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6. Multidisciplinary perspectives on intercultural conflict: the 'Bermuda Triangle' of conflict, culture and communication

Nathalie van Meurs and Helen Spencer-Oatey

1. Introduction

A few decades ago, managers spent more than 20% of their time trying to resolve conflicts (Thomas and Schmidt 1976). Nowadays, conflicts are probably even more complex and time consuming to resolve, because technological advances, the world's exponential growth rate, and globalization have led to increased contact between culturally diverse people. Different norms, values, and language can make negotiating more stressful and less satisfactory (Brett and Okumura 1998), and conflict cannot be managed effectively without simultaneously considering both culture and communication. In fact, the three concepts of conflict, culture and communication are like a Bermuda Triangle – hazardous conditions will emerge unless the three are simultaneously handled appropriately.

Conflict processes are studied by researchers in a range of disciplines, including organizational behaviour, management studies, (intercultural) communication studies, peace studies, and applied linguistics. Unfortunately, research in these various disciplines tends to exist in parallel fields, with infrequent passages across theoretical and empirical divides. In this chapter we provide an overview of key theoretical frameworks, explore some of the main views as to the impact of culture, and consider the interrelationships between conflict, culture and communication. We call for more interdisciplinary research, so that boundaries can be broken down and illuminating new insights can emerge.

2. The concept of conflict

Conflict is an unavoidable element of interaction; it takes place between friends and family, and within and between groups and organizations. It occurs "when two or more social entities (i.e. individuals, groups, organizations, and nations) come in contact with one another in attaining their objectives" and when some kind of incompatibility emerges between them (Rahim 1992: 1). It is often regarded as undesirable, and much attention is typically focused on how to prevent or resolve it. However, conflict need not necessarily be undesirable. It can contribute to the maintenance and cohesion of groups, and it can stimulate reflection and change. So in these senses, it can be positive.

According to Hammer (2005: 676), conflict entails two key elements: (a) perceived (substantive) disagreement and (b) strong, negative emotions. The source of the disagreement or incompatibility can be various, of course. It could be that people have incompatible attitudes, values, and beliefs; or it could be that two parties require the same resource, or need to engage in incompatible activities to acquire a goal. In terms of affective experience, Rahim (1992: 17) argues that the incompatibilities, disagreements, or differences must be sufficiently intense for the parties to experience conflict. Yet, there can be differences in people's threshold of conflict awareness or tolerance, and this can sometimes be a cause of conflict in itself.

Conflict can be classified into two basic types, according to whether its predominant basis or source is cognitive or affective. Cognitive conflict results from differences of opinion on task-related issues such as scarce resources, policies and procedures, whereas affective, psychological, or relational conflict stems from differences in emotions and feelings (De Dreu

1997, Rahim 1992, Thomas 1976). Of course, these sources are not mutually exclusive, in that a conflict can start by being about a task-related issue and then develop into a personality clash.

What, then, do researchers want to find out through their study of conflict? There are three fundamental issues:

- What are the procedural characteristics of conflictive episodes? What tactics, communicative styles and linguistic strategies can be used to manage them?
- What factors influence the preferences, styles and tactics that people may choose, and what positive and negative impacts do they have on the outcomes? How may cultural differences impact on the emergence and management of conflict?
- What role does communication play in the emergence and management of conflict?

The following sections explore some of the main approaches that researchers have taken in addressing these questions.

3. Classic frameworks for analyzing conflict

3.1. Thomas' (1976) models of dyadic conflict

Kenneth Thomas (1976), in a classic paper, proposed two complementary models of conflict – a process model and a structural model. The process model focuses on the sequence of events within a conflict episode, whilst the structural model focuses on the underlying factors that influence the events.

In his process model, Thomas (1976) proposes that a conflict episode comprises five main events from the viewpoint of one of the parties: frustration, conceptualization, behaviour, other's reaction, and outcome, with the outcome of a given episode setting the stage for subsequent episodes on the same issue. Thomas' specification of the behavioural element in this process is particularly well known. He applied Blake and Mouton's (1964) classic managerial grid to the study of conflict, arguing that people may hold different orientations towards a given conflict, depending on the degree to which they want to satisfy their own concerns and the degree to which they want to satisfy the other's concerns. He identified five orientations: neglect, appeasement, domination, compromise and integration (see Figure 1). Neglect reflects avoidance or indifference, in that no attention is paid to the concerns of either self or other. Appeasement reflects a lack of concern for self, but a high concern for the other, whilst domination represents a desire to win at the other's expense. Compromise is intermediate between appeasement and domination, and is often the least satisfactory for the two parties. Integration represents a problem-solving orientation where there is a desire to integrate both parties' concerns.

