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Paper citation:

Abstract:

We examined intergenerational communication and conflict management styles in China. Older and younger Chinese adults were randomly assigned to evaluate one of four conversation transcripts in which an older worker criticizes a young co-worker. The young worker's communication was varied across the transcripts to reflect four conflict management styles: competing, avoiding, accommodating, and problem-solving. As expected, older participants favored the accommodating style over the problem-solving style. Young adults either preferred the problem-solving style to the accommodating style, as predicted, or judged the two styles as equally positive. The results illustrate the juxtaposition of tradition and modernization/globalization in the changing Chinese cultural context, and demonstrate how such cultural changes are reflected in interpersonal communication between the generations.

Keywords: Globalization, China, Intergenerational communication, Conflict, Filial Piety

Text of paper:

Perceptions of Conflict Management Styles in Chinese Intergenerational Dyads

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Research on cross-cultural communication and conflict management has generated a rich literature on how individuals perceive, manage and negotiate conflict in Eastern and Western cultures (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987; Kim & Leung, 2000; Sillars & Weisberg, 1987). Another line of investigation has explored conflict style preferences from a life-span perspective (Bergstrom & Nussbaum, 1996; Williams & Bergstrom, 1995). The current study links and extends these two research agendas by examining conflict style preferences in the modern Chinese intergenerational context, where the

cultural norms of harmony, hierarchy and filial piety are upheld by traditional values, on the one hand, and challenged by the influx of Western values on the other (Ng, Liu, Weatherall, & Loong, 1997; Zhang & Hummert, 2001).

Prior research demonstrates that two profoundly important values intertwine and influence evaluations of conflict in the Chinese culture: harmony and hierarchy (Gabrenya & Hwang, 1996; Ting-Toomey, 1994; Westwood, Tang, & Kirkbride, 1992). According to Confucius, social relations are innately hierarchical, and social harmony is maintained only when hierarchical relations based on status and authority are observed and respected (Chinese Cultural Connection, 1987). In studying conflict communication in the Chinese culture, scholars have tended to focus on these values, united in the concept of collectivism (Bond & Hwang, 1986; Hofstede, 1980). This study is built on the premise that other important aspects of the Chinese culture, such as the norm of filial piety and the influence of cultural change, also affect conflict management.

The generalized notion of hierarchy influencing harmony achieves a more specific articulation in the idea of filial piety. Filial piety is an explicit age-based norm suggesting that in order to seek harmonious relationships with their elders, young people should respect the age hierarchy in intergenerational interactions (Ng et al., 1997; Zhang & Hummert, 2001). However, the globalization and modernization movements of the last two decades have produced not only significant economic changes in Chinese society, but also cultural ones (Chan & Cheng, 2002; Zhang & Harwood, 2004). One such change is that Chinese young people (especially the more educated) are becoming increasingly independent and individualistic, expressing a strong desire to maintain equal status in intergenerational relations (Ng et al., 1997; Zhang & Hummert, 2001). Thus, although studies have demonstrated that both young and older Chinese adults endorse filial piety, they show that older individuals are stronger proponents of this norm than are younger persons (Ng et al., 1997; Zhang & Harwood, 2002; Zhang &

Hummert, 2001).

Cultural values have implications for everyday interpersonal communication (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Chua, 1988). For instance, the traditional value of filial piety legitimizes the power of older adults over young people and validates older people's expectations of hierarchical intergenerational communication. As a result, older Chinese individuals often openly and vigorously criticize young people for being irresponsible or violating norms (Zhang & Hummert, 2001; Zhang, in press). For older adults, this harsh criticism is equivalent to "bitter medicine that cures a bad disease" (part of a traditional Chinese saying). Yet criticism has been identified as one of the five major initiating factors that precipitate and escalate interpersonal conflict (Peterson, 1983; Witteman, 1992), including conflict between the generations in China (Zhang, in press).

In responding to criticism, Chinese young people must balance their (growing) desire for egalitarian intergenerational relationships with their desire to conform to the societal norms of hierarchy, harmony, and filial piety (Ng et al., 1997; Zhang & Hummert, 2001). By studying Chinese intergenerational conflict communication, we can understand more about that cultural dynamic. Such examinations are valuable theoretically because they show us how broad cultural shifts (i.e., modernization, globalization) may at times play out in quite private interpersonal behavior. Therefore, this study examined younger and older Chinese adults' perceptions of conflict management styles employed by a young person when an older person criticizes in a direct, bossy and reprimanding way. Our predictions were informed by prior research on intergenerational and cultural differences in conflict management style preferences, as well as by politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and the literature on Chinese cultural norms.

