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The Typology of Conflict Management Style

Julian Ming-Sung Cheng* and Bayu Sutikno**

This paper proposes a triple model of typology of conflict management style, which incorporates three factors: (1) interaction concerns (cooperation versus competitiveness), (2) individualistic versus collectivistic cultures, and (3) environmental uncertainty (stable versus dynamic). The objectives are achieved by reviewing literature on the typology of conflict management style from the working of Blake and Mouton's (1964) model to Freeman and Browne's (2004) model. The findings highlight the triple model of typology of the conflict management style. It is based on an internal factor (interaction concerns between actors, cooperation versus competitiveness) and two external factors, such as cultural dimension (individualism-collectivism) and environmental uncertainty (stable versus dynamic). Hence, eight conflict management styles are proposed: (1) reactive, (2) passive, (3) active, (4) proactive, (5) adaptive, (6) repressive, (7) preemptive, and (8) supportive. There is no single conflict management style for every conflict situation. It depends on these three factors. A review of literature has revealed that although more attention has been paid to the topic of the typology of conflict management style, insufficient attention has been paid to external factors of conflict in the development of the typology.

***Keywords**: conflict management, competitiveness, cooperation, collectivism, individualism, environmental uncertainty, typology.*

Introduction

Conflict management affects organizational processes, such as staff retention, commitment, job satisfaction and productivity (Onishi and Bliss, 2006). The managerial importance stems from the fact that participants' adoption of different conflict management strategies not only influence the immediate resolution of a specific disagreement, but also have critical relational consequences (Lin and Wang, 2002). The mostly Western-based literature suggests that the right amount of conflict is healthy in organizations (Robbins, 1974; Elsayed-Ekhouly and Buda, 1996; Wang et al., 2005), but many Asian cultures, particularly East Asian, consider conflict to pose a negative effect on the balance of feeling within the work unit (Swierczek, 1991, 1994; Wang et al., 2005).

Therefore, understanding the conflict

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management style is pivotal. Fortunately, previous studies shed some light on the issue of the typology of conflict management style (see among others: Rahim, 2002; Wang et al., 2005; Onishi and Bliss, 2006). Nevertheless, they are lacking in explaining the external factors of conflict. This study attempts to contribute to literature by elaborating on the strengths and weaknesses of current typology of conflict management style, and this study proposes a triple model as a new typology of conflict management style.

The main objective of this paper is to categorize current typologies of conflict management style, then highlight their strengths and weaknesses, and finally propose a new typology. The plan of this paper is as follows. The paper begins in the following section with a review of literature on current typologies of conflict management style. Subsequently, we analyze their strengths and weaknesses of current typologies of conflict management style. This will be followed by the triple model as the new typology of conflict management style. Conclusions and implications will be drawn in the last section.

Literature Review

Conflict can be defined as the process which begins when one party perceives that the other has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affects, something that he or she cares about (Thomas, 1992; Freeman and Browne, 2004). It occurs when members engage in activities incompatible with those of colleagues within their network, members of other collectivities, or unaffiliated individuals who utilize the services or products of organization (Roloff, 1987; Rahim, 2002). Robbins and Judge (2007) suggest that there are three schools of thought about conflict: traditional view (conflict is harmful and must be avoided), human relation view (conflict is a natural and inevitable outcome in any group), and interactionist view (conflict is not only a positive force in a group, but also an absolute necessity for a group to perform affectively).

Conflict may involve interpersonal, intragroup, intergroup, and extragroup. Several conditions can trigger the conflict (Rahim, 2002): a party is required to engage in an activity that is incongruent with his or her needs or interests; a party holds behavioral preferences, the satisfaction of which is incompatible with another person's implementation of his or her preferences; a party wants some mutually desirable resources that are in short supply such that the wants of everyone may not be satisfied fully; a party possesses attitudes, values, skills, and goals that are salient in directing his or her behavior but are perceived to be exclusive of the attitudes, values, skills, and goals held by the others; two parties have partially exclusive behavioral preferences regarding their joint actions; and two parties are interdependent in the performance of functions or activities. Various prominent scholars propose their approaches to dealing with conflict management style. We could categorize them into three models of typology: (1) dual model, (2) process model, and (3) specific model.

