

Conflict Management Style: Accounting for Cross-National Differences

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# *Conflict Management Style: Accounting for Cross-National Differences*

Michael W. Morris, Katherine Y. Williams, Kwok Leung, Richard Larrick, M. Teresa Mendoza, Deepti Bhatnagar, Jianfeng Li, Mari Kondo, Jin-Lian Luo, Jun-Chen Hu

*A problem in joint ventures between U.S. and Asian firms is that cultural differences impede the smooth resolution of conflicts between managers. In a survey of young managers in the U.S., China, Philippines, and India we find support for two hypotheses about cultural differences in con-*

*flict style and the cultural values that account for these differences: Chinese managers rely more on an avoiding style because of their relatively high value on conformity and tradition. U.S. managers rely more on a competing style because of their relatively high value on individual achievement.*

A recurring theme in studies of international business is the idea that problematic misunderstandings arise as a result of cultural differences in styles of negotiating and handling conflict (Adler, 1986; Adler & Graham, 1989; Hofstede, 1991; Maddox, 1993). Negotiation can be thought of as a mutual

exchange of signals. Since cultures have different signalling languages, negotiators faced with a counterpart from another culture can easily misread a signal or transmit an unintended message. The literature suggests that U.S. negotiators struggle with such crossed signals not only with counterparts from

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completely unfamiliar cultures, such as indigenous tribal groups, but also with counterparts from cultures with which they have a surface familiarity, such as Japan (Graham & Sano, 1984), China (Pye, 1982) and India (Gopalan & Rivera, 1997). As Pye (1982, pp. 20-23) explained:

“Unquestionably the largest and possibly the most intractable category of problems in Sino-American business negotiations can be traced to the cultural differences between the two societies. . . . Conscious efforts to take into account the other party’s cultural practices can eliminate gross misunderstandings, but cultural factors continue to surface and cause problems in more subtle and indirect ways.”

Although cultural differences present a challenge in a one-time formal negotiation, the problem of cultural differences is even more endemic in joint ventures where managers need to resolve everyday conflicts with co-workers from other cultures (Baird, Lyles, Ji, Wharton, 1990; Miller, Glen, Jaspersen, Karmokolias, 1997). In the literature on joint ventures between U.S. and Asian firms, two types of misunderstanding in conflicts are frequently identified. In one type of misunderstanding, U.S. managers make the error of reading silence from their Asian counterpart as an indication of consent. U.S. managers may fail to pick up on the indirectly expressed objections of Asian colleagues (see Graham and Sano, 1984). A different type of misunderstanding occurs when Asian managers make the error of reading an U.S. colleague’s direct adversarial arguments as indicating unreasonableness and lack of respect. Consider the reaction of a Thai manager to his assertive U.S. colleague:

“I’ve tried to explain all this to Max

several times, but, like so many Americans I’ve known, he’s not interested in listening when he thinks he’s right. He wants this thing done yesterday. He has practically screamed this at me at our last few meetings—once in front of a few of my employees” (Roongrerngsuke and Chansuthus, in press).

The many examples of joint ventures that have run aground on cultural differences have been an impetus for research on cultural differences in styles of handling conflict with co-workers. Researchers have shifted from the method of inductively generalizing from qualitative interviews (Pye, 1982) to the method of testing hypotheses with carefully matched samples of managers and quantitative measures (Graham, 1985). Many studies have investigated so-called “East-West differences” by comparing U.S. managers to a matched group in an Asian society. Two patterns of findings have been observed repeatedly, albeit the precise cultural boundaries on these differences are not well understood. First, compared to U.S. managers, Asian managers rely on a style of avoiding explicit discussion of the conflict. Second, compared to Asians, U.S. managers are more inclined toward a style of assertively competing with the other person to see who can convince the other of their preferred resolution of the conflict. Although many researchers have speculated that these behavioral differences reflect underlying differences in cultural values (Bond & Hwang, 1986; Kirkbride, Tang, & Westwood, 1991), this has not been rigorously investigated. We review the cross-cultural literature on conflict style and values to derive more precise predictions. Then we compare the conflict management

styles and values of young managers in the U.S. and three Asian societies to test predictions about the values underlying cultural differences in conflict style.

### MODELS OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLE

Researchers in social psychology and organizational behavior have proposed models that reduce the myriad tactics of negotiators and managers to several basic styles. Early models of strategy in conflict (Deutsch, 1973) followed the intuitive notion that styles can be arrayed on a single dimension ranging from selfishness (concern about own outcomes) to cooperativeness (concern about the other party's outcomes). However, a limitation of single-dimension models is that they fail to encompass styles that involve high concern for both self and other and likewise, styles that involve a high concern for neither self nor other (e.g., Thomas & Killman, 1974; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986).