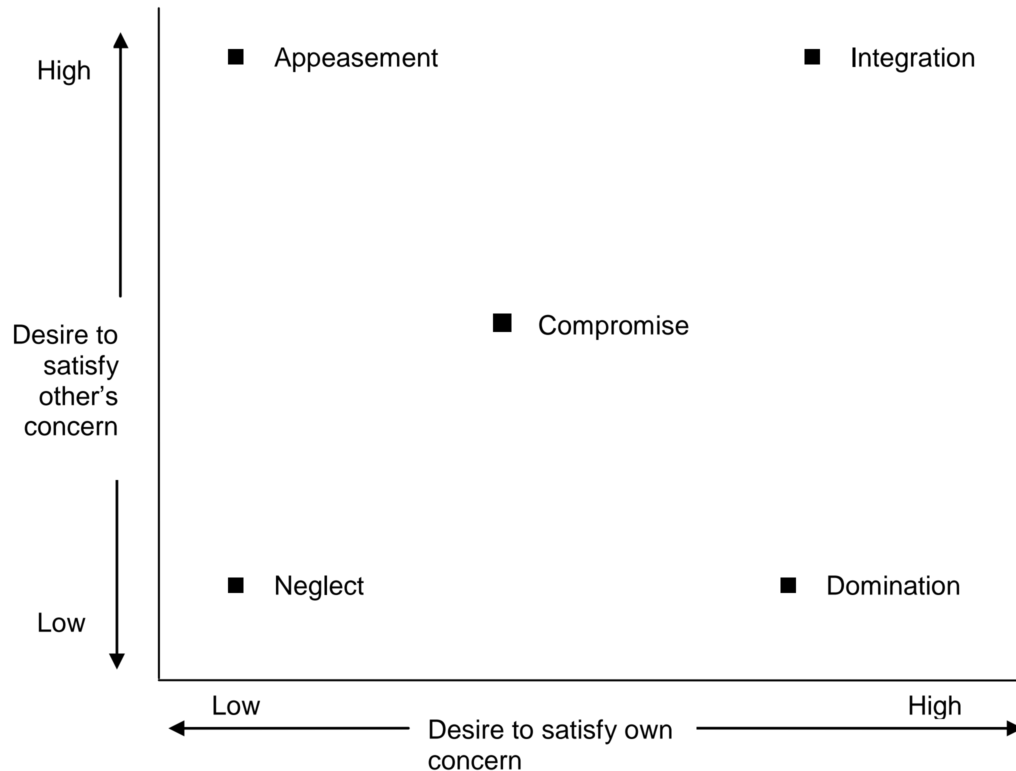

Figure 1. Thomas' 'grid' framework of conflict management orientations
(Based on Thomas 1976: 900)

A number of different terms are now in widespread use for these five orientations, and these are shown in Table 1. In the rest of this chapter, the terms used are: collaborative, competitive, compromising, accommodative and avoiding.

Table 1: Main terms used as labels for the five conflict management orientations

High self/high other concern	High self/low other concern	Medium self/ medium other concern	Low self/high other concern	Low self/low other concern
• Integrating (Thomas 1976; Rahim 1992) • Collaborative (Thomas 1976) • Problem solving (De Dreu 1997)	• Dominating (Thomas 1976; Rahim 1992) • Competitive (Thomas 1976) • Contending (De Dreu 1997)	• Compromising (Thomas 1976; Rahim 1992) • Sharing (Thomas 1976)	• Appeasing (Thomas 1976) • Accommodative (Thomas 1976) • Obliging (Rahim 1992) • Yielding (De Dreu 1997)	• Neglecting (Thomas 1976) • Avoidant/ avoiding (Thomas 1976; Rahim 1992; De Dreu 1997)

Thomas and Kilmann (1974) developed the Thomas–Kilmann conflict MODE instrument to measure people's conflict handling orientations. However, Rahim (1983) criticized its validity and reliability, and developed the 'Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II' (ROCI-II Instrument). It achieved higher reliability scores, and this instrument has been widely used by researchers in management studies and intercultural communication. However, Sorenson, Morse and Savage (1999) actually measured the underlying concerns particular to the dual concern model (i.e. self vs. others) and found that only dominating and appeasement strategy choice correlated with these concerns; the more integrative strategies (i.e. problem solving and obliging) shared little variance and seemed subject to other contextual variables.

3.2. Intercultural perspectives

In his structural model, Thomas (1976) maintains that people's response styles are hierarchically ordered, in that they have a dominant style, a back-up style, a least-preferred style and so on. He suggests that this hierarchy could be influenced by factors such as personality, motives and abilities. Could culture, therefore, influence this hierarchy, with some orientations being more prevalent in certain societies than in others? Many cross-cultural studies have explored this question, and a widespread finding (e.g., Bond and Hwang 1986; Morris et al. 1998; Ohbuchi and Takahashi 1994; Trubinsky et al. 1991) is that a neglect style (that is also labeled avoidance) is more common among East Asians than among Americans. Yet, van Meurs (2003) found there were also differences between British and Dutch managers in this respect. Her results showed that although managers preferred a collaborative approach, the British managers were more avoiding than the Dutch managers, both in their own eyes and in those of the Dutch. While Britain and the Netherlands are often grouped together in terms of cultural values, they differ in terms of their need to avoid uncertainty, with the Dutch having a greater aversion to uncertainty and ambiguity (Hofstede 1991, 2001). This is a value that could have a major impact on preferences for handling conflict.

