If fairness is a motivation, it would direct or influence which tactics participants choose for conflict resolution. By analyzing everyday interpersonal conflicts, Ohbuchi and his colleagues found that both Japanese and American students tended to choose collaborative tactics when a relationship goal was strongly activated while they chose confrontational tactics when a fairness goal was strongly activated (Fukushima & Ohbuchi, 1996; Ohbuchi & Tedeschi, 1997). In the Japanese organizational conflicts, we expected to observe the same relationships between goals and tactics (*Hypothesis 2*).

The third approach was an analysis of fairness in the evaluation of social processes or consequences. As we mentioned above, Western participants who perceived the processes and outcomes of organizational conflict resolution as fair felt strong satisfaction with the outcomes (Tyler et al., 1996). Based on the individualism-collectivism theory, however, we predicted that Japanese would feel strong satisfaction with the outcomes when collectivistic goals were achieved rather than when individualistic goals were achieved (*Hypothesis 3*).

In order to test the above hypotheses, we asked employees of business organizations in Japan to rate their experiences of conflict with their supervisors in terms of goals, tactics, processes, and outcomes. Some researchers found, in Western organizations, that participants are concerned more with procedural fairness than distributive fairness in conflict resolution (Tyler, 1994; Tyler & Lind, 1992). Thibaut & Walker (1975) formulated decision control and process control as factors of procedural fairness, and Niehoff and Moorman (1993) argued that the decision systems of organizations which bestow members these kinds of control should be focused. It is very interesting to us that a number of organizational researchers such as Folger and Lewis (1993), Greenberg (1993), Shapiro (1993), or Tyler and Lind (1992) have emphasized that the quality of relationships with supervisors determines the perception of procedural fairness. Tyler and Lind distinguished trust, standing, and neutrality as the relationship factors. Apparently, these concerns for relationships are derived from collectivistic values, and therefore, the perception of procedural fairness may partially depend on the achievement of collectivistic goals. By exploring factors of procedural fairness for Japanese participants in organizational conflicts, an additional purpose of the present study was to examine if the achievement of collectivistic goals contributed perceptions of procedural justice.

Method

Participants

We mailed a questionnaire to 300 employees of Japanese business companies in Japan, none

of whom were managers.　They were asked to anonymously respond and were given 1,000 yen for the participation in the research.　Among them, 154 employees (85 men, 58 women, and 10 unidentified) participated.　Their mean age was 27.0, ranging from 19 through 41.

Questionnaire

On the face sheet, each participant was instructed to recall an experience in which he or she was involved in a conflict with his or her supervisor over his or her job, labor conditions, salary, or promotion, and to rate the experience in terms of goal orientation, goal achievement, processes, and outcomes of the conflict.

Goal Orientation.　Goal orientation was measured by the 14 items in Table 1, which were designed to measure relationship (to maintain a good relationship with the supervisor), group order (to maintain group order), group performance (to enhance group performance), fairness (to restore fairness), personal performance (to enhance personal performance), power-hostility (to defeat the supervisor), and personal identity (to protect personal identity).　The participants were asked to indicate how strongly they wanted the outcomes described by these items in their attempts at conflict resolution, by rating each item on a 7-point scale ranging from *Not at all* (1) to *Very Strongly* (7).　Most of these items were derived from Ohbuchi and Tedeschi (1997).

Tactics.　The four types of tactics measured were conciliation, assertion, third party intervention, and avoidance.　Conciliation and assertion are active and direct tactics to resolve conflicts (e.g., Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994; Sillars, Coletti, Parry, & Rogers, 1982; Van der Vliert conflicts (e.g., Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994; Sillars, Coletti, Parry, & Rogers, 1982; Van der Vliert & Euwema, 1994).　Conciliation is defined as an attempt to consolidate one's and the other's goals (integration), to alleviate the supervisor's negative emotions (appeasement), or to indirectly communicate one's expectations (indirect communication).　Assertion is defined as an attempt to strongly assert one's request (contention), to criticize or display anger at the supervisor (aggression), or to coerce the supervisor to do something (coercion).　In contrast to conciliation or assertion, avoidance is defined as a passive tactic, that is, as an attempt to avoid a confrontation with the supervisor, keeping self-control.　Finally, third party intervention is defined as an attempt to seek help or advice of a third party for resolving conflicts.　To measure these tactics the participants were presented with the 11 items in Table 1, which were also derived from Ohbuchi and Tedeschi (1997).　The participants were asked to indicate how strongly they engaged in the tactics, by rating each of the items on a 7-point scale ranging from Not at all (1) to Very strongly (7).

