Communication Faculty Publications   Communication Department

2012

Conflict types, resolution, and relational satisfaction: A U.S.-China investigation

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Peer Reviewed

Conflict Types, Resolution, and Relational Satisfaction:
A U.S.-China Investigation

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine the relationships of conflict types with conflict resolution and relational satisfaction in the U.S. and Chinese cultures, and to explore the moderating effects of culture in the relationships of conflict types and resolution with relational satisfaction. Four main findings are reported. First, task conflict is more likely to be resolved than relationship conflict in both cultures. Second, Chinese experience less relational satisfaction than Americans during conflict. Third, task conflict is associated with a higher level of relational satisfaction than relationship conflict in both cultures; similarly, resolved conflict is associated with a higher level of relational satisfaction than unresolved conflict. Fourth, culture mediates the effects of both conflict types and conflict resolution on relational satisfaction.

Keywords: Conflict types; conflict resolution; relational satisfaction; cross-cultural comparison

1. Introduction

Generally conceptualized as an interaction of interdependent parties with perceived incompatibilities in goals and resources and interference from others in achieving the goals (Putnam & Poole, 1987), conflict is a natural part of interpersonal relationships (Kim & Leung, 2000; Roloff, 1987). Not surprisingly, conflict has generated substantial attention in interpersonal and intercultural communication research. Substantial research on interpersonal and intercultural conflicts has examined conflict management or resolution, its cultural, situational, and individual antecedents (Ting-Toomey, 2005; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001), and psychological and relational outcomes (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006). In spite of some minor inconsistencies, studies demonstrate that individuals from low context and individualistic cultures tend to be more competing and confrontational, but less avoiding and obliging, than those from high context and collectivistic cultures (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Ting-Toomey, 2005).

Although conflict types or issues as important contextual features constitute the focal point in conflict (Cahn & Abigail, 2007), and demonstrate considerable influences on intragroup conflict processes and outcomes in organizations (Jehn, 1997; Jehn, Greer, Levine, & Szulanski, 2008), very few studies have investigated their effects on interpersonal conflict in close relationships. While the nature of conflict issues or types has been found to affect perceived resolvability in close relationships (Johnson & Roloff, 1998; Miller, Roloff, & Malis,

2007), it has yet to be linked to actual resolution and relational outcomes. Moreover, cultural effects on conflict styles are well-established (Oetzel et al., 2001; Ting-Toomey, 2005; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001), but it is still unclear whether culture will moderate the effects of conflict types and actual resolution on relational satisfaction. Thus, the purpose of this study is two-fold: to examine the relationships of conflict types with conflict resolution and relational satisfaction in the U.S. and Chinese cultures, and to explore the moderating effects of culture in the relationships of conflict types and resolution with relational satisfaction.

2. Conflict Types

Two types of conflict have been identified in groups: task conflict and relationship conflict (Jehn, 1997; Simons & Peterson, 2000). Task conflict, also referred to as cognitive or substantive conflict, focuses on the task-oriented disagreement arising from the perceived incompatibilities in views or perspectives concerning a task being performed, whereas relationship conflict, also known as emotional or affective conflict, pertains to the individual-oriented or relationship-oriented disagreement arising from perceived interpersonal incompatibilities unrelated to a task, mostly involving emotional tension or antagonism related to personality, trust, attitude, power, esteem, honesty, or respect, etc. (Amason & Sapienza, 1997; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Jehn et al., 2008; Yang & Mossholder, 2004). Scholars have long held that task conflict is beneficial to group performance and decision making quality because it facilitates the exchange of information among members; conversely, relationship conflict is detrimental to groups because it produces tension and hostility that obstruct members from performing the task (Simons & Peterson, 2000; Yang & Mossholder, 2004); however, a more recent meta-analysis revealed negative relationships between both conflict types with group performance and satisfaction (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003).