These findings could be regarded as conceptually problematic, because according to Thomas' orientation framework, neglect is an ineffective orientation, in that it reflects a lack of concern for the interests of either self or other and entails withdrawal. In fact, other researchers have found that avoiding is motivated by a concern for the relationship with the people involved (e.g., De Dreu 1997; Leung et al. 1992; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Morris et al. 1998). Friedman, Chi and Liu (2006) proposed that far from reflecting lack of concern, an avoiding style could result from concern for others. They hypothesized that it could reflect three possible concerns: (a) concern that a direct approach will damage the relationship, (b) concern that a direct approach will be more costly in cost–benefit terms, and (c) genuine concern for others based on personal values. They also hypothesized that the hierarchical status of the people involved in the conflict would have an impact. Using respondents from Taiwan and the USA, their results show a greater tendency to use avoidance than Americans do. They found that this was explained by higher Taiwanese expectations that direct conflict will hurt the relationship with the other party, and by greater intrinsic concern for others. They found that it was not explained by differences in expected career costs/benefits of good/bad relations with others. In addition, their Taiwanese respondents showed more sensitivity to hierarchy than their American respondents did, in that avoidance behaviour was even more important for them when the other party was of higher status.

Superficially these studies suggest that Thomas' (1976) grid framework has limited cross-cultural validity. In fact, however, it is important to distinguish people's orientations (i.e. the degree to which they want to satisfy their own desires and those of the opposing party) and

the tactics that people use to pursue them. This is a distinction that Thomas himself originally made, and Friedman, Chi and Liu's (2006) qualitative data illustrate its importance. They found that their Chinese respondents often displayed a long-term orientation, reporting tactics such as 'do nothing right now, but draw a lesson for future actions' and 'say nothing but collect more data on my own'. In other words, they found that avoidance was a tactic for achieving a satisfactory resolution of the conflict in the longer-term.

However, van Meurs (2003) wanted to assess the motivations for conflict styles by measuring individual's concern for clarity, control and inconvenience without the focus on self vs. other. She found that managers were equally concerned about clarity but that British managers were more concerned than Dutch managers about inconvenience (i.e., to prevent awkward and uncomfortable situations from happening or difficult questions from being asked). They are unlikely to do so because they care for the other party, so it may be that the Dutch managers are extremely unconcerned about inconvenience, mainly because they care more about clarity and control regardless of harmony. Indeed, a concern for inconvenience significantly predicted managers' use of avoiding.

From an intercultural point of view, it is vital, therefore, to explore the tactics that people use, as well as people's desired outcomes for a particular conflict episode and their generally preferred style or orientation for handling it. Lytle (1999), for example, in her study of Chinese conflict management styles, reports several categories of behaviour that cannot easily be linked with the grid framework, because they are tactics rather than orientations or styles. They include group-oriented behaviour (such as consulting with the group to solve a problem, reframing the problem as a group problem and appealing to the group for help) and relational behaviour (including building up the relationship with the other party, and building up 'guanxi' or social connections with others).

3.3. Brown and Levinson's face model

A second classic study that has had a major impact on studies of conflict is Brown and Levinson's (1987) face model of politeness. These authors start with the basic assumption that "all competent adult members of a society have (and know each other to have) 'face', the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (Brown and Levinson 1987: 61). They further propose that face consists of two related aspects: negative face and positive face. They define negative face as a person's want to be unimpeded by others, the desire to be free to act as s/he chooses and not be imposed upon. They define positive face as a person's want to be appreciated and approved of by selected others, in terms of personality, desires, behaviour, values, and so on. In other words, negative face represents a desire for autonomy, and positive face represents a desire for approval. The authors also draw attention to another important distinction: the distinction between self-face and other-face

Brown and Levinson (1987) point out that face is something that is emotionally invested; it can be lost, maintained or enhanced in interaction, and so interlocutors constantly need to pay attention to it. They assume that people typically cooperate with each other in maintaining face in interaction, because people are mutually vulnerable to face attack: if one person attacks another person's face, the other is likely to retaliate. Moreover, they argue that some speech acts (such as criticism, directives) are inherently face-threatening, and that conflict can be avoided by managing those speech acts in contextually appropriate ways. They claim that there are five super-strategies for handling face-threatening acts:

- bald on-record performance (clear, unambiguous and concise speech)

- positive politeness (language that is 'approach-based' and treats the hearer as an in-group member)
- negative politeness (language that is 'avoidance-based' and respects the hearer's desire for freedom and autonomy)
- off-record performance (indirect and comparatively ambiguous speech)
- non-performance of the face-threatening act.