Goal Attainment and Outcome Satisfaction.　In the measurement of goal attainment, the participants were presented with the same goal items (Table 1) except the fairness items, and were asked to indicate the degree to which the goals were finally attained, by rating each of the items on a 7-point scale ranging from *Not at all* (1) to *Perfectly* (7).　Regarding fairness, the participants were asked to rate the items of procedural fairness and those of distributive fairness separately. The former was to measure the perception of processes of conflict resolution and the latter to measure the outcomes of conflicts.　Then, the participants were asked to answer how satisfied they were with the outcomes of the conflicts, by rating on a 7-point scale ranging from *Not at all*

(1) to *Perfectly* (7).

Factors of Procedural Fairness. We attempted to measure six variables which were assumed as factors of procedural fairness. Decision control was the perception of how much strongly the participant influenced the outcome. Process control was the perception of how much opportunity to participate the employee had in the process of conflict resolution. Trust was the perception of how much the supervisor considered the participant's desires. Standing was the perception of how much the supervisor respected the participant as a member of the organization. Neutrality was the perception of how biased the supervisor's judgements and behaviors regarding conflict resolution were. Appropriateness of the system was the perception of how appropriately the organizational system worked toward conflict resolution. The participants were asked to rate the items to measure these variables (Table 1) on a 7-point scale ranging from *Not at all* (1) to *Very strongly* (7).

Table 1 Dependent Variables and Items Used to Measure them.

Dependent Variables	Items
Goal orientations	
Relationship	To achieve mutual understanding with the supervisor.
	To maintain a good relationship with the supervisor.
Group order	To keep group harmony of the team or section.
	To keep group order of the team of section.
Group performance	To contribute to the team or section.
	To contribute to the company.
Fairness	To be treated by the supervisor fairly.
	To reach a fair solution.
Distributive fairness	How fair was the outcome you received?
	Was the outcome fair for all the participants?
Procedural fairness	How fair was the method used to make decisions? regarding the conflict?
	Was the method used to resolve the conflict appropriate?
	Was the method used to resolve to resolve the conflict fair?
Personal identity	To protect your self-esteem or personal pride.
	To protect your social face or reputation.
Power-hostility	To punish the supervisor.
	To defeat the supervisor.
Personal performance	To increase productivity or quality of your work.
	To enhance or maintain evaluation of your work.
Tactics	
Collaboration	To calmly and patiently attempt to persuade the supervisor.
	To bargain or compromise with the supervisor.
	To communicate your expectation indirectly to the supervisor.
Confronation	To show your anger or complains against the supervisor.
	To criticize the supervisor.
	To confront the supervisor.
Third party	To ask a third person to help resolve the conflict.
	To ask a third person to support your position.

Table 1   Dependent Variables and Items Used to Measure them(continue).

Dependent Variables	Items
Avoidance	To comply with the supervisor.
	To try to avoid the conflict by controlling yourself.
	To alleviate the supervisor's unpleasant feelings.
Outcome satisfaction	Over all,how much was your expectation satisfied?
	Over all,how much satisfaction did you feel about the outcame?
Factors of procedural fairness	
Decision control	How much control did you have over the outcome?
	How much influence did you have over the final outcome?
Process control	How much opportunity were you given to express your concerns in the process of conflict resolution?
	How much opportunity did you have to discuss with the supervisor about the problem?
Trust	How hard did the supervisor endeavor to satisfy your expectations?
	How much convenience did the supervisor give you?
	How much consideration did the supervisor give to your needs in the conflict resolution?
Standing	How much honestly did the supervisor manage the problem?
	How much did the supervisor respect you as a member of the company?
Neutrality	How much the supervisor handle the problem in his or her favor?
	Was the supervisor's judgments affected by his or her biased or improper ideas?
	Did the supervisor offer explanations that mede sense to you?
Appropriateness of the systems	Did the systems of your company work effectively for resolving the problem?
	Were the systems or procedures of your company reasonable for resolving this kind of problems?