Subsequent theorists have drawn on Blake, Shepard and Mouton's (1964) taxonomy of managerial styles to model conflict styles within a framework of two orthogonal motivational dimensions, a self-oriented and an other-oriented concern (see Thomas & Killman, 1974; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). Within this framework, Thomas and Kilmann (1974) developed an instrument for measuring an individual's dispositions toward five discrete styles. We will focus on two of these, on avoiding (low self-concern and low other-concern) and competing (high self-concern and low other-concern). The remaining styles are, respectively, the polar opposites of avoiding (collaborating) and of competing (accommodating) and a blend of the four foregoing styles (compromising). The evidence from empiri-

cal assessments of the five-fold taxonomy as a model of the overall structure of conflict behavior is mixed (Jehn & Weldon, 1997; Rahim, 1983; Womack, 1988). Nevertheless, the Thomas and Kilmann scales for tapping particular conflict styles, such as avoiding and competing, compare favorably to other methods in terms of validity and reliability (Brown, Yelsma, & Keller, 1981; Killman & Thomas, 1977).

On theoretical grounds, Pruitt and Rubin (1986) have argued that modeling conflict style in terms of five dispositions is redundant. The important insight is that low concern for the opponent occurs with two quite different styles: Passively avoiding discussion of conflict as opposed to actively collaborating, and competing as opposed to accommodating. These two styles, then, seem particularly likely to underlie friction in a working relationship, and this may explain why these styles have been the focus in cross-cultural conflict management. To understand the roots of cultural differences in avoiding and competing in conflicts, however, we need measures of underlying values.

### MODELS OF VALUES

Researchers have taken several approaches to conceptualizing and measuring values. Most research focuses on individual differences within cultures rather than cross-cultural differences; nevertheless, researchers assume that one's values represent cultural demands as well as idiosyncratic goals (Rokeach, 1973). Members of the same culture are likely to share a set of values acquired in the process of socialization – values that represent the acceptable modes of conduct in a particular society. Furthermore, a separate research tradition has utilized

values as a way of distinguishing cultures (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961). These researchers measure values that are equally interpretable, yet differentially endorsed, across cultures.

The primary method for the study of individual differences in values has been inventories of abstract terms. The seminal work of Rokeach (1973) measured an individual's profile on thirtysix terms that are central to Western discourse on values, such as "equality" and "freedom." By contrast, the most influential cross-cultural studies have involved more specific statements of attitudes and preferences (Hofstede, 1980). Hofstede (1980) compared managers in a large sample of countries on a set of statements of attitudes about work and life, which allowed him to position the countries on several dimensions, such as Individualism-Collectivism. One limitation of this study is that value scores could be derived only at the country level rather than at the individual level. Triandis and colleagues (Triandis et al., 1986) have developed a scale to measure Individualism-Collectivism at the level of individual values; however, it increasingly appears that this construct is not coherent at the individual level, and different components need to be conceptualized separately (Triandis, 1995). Another limitation is that Hofstede's (1980) instruments were developed in Western countries and then translated. Because of the possibility that values not salient in Western societies were omitted from the supposedly universal space of values, researchers in non-Western settings have developed measures that concentrate on the values central to their traditions. For example, a distinct value dimension that emerged in studies of Chinese values, Moral Discipline, involves self-regulation and attention to role obligations (Chinese

Culture Connection, 1987).

Schwartz (1992, 1994) has attempted to encompass the Western values studied by Rokeach, as well as values identified in non-Western settings, into a multidimensional model of the structure of basic human values. With regard to the reliability of the measurement instrument and the representativeness of the sample within and across cultures, this research dominates previous work. Schwartz's model begins with respondents' endorsement of value descriptors (such as "obedience," "politeness," etc.) which are then clustered into measures of ten values, such as "Conformity." These values are further aggregated into a few broad value dimensions, for example, "Conformity" and "Tradition" make up the "Societal Conservatism" dimension. "Achievement" and "Power" make up the "Self-Enhancement" dimension.