People choose which super-strategy to use by assessing the 'weightiness' of the speech act. According to Brown and Levinson (1987) this entails assessing the power differential between the interlocutors, the distance–closeness between them, and the degree of imposition (or face-threat) of the message itself.

3.4. Limitations of Brown and Levinson's face model

Brown and Levinson's (1987) face model has been hugely influential. Numerous studies have used it as an analytic framework and many others have investigated one or more of its elements. Nevertheless, there have also been widespread criticisms of it, and here we consider those that are most pertinent to the study of conflict.

As explained in section 3.3, Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework starts with the assumption that harmony is the desired option, because we all want our own face needs to be upheld. Culpeper (2005, Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann 2003), on the other hand, argues that people may sometimes want to be deliberately offensive or face-threatening, and that Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework is not broad enough to cater for this. He therefore proposes a set of 'impoliteness' super-strategies that are mirror images of Brown and Levinson's politeness super-strategies. When speakers use these strategies, their intention is to attack the hearer's face, rather than to uphold it. Culpeper (2005, Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann 2003) draws on a variety of data sources to provide authentic examples of the use of these various super-strategies.

Other researchers have questioned whether Brown and Levinson's (1987) focus on the performance of (face-threatening) speech acts provides a broad enough basis for analyzing the complexities of (dis)harmony in interaction. Spencer-Oatey (2005), for example, argues that rapport is dependent on the participants' dynamic management of three main factors: interactional wants (both task-related and relational), face sensitivities, and perceived sociality rights and obligations. She maintains that relational conflict is likely to emerge if the various participants' expectations over each of these factors are not handled appropriately, and that a pre-requisite for maintaining positive rapport is thus for each of the participants to be aware of and/or sensitive to the interactional wants, face sensitivities, and perceived sociality rights and obligations that they each hold. Spencer-Oatey (2000: 29-30) also proposes that people may have different orientations towards positive rapport:

1. Rapport-enhancement orientation: a desire to strengthen or enhance harmonious relations between interlocutors;
2. Rapport-maintenance orientation: a desire to maintain or protect harmonious relations between the interlocutors;
3. Rapport-neglect orientation: a lack of concern or interest in the quality of relations between the interlocutors (perhaps because of a focus on self);
4. Rapport-challenge orientation: a desire to challenge or impair harmonious relations between the interlocutors

She points out that people's motives for holding any of these orientations could be various.

3.5. A synthesized summary

Building on the theorizing of Thomas (1976), Brown and Levinson (1987), Spencer-Oatey (2000), along with Friedman, Chi and Liu's (2006) and van Meurs' (2003) findings, it seems that the motivations underlying these conflict-handling tactics can be multiple, and can include the following (interrelated) concerns:

- Cost–benefit considerations (the impact of the handling of the conflict on the instrumental concerns of self and/or other)
- Rapport considerations (the impact of the handling of the conflict on the smoothness/harmony between the parties)
- Relational considerations (the impact of the handling of the conflict on the degree of distance–closeness and equality–inequality between the parties)
- Effectiveness considerations (the impact of the handling of the conflict on the degree of concern for clarity, control, and inconvenience between parties)

Thomas' five conflict-handling orientations or styles cannot be mapped in a straightforward manner onto these underlying concerns, and thus cannot be explained simply in terms of concern for self versus concern for other, as Thomas's (1976) and Rahim's (1983, 1992) frameworks suggest. Similarly, styles and tactics do not have a one-to-one relationship. Let us take avoidance as an example. If I avoid handling a conflict, it could be that I want to withdraw from the problem (as indicated by Thomas' grid), but there could also be several other possibilities. It could be that I want to maintain or build rapport with the other person; it could be that I want to show respect for the superordinate status of the other person; or it could be that my long-term goal is to dominate my opponent, and that I feel the best way of achieving this is to initially avoid conflict whilst I muster my arguments and/or gain support from elsewhere. Alternatively, I may feel uncomfortable avoiding the problem, because I have a low tolerance for uncertainty, and prefer to maintain clarity and control. Finding an effective solution may be more important to me, even if it risks damaging the relationship, because I believe I can amend that at a later date.

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness super-strategies, and Culpeper's (2005, Culpeper, Bousfield and Wichmann 2003) impoliteness super-strategies are potential verbal tactics that primarily relate to rapport considerations (although naturally they can have a knock-on effect on both relational and cost–benefit considerations). Analysis of the verbal tactics that people use in conflict episodes is an area where applied linguistics can make a valuable contribution to the study of conflict (see section 5.2).

The studies discussed in section 3.2 highlight the importance of considering culture in the Bermuda Triangle of conflict, and we explore this in detail in the next section.