Results

The participant group was split at the median age (26) into two groups.   The number of participants whose age was 26 or younger than 26 was 71 (33 men and 38 women) and the number of participants who were older than 26 was 70 (52 men and 15 women).   Then, scores of goal orientation, goal attainment, tactics, and factors of procedural fairness were computed by averaging scores of the items designed to measure each variable.   The goal orientation scores were analyzed by ANOVA using gender, age level, and goal category as independent variables. A main effect of goal category was highly significant, $F(6, 804) = 47.27$, $p < .01$.   Table 2 indicates that the participants wanted to achieve collectivistic goals more strongly than individualistic goals ($M = 3.98$ and 3.01, $p < .01$), particularly, group order most strongly, but

Table 2 Mean Goal Oriemtation Scores in the Younger and Older Participants.

	Collectivistic Goals			Indvidualistic Goals			
	Group order	Relationship	Group performance	Fairness	Personal identity	Personal performance	Power-hostikity
26 or younger than 26	4.20	4.25	3.86	4.03	3.78	3.18	1.84
Older than 26	4.13	3.52	3.19	3.62	3.25	2.82	1.96
Grand Means	4.07	3.99	3.87	3.78	3.46	2.98	1.80

that they strongly wanted to achieve fairness, that is, its mean score did not differ from those of relationship or group performance. They did not strongly want to achieve a power-hostility goal. A marginally significant interaction of age level x goal category, $F_{(6, 804)} = 1.93$, $p = .073$, indicates that the younger participants wanted to achieve relationship, fairness, and personal identity goals more strongly than the older participants $(p < .05)$.

Table 3 shows the results of regression analyses using tactic scores as dependent variables and goal orientation scores as independent variables. Relationship, personal identity, and power-hostility goals increased collaborative tactics. Fairness and power-hostility goals increased but a relationship goal decreased confrontational tactics. Third party tactics were chosen when both group order and power-hostility goals were strong. Avoidance tactics were chosen when a group order goal was strong but a power-hostility goal was weak.

Table 3 Regression of Tactics by Goal Orientation.

	Collaboration		Confrontion		Thied Party		Avoidance	
	r	ß	r	ß	r	ß	r	ß
Collectivistic Goals.								
Group order	.21*	—	.07	—	.34**	.32**	.33**	.31**
Relationship	.31**	.26**	−.21**	−.27**	−.06	—	.22	—
Group performance	.20*	—	.13	—	.15	—	.13	—
Individualistic Goals								
Fairness	.36**	—	.23**	.31**	.27**	—	.08	—
Personal identuty	.15	.21*	.24**	—	.21*	—	.01	—
Personal performance	.12	—	.11	—	.09	—	.15	.14+
Power-hostility	.17*	.21*	.47**	.36**	.30**	.28**	−.15	−.22**
R^2		.19**		..30**		..19**		..16**

Notes. ** $p < .01$ and * $p < .05$.

Table 4 shows the results of a regression analysis using outcome satisfaction as a dependent variable and goal attainment scores as independent variables.   Attainment of distributive fairness, procedural fairness, and personal identity goals significantly contributed to outcome satisfaction.   Particularly, the contributions of fairness were large.

Table 4   Regression of Outcome Satisfaction by Goal Attainment.

	r	β
Collectivistic Goals.		
Group order	.34*	—
Relationship	.43**	.26**
Group performance	.37*	—
Individualistic Goals		
Distribural Fairness	.70**	.40**
Procedural fairness	.71	.36
Personal identuty	.39	.16*
Personal performance	.28	—
Power-hostility	.22*	—
R^2		.59**

Notes.   ** $p < .01$ and * $p < .05$.