Interpersonal Conflict Management Styles and Intergenerational Issues

Four interpersonal conflict management styles (competing, avoiding, accommodating, and problem-solving) have been identified with some consistency in prior research, and as such, warrant consideration within the intergenerational communication context (Cai & Fink, 2002; Sillars, 1980; van de Vliert & Hordijk, 1989). The *competing* style is characterized as overly negative, confrontational, assertive and uncooperative. It includes such communication behaviors as faulting and rejecting the other, hostile questioning, and denying responsibility. The *avoiding* style is non-confrontational, but under-responsive to the conflict. It includes acts minimizing explicit discussion of the conflict, trivializing and downplaying the disagreements, and shifting the topic as a way to withdraw from the conflict. The *accommodating* style emphasizes relational harmony. It includes such behaviors as recognizing the other party's needs, affirming the other's position, taking full responsibility for the problem, apologizing, and being unassertive. The *problem solving* style is assertive and cooperative in initiating mutually satisfying and acceptable solutions. Like the accommodating style, it includes showing empathy for the position of the other person, but unlike the accommodating style, it involves soliciting input from the other person and engaging that individual in finding a mutually acceptable solution.

Conflict management styles have been extensively examined in various communication contexts (e.g., interpersonal and organizational) and relationships (e.g., romantic and family), with the problem-solving style emerging as the most appropriate and effective strategy in the West (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987; Sillars & Weisberg, 1987). Studies linking culture to conflict style preference found that people from East Asian collectivistic cultures (e.g., China and Korea) were less confrontational in general than people from the U.S., which is considered an individualistic culture (Chua & Gudykunst, 1987; Leung, 1988; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Specifically, Chinese young participants were found to be more accommodating, more avoiding and less problem-solving than those from the U.S. (Chiu & Kosinski,

1994).

Bergstrom and colleagues have examined intergenerational conflict management. Williams and Bergstrom (1995) asked young participants to imagine themselves in conflicts with young and older coworkers. Results indicated that respondents reported most satisfaction with an older coworker who was cooperative and least satisfaction with a young co-worker who competed. Bergstrom and Nussbaum (1996) found that younger individuals preferred the competing style whereas older people preferred the solution-orientation or problem-solving style. These authors argued that older adults have learned from their lifetime experience with conflict to use an engaging, cooperative style, whereas young adults have yet to learn that skill. Expanding this research to include middle-aged participants, Bergstrom (1997) found support for the claim that preference for problem-solving in conflict management increases with age.

Although informative regarding intergenerational preferences in the U.S., these studies are limited by their primary use of survey methods and their focus on only three conflict management styles: competing (i.e., confrontation), avoiding, and problem-solving (i.e., solution-orientation). The accommodating style (Cai & Fink, 2002; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974; van de Vliert & Hordijk, 1989), which emphasizes the relational harmony so important in Chinese culture, was not included. Politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and Chinese cultural norms provide insights as to how the four conflict management styles may be evaluated in the Chinese intergenerational context.

Politeness Theory, Chinese Culture, and Conflict Management Styles

The way individuals deal with conflict affects communication satisfaction and judgments of perceived competence, which in turn influence relational outcomes (Canary & Cupach, 1988; Canary, Cupach, & Serpe, 2001). Spitzberg and Cupach (1984) pointed out that communicators are in a constant process of balancing effective communication, which "accomplishes the goals, objectives, or intended

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functions of the interactant" (p. 93), and appropriate communication, which "avoids the violation of the situational or relational rules governing the communicative context" (p. 94). In other words, a competent communicator achieves his/her own goals and respects the other party's interests (Lakey & Canary, 2002) or *face* (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), face (identity or image) is composed of negative face or the right "to freedom of action and freedom from imposition" (p. 66), and positive face or the desire for social approval. "Those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or the speaker" (Brown & Levinson, p. 65) are called face-threatening acts. Acts vary in degree of face threat as a function of the relative power of speaker and hearer, their distance (intimacy), and the imposition of the act. In turn, according to politeness theory, more face threatening acts demand more polite message strategies. Like complaints or reproaches, criticism constitutes a face-threatening act (Cupach & Carson, 2002) that can lead to relational devaluation and precipitate conflict (Carson & Cupach, 2000; Witteman, 1992; Zhang, in press). In the Chinese intergenerational context, the disapproval inherent in an older person's blunt and public criticism threatens the young person's positive face, while its underlying call for behavioral change threatens the young individual's negative face. However, we suggest that generational differences in adherence to the norms of hierarchy and filial piety may lead older and younger Chinese individuals to differentially evaluate the face threat in such criticism, as well as the face threat in the four conflict management styles (i.e., competing, accommodating, avoiding, problem-solving).