The categorization of task conflict and relationship conflict in groups can also be applied to interpersonal conflict in close relationships. Although close relationships are an important source of satisfaction in life, they are also a major source of frequent conflict (Malis & Roloff, 2006). Due to substantial interactions and interdependence in close relationships, individuals may constantly encounter task-focused or relationship-focused conflict (Johnson & Roloff, 1998). Task-oriented conflict in close relationships often involves disagreements over tangible/ substantive issues or material resources that are generally countable and divisible, such as how to handle money and time (Cahn & Abigail, 2007). Task conflict tends to be a one-time occurrence, meaning that it can be resolved in a single episode. Relationship-oriented conflict mostly concerns disagreements over intangible issues or immaterial resources, such as relational transgressions (e.g., lying or lack of respect), failure to follow through with commitments, or distrust (Cahn & Abigail, 2007; Miller et al., 2007). Relationship conflict can be serial in that it may occur repeatedly in interactions (Johnson & Roloff, 1998).

3. Conflict Resolution

While many everyday arguments end quickly, some conflicts are not easily resolved, often end without complete resolution, and likely resurface in future interactions (Johnson & Roloff,

1998). The reported percentage in previous studies of unresolved conflict with dating partners, family members, or close friends ranged from 32% to 66% (Miller et al., 2007). In this study, overall, about 24% of the recalled conflicts ended without resolution. Specifically, about 33% of U.S. participants and 17% of Chinese participants reported their recalled conflicts ended unresolved.

Although the direct link between conflict types and resolution efficacy has yet to be established, serial argument Research indicates that conflicts that are difficult to resolve and likely to re-emerge tend to be those about intangible issues, such as relationships, violated expectations, personality, or values (Johnson & Roloff, 1998; Miller et al., 2007), but task-oriented conflicts tend to be those about tangible issues, which can be resolved in a single episode (Cahn & Abigail, 2007). Thus, it seems reasonable to assume that task conflict is more likely to be resolved than relationship conflict. We propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Task conflict is more likely to be resolved than relationship conflict in close relationships in both the U.S. and China.

4.   Relational Satisfaction

Prior research has examined the effects of conflict styles on relational outcomes, which has demonstrated a robust association between conflict behavior and relational satisfaction (Canary, 2003). In the U.S., competing and avoiding styles are generally found to be associated with lower levels of relational satisfaction than positively toned integrative styles (Canary, 2003; Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006). The more negativity and belligerence a counterpart or spouse exhibits, the less satisfied one becomes with the relationship (Segrin, Hanzal, & Domschke, 2009). Likewise, integrating, compromising, and obliging styles are also found to be correlated with higher levels of relational satisfaction than competing and avoiding styles in Chinese culture (Zhang, 2007). But collectivistic Chinese may value harmony, relationship, and face more than individualistic Americans, so conflict may be associated with a lower level of relational satisfaction in China than the U.S..Thus, we offer the following hypothesis:

H2: During conflict, Chinese experience less relational satisfaction than Americans.

In organizational settings, task conflict tends to be perceived as functional, contributing to group performance and productivity, whereas relationship conflict is generally viewed as dysfunctional, decreasing group performance and satisfaction (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Simons & Peterson, 2000). Unresolved serial arguments have been found to be a stressor, adversely impacting relationships, health, and functioning (Johnson & Roloff, 1998; Miller, et al., 2007). In light of these findings, it seems plausible to hypothesize:

H3: Task conflict is associated with a higher level of relational satisfaction than relationship conflict in both the U.S. and China.
H4: Resolved conflict is associated with a higher level of relational satisfaction than unresolved conflict in both the U.S. and China.

Substantial cross-cultural studies demonstrate that culture plays an important role in affecting the perceptions of conflict and conflict styles (Oetzel et al., 2001; Ting-Toomey, 2005; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). Given the great emphasis on harmony, face, and relationship in traditional Chinese culture, Chinese aim to establish a conflict-free society (Chen, 2002), and prefer the avoiding, accommodating, collaborating, and/or compromising styles to the competing style (Ting-Toomey et al., 1991; Trubisky, Ting-Toomey, & Lin, 1991; Zhang, 2007). But it remains unknown whether culture influences the effects of conflict types and resolution on relational satisfaction. Thus, we propose:

RQ1: Does culture moderate the effects of conflict types on relational satisfaction?
RQ2: Does culture moderate the effects of conflict resolution on relational satisfaction?

