

The Practices of Conflict Management Styles from Different Perspectives

¹Siti Marziah Zakaria
Nor Hazila Mat Lazim

*Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia*

¹Corresponding e-mail: [marziah@ukm.edu.my]

Conflict is a form of competing struggle between two parties that possess different and incompatible goals, which commonly involve a win-lose situation. Thomas and Killman suggested that conflict management can be addressed in five styles, namely competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating. These styles have been widely favored and practiced by different cultures and religious orientation. Apparently, the five conflict management styles proposed by Thomas and Killman in 1974 have been adopted in most cultures. Therefore, the aim of this concept paper is to provide a detailed discussion on the practices of different conflict management styles in various cultures and settings. Conflict management styles are inevitably related to culture, religion and orientation. It is also highly dependent on situational and environmental factors. Apparently, conflict management styles may function in phases. Thus, the phases should also be examined as conflict management styles may work in different phases for different types of setting.

Keywords: conflict management styles, culture, religion, Thomas and Killman.

Conflict is regarded as an inevitable part of the human relatedness process and social phenomenon (Ting- Toomey et al., 2001). In regard to this, it should be noted that researchers from various disciplines such as psychology, behavioural sciences, sociology, communication, and anthropology (Che Rose et al., 2006) tend to define conflict in broad terms. Hocker and Wilmot (1991) defined conflict as “an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals” (p. 12). Meanwhile, Rubin et al. (1994) further added to the definition by describing conflict as a “perceived divergence of interest, or a belief that the parties’ current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously” (p. 5).

Barki and Hartwick (2004) further elaborated the definition of conflict as “a dynamic process that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience

negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of their goals” (p. 234). On the other hand, Jehn and Bendersky (2003) broadly defined conflict as “perceived incompatibilities or discrepant views among the parties involved” (p. 189). Therefore, it can be concluded that conflict is a form of competing struggle between two parties who not only have different but incompatible goals, which involves a win-lose situation.

However, Tjosvold (2006) argued that majority of individuals tend to use the common definition of conflict that is related to destruction and negativity despite the huge amount of research showing that some researchers have a broader idea of what the term “conflict” comprises. In his commentary, he showed that the term may also be used in certain situations when conflict can have a positive effect. In addition, it was also emphasised that a properly and well-

managed conflict can bring out ignored problems to allow them to be solved, facilitate innovation and change, and increase loyalty and cohesiveness of members of various groups (Baron, 1991). Apart from that, it can also lead to improved efficiency, creativity, and profitability (Axelrod & Johnson, 2005).

Conflict is bound to occur between individuals, groups or community, organisations, and even nations that is intercultural in nature (Dechurch & Marks, 2001; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2006). In particular, conflict in organisations can be categorised into four levels or interfaces described as follows: (1) the individual with the organisation, (2) individuals with one another, (3) organisational units with other units, and (4) inter-organisational relationships. On a more important note, it is significant to treat these interfaces as somewhat distinct even though they are not discrete (Burke, 2006). According to Burke (2006, p. 782-783) in the *Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, conflicts tend to occur in organisations due to the following causes:

- Increase work complexity in most organisations which will produce myriad perspectives and viewpoints.
- Increase electronic communication particularly e-mail in order to reduce face-to-face contact, and thus provide more “freedom” to communicate in confrontation, especially in potentially hostile ways.
- Constant pressure on organisations to be cost-conscious and effective at managing costs to avoid a scarcity of resources, which in turn increases competition among managers, in particular as well as employees in general.

Thus, this article will explore the concept of conflict management styles from Thomas and Killman’s approach. Subsequently, the differences of conflict management styles in different cultures and religious affiliations will be examined based on previous findings. This will provide a bigger perspective on the practices and preferences of conflict management styles. Conflict management styles are inevitably influenced by cultures, norms, values, goals, and religious affiliation. This article will focus on cultures and religions as these two variables have been studied extensively.

Conflict Management Styles

Conflict management styles are described as measures that are able to limit, mitigate, and contain a conflict without having to necessarily solve it (Swanström & Weissmann, 2005). In regard to this matter, several approaches have been developed to explain conflict management styles, however, the main approach that has been widely adopted is known as a five-style model based on two dimensions (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Thomas & Killman, 1974). According to the approach developed by Thomas and Killman (1974), the two basic dimensions involved in conflicts include: (1) assertiveness which refers to the extent whereby an individual endeavour to satisfy his or her own concerns, and (2) cooperativeness which is described as the extent to which an individual endeavour to satisfy the other person’s concerns. More importantly, these two dimensions of behaviour can be used to define the five methods of dealing with conflict, namely competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating as shown in Figure 1 below.