### RELATING VALUES TO CONFLICT STYLE

#### *Is Individualism-Collectivism the Key?*

Most previous researchers who have linked cultural values to conflict style have pointed to the Individualism-Collectivism dimension. The most explicit argument in the previous literature is the thesis of Ting-Toomey (1988) and colleagues (Trubisky, Ting-Toomey & Lin, 1991) that country differences in communication style can be accounted for in terms of the Individualism-Collectivism dimension. Specifically, collectivism is associated with indirect communication, such as the Avoiding style of handling conflict, whereas individualism is associated with direct modes of expression, such as the Competing style of handling conflict. Two predictions follow from an

Individualism-Collectivism (IC) account. First, measures of Avoiding and Competing should dramatically separate U.S. managers from Asian managers; for example, in Hofstede's IC data, the U.S. score (91) is far higher than those of Asian societies, which are relatively close together (for example, India=48, Phillipines=32, and Taiwan=17). Moreover, Asian patterns should resemble those in other highly collectivist societies, such as Middle Eastern and Latin societies. This general prediction of similarity across all highly collectivist cultures is not tested in the current study because it has been disconfirmed by careful comparative studies of conflict style (Graham, 1985); we compare across Asia.

A second prediction is that differences between the countries in conflict style should be mediated by individual differences on measures of Individualism-Collectivism. Again, the existing data is not encouraging: Researchers who have correlated participants' scores on Individualism-Collectivism scales with conflict behaviors have found no relationship (Leung, 1988). The problem may be that the Individualism-Collectivism construct conflates a number of distinct values and attitudes and hence obscures relations between specific values and social behaviors. The reliability of Individualism-Collectivism scales has proved quite low, and in recent years Triandis (1995) and colleagues have shifted from the position that individualism versus collectivism is a unitary dimension of values. Similarly, our view is that cross-cultural differences in conflict management style cannot be reduced to a single value dimension running from individualism to collectivism (see review by Morris & Leung, 1999).

### *Which Values in Chinese Culture Lead to Conflict Avoidance?*

A number of theorists have suggested that Chinese culture promotes an indirect, avoiding style of handling conflicts (Bond & Wang, 1983). Some studies have employed conflict style scales to test that Chinese managers are more disposed to an avoidant style than Western managers. Tang and Kirkbride (1986) measured the conflict styles of Hong Kong Chinese and British executives in the Hong Kong Civil Service, and found that the Chinese managers were higher on the Avoiding style. However, given that ingroup/outgroup differences influence conflict avoidance (Leung, 1988), it is ambiguous whether British culture or expatriate status was the key to the behavior of this sample of British managers. Trubisky, Ting-Toomey and Lin (1991) compared Taiwanese and U.S. students and found that Taiwanese participants relied on an indirect avoiding style more than U.S. participants. Yet, as Leung (1997) pointed out, this is one of many studies in the literature that suffers from interpretive difficulties owing to the fact that the responses were not standardized before making cultural comparisons; higher scores in one culture may thus reflect differing response sets, such as acquiescence bias.

What underlies the difference that Chinese respondents rely on Avoiding more than comparable groups of U.S. respondents? The evidence clearly suggests that not all highly collectivist cultures share this tendency (Graham, 1985). A clue is suggested by a study comparing conflict styles of Japanese and U.S. students, which found that twice as many Japanese students reported reliance on avoiding in their most recent conflict (Ohbuchi & Takahashi,

1994). One of the most important reasons for avoiding explicit discussion of the conflict for the Japanese students was the desire to preserve their personal relationships. Interestingly, though both Japanese and U.S. respondents agreed that avoidance is the least effective strategy for resolving the issues, for Japanese it was the preferred style because they value the conservation of existing relationships. Adjusting oneself to the stable social structure—to relationships, organizations, and institutions—is a virtue in Confucian tradition of role-appropriate behavior, which is a central strain of Chinese culture also influential in Japanese culture (Su, Chiu, Hong, Leung, Peng & Morris, 1998). Confucian ethics lays out certain “rules of propriety” which structure interpersonal relationships, and adjustment to these prescribed patterns is valued. This Confucian virtue was tapped in studies of Chinese values by the factor of Moral Discipline (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987). Chiu and Kosinski (1994) compared U.S. and Hong Kong Chinese participants in their endorsement of Chinese values and in their conflict management styles. Results showed that Chinese respondents were higher on both Moral Discipline and Conflict Avoidance. This dimension corresponds to Schwartz’s value dimension of Societal Conservatism. Drawing together these ideas, we hypothesize:

**H1:** Chinese culture fosters an Avoiding style of conflict management.

**H2:** An Avoiding style of conflict management reflects an individual’s orientation toward Societal Conservatism values (e.g., Conformity).

**H3:** Country differences in the Avoiding style are mediated by country differences in orientation toward Societal Conservatism.