5. Method

5.1. Participants

Participants included 305 college students: 157 from a medium-sized university in the Northeastern U.S. (36 males, 120 females, 1 unidentified) and 148 from a large university in Central mainland China (55 males and 93 females). The average age of the participants was 19.87 (*SD* = 1.35) for the U.S. sample and 21.77 (*SD* = 4.63) for the Chinese sample. The ethnicities in the U.S. sample were 86% Caucasian, 3% African, 3% Asian, 6% Hispanic, and 2% other. The Chinese students were all ethnically Chinese.

5.2. Procedure

As part of a larger project on cross-cultural conflict, the questionnaire was developed in English and translated and back-translated into Chinese by different bi-lingual scholars to ensure linguistic equivalence. The U.S. participants were recruited from a variety of communication and anthropology classes and the Chinese participants from English classes. Participants were asked to recall a recent conflict or intense disagreement with someone close to them, such as a boy-friend/girl-friend, a family member, or a close friend. They were asked to describe who the counterpart was (i.e., close friend, boyfriend/girlfriend, or family member), the sex of the counterpart, what the conflict was about, and whether the conflict was resolved, Altogether 47% of the participants described a conflict with a close friend, 35% with boyfriend/girlfriend, 17% with a family member, and 1% unspecified.

Participants were also asked to keep the same recalled conflict in mind and respond to Likert-type questions measuring relational satisfaction. The questionnaire required approximately 15 minutes to complete. All the participants responded to the questionnaire in their native language. The participation was anonymous.

5.3. Data Coding

5.3.1. Conflict types

Participants were asked to describe in detail a recent conflict or intense disagreement with someone close to them. Two independent coders were trained to code the participants' open-ended descriptions into one of the two conflict types: task conflict or relationship conflict. Task conflict involves the perceived differences in viewpoints pertaining to a task (e.g., "Going to a party or staying at home"). Relationship conflict refers to the perceived interpersonal incompatibilities, relational transgressions, or emotional tension related to trust, power, esteem, honesty, or respect, etc. (e.g., "lying, disrespect, and manipulation"). After pilot coding 20 responses together and discussing discrepancies, the two coders independently coded the rest of the responses and the intercoder reliability was assessed. Scott's pi was .86. All the discrepancies were later resolved through discussion.

5.4. Measures

5.4.1. Relational satisfaction

Relational satisfaction was measured using a five-item Likert-type scale (5 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree) adapted from Sillars, Koerner, and Fitzpatrick (2005). Sample items include: "My counterpart and I still have fun together," and "My counterpart and I still get along well." The alpha for this study was .98 for the U.S. sample and .96 for the Chinese sample.

6.   Results

6.1. Hypotheses

H1 predicted that task conflict is more likely to be resolved than relationship conflict in close relationships in both the U.S. and China. Separate Chi-square tests were performed to determine whether there was a significant difference between task conflict and relationship conflict in resolution efficacy in both cultures. In the U.S., 80% of task conflict was resolved, whereas only 47% of relationship conflict was resolved, and the difference was significant, χ^2 (1) =19.89, $p < .001$. Likewise, in China, 94% of task conflict was resolved, whereas 71% of relationship conflict was resolved, and the difference was significant, χ^2 (1) =11.78, $p < .005$. Thus, task conflict is more likely to be resolved than relationship conflict in close relationships in both the U.S. and China. H1 was supported.

H2 predicted that, during conflict, Chinese experience less relational satisfaction than Americans. Independent samples t-test was utilized to test the hypothesis. Chinese ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.12$) are found to experience less relational satisfaction than the Americans ($M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.30$), t (302) = 2.33, $p < .05$. H2 was supported.