4. Conflict and culture

4.1. Conflict and cultural values

Hofstede (1991, 2001) identified five dimensions of cultural values (individualism–collectivism, high–low power distance, masculinity–femininity, high–low uncertainty avoidance, and long/short-term orientation), and many researchers have focused on the impact of individualism–collectivism on conflict management styles and preferences. Hofstede defines this dimension as follows:

> Individualism stands for a society in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him/herself and her/his immediate family only. Collectivism stands for a society in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.
> Hofstede 2001: 225

Leung (1987) found that respondents from individualist societies (North America and Europe) differed in their conflict-handling preferences from those from collectivist societies (China), although he also found some culture-general results. Ting-Toomey (1999: 211–212) argues that individualist and collectivist values are reflected in independent and interdependent self-construals respectively, and that these can impact on conflict as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Cultural Values, Self-Construals and the Conflict Process
(Derived from Ting-Toomey 1999: 211–212)

Individualist Values and Independent Self-Construals	**Collectivist Values and Interdependent Self-Construals**
1. Conflict is perceived as closely related to the goals or outcomes that are salient to the respective individual conflict parties in a given conflict situation.	1. Conflict is weighted against the face threat incurred in the conflict negotiation process; it is also interpreted in the web of ingroup/outgroup relationships.
2. Communication in the conflict process is viewed as dissatisfying when the conflict parties are not willing to deal with the conflict openly and honestly.	2. Communication in the conflict process is perceived as threatening when the conflict parties push for substantive discussion before proper facework management.
3. Conversely, communication in the conflict process is viewed as satisfying when the conflict parties are willing to confront the conflict issues openly and share their feelings honestly (i.e. assertively but not aggressively).	3. Communication in the conflict interaction is viewed as satisfying when the conflict parties engage in *mutual* face-saving and face-giving behaviour and attend to both verbal and nonverbal signals.
4. The conflict outcome is perceived as unproductive when no tangible outcomes are reached or no plan of action is developed	4. The conflict process or outcome is perceived as unproductive when face issues are not addressed and relational/group feelings are not attended to properly.
5. The conflict outcome is perceived as productive when tangible solutions are reached and objective criteria are met	5. The conflict process or outcome is defined as productive when both conflict parties can claim win–win results on the facework front in addition to substantive agreement.
6. Effective and appropriate management of conflict means individual goals are addressed and differences are dealt with openly, honestly, and properly in relation to timing and situational context.	6. Appropriate and effective management of conflict means that the mutual 'faces' of the conflict parties are saved or even upgraded in the interaction and they have dealt with the conflict episode strategically in conjunction with substantive gains or losses.

Not all studies have completely supported the link between individualism–collectivism and conflict-handling preferences. For example, Gire and Carment (1992) investigated Canadian (individualist) and Nigerian (collectivist) preferences and found there were various similarities. Moreover, others have explored the influence of other values. Leung et al. (1990), for instance,

investigated the impact of masculinity–femininity using respondents from Canada and The Netherlands (masculine and feminine societies respectively, according to Hofstede's data), and found that their Dutch respondents preferred more harmony-enhancing procedures than their Canadian respondents did.

Other researchers have used Schwartz's (1992; Schwartz et al. 2001) framework of cultural values to examine the interrelationship between values and conflict management styles. Schwartz's framework has the advantage that it can be measured easily and reliably at the individual level, whereas Hofstede's figures are culture level measures; moreover, the other main individual-level measure, independent–interdependent self-construal (as referred to by Ting-Toomey 1999), may be too broad and also of dubious validity (Kim 2005: 108).

In Schwartz's (1992; Schwartz et al. 2001) individual-level framework, there are ten universal value constructs, and they fall into four main groupings: Self-Enhancement, Self-Transcendence, Openness to Change, and Conservation. Morris et al. (1998) analyzed the extent to which Schwartz's cultural values could predict two of the grid framework conflict handling styles: avoidance and competition. In a study of Chinese and US managers in joint venture firms, they predicted that the Chinese managers would have a greater preference for avoidance than the US managers, and that the US managers would have a greater preference for competition than the Chinese managers. These predictions were confirmed. They also hypothesized that (a) an avoiding style would reflect an individual's orientation towards Conservation values, and that any Chinese–US differences in avoiding style would be mediated by country differences in preference for Conservation; and that (b) a competition style would reflect an individual's orientation towards Self-Enhancement, that any Chinese–US differences in competition style would be mediated by country differences in preference for Self-Enhancement. Both of these hypotheses were confirmed.