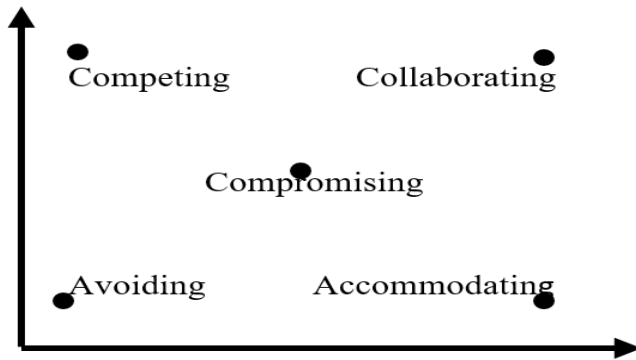


Figure 1 Conflict Management Styles
(Source: Thomas & Killman, 2015)

The competing which is also called “dominating” style refers to when an individual pursues his or her interests at the cost of others. In other words, the primary focus of this style revolves around “defeating the opponent” (Cai & Fink 2002, p. 69). Next, the attempt of the collaborating or integrating style is to best fulfil the needs of all parties involved in a conflict (Croucher, 2011). On another note, the compromising style is described as a method that can rapidly resolve conflict with the attempt of finding a quick middle ground (Rahim, 1983). Hence, this simply indicates that the person who utilises this style is more likely to divide resources in equitable way.

However, it is important to understand that both collaborating and compromising conflict styles are commonly employed by individuals who are concerned about their own interests and the other person’s interests. On the other hand, the avoiding style does not address the conflict, which clearly indicates that an avoider tends to withdraw from the situation entirely (Croucher, 2011). Finally, the accommodating which is also known as “obliging” style is described as a self-sacrificing style where an individual denies their own needs for the benefit of others (Croucher, 2011). In this case, the person who uses this style is willing to forgo his or her interest for the

gain of his or her counterpart (Azim, 2017a).

Collectivist vs Individualist Cultures

In general, conflict management preferences are normally associated with cross-cultural differences, particularly collectivist and individualist cultures. The concern of the individualist culture revolves around prioritising the goals, needs, and rights of the individual over the goals, responsibilities, and obligations of the group (Cai & Fink, 2002). In this case, Western countries such as Germany, France, United Kingdom, and United States are typically considered as individualists. On the other hand, the concern of collectivists is to “value the goals, responsibilities, and obligations of the group over the goals, needs, and rights of the individual” (Cai & Fink 2002, p. 70). Contrasting to the individualists, the collectivists are generally defined in terms of their relationship with a higher consideration given to in-group members such as family or co-workers. In regard to this notion, it is important to understand that people from Eastern countries (Asia and Middle East) and Latino countries are often considered to possess collectivistic culture (Hofstede, 2011).

A considerable amount of literature has established the intercultural comparison between the collectivism and

individualist cultures towards the preference of conflict management styles (Cai & Fink, 2002; Hofstede, 2011). Most of the findings revealed that Americans which are classified as individualist tend to employ a direct method, assertive orientation, dominating, and confrontational style compared to collectivism countries such as Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Arab, and Mexico. In other words, it can be said that they are not fond of the avoiding and obliging style. Contrastingly, Japan, China, and Korea which are under the Confucian philosophy mostly favour the avoiding style (Ting-Toomey et al., 1991; Trubisky et al., 1991; Knutson et al., 2002; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Morris et al., 1998; Tinsley & Weldon, 2003; Ohbuchi & Takahashi, 1994; Ohbuchi et al., 1999; Lee & Rogan, 1991; Hong, 2005). Meanwhile, Malaysians, Indonesians, and Arabs have a strong desire to adopt the collaborating or integrating style in dealing with conflicts (Suppiah, 2006; Salleh & Safarali, 2013; Mohd Kassim, Abdullah & Mansor, 2018; Lukman et al., 2009; Shih & Susanto, 2010).

In comparison to the individualists (European Americans), Ting-Toomey et al. (1991) and Trubisky et al. (1991) provided some evidence that collectivists (i.e., Chinese and Taiwanese groups) tend to use the obliging and avoiding styles to a greater extent in dealing with acquaintance conflicts, while the dominating style is minimally used. Similarly, Knutson et al. (2002) further strengthened the finding by stating that Taiwanese Chinese participants display a higher preference for avoiding, face-to-face discussion of the matter, and obliging styles of conflict resolution. On the other hand, the US participants are more likely to deal with conflict through assertive, explicit, competitive, and intermediary styles.