H3 predicted that task conflict is associated with a higher level of relational satisfaction

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than relationship conflict in both the U.S. and China. In the U.S., task conflict was associated with a higher level of relational satisfaction ($M = 4.45$, $SD = .94$) than relationship conflict ($M = 3.16$, $SD = 1.44$), $t (152) = 6.72$, $p < .001$. Likewise, in China task conflict was also associated with a higher level of relational satisfaction ($M = 3.84$, $SD = 1.01$) than relationship conflict ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.33$), $t (126) = 2.40$, $p < .05$. Thus, H3 was supported.

H4 predicted that resolved conflict is associated with a higher level of relational satisfaction than unresolved conflict in both the U.S. and China. In the U.S., resolved conflict was associated with a higher level of relational satisfaction ($M = 4.43$, $SD = .90$) than unresolved conflict ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.46$), $t (154) = 7.62$, $p < .001$. Likewise, in China resolved conflict was also associated with a higher level of relational satisfaction ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.00$) than unresolved conflict ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.23$), $t (135) = 3.23$, $p < .005$. Thus, H4 was supported.

6.2. Research Questions

RQ1 inquired whether culture moderates the effects of conflict types on relational satisfaction. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the main effects and interaction effects of culture and conflict types. Culture was contrast coded, with the U.S. as 1 and China as -1. Likewise, conflict types were also contrast coded, with task conflict as 1 and relationship conflict as -1. Table 1 displays the results of the main effects and the moderating effects of conflict types and culture.

Table 1. Regression Results of Culture and Conflict Types Predicting Relational Satisfaction

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	t	β	t	β	t
Conflict Types	.36***	6.54	.36***	6.48	.35***	6.33
Culture			.12*	2.11	.09	1.54
Conflict Types × Culture					.16**	2.81
Adjusted R^2	.13		.14		.16	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

In Model 1, conflict types were entered as the predictor variable and relational satisfaction as the dependent variable. The results indicated that conflict types had a positive main effect on relational satisfaction, $\beta = .36$, $p < .001$. In Model 2, culture was included as an additional predictor variable. The main effect for culture was significant, $\beta = .12$, $p < .05$. In Model 3, the moderating effect of culture was tested. The interaction term culture × conflict types was examined, and the interaction effect was significant, $\beta = .16$, $p < .01$. Culture exerted a significant moderating effect in the relationship between conflict types and relational satisfaction. To explore the nature of this interaction effect, we conducted simple slope analyses (Aiken & West, 1991), using the Interaction program (Soper, 2012). As can be seen in Figure 1,

the follow-up analysis revealed that, although relational satisfaction increases from relationship conflict to task conflict in both the U.S. and China, the increase is significantly greater in the U.S ($p < .001$) than China ($p < .05$).
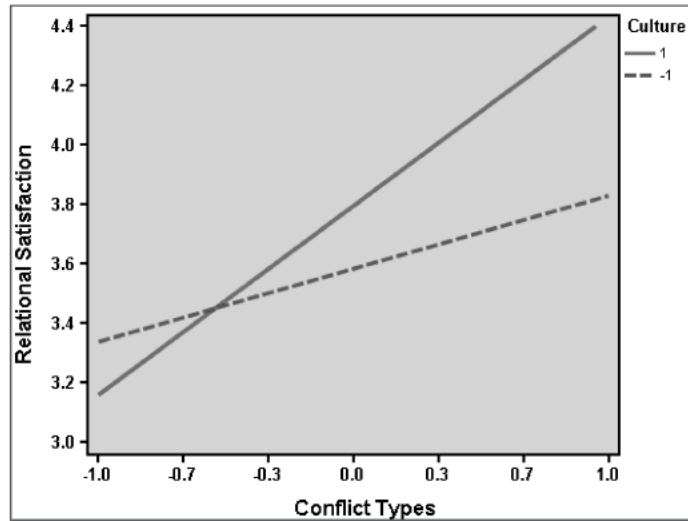

Figure 1. The Moderating Effects of Culture in the Relationship of Conflict Types with Relational Satisfaction

RQ2 inquired whether culture moderates the effects of conflict resolution on relational satisfaction. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were again conducted to examine the main effects and interaction effects of culture and conflict resolution. Culture was contrast coded, with the U.S. as 1 and China as -1. Likewise, conflict resolution was also contrast coded, with resolved conflict as 1 and unresolved conflict as -1. Table 2 displays the results of the main effects and the moderating effects of conflict resolution and culture.