The dual model has used two variables or dimensions to describe the typology of conflict management style. This model has been dominating in this area. Several typologies are categorized into the dual model, including Blake and Mouton (1964); Thomas (1976); Rahim and Bonoma (1979); Pruitt (1983); Darling and Walker (2001); Rahim (1983, 2002); Conerly and Tripathi (2004); Freeman and Browne (2004). The dual model is displayed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The Dual Model

Scholars	Basis of typology	Typology
Blake and Mouton (1964)	Manager' concerns for production and Manager' concerns for people	5 styles (forcing, withdrawing, smoothing, compromising, problem solving)
Thomas (1976)	Cooperation (satisfy others concerns) and Assertiveness (satisfy own concerns)	5 styles (competing, collaborating, compromising/sharing, accommodating, avoiding)
Rahim and Bonoma (1979)	Concerns for self and Concerns for others	5 styles (dominating, integrating, avoiding, obliging, compromising)
Pruitt (1983)	Concerns for self and Concerns for others	4 styles (yielding, problem solving, inaction, contending)
Darling and Walker (2001)	Assertiveness and Responsiveness	4 styles (analyzer, director, relater, socializer)
Conerly and Tripathi (2004)	Emphasis on relationship and Emphasis on goal	5 styles (withdrawing, forcing, smoothing, confronting, compromising)
Freeman and Browne (2004)	Competing approach (degree of assertiveness) and Accommodating approach (degree of cooperation)	5 styles (assertive, collaborative, midpoint, avoidance, cooperative)

Table 2. The Process Model

Elements of conflict process	Harmony style	Confrontational style	Regulative style
Antecedent conditions	Low competitiveness due to observance of mutual obligations.	Highly competitive work environment due to individualistic goals.	Low competitiveness due to extensive rules and procedures.
Thoughts	Holistic definition of conflict in particularistic terms.	Analytical definition of conflict, in terms of sub issues.	Analytical definition of conflict in terms of universalistic principles.
Emotions	Suppression of negative emotions.	Expression of negative emotions.	Expression of negative emotions.
Behavior	Avoidance and accommodation.	Confrontation and compromise.	Avoidance or forcing.
Outcome criteria	Face-saving concerns.	Due process concerns.	Due process concerns.
Nonmanagerial third parties	Frequent, intrusive and informal.	Infrequent, planned, non intrusive.	Formal appeal systems and adjucative.
Managerial intervention	Mediatorial.	Facilitational or autocratic.	Restructuring or laissez-faire
Third-party emphasis	Harmony and shame.	Reason and fairness (equity)	Reason and general principles (equality)

Secondly, the process model develops its typology based on elements of conflict process. Kozan (1997) proposes three conflict handling management styles: (1) harmony, (2) confrontational, and (3) regulative. The detailed characteristics of each style are presented in Table 2

Eventually, the specific model describes the conflict management style for specific cultural basis. For instance, Ding (1996) develops four characteristics of Chinese conflict management style: (1) differentiating approach/*qiu da dong, cun xiao yi* – meaning that they tend to be more assertive in handling major and principal issues while more accommodating and flexible in dealing with conflicts over minor issues; (2) longrun approach/*cong chang yi ji i* – placing high value on long-term cooperation, they are willing to make concessions and provide preferential treatments in exchange for long-term returns and benefits; (3) contextual approach/*sui ji yin bian* – they handle conflicts by reflecting a flexible and contextual approach to conflict resolution that deals with conflictive issues on a case-by-case basis; (4) holistic approach/ *gu quan da ju* – they avoid dealing with particular conflictive issues on isolation, separating specifics from totality such that the personal interests are subordinate to those of the enterprise and the enterprise's to the state's.

Results and Discussion

Analysis

The three models of typology of conflict management style could be analyzed according to their strengths and weaknesses as presented in Table 3. The dual model describes the typology of conflict management very well, and it could be adopted easily. However, it is a generic approach (simple and too general), thereby requiring adaptation with the context for each of specific study. In addition, the dual model is focused on the nature of interaction between actors of conflict such as concerns, interests, and orientation, but it neglects the external factors such as the culture and environmental uncertainty.