Table 5 shows the results of a regression analysis using procedural fairness as a dependent variable and decision control, process control, trust, standing, neutrality, and appropriateness of the system as independent variables.   Decision control, trust, standing, and appropriateness of systems significantly contributed to the perception of procedural fairness.   Although process control positively correlated with the perception of procedural fairness, it did not have any unique contribution because it correlated with standing and trust (rs = .58 and .39).   On the other hand, neutrality neither correlated with the perception of procedural fairness nor other independent variables.

Table 5   Regression of Procedural Fairness.

	r	β
Decision control	.56*	.30*
Process control	.43**	—
Trust	.68*	.16
Standing	.65**	.33**
Neutrality	.01	—
System appropriateness	.63	.28*
R^2		.67**

Notes.   ** $p < .01$ and * $p < .05$.

Discussion

In *Hypothesis 1*, we predicted that Japanese participants in organizational conflicts would be more strongly oriented toward collectivistic goals (relationship, group order, and group performance) than toward individualistic goals (fairness, personal performance, personal identity, and power-hostility). The present results are generally consistent with this hypothesis. However, an orientation toward fairness was relatively strong, that is, it was one of the second most important goals. These results indicate that fairness was also an important value for the Japanese participants in organizational conflict resolution.

Hypothesis 3, which stated that the attainment of collectivistic goals would determine satisfaction with the outcomes, was not supported. Table 4 shows that the outcome satisfaction was strongly determined by fairness and none of collectivistic goals made significant unique contribution in the regression of the outcome satisfaction. These results were very different from those of Ohbuchi's (1996) study with Japanese students, in which the attainment of a relationship goal significantly associated with the outcome satisfaction. There seem to be several possible interpretations for the difference between the two studies.

First, we have to examine a ceiling effect in the attainment of collectivistic goals. If collectivistic values are shared with members of Japanese business organizations and participants in conflicts behave based on these values, their collectivistic goals would be satisfied at a high level. If it is the case, the standard deviations of the attainment scores of collectivistic goals may be small and their correlations with the outcome satisfaction would be generally low. However, this was not the case. The means and standard deviations of the attainment scores of relationship, groups order, and group performance goals were 3.19/1.39, 3.74/1.17, and 3.13/1.44, and those of the attainment scores of procedural and distributive fairness scores were 3.55/1.29 and 3.34/1.32. Neither the means of the attainment scores of collectivistic goals were particularly high nor their standard deviations were particularly small.

The second possibility was an age difference. The participants of Ohbuchi's (1996) study were students and they were younger than those of the present study. In order to examine age differences in the determinants of the outcome satisfaction, we conducted the regression analysis separately for the participants who were 26 or younger than 26 and for those who were older than 26. The results were very similar, that is, only distributive and procedural fairness showed significant contributions (βs = .25 and .59, $p < .01$) to the outcome satisfaction among the younger participants, and distributive and procedural fairness and identity showed significant contributions (βs = .35, .27, and .19, $p < .05$) among the older participants. Since the attainment of fairness goals determined the outcome satisfaction but that of collectivistic goals did not in both analyses, the age difference cannot explain the differences between the present study and Ohbuchi's (1996) study.

The third and most plausible interpretation is to focus on the relationships in which conflicts happened. Since the participants of Ohbuchi's (1996) study were asked to report everyday interpersonal conflicts, it is reasoned that most of them reported conflicts in informal relationships such as family or peers. It might be suggested therefore that collectivistic concerns are more

important in conflicts in informal settings than fairness and fairness is more concerned in conflicts in organizational settings. However, the relationship between fairness and collectivistic concerns is more complex. The perception of fairness, especially that of procedural fairness, has been regarded to be affected by the quality of relationship with the authority (Folger & Lewis, 1993; Shapiro, 1993; Tyler & Lind, 1992). The present results also showed that relational factors such as trust or standing affected the perception of procedural fairness. It seems that fairness and collectivistic concerns are not always incompatible with each other. Indeed, they were found to positively correlated with each other in the present study.