Table 2. Regression Results of Culture and Conflict Resolution Predicting Relational Satisfaction

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	t	β	t	β	t
Conflict Resolution	.40***	7.46	.43***	8.09	.40***	7.20
Culture			.18**	3.44	.11	1.66
Conflict Resolution × Culture					.14*	2.21
Adjusted R^2	.16		.19		.20	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .005$, *** $p < .001$

In Model 1, conflict resolution was entered as the predictor variable and relational satisfaction as the dependent variable. The results indicated that conflict resolution had a positive main effect on relational satisfaction, $\square$ = .40, p <.001. In Model 2, culture was included as an additional predictor variable. The main effect for culture was significant, $\square$ = .18, p <.005. In Model 3, the moderating effect of culture was tested. The interaction term culture × conflict resolution was examined, and the interaction effect was significant, $\square$ = .14, p < .05. Culture exerted a significant moderating effect on the relationship between conflict resolution and relational satisfaction. To explore the nature of this interaction effect, we conducted simple slope analyses (Aiken & West, 1991), using the Interaction program (Soper, 2012). As can be seen in Figure 2, the follow-up analysis revealed that, although relational satisfaction increases from unresolved conflict to resolved conflict in both U.S. and China, the increase is significantly greater in the U.S. (p <.001) than China (p <.05).
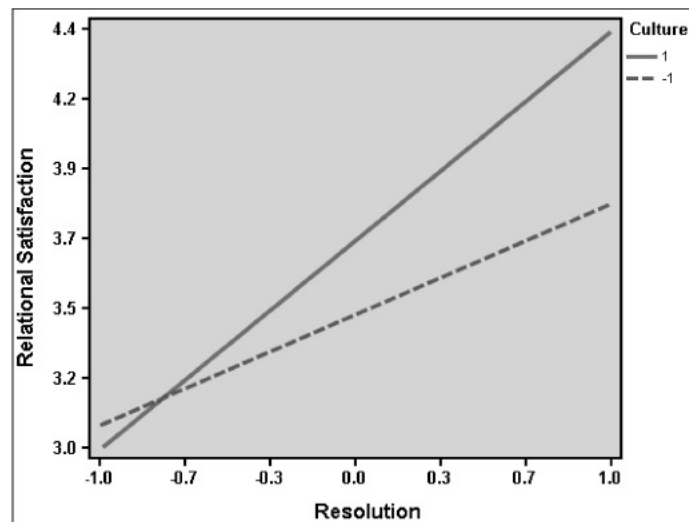

Figure 2. The Moderating Effects of Culture in the Relationship of Conflict Resolution with Relational Satisfaction

7.   Discussion

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationships of conflict types with conflict resolution and relational satisfaction in the U.S. and Chinese cultures, and to explore the moderating effects of culture in the relationships of conflict types and resolution with relational satisfaction. Four main findings are reported. First, in both cultures, task or substantive conflict is more likely to be resolved than relationship conflict. Second, during conflict, Chinese experience less relational satisfaction than Americans do. . Third, in both cultures, task conflict is associated with a higher level of relational satisfaction than relationship conflict ; similarly, resolved conflict is associated with a higher level of relational satisfaction than unresolved

conflict. Fourth, culture mediates the effects of both conflict types and conflict resolution on relational satisfaction. Although in both cultures, relational satisfaction increases from relational conflict to task conflict and from unresolved conflict to resolved conflict, the increase is significantly greater in the U.S. than in China.