### *Which Values in U.S. Culture Lead to Competing in Conflicts?*

Now let us review the evidence about cultural differences in competitive styles of handling conflict. A robust pattern of findings comes from studies of choices between dispute resolution procedures. Leung and colleagues found that whereas competitive adversarial procedures are preferred by North Americans, less competitive procedures, such as mediation, are preferred in many other cultural contexts, such as Hong Kong and Spain (Leung & Lind, 1986; Leung et al., 1992). Other studies have measured participants’ choices between competitive and cooperative strategies in conflict games. Li, Cheung and Kau (1979) found that U.S. children rely on competitive strategies to a greater extent than do matched samples of children in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Although not a cross-national comparison, a study by Cox, Lobel and McCleod (1991) found that Anglo-Americans competed more than African-, Asian-, or Hispanic-Americans.

What value orientation might underlie the tendency of U.S. managers toward a Competing style? One possibility is that competing reflects the value-orientation that Parsons (1951) referred to as an achievement versus ascription-orientation, and McClelland (1961) later operationalized as need for achievement. An achievement orientation means “looking out for number one,” placing a higher concern for one’s own outcome than on the other’s outcome. Achievement orientation is high in societies, such as the United States, that traditionally permit individual social mobility, and low in societies such as India where ascribed characteristics (e.g., caste) determine one’s life outcomes. Value surveys have long

revealed that U.S. respondents endorse individual achievement more than South and East Asian respondents (Singh, Huang & Thompson, 1962; Morris, Podolny & Ariel, 1999). An orientation toward achievement and mobility is captured by the Self-Enhancement dimension in Schwartz's model. Hence, we hypothesize the following:

**H4:** U.S. culture fosters a Competing style of conflict management.

**H5:** A Competing style of conflict management reflects an individual's orientation toward Self-Enhancement values (e.g., Achievement).

**H6:** Country differences in the Competing style are mediated by country differences in orientation toward Self-Enhancement.

### *Expectations About Other Countries*

We have proposed hypotheses about distinct value dimensions underlying cultural differences in Avoiding and Competing, which can be contrasted with previous arguments that cultural differences in both conflict styles are a function of a general Individualism-Collectivism dimension. To find support for our hypotheses it is useful to not only compare U.S. and Chinese managers, but also to observe managers in other Asian cultures that, while highly collectivist, have cultural heritages that lead us to expect conflict styles differing from Chinese managers. First let us consider India. Observers have argued that Indian managerial conflict resolution tendencies reflect Hindu norms of seeking a solution that pleases everyone, as well as British norms of active, mutual problem solving (Moran & Stripp, 1991). Hence, we might expect that Indian managers have a

style less inclined toward competing than in the than U.S. managers, but this does not take the form of avoidance that it takes in Chinese contexts. Similarly in the Philippines, where the historical influence of Chinese culture has been moderated by the more recent influence of Spanish and U.S. cultures, it has been noted that managers avoid overt competing in conflicts with colleagues, but not through avoidance of addressing the issues. Rather the tendency is to express one's point indirectly, or to cushion one's statements so as to preserve smooth relationships (Gouchenour, 1990).

We tested our hypotheses in a comparative survey involving MBA students in four countries. This choice of sample was designed to satisfy several important methodological goals. A first goal was to sample enough sites to test our hypotheses that conflict management styles vary as a function of specific cultural traditions as opposed to a very general Individualism-Collectivism dimension. We compared a U.S. sample with Chinese, Indian, and Philippine samples. Our key variables were scales measuring Avoiding and Competing styles in conflict and measures of the Schwartz value dimensions relevant to our hypotheses, "Social Conservatism" and "Self-Enhancement." We also analyzed a standard scale of Individualism-Collectivism and a scale measuring the value dimension that Schwartz has described as most similar to Individualism-Collectivism, which is "Openness to Change."

## METHOD

### *Participants*

To compare groups who differ in culture yet are relatively similar otherwise,

we sampled students at highly ranked masters of business administration (MBA) programs in each country – in the United States (Stanford University and University of Chicago), in China (Tong Ji and Fudan Universities), in the Philippines (Asian Institute of Management), in India (Indian Institute of Management-Ahmedabad) (see Tripathi, 1996). These students have relatively similar academic training, work experiences, and career goals. We recruited participants in large classes that comprised a cross-section of the students enrolled in the program, and participation rates were above 80 percent in each country. For the sake of clear comparisons, we only analyzed data from participants who were citizens of the country where the data was collected. There were 454 participants included in the analyses: 132 participants from the United States, 100 from China, 160 from India, and 62 from the Philippines. The percentage of females was 28 percent in the United States, 24 percent in China, 11 percent in India, and 44 percent the Philippines, respectively. The average age of respondents varied somewhat in the four countries. In the United States the average age was 28.69 years. It was 30.05 years in China, 23.31 years in India, and 26.26 years in the Philippines. Overall 76 percent of the respondents were male, and the average age of the respondents was 26.75 years.