The process model offers a comprehensive and sequential approach to describing the conflict management style, by identifying all factors that influence conflict management style. Unfortunately, this model does not have a strong basis for the categorization of its three styles, and also has a measurement problem. Finally, the strength of the specific model lies in the cultural factor as an important factor for a specific country; however, it implies low generalization to the other settings (different countries and different cultures). In addition, the typology of the specific model is not clear owing to its measurement problem.

Based on the analysis of strengths and weaknesses of the three models of typology, this paper proposes a triple model, which combines internal and external factors of conflict management. This model consists of concerns over interaction (internal factor), collectivistic versus individualistic cultures (external factor), and environmental uncertainty (external factor). The internal factor refers to the concerns about interaction among actors involved in the conflict. We categorize this factor into cooperation and competitiveness (*see among others*: Thomas, 1976; Pruitt, 1983; Freeman and Browne, 2004). The cooperation dimension refers to the use of accommodating approach among actors by focusing on a win-win solution or common interests in conflict management, whereas competitiveness dimension is defined as the utilization of competing approach among

Table 3. Strengths and Weaknesses

Aspect	The Dual model	The Process model	The Specific model
Strengths	Simple and adopted widely.	Holistic and sequential approach.	Culture-specific rooted.
Weaknesses	Generic approach, it required adaptation for specific study.	No strong basis for categorization.	Low in generalization for cross countries-cross cultures study.
	Neglected importance of culture	Neglected interaction concerns among actors	Neglected interaction concerns among actors
	Neglected factor of environmental uncertainty	Items of measurement is still underdeveloped	Items of measurement is still underdeveloped

actors by emphasizing a win-lose solution to conflict management.

Secondly, this paper reveals the importance of cultural factor in explaining the typology of conflict management style. Several previous studies have supported this argument (*see among others*: Leung and Lind, 1986; Elsayed-Ekhouly and Buda, 1996; Wang et al., 2005). The most common explanation theory of cross-cultural research on conflict handling strategies is the individualism-collectivism framework (Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Triandis et al., 1988). The collectivistic society is defined as the degree to which a culture relies on and has allegiance to the self or the group and the strength of group ties, group norms, and group achievements such that people are willing to sacrifice themselves for the greater benefits of the social unit of the society or group. On the other hand, the individualistic society refers to the emphasis on personal freedom, personal achievement, and individual decision-making (Hofstede 1980, 1991).

People from individualistic culture are more solution oriented (favoring a compromising and problem solving style) while people from collectivistic cultures tend to be avoidance oriented (preferring an avoiding and obliging style). Consistent with this result, Schneider and Barsoux (2003) suggest that people from individualistic culture are more likely to push for their own ideas and thus prefer a distribution dimension (forcing or obliging style) that frames the negotiation as a zero-sum game with a winner and a loser. Meanwhile, people from collectivistic culture are more concerned about sharing with their partners and therefore prefer an integrative dimension (problem solving or avoiding style), which frames no one loses out. Comparing the dispute resolution styles of the U.S. (individualistic culture) and Hong Kong (collectivistic culture); Leung and Lind (1986) document that individualistic culture prefers adversarial (emphasizing autonomy and competitiveness) procedures while collectivistic culture has no preference but tend to implement nonadversarial (emphasizing harmony) procedures. Kozan (1997) also substantiates this finding, concluding that a harmony model is most likely to be found in collectivistic culture while a confrontation model is most likely to be seen in individualistic culture.

Thirdly, this paper suggests the prevalence of environmental uncertainty in describing the typology of conflict management style. The environmental uncertainty refers to the volatility or frequency of environmental change coupled with the unpredictability (Homburg, et al., 1999; Kabadayi et al., 2007). In a stable environment, there is low volatility, meaning that the frequency of environmental changes is low and could be predicted easily, while in a dynamic environment, there is high volatility difficult to predict and the environment changes more frequently. Based on the three factors (interaction concerns, culture, and environmental uncertainty), the triple model is depicted in Table 4 below.