Oetzel and Ting-Toomey (2003) in their study found that the subjects from the traditionally collectivist cultures of China and Japan prefer to adopt more avoiding style instead of the integrating style which is in contrast of the members of the individualist cultures such as Germany and the United States. Similarly, Morris et al. (1998) found that Chinese managers tend to rely mostly on avoiding style compared to managers in other three nations (Philippines, India, US). Meanwhile, US managers have a heavy reliance on competing style compared to the other three countries. In this case, the different reliance of conflict styles is resulted by the high value of conformity and tradition in Chinese culture, whereas US culture revolves around the high value of individual achievement. In a quantitative study by Tinsley and Weldon (2003), Chinese managers were discovered to have a stronger desire of shaming and teaching a moral lesson compared to American managers. In contrast with Chinese managers that practise the indirect method, Americans are unlikely to express a desire for revenge and they prefer to respond to normative conflict.

Ohbuchi and Takahashi (1994) carried out a study on 94 Japanese and 98 American students for the purpose of investigating their conflict management strategies. The result particularly showed that Japanese subjects have a strong tendency to avoid conflicts. Specifically, the finding demonstrated that the Japanese adopt the avoiding strategy 48% of the time, whereas Americans only employ this strategy 22% of the time. In a similar vein, Ohbuchi et al.'s (1999) study also managed to prove that Japanese participants have a clear preference for avoidance tactics, while US prefer assertive, controlling, and active style in resolving conflict.

On a similar note, Lee and Rogan (1991) conducted a study on 80 Koreans

and 90 US subjects with the purpose of identifying their conflict management behaviours in an organisational setting. The overall findings illustrated that Koreans prefer integrative conflict resolution strategies (integrating style), while Americans prefer to use either non-confrontation or control strategies (controlling style). Apart from that, the data also showed that the Korean group tend to use less non-confrontational strategies as they get older and possess more power. Other than that, Hong (2005) conducted a study to compare conflict management strategies (CMS) between Koreans and Americans involving 600 subjects (300 Koreans and 300 Americans). The findings of this study showed that Koreans always choose the avoidance strategy and a cooperative orientation, whereas Americans prefer a competition strategy and an assertive orientation.

In an empirical study performed by Suppiah (2006), a high percentage (65.5%) of public sector managers in Malaysia was reported to mostly employ the integrating style, followed by the compromising style (23.8%) in resolving interpersonal conflicts. Apart from that, other significant styles that have been widely used include dominating (5.0%) and avoiding style (4.2%), whereas the least preferred style is obliging style (1.5%). On another note, Salleh and Safarali (2013) managed to observe that academic administrators of International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) highly practise the integrating style based on the highest mean score 4.22, followed by the compromising style with the mean of 3.85, obliging style with the mean of 3.38, avoiding style with the mean of 3.32, and dominating style with the lowest mean score of 2.61.

According to the study carried out by Mohd Kasim, Abdullah, and Mansor (2018) on academic staffs in Malaysian public universities, the integrating and

compromising styles were discovered to be significant with affective commitment, while the avoiding style does not relate with affective commitment. These findings indicated that Malaysian people dislike aggressive behaviour as they prefer more relationship-based approaches, and they tend to choose consensus and compromise instead of confrontation (Abdullah, 2001). Apart from that, the face concern is important within a working environment with the purpose of maintaining a continuous and sustainable working relationship (Che Rose et al., 2007).

Lukman et al. (2009) indicated that Malaysian employers have a greater tendency to employ either the dominating style or integrating style in dealing with conflict, while the Indonesian domestic workers in Kuala Lumpur prefer to adopt either the avoiding or integrating style in managing intercultural communication conflict. In regard to this notion, Shih and Susanto (2010) further revealed that subordinates at three selected local government agencies in Indonesia were found to use integrating style, followed by compromising style. These styles are most likely used by intelligent people in order to solve conflicts productively. However, Sharif, Majid, and Badlishah (2014) reported a different finding in regard to resolving conflict among the management style in Malaysia. The data showed that the accommodating style is dominantly used among Malaysian institution managers compared to other conflict styles.

In addition, Elsayed-Ekhouly and Buda (1996) expanded the literature by conducting a study on Arab executives (collectivists). The results showed that the Arab executives tend to use more collaborating and avoiding styles in handling interpersonal conflicts at work, while their American counterparts (individualists) clearly favour the obliging, dominating, and compromising styles.

Furthermore, Khakimova, Zhang and Hall (2012) reported a similar finding in their study which found that Arabs are most likely to utilise the collaborating third-party help and avoiding style, whereas the Americans perceive that utilising emotional expression, dominating, and neglect styles is more effective. However, it should be noted that the participants in this study did not have different preference on the compromising and obliging conflict management styles.

In a quasi-experimental study, Gomez and Taylor (2017) found that Mexicans have a greater preference on the use of social influence and negotiation when they are confronted with a conflict compared to the Americans. Furthermore, collectivism helps to explain the differences of these countries considering that it mediates the relationship between countries and the likelihood of using social influence and negotiation. In addition, the perceptions of fairness have a stronger influence on the preferences of a conflict resolution strategy compared to the preference of Americans on negotiation.