### *Materials*

Participants received a booklet entitled “Managerial Style Inventories” with brief instructions on the cover and a request for demographic information, such as country of citizenship, age, and gender. Next appeared Rahim’s (1983) adapted version of the Killman-Thomas self-

report conflict style scale. This version involved a rating scale format, which is important in cross-cultural studies because it facilitates checking the inter-item reliability of the scale, which cannot be presumed to carry across cultures. Participants were asked to consider interpersonal conflicts at work, and rate how well their typical behavior is described by a series of 53 statements, such as “I try to win my position.”

Next, participants received the 57-item instrument for measuring value orientations (Schwartz, 1994). Respondents were asked to indicate on a 9-point scale ranging from -1 to 7, how important each value was to them personally. A score of -1 indicated that the item was “opposed to my values,” a 0 indicated “not important,” and 7 indicated of “supreme importance.” Finally, we also employed a widely used 18-item scale designed to measure the Individualism-Collectivism dimension of social values (Triandis et al., 1986). The scales were presented in the language of instruction of the MBA program: English in the United States, India, and Philippines, and Mandarin in China. Scales were translated and back-translated to achieve comparability. Completing the full survey took participants about 20 minutes.

### *Scale Construction*

A first step in preparing the data was to standardize participants’ responses to each instrument so that response biases could not enter into the cultural differences. This was done by subtracting from the raw score for each item the mean of all the items on the focal scale, and dividing this by the standard deviation of items on the scale. Next we examined, within each country, the inter-item reliability of the specific factors from the

instruments relevant to our hypotheses. For the conflict style and value factors, acceptable levels of reliability were reached. The appendix shows the items that made up each scale. Table 1 below shows Cronbach  $\alpha$  reliability scores for Avoiding and Competing scales and the three Schwartz value dimensions relevant to hypotheses (Openness to Change, Societal Conservatism, and Self-Enhancement). As may be seen in Table 1, all these scales reached acceptable levels within each country and satisfactory levels across countries. However, the Individualism-Collectivism scale did not show an adequate level of reliability (and no subset of items could be found that improved its performance). Hence, this scale was not used further.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Country Differences*

Table 2 indicates the extent to which MBA respondents in the four countries rely on Avoiding and Competing strategies for managing conflicts. We tested

hypotheses using Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and planned comparisons. Consistent with H1, Chinese managers relied more on the Avoiding style than managers in the other countries ( $t = 2.68$ ,  $df = 449$ ,  $p < .01$  one-sided) leading to a main effect of Country ( $F = 3.14$ ,  $p < .03$ ). Consistent with H2, U.S. managers relied more on a Competing style than managers from the other three countries ( $t = 1.92$ ,  $df = 449$ ,  $p < .05$  one-sided), which resulted in a main effect of Country ( $F = 2.60$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

Table 2 also shows the profile across countries on the Schwartz value dimensions relevant to the hypotheses. Because the Schwartz instrument comprehensively covers the semantic space of values, it is again appropriate to interpret the standardized scores (shown in bold). Factors with higher standardized scores are those that respondents place above most other values. Overall, our MBA respondents endorsed Societal Conservatism less than Self-Enhancement or Openness to Change; however, there were strong and readily inter-

**TABLE 1**  
**RELIABILITY SCORES FOR CONFLICT AND SCHWARTZ**  
**VALUES SCALES WITHIN EACH COUNTRY**

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha				
	United States	China	India	Philippines	Total
<b>Conflict Style</b>					
Avoidant	.87	.60	.83	.76	.77
Competitive	.78	.75	.73	.83	.77
<b>Schwartz Values</b>					
Societal					
Conservatism	.72	.71	.79	.76	.75
Self-enhancement	.80	.80	.84	.83	.82
Openness to Change	.77	.74	.77	.87	.79
<b>Individualism/Collectivism</b>	.34	.69	.41	.49	.48

pretable country differences. Endorsement of Societal Conservatism varied as a function of Country ( $F(3, 449) = 22.17, p < .01$ ). Consistent with our expectation that this factor taps Confucian values, it was relatively high in China and the Philippines compared with India and especially compared with the United States ( $t=6.44, df=449, p < .01$ ). This pattern with the Social Conservatism scale reflected virtually identical profiles across countries on its compo-

nent subscales for Conformity and Tradition values.