The eight styles of conflict management

Table 4. The Triple Model

INTERNAL and EXTERNAL factors	**Collectivism culture**		**Individualism culture**	
	Stable environment	**Dynamic environment**	**Stable environment**	**Dynamic environment**
Cooperation (Win-Win)	ACTIVE	PROACTIVE	ADAPTIVE	SUPPORTIVE
Competitiveness (Win-Lose)	PASIVE	REACTIVE	REPRESIVE	PREEMPTIVE

are explained below. In the collectivistic society (for example, Asian or Eastern countries), the actors of conflict tend to avoid the conflict and they prefer to maintain a harmony with other parties. The four styles of conflict management in this society are:

1. The active style – cooperative, stable, and collectivistic. The actors prefer to compromise in conflict dissolution by taking and giving with the other parties in the conflict.
2. The passive style – competitive, stable, and collectivistic. In spite of seeking for his or her own interests regardless their impacts on the other parties (zero sum game), they tend to wait and see the actions of other parties.
3. The reactive style – competitive, dynamic, and collectivistic. Since the environmental volatility is high, the actors of conflict accommodate the others parties to a lesser extent.
4. The proactive style – cooperative, dynamic, and collectivistic. The actors agree to cooperate with others parties to get mutual benefits and to handle the unpredictability of environment.

On the contrary, in the individualistic society, the actors of conflict are focused on their own interests rather than common interests or harmony with others parties in the conflict. They tend to use a forcing and legalistic approach instead of avoiding the conflict per se. The four styles of conflict management in this society are:

5. The adaptive style – cooperative, stable, and individualistic. The actors of conflict adapt their approach with that of others parties by considering their own interests to be the first priority in the negotiation with others parties.
6. The repressive style – competitive, stable, and individualistic. The actors use a forcing approach; they keep on track with goals, like to win, and assume that conflict is usually a win-lose game where a win gives them a sense of pride and achievement.
7. The preemptive style – competitive, dynamic, and individualistic. The actors tend to be fast response, knowing where they are going and what they want, often pragmatic, decisive, result oriented, and creative to get their own interests.
8. The supportive style – cooperative, dynamic, and individualistic. The actors are willing to share with others parties to handle problems in a high volatility environment, indicating that each party in the conflict seeks to give up something by sharing; accordingly, there is no clear winner or loser.

Conclusions

In current situation, two important issues should be given more attention. First, many scholars agree to shift from avoiding to managing conflict. Second, it is of importance to manage conflict effectively where less substantial conflict could be tolerated. It will produce a functional conflict rather than a dysfunctional one, and this subsequently will enhance performance of the organization. Our review yields several conclusions. First, despite the fact that many scholars have provided good typologies of conflict management style, they are still lacking in empirical evidence with respect to measurement. Second, the typology of conflict management style could be categorized into three models: dual model, process model, and specific model. The previous studies of typology are dominated by the dual model (two-dimension perspective); for example, assertiveness versus cooperation, self-concern versus other concern, and assertiveness versus responsiveness. Third, the current typologies are focused on internal factor (interaction among actors of conflict), and these typologies neglect the external factors of conflict. Fourth, this study proposes a new typology of conflict management style (the triple model), which is based on interaction concerns among actors of conflict (cooperation or win-win versus competitiveness or win-lose), and two external factors: collectivistic versus individualistic cultures, and environmental uncertainty (stable versus dynamic). Finally, the triple model encompasses eight styles of conflict management: reactive, passive, active, proactive styles in collectivistic culture, and adaptive, repressive, preemptive and supportive styles in individualistic culture.

Future research should be focused on the issue of measurement of conflict that can be validated across countries and across cultures, both interpersonal and interorganizational conflicts. The triple model should be operationalized into items of measurement. Second, the conflict is so far measured by the perception of a single actor; in the future, more attention to the operationalization of conflict should be given by combining the perception and the real conflict from dyadic perspectives (both sides of actors). It will be possible that the real conflict management style differs from the perceived conflict management style. Finally, future research should investigate the interactions among personal factor, organizational factor, and national factor as the determinants of the preference of conflict management style across countries and cultures. In addition, the consequences of each of the eight conflict management styles for the organizational performance should be examined.

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