Bilsky and Jehn (2002), in a study using German students, found that avoiding behaviour was negatively correlated with Self-Direction (a component value of Openness to Change), and since Schwartz (1992) argues that Self-Direction and Conservation (Conformity and Tradition) are polar opposites, this fits in with Morris et al.'s (1998) findings. In other words, the studies found that Conservation was important to Chinese MBA students and this was linked with a preference to avoid conflict, whereas the polar opposite value Openness to Change was important to German students and this was linked with a preference NOT to avoid conflict. Van Meurs (2003) suggests that the role of Uncertainty Avoidance needs to be evaluated further as Germanic clusters have been found to be more uncertainty avoidant than Anglo clusters (Ashkanasy, Trevor-Roberts and Earnshaw 2002; House et al. 2002). Unfortunately, to date, Uncertainty Avoidance is not adequately represented by individual-level value measures.

4.2. Conflict, culture and context

One of the weaknesses of this macro level research is that it ignores a lot of contextual variation. Although there may be differences (such as between Americans and Chinese) in preferred styles for managing conflict, such generalizations can gloss over the rich complexity and variation that exists in real-life situations. Davidheiser's (2005) study of mediation practices in southwestern Gambia illustrates this point very vividly. He observed and recorded 121 live conflict mediation events, conducted 54 ethnographic interviews and 39 semi-structured interviews, and held panel sessions with Gambian mediation experts. He draws the following conclusions:

> Shared values have a profound effect both on how mediation is practiced and on the nature of the process itself. However, this impact is multi-dimensional and resists easy

> generalization. …Whilst it is true that there appear to be meta-level normative differences in orientations to mediation in the West and elsewhere, there is also great heterogeneity in both of these areas. Dichotomizing mediation praxis according to whether the practitioners are Western or non-Western, traditional or modern, high- or low-context communicators, glosses over the multiplicity of practice found outside the realm of theory and dramatically over-simplifies a complex picture.
>
> Mediation practices can be described as 'embedded', or linked to macro- and micro-level influences and varying according to the specific context and characteristics of each case. Peacemaker behaviour was influenced by numerous factors, including the sociocultural perspectives of the participants and situational variables such as the type of dispute in question, the nature of the social relations between the parties, and the participants' personalities.
>
> Davidheiser 2005: 736–7

If we are to gain an in-depth understanding, therefore, of intercultural conflict in real-life situations, it is vital to consider contextual variability. In fact, as Bond, Zegarac and Spencer-Oatey (2000) point out, culture can be manifested in a variety of ways, in addition to cultural values, including perception of contextual variables Spencer-Oatey's (2005) rapport management framework identifies some features that can be subject to cultural variation yet that are also contextually sensitive. These include (but are not limited to) the behavioural norms, conventions and protocols of given communicative events (e.g., how formal they 'should' be), the 'scripts' as to how given communicative events should be enacted; the rights and obligations associated with given role relationships; and the contractual/legal agreements and requirements (written and unwritten) that apply to a given organization, profession or social group. When people's expectations are not fulfilled, they may perceive this as 'negatively eventful' (Goffman 1963: 7), and this can (but, of course, need not necessarily) be a source of interpersonal conflict. Many cross-cultural and intercultural pragmatic studies aim to unpack and illuminate these processes through careful analysis, as section 5.2 reports.

5. Conflict and communication

5.1. Communicative conflict styles

Much of the argumentation on conflict and cultural values (see section 4.1) touches on the role of communication. Directness–indirectness is seen as having a particularly important impact on both the instigation and the management of conflict. It has been found that different cultures may endorse the same conflict management orientation (e.g., collaborative) yet vary in the way they handle it verbally. Pruitt (1983) found that both direct and indirect information exchange correlated with socially desirable, collaborative agreements. Similarly, Adair, Okumura and Brett (2001) showed that Americans achieve collaborative integration of ideas through direct communication but that Japanese do so through indirect communication which allows people to infer preferences. They concluded that "facility in direct or indirect communications may not lead to joint gains if parties do not also have a norm for information sharing", and that collaborative behaviour is based on different motivations, dependent on the culture (Adair, Okumura and Brett 2001: 380). Similarly, van Meurs (2003) found that Dutch managers equated directness with being consultative, whereas the British preferred to use indirectness and be consultative.

In much intercultural research, directness–indirectness is assumed to be associated with individualism–collectivism and/or independent–interdependent self-construal, and it is linked with concern for face. Unfortunately, however, the majority of studies (in management, cross-

cultural psychology and in communication studies) conflate the measurement of the two, using, for example, a questionnaire item on directness both as a measure of Individualism/Independence and as a measure of communicative directness–indirectness. This, of course, is circular and unsatisfactory. In addition, there is a need to consider whether other communicative styles are important.

Hammer (2005) proposes two fundamental dimensions (directness–indirectness, emotional expressiveness–restraint), and four types of conflict styles: Discussion Style (direct but emotionally restrained), Engagement Style (direct and emotionally expressive), Accommodation Style (indirect and emotionally restrained), and Dynamic Style (indirect and emotionally expressive) (cf. Kotthoff in this volume, on communication style). Hammer has developed an Intercultural Conflict Styles Inventory [ICSI] in relation to this, and has used it, along with his four-quadrant model, in a variety of applied contexts. He reports that it has been of practical benefit in his mediation sessions.