Endorsement of the Self-Enhancement dimension was similar across the four countries. However, the flat profile on this general dimension masks interesting patterns on the component subscales for Achievement and Power. Achievement varied as a function of Country ( $F(3, 449) = 11.16, p < .01$ ) in the predicted pattern of greater endorsement by U.S. managers ( $M=.48$ ) compared with man-

**TABLE 2**  
**CONFLICT STYLE AND MAJOR VALUE DIMENSIONS OF**  
**MANAGERS IN 4 COUNTRIES**

	United States	China	India	Philippines
<b>CONFLICT STYLE</b>				
<b>Avoiding Style</b>				
Raw	3.17 (.84)	3.21 (.50)	2.96 (.86)	3.42 (.73)
Standardized	<b>-.37 (.61)</b>	<b>-.19 (.37)</b>	<b>-.39 (.55)</b>	<b>-.32 (.53)</b>
<b>Competing Style</b>				
Raw	3.75 (.55)	3.45 (.55)	3.39 (.57)	3.82 (.63)
Standardized	<b>.12 (.61)</b>	<b>.05 (.47)</b>	<b>-.06 (.52)</b>	<b>.02 (.61)</b>
<b>MAJOR VALUE DIMENSIONS</b>				
<b>Social Conservatism</b> (conformity, tradition)				
Raw	2.74 (.93)	4.27 (.93)	3.64 (1.13)	4.33 (.97)
Standardized	<b>-.69 (.40)</b>	<b>-.36 (.38)</b>	<b>-.43 (.44)</b>	<b>-.23 (.37)</b>
<b>Self-enhancement</b> (power, achievement)				
Raw	3.81 (.91)	4.68 (.99)	4.25 (1.09)	4.53 (1.05)
Standardized	<b>-.08 (.43)</b>	<b>-.03 (.36)</b>	<b>-.05 (.48)</b>	<b>-.07 (.38)</b>
<b>Openness to Change</b> (hedonism, stimulation, self-direction)				
Raw	4.44 (.77)	4.31 (.94)	4.44 (.89)	4.17 (1.22)
Standardized	<b>.33 (.32)</b>	<b>-.14 (.31)</b>	<b>.14 (.36)</b>	<b>-.14 (.31)</b>
N	131	99	160	62

Note. Means and (sds) for raw and standardized variables are shown. Means of standardized variables are in boldface.

agers from China ( $M = .19$ ), India ( $M = .30$ ) or the Philippines ( $M = .25$ ;  $t=5.46$ ,  $df=449$ ,  $p<.01$ ). Yet the other component value, Power, revealed an opposite pattern ( $F(3, 449) = 49.58$ ,  $p < .01$ ) in which U.S. managers were lower ( $M = -.63$ ) than managers from China ( $M = -.24$ ), India ( $M = -.39$ ) or the Philippines ( $M = -.40$ ). This finding resonates with Hofstede's (1980) finding that U.S. respondents were lower in Power Distance than those in the other three samples. Apparently, U.S. managers believe in trying to get ahead, but they are uncomfortable with the notion that people have privileges once they get ahead. Because the components of this general dimension differ in their profiles across countries, it will be important to examine relations to conflict style both at the level of the general dimension and

at the level of its specific component values, Achievement and Power.

Finally, let us turn to the dimension in Schwartz's model closest to Individualism-Collectivism, viz., Openness to Change. As expected, it varied across countries ( $F(3, 449) = 49.58$ ,  $p < .01$ ) in the pattern of U.S. managers being higher than the other three groups ( $t=10.79$ ,  $df=449$ ,  $p<.01$ ). This pattern summarizes consistent profiles on the component values of Self-Direction, Hedonism, and Stimulation. A further detail that can be noted at the end of our discussion of Table 2 concerns the relative size of country differences. Consistent with our conceptual model that values come between country and conflict style, value-orientations differ more dramatically across country than do conflict styles.

**TABLE 3**  
**CONFLICT STYLES REGRESSED ON COUNTRY AND MAJOR VALUE DIMENSIONS**

Predictors	Avoiding			Competing		
	1a	2a	3a	1b	2b	3b
China	.14*		.08	-.05		.03
India	-.02		-.07	-.15**		-.12*
Philippines	.04		-.02	-.06		.02
<b>Social Conservatism</b>		.16**	.19**		-.03	-.00
<b>Self Enhancement</b>		.01	.02		.26**	.27**
<b>Openness To Change</b>		-.02	.02		.15**	.20**
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.01	.03	.03	.01	.10	.12
d.f.	449	448	445	449	448	445
F	3.14*	4.82**	3.51**	2.60	18.18**	10.76**

Note: Coefficients are standardized beta weights. The country variables are dummy variables with the United States as the excluded category. All variables are standardized.