We factor-analyzed the attainment scores of eight goals in a standard fashion (principal factor solution, varimax rotation, and 1 eigen value criterion) and obtained two factors, in one of which procedural and distributive fairness, relationship, and group order goals showed high loadings (+ .47 through + .90). In a factor analysis of the orientation scores of seven goals, we found a similar factor structure, that is, in one of two factors fairness, relationship, and group order showed high loadings (+ .61 through + .69). These findings suggest that fairness and collectivistic goals are closely related to each other in some type of conflict situations.

Fairness has been investigated by researchers as a principle for exchange of material resources. However, Tyler, Boeckmann, Smith, and Huo (1997) argued recently that people also concern fairness in exchange of social or interpersonal resources such as love or status. The same concept was also found in Azzi's (1992) study, in which he regarded procedural fairness as a fair distribution of social power (control) between participants. A close relationship between fairness and collectivistic goals may be interpreted from the social resource perspective of fairness. This theory involves an assumption that material and social resources are interchangeable in producing the perception of fairness. It seems to explain the past finding that a complaint about material resources was reduced by the perception of procedural fairness (Brockner & Wiesenfeld, 1996; Tyler et al., 1997), because it is increased by satisfaction of relational concerns (Tyler & Lind, 1992).

The social resource theory by Foa and Foa (1976) and Buss (1986) emphasizes that social resources are less universal than material resources and that their value depends on relationships with others. Apparently, social and material resources complementarily determine the perception of procedural fairness in intragroup or intraorganizational conflicts. Huo, Smith, Tyler, and Lind (1996) who analyzed intra-organizational conflicts among Americans found that only participants who identified with the group perceived procedural fairness when their relational concerns were satisfied. Their finding seems to suggest that social resources are highly valued among ingroup members, thus increasing the perception of fairness in ingroup conflict resolution. Based on the individualism-collectivism theory, we initially assumed that fairness and collectivistic values are incompatible with each other in conflict resolution. However, the present results suggest us to correct this assumption. In organizational conflict resolution, at least, relational concerns were very closely related to the perception of fairness.

The present study, on the other hand, showed that fairness and collectivistic concerns had different effects in the decision of tactics. As we predicted in *Hypothesis 2*, when a fairness goal was activated, the participants chose confrontational tactics such as strong assertion, coercion, or

criticism. These tactics are likely to induce negative reactions from the other party and thus to escalate conflicts. It means that a concern for fairness is a risky motivation, though Table 4 indicates that it gives a participant a strong satisfaction when achieved. When collectivistic goals were activated, in contrast, the participants chose non-confrontational tactics such as collaboration and avoidance. In these tactics, the participants attempt to mitigate conflicts by self-controlling personal interests. They are safe and thus socially expected tactics in organizational settings, though they do not bring about so strong personal satisfaction as fairness, as Table 4 also indicates.

Third party and avoidance are non-direct tactics, and their motivations seem contrasting. When the participants were strongly concerned with group order but did not have hostility against their supervisor, they chose avoidance tactics. When they had a strong concern for group order and strong hostility against their supervisor, they chose third party tactics. Goldman (1994) and Lebra (1976) pointed out that Japanese organizations regard overt conflicts as threatening to social order and therefore have developed a number of institutions to prevent or avoid intra-organizational conflicts. According to it, avoidance tactics may be the normative behavior recommended for Japanese employees to choose when in conflicts with their supervisor. The present results seem to suggest that only when the participants did not have hostility against the supervisor, they obey this recommendation, implying that the quality of their relationships determined whether they engaged in organizationally oriented behaviors. Seeking help of third party, on the other hand, is to make conflicts overt, and therefore it may be seen as a kind of attack against the supervisor in such a collectivistic organizational culture. The participants might have decided to punish the supervisor by this type of tactic based on their judgment that the supervisor was harming the group order. These results suggest, therefore, that a concern for group order not only prompted the Japanese employees of self-control and mitigation of conflicts but also encouraged them to take an accusing act against the supervisor.

In conclusion, the present study indicated that, similar to studies on Western organizations, fairness affected Japanese employees' reactions to organizational conflicts. It was also found, however, that Japanese employees had strong collectivistic concerns, which had different effects on their tactical decisions making than did fairness.

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