> In one mediation I conducted, both parties completed the ICSI prior to the initial mediation session. After reviewing the mediation process with the parties, I then reviewed with them their ICSs. One of the disputants' style was 'engagement' while the other was 'accommodation.' A large part of the conflict between these individuals had involved misperceptions each held of one another, based on differences in intercultural conflict resolution style. For example, the accommodation style individual felt the other party was 'rude and aggressive' while the engagement individual characterized the accommodation style person as deceptive and lacking in commitment. After discussing these misperceptions in terms of differences in conflict resolution styles (rather than personal traits), the disputants were better able to address their substantive disagreements.
> Hammer 2005: 691–2

However, one very major weakness of virtually all the research into the role of communication in conflict processes that is carried out in management, cross-cultural psychology and communication studies is that it is nearly always based on self-report data, using Likert-style responses to questionnaire items. There is a very great need for discourse-based research, of the kind reported in the next section.

5.2. Conflict and discourse research

One very significant contribution that applied linguistics can make to our understanding of conflict processes is the identification of the types of linguistic tactics that people may use to implement the conflict management styles that Thomas (1976) identified. For example, how may people avoid conflict? What insights does applied linguistic research offer on this question? Most linguistic research does not attempt to draw any explicit links with frameworks in business and communication studies, but an exception is Holmes and Marra (2004). Using their New Zealand workplace data (see Marra and Holmes in this volume), these researchers explored the role that leaders may play in managing conflict in meetings. They argue that the effective management of conflict begins well before any actual conflictual episodes occur, and demonstrate how 'assertion of the agenda' is one effective technique that skillful leaders use to avoid conflict. They provide several examples of actual discourse to illustrate ways in which chairpersons achieve this, including moving talk on to the next agenda item, and directing people's attention back to a key point when disparate views begin to be expressed. They also identify a second tactic that could be regarded as an avoidance strategy: diverting a contentious issue to another venue for discussion. Saft (2004) also found that the ways in which meetings are chaired has a major impact on conflict behaviour. He analyzes two different sets of university faculty meetings in Japan, in which

arguments were frequent in one set but rare in the other. Saft demonstrates how the chairpersons' control and organization of turn-taking in the meetings was crucial, in that it either constrained the expression of opposition or enabled it.

In both of these studies, the researchers demonstrate how conflict can be avoided through skillful management of meetings. This data thus indicates that far from being a negative strategy that shows lack of concern both for self and for other (see Figure 1 above), promoting conflict avoidance can be a very effective and positive management strategy. This applied linguistic research thus supports other work in organizational behaviour and cross-cultural psychology (e.g., De Dreu 1997; Gire and Carmet 1992; Leung et al. 1990; Markus and Kitayama 1991; Morris et al. 1998; Ohbuchi and Takahashi 1994) that maintains that conflict avoidance in fact can be motivated by a concern (rather than lack of concern) for others.

Context is important in terms of the choice of strategy (Rahim 1992). A crisis situation may need a dominating strategy, whereas a complex problem may require an integrating (i.e. problem solving) approach, and a relational issue may require people to avoid each other for the short term. Holmes and Marra's (2004) study of workplace discourse confirmed the impact that context can have on conflict management tactics. They found the following factors to be important in influencing leaders' choices of strategy:

- Type of interaction (e.g., workplace meeting), its level of formality, number of participants, and so on.
- Workplace culture, including organizational culture and community of practice culture
- Importance/seriousness of the issue
- Leadership style

In relation to avoidance, they point out that the seriousness of the issue is a key contextual factor. They found that, in their data, good chairpersons and effective leaders tended to encourage 'working through conflict' when a decision was serious or when it was an important one, for example, one that set a precedent for subsequent decisions.

Much linguistic research focuses on analyzing the detailed linguistic strategies that occur in conflictive discourse, and does not attempt to link them to the macro styles identified in business and communication studies. For example, Günthner (2000) analyzes the ways in which German participants in a German–Chinese conversation maximize the expression of dissent, and ways in which the participants end a confrontational frame. She identifies three strategies in her discourse data that the German participants used for signaling dissent in a focused and maximized way:

- 'Dissent-formats': the speaker provides a (partial) repetition of the prior speaker's utterance and then negates it or replaces parts of it with a contrasting element.
- 'Dissent-ties': the speaker latches her disagreeing utterance to the prior turn, and thus produces a syntactic and lexical continuation of the preceding utterance, but then in continuing it demonstrates consequences which contradict the argumentative line of the first speaker.
- Reported speech: the speaker reproduces the opponent's prior utterance (maybe several turns later) in order to oppose it.