However, Cai and Fink (2002) conducted a study on a total of 188 graduate students from 31 different countries residing in the U.S. In this study, different findings were reported based on the result that avoiding style is preferred by individualist rather than the collectivists. On the other hand, it was discovered that collectivists tend to choose compromising and integrating styles.

In short, the comparison made on the practices of conflict management styles on both individualist and collectivist countries seemingly shows a pattern. The individualist was found to prefer competing and avoiding style, while collectivist prefers accommodating, compromising and collaborating styles. The organizational goals, work culture, work practices and their values apparently

influence their conflict management styles. The collectivist goals, which are to find peace, maintain harmony, serve others, seek justice, gain equality and so forth will influence their decisions and practices.

Religious Affiliation and the Preferred Conflict Management Styles

Religion is also regarded as a determining factor in selecting conflict management styles (Azim, 2017b). In other words, religion plays a significant role in regard to conflict management preferences considering that it is part of a culture. A limited number of studies (Wilson & Power, 2004; Wekhian, 2015; Polkinghorn & Byrne, 2001; Croucher, 2011; Croucher, 2013) have shown that conflict management styles are not in line with religion.

In regard to this matter, Wilson and Power (2004) conducted a study with the purpose of distinguishing between four groups: practicing or non-practicing Christians and practicing or non-practicing Muslims. The result showed that both groups of Christians and Muslims with low religiosity tend to choose the collaborating style in resolving conflicts (Wilson & Power, 2004). On the other hand, Muslims with higher religiosity prefer the compromising style of conflict resolution (Wilson & Power, 2004). Hence, it can be implied from this study that the Muslims level of practice significantly impact their preferences on conflict resolution style, however, the level of practice by Christians provides no significant differences upon their conflict management style preference. In line with their study, Wekhian (2015) further supported by stating that religiosity has a significant predictive relationship in choosing the obliging, compromising, integrating, and dominating conflict management styles.

Moreover, Polkinghorn and Byrne (2001) studied the impact of gender and religious affiliation on conflict management styles in four different conflict zones which include South Africa, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Northern Ireland. The results of the study indicated that most religious groups prefer to use the avoiding style except for the Bosnian Muslims. On the other hand, Protestants in Northern Ireland strongly prefer the accommodating style, while the Bosnian Muslim respondents were the only group that reported a preference for the controlling style. Apart from that, all religious groups (i.e. Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Catholic, and Protestant) were reported to have a high preference on the collaborating style in resolving conflict.

In addition, Croucher (2011) examined the influence of national and religious identification on conflict styles preferences among Christians and Muslims in Western Europe (i.e. France, Germany, United Kingdom). The results of the study found that national and religious identification have a significant influence on conflict management style preference. In particular, the findings showed that Muslims prefer more compromising and obliging conflict styles, while Christians tend to choose the dominating style as their preferred style. Other than that, it was also discovered that France is more dominating compared to Germany and United Kingdom.

Meanwhile, Croucher (2013) explored the relationships between self-construal, religious identification, and conflict styles in India. In his study, it was demonstrated that religious identification (Hindus and Muslim) significantly influence the relationship between self-construal and conflict style preference. Moreover, it was also showed that Hindus choose to be dominating in conflict situations, whereas Muslims are most

likely to avoid conflict by putting more emphasis on group-oriented conflict styles.

Nevertheless, there is still room to explain the underlying relationship from the religion perspective besides the above-mentioned studies, which have managed to identify the relationship between conflict management styles and religion. This can be attributed to the fact that it is important to understand the underlying reasons for the differing preferences because it can further expand the body of knowledge in regard to cross-cultural differences. In a more important sense, these findings can be generalised to other cultures that demonstrate the same value orientations by studying the role of cultural values. Additionally, such knowledge can definitely be useful in building a stronger theoretical understanding of cross-cultural differences, and at the same time significantly assisting managers and organisations in doing a cross-cultural business.

Conclusion

Conflict management styles are inevitably related to culture, religion and orientation. It is also highly dependent on situational and environmental factors. Countries which are being deprived of their legal and human rights may practice a more assertive style to fight for their rights. While countries that have obtained economic and political stability may find a better conflict management styles which serve justice and equality to all. Culture and religion are not the sole predictors of conflict management styles as other factors may intervene the relationship. Social and economic factors may play a stronger role while examining the relationships between them. Apparently, conflict management styles may function in phases. One can initially practice an accommodating style, but convert it to competing styles once the former style is not effective, and later on opting avoiding style as other styles are no

longer productive. Thus, the phases should also be examined as conflict management styles may work in phases.

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