As expected, our findings indicate that task or substantive conflict seems to be more resolvable than relationship conflict in both cultures. In the U.S., 80% of task conflict was reported resolved, but only 47% of relationship conflict was resolved. Similarly in China, as much as 94% of task conflict was reportedly resolved, but only 71% of relationship conflict was resolved. Task conflict is relatively easier to resolve maybe because it only involves the perceived differences in perspectives about a task being performed. Comparatively, relationship conflict can be more difficult to resolve maybe because it deals with more serious issues and concerns, such as perceived interpersonal incompatibilities, relational transgressions, or emotional antagonism pertaining to trust, power, esteem, honesty, or respect (Amason & Sapienza, 1997; Jehn et al., 2008; Yang & Mossholder, 2004). This finding regarding difficult relationship conflict is also consistent with the growing research on serial arguing, which suggests that many conflicts in close relationships (e.g., intimate, marital, and sibling) cannot be resolved in a single episode and reoccur repeatedly over time, and some may even become irresolvable, intractable, and perpetual problems (Johnson & Roloff, 1998; Miller et al., 2007).

Interestingly, although more Chinese participants (i.e., 83%) than the U.S. participants (i.e., 67%) reported their conflict ended in being resolved, Chinese experience less relational satisfaction than Americans. This finding may be related to the value differences between the two cultures. In light of the emphasis on harmony, face, and relationships in traditional Chinese culture, avoidance is usually preferred in managing conflict, especially when the conflict involves family members, friends, or close ingroup members (Yu, 1997). So conflict is always a stressor to Chinese in their attempt to establish a conflict-free society (Chen, 2002), lowering their relational satisfaction.

Unsurprisingly, results reveal that in both cultures task conflict is associated with a higher level of relational satisfaction than relationship conflict . This finding makes sense considering that task or substantive conflict facilitates the exchange of information and can thus be functional, whereas relationship conflict incurs animosity and tension and is thus largely dysfunctional (De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; Yang & Mossholder, 2004). This finding is also aligned with prior studies on group conflict that demonstrate a positive relationship between task conflict and performance and satisfaction, but a negative correlation between relationship conflict and member satisfaction (Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Simons & Peterson, 2000). Similarly, resolved conflict is also found to produce a higher level of relational satisfaction than unresolved conflict in both cultures. This finding provides support to the prior argument that unresolved conflict is particularly stressful, detrimental to relationships and health (Johnson & Roloff, 1998; Miller et al., 2007).

This study also shows that culture mediates the effects of both conflict types and conflict resolution on relational satisfaction. Specifically, although relational satisfaction increases from relational conflict to task conflict and from unresolved conflict to resolved conflict in both cultures, the increase is significantly greater in the U.S. than in China. This study shows that, regardless of conflict types (i.e., task conflict or relationship conflict) and resolution efficacy

(i.e., resolved or unresolved), Chinese appear to feel less relational satisfaction than Americans, however, the level of relational satisfaction seems to be more affected by conflict types and resolution efficacy in the U.S. than in China. Relative to Chinese, Americans seem to be far more dissatisfied with their relationships in relationship or unresolved conflict than task or resolved conflict. One possible explanation is that Americans may distinguish task conflict from relationship conflict or resolved conflict from unresolved conflict, and they perceive their impact on relational satisfaction very differently. Relatively, they are far less bothered by task or resolved conflict than relationship or unresolved conflict. Conversely, Chinese may consider all conflict as interference to relational satisfaction; thus, whether the conflict is about task or relationship or whether it is resolved or not may not make such a great difference to their perceptions of relational satisfaction.

A main limitation of this study involves the use of retrospective self-reports to collect data. Although participants were asked to recall a recent conflict with someone close to them, their reports of past conflict might be inaccurate and distorted from the actual conflict, due to intentional or unintentional perceptual bias or the halo effect confounded by the relationship climate at the time when the survey was completed. Thus, the data collection method might be a threat to the validity of this study and the findings need to be interpreted and generalized with caution. Future research could consider more cross-cultural investigations of the effects of conflict types or issues on relational outcomes.

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