\*  $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$

### *Do Values Mediate Conflict Style Differences?*

To demonstrate that value differences account for the differences in conflict style, several criteria must be met (see Baron & Kenny, 1986). The putative mediating variable should predict the dependent variable. Moreover, when the independent variable and the putative mediating variables are simultaneously entered into an equation predicting the dependent variable, the coefficient on the independent variable should be markedly reduced. Whereas the coefficient on the mediating variable should be less affected. Our analytic strategy will be to first test whether country effects on conflict style are mediated by values in an analysis that includes all the relevant value dimensions. Then we will try to pinpoint the values responsible for effects by examining the role of specific component values of the general value dimensions. Models with gender and age as controls were run first. Gender had no effect, and age had a slight effect only in the model for Competing, which did not alter the pattern of inter-relationships between variables of interest. Hence, these controls are dropped in our featured analyses.

Let us first consider the result of regressing the Avoiding style on Country dummy variables and value measures. As may be seen in Table 3, and specifically in Equation 1a, there is an effect of the China dummy variable on Avoiding (Chinese managers are higher than U.S. managers). Consistent with H2, the value-orientation of Social Conservatism predicts conflict avoidance (see Equation 2a). By contrast, Self-Enhancement and Openness to Change, which corresponds most closely to Individualism-Collectivism, do not

predict Avoiding. A mediation relationship is seen in that the country effect is reduced when values are simultaneously entered, yet the effect of the value dimension is undiminished (see Equation 3a). In sum, results unequivocally support H3 that the value dimension of Social Conservatism accounts for the greater Chinese tendency to avoid conflict. Seeking a more fine-grained understanding of the mediating variable, we conducted parallel analyses using the specific component values of Tradition and Conformity, one at a time, and found that either serves to completely account for the greater Chinese tendency to rely on an avoiding strategy in conflicts.

Now let us consider the Competing style. As shown in Equation 1b, consistent with the ANOVA results, there is an effect of the India dummy variable on Competing (indicating that U.S. managers are higher than Indian managers on competing). Moreover, consistent with H5, the value dimension of Self Enhancement predicts a Competing style (see Equation 2b). A sign of a partial mediation relation is that the country effect drops by an order of significance when the value scores are simultaneously entered in the model (compare Equation 3b to Equation 1b). The decrease in the beta coefficients is small, but it is best appreciated in opposition to increase in the beta coefficients on the value scores. This increase indicates that their causal relation to the conflict style is not diminished; it is instead clarified by the inclusion of the country dummy variable (compare Equation 3b to Equation 2b).

To look for more fine-grained relationships, we conducted parallel analyses with the components of Self-Enhancement (Power and Achievement)

and of Openness to Change (Hedonism, Self-Direction, and Stimulation) examined one at a time as possible mediators of the country difference in Competing. Not surprisingly given the pattern of means, Power does not mediate the country difference at all. Achievement performs better than the overall measure, and hence seems to capture the value that partially mediates the country difference. The component values of Openness to Change do not perform as well as the overall scores in Table 3. Hence, we can conclude that compared with other values, individual achievement is most relevant to country differences in the competing style of conflict management.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

### *Contribution of current findings*

The current findings make a substantial contribution to the research evidence that conflict management behavior differs as a function of cultural values. Using samples that provide a conservative test of cultural differences, we have identified two patterns of differences between U.S. and Asian managers in conflict management style. Chinese managers tend toward an Avoiding style, U.S. managers, toward a Competing style. More importantly, we have provided an analysis of how these differences in managerial behavior reflect underlying differences in value-orientations. A Societal Conservatism value-orientation, tapping values such as Conformity and Tradition, underlies the tendency of Chinese managers to avoid explicit negotiation of workplace conflicts. An orientation toward Self Enhancement, and specifically Achievement, underlies the tendency of U.S. managers to take a competing

approach in workplace conflicts.

Another general pattern that can be seen by comparing standardized scores in Table 2 is that the country differences on value dimensions are sharper than the country differences in conflict style. This makes sense given that individuals are more or less free to value what they want, but the role requirements of a manager require use of all of the different conflict management strategies. It is consistent with our argument that values are proximally related to country, and that the influence of country on conflict styles arises through the values into which managers are socialized.