She also identifies three strategies that the participants use to (try to) end a confrontational frame:

- Concession, when one participant 'gives in'.
- Compromise, where a speaker moves towards the other party's position and proposes a possible 'middle ground'.
- Change of activity, where a speaker introduces a new verbal activity, such as focusing on the situation at hand (e.g., by enquiring 'what kind of tea is this?')

These last three strategies could, in fact, be linked with the macro styles of avoiding, obliging, competing, sharing and problem solving. Concession is an obliging strategy, compromise is a sharing strategy, and change of activity could be regarded as an avoiding strategy.

Another example of the detailed analysis of linguistic strategies in conflictive encounters is Honda (2002). She analyzes Japanese public affairs talk shows, and examines the ways in which oppositional comments are redressed or downplayed. Table 3 shows the classification of strategies that she identifies.

Table 3: Redressive Strategies identified by Honda (2002) in her Analysis of Japanese Public Affairs Talk Shows

Redressive Strategy	**Gloss**	**Example**
Mollifiers	Remarks that precede the expression of opposition, and downplay its directness	• Initial praise • Initial token agreement • Initial acceptance of the opponent's point of view • Initial denial of disagreement or one's own remark
Mitigators	Features within the expression of opposition that downplay its directness	• Pauses • Discourse markers that show hesitation • Minimizers such as *a little, maybe*
Untargeted opposition	Expression of opposition that does not make it clear whether or not it is targeted at a specific person or viewpoint	• Remark that contradicts or differs from the opponent's view but the opposition is attributed as being with a third party rather than with the opponent • Remark that contradicts or differs from the opponent's view but is not directed at the opponent, or made in response to the opponent's previous remarks

Honda (2002) also demonstrates how some confrontations in her data initially proceed in an unmitigated fashion, but later the opposing parties take restorative action and end their argument in a seemingly cooperative fashion. In other words, as with Günthner's study, different tactics were used at different points in the conflict. This suggests once again that context (in this case, discourse context) can influence choice of strategy, and that macro designations of people's conflict management styles will only be able to provide indicative generalizations of their normative preferences.

A second major contribution that applied linguistics can make to our understanding of conflict processes, especially in intercultural contexts, is to reveal how conflicts may arise by carefully analyzing authentic interactions. Bailey (1997, 2000), for example, analyzes service encounters between Korean retailers and African-American customers to help throw light on the longstanding conflict between these two groups that had been widely reported in the media. Analyzing video recordings of the service encounters, he found that there were noticeable differences in the ways that Korean and African-American customers interacted with the Korean retailers, such as in terms of length of the encounter, overall quantity of talk, inclusion of personable topics and small talk, and the amount of affect displayed. Follow-up interviews with

the customers and the retailers indicated that both the Korean retailers and the African-American customers evaluated the other negatively, interpreting the other's behaviour as disrespectful, and as racist (in the case of the Korean retailers) and as intimidating (in the case of the African-American customers). Bailey draws the following conclusion:

> … divergent communicative patterns in these everyday service encounters simultaneously represent (1) an on-going *source of tensions*; and (2) a *local enactment of pre-existing social conflicts.*
>
> Bailey 2000: 87 (italics in the original)

Another example is Spencer-Oatey and Xing (2003). These researchers compare two Chinese–British business welcome meetings which were very similar in many respects, yet were evaluated very differently by the participants. One of them was part of a very successful business visit, whilst the other led to a very problematic visit which came to a climax on the final day when there was a heated dispute that lasted for nearly two and a half hours. The authors analyze the reasons for the differences in outcomes, and identify the following: the role of the interpreter (see also Spencer-Oatey and Xing in this volume), the role of the chairperson, mismatches between British and Chinese culturally-based and contextually-based assumptions and expectations, confusion over the roles and relative status of the participants, and a confounding effect between all of these factors.

6. Concluding comments

The various approaches to studying and analyzing conflict reported in this chapter each have their own strengths and weaknesses. In terms of research methodology, most organizational psychological and communication studies research uses either simulated role play in experimental-type conditions, or self-report questionnaire items. Whilst these approaches are useful in many respects, they have some serious limitations and need to be complemented by studies of authentic conflictive encounters and situations. Such studies need to collect various types of research data, including ethnographic, discourse and/or post-event interview data, in order to improve the validity and granularity of research findings on conflict. Applied linguists have a major role to play here. However, it needs to be acknowledged that much applied linguistic research is impenetrable for people from other disciplines. The analyses are often so detailed and so full of linguistic technical terms, that they are difficult for non-linguists to follow. Moreover, it is hard for people (such as intercultural trainers) to pick out the practical relevance of the findings.

Up to now there has been very little interchange of conceptual frameworks and research findings between applied linguistic researchers of conflict and those working within organizational behaviour and communication studies. Findings are typically published in different journals, and people may be unaware of each other's work. We hope that this chapter will help to start breaking down this divide, and that there will be greater interdisciplinary sharing and discussion of ideas, concepts and findings, even if some conflict is a concomitant part of the process!

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