Our use of managers in elite MBA programs raises another important question in the literature on cultural differences in international business, which is whether the most cosmopolitan groups in every country have converged to a common global business culture (Barnet & Cavanaugh, 1994). Our Asian participants are arguably among the most Westernized members of their societies, and yet they still differed quite markedly in their values from the U.S. participants. Hence, our data are consistent with the view that even the most cosmopolitan sectors of these societies have not completely converged in their values and managerial behaviors.

Evidence about cultural differences in style and underlying values, can be of help to managers in joint ventures who must interact as colleagues and resolve conflicts with managers from other cultures. Although a U.S. manager in China may find it difficult that colleagues withhold their critical feedback, knowing that he or she should not expect direct expression of conflict will prevent the error of taking the lack of expressed disagreement as an indication

of support. Correctly interpreting the source of this behavior in the Confucian values of the accommodating oneself to the social structure will guide against erroneous attributions to personal characteristics or intentions that can have harmful and self-fulfilling effects (Morris, Leung & Sethi 1996; Morris, Larrick & Su 1999). Likewise, for Asian managers, an understanding that a U.S. manager's competitive style is not based on a lack of respect for the others in the room, but merely in a value on achievement, may help this behavior to be accepted without offence.

### *Issues for future research*

The current findings lay the groundwork for future analyses that include more variables. One issue of interest is the role of personality in determining conflict style. Sternberg and colleagues (Sternberg & Dobson, 1987) have found mixed evidence that North American college students' conflict styles are predicted by personality variables. It is interesting to consider whether personality plays an equal role in other countries, given that some studies have found that social behavior is driven more by personality in the individualistic context of the U.K. than in the collectivist context of Japan (Argyle, Shimoda & Little, 1978).

Another important variable to manipulate in future studies is the status of the other person in the conflict. For example, the difference in conflict avoidance may interact with status, such that managers who show the most deference to a superordinate will also demand the most deference from a subordinate. In predicting general styles of conflict management in recurrent roles, the current strategy of adducing these behavioral style differences to fairly general differences in val-

ues is likely to be a useful strategy. Yet to the extent that we want to predict cultural differences in responses to particular situations, then, it is likely that theories will have to shift from reliance on general value constructs to more specific belief constructs (for a review, see Morris & Leung, 1999).

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## APPENDIX

Scales Measuring Avoiding and Competing Styles of Managing Conflict and Schwartz Value Factors. Component Value Scale Reliabilities Indicated by Cronach Alpha Statistics.

### **Conflict Style: AVOIDING**

1. I attempt to avoid being "put on the spot" and try to keep my conflict with others to myself.
2. I usually avoid open discussion of my differences with the other person.
3. I generally avoid an argument.
4. I try to stay away from disagreement with the other person.
5. I avoid an encounter with others.
6. I try to keep my disagreement with others to myself in order to avoid hard feelings.
7. I try to avoid unpleasant exchanges.
8. I sometimes avoid taking positions which would create controversy.
9. I try to do what is necessary to avoid useless tensions.
10. I feel that differences are not always worth worrying about.\*
11. There are times when I let others take responsibility for solving problems.\*

### **Conflict Style: COMPETING**

1. I usually hold on to my solution to a problem.
2. I use my influence to get my ideas accepted.
3. I use my authority to make a decision in my favor.
4. I argue my case to show the merits of my position.
5. I am generally firm in pursuing my side of the issue.
6. I sometimes use my power to win a competitive situation.
7. I try to win my position.
8. I am usually firm in pursuing my goals.
9. I try to show others the logic and benefits of my position.
10. I assert my wishes.

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\*Indicates item dropped from scale due to low correlations with other items.

### **Value Factor: SOCIETAL CONSERVATISM**

Component Value: Conformity ( $\alpha = .66$ ):

self-discipline, politeness, honoring of parents and elders

Component Value: Tradition ( $\alpha = .55$ ):

accepting of my portion in life, moderate, respect for tradition, devout, humble

### **Value Factor: SELF ENHANCEMENT**

Component Value: Power ( $\alpha = .75$ ):

preserving my public image, social recognition, authority, wealth, social power

Component Value: Achievement ( $\alpha = .67$ ):

ambitious, influential, successful, capable, intelligent

### **Value Factor: OPENNESS TO CHANGE**

Component Value: Hedonism ( $\alpha = .75$ ):

pleasure, enjoying life, self-indulgent

Component Value: Self-Direction ( $\alpha = .63$ ):

self-respect, creativity, choosing own goals, curious, independent, freedom

Component Value: Stimulation ( $\alpha = .71$ ):

a varied life, an exciting life, daring