The Chinese norms of hierarchy and filial piety give older people power over younger people in intergenerational relations. As strong proponents of these norms, Chinese older adults may perceive their blunt criticism of young persons as a legitimate reflection of their higher status and therefore a relatively low-level face threatening act (Lim, 1994). Hence, older Chinese may expect their criticism to

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be met with accommodation from younger individuals. The accommodating style constitutes the most "polite" response (in terms of negative face threat) and it strongly affirms the Chinese values of hierarchy and filial piety. The problem-solving style threatens older people's positive face by positioning the young person as an equal. Therefore, although older Chinese persons should recognize the benefits of problem-solving as do older adults in the West (e.g., Bergstrom, 1997; Bergstrom & Nussbaum, 1996), they should evaluate it less positively than the accommodating style.

Young individuals, on the other hand, endorse hierarchy and filial piety values less strongly than do older persons, and desire more egalitarian relationships with their elders (Ng et al., 1997; Zhang & Hummert, 2001). As a result, they may view the criticism of an older person as less legitimate and therefore more face threatening than do older individuals. They should therefore favor a conflict management style that is assertive in addressing their own face needs (Ng et al., 1997; Zhang & Hummert, 2001). At the same time, young persons should affirm their basic commitment to the respect for elders mandated by filial piety by ensuring that the conflict style also acknowledges the face needs of the older person. In contrast to older adults, then, younger Chinese people should evaluate the problem-solving style as more respectful, appropriate and effective than the accommodating style due to its more equal attention to both parties' face needs. Age group differences in judgments of the respectfulness, appropriateness, and effectiveness of the conflict styles should be reflected in assessments of the communication competence of the young workers using those styles.

Given these considerations, we offer the following hypotheses:

H1: Older participants will judge the accommodating style, when used by younger persons, as most respectful, appropriate, and effective, whereas younger participants will judge the problem-solving style most positively on these dimensions.

H2: Older participants will judge the young worker using the accommodating style as most

competent, whereas younger participants will judge the worker using the problem-solving style as most competent.

Although young and older Chinese individuals differ in the degree to which they endorse filial piety, particularly its hierarchical component, both groups have a basic commitment to that cultural norm as well as to the cultural value of harmony (Westwood et al., 1992; Yue & Ng, 1999; Zhang & Hummert, 2001). While we expect that their differing views on hierarchy will be reflected in preferences for either the problem-solving or accommodating conflict styles, we believe that their shared commitments to harmony and the basic premise of filial piety should lead to similar assessments of avoiding and competing styles. While avoiding attends to negative face needs and apparently preserves harmonious relations, it displays very little concern for the older person's positive face. Thus, avoidance does not address minimal filial piety obligations. The competing style violates politeness standards by functionally attacking the older person's positive and negative face, and in doing so flouts both harmony and filial piety values. As a result, both young and older Chinese should evaluate avoiding less positively than either the accommodating or problem-solving styles, and both age groups should reserve their most negative assessments for the competing style. Judgments of the communication competence of young workers using the avoiding and competing styles should follow a similar pattern.

Evaluations of participants' satisfaction in conflict encounters are also important in attempts to uncover the preferred management styles for given situations. Research on intergenerational communication in the West indicated that young people had to "bite their tongue" or "accommodate reluctantly," and felt under obligation to show respect for age, which was dissatisfying to them (Williams & Giles, 1996; see also similar accounts in Ng et al. (1997) with Chinese New Zealanders). These findings indicate that young people are aware that the accommodating style would be most satisfying to older adults, although not in their best interest. In line with our argument for H1 and H2 that the

accommodating style protects the best interests of Chinese older adults, and that the problem-solving style enhances young people's face management, we present our third hypothesis.

H3. Regardless of age, participants will evaluate the older worker as most satisfied with the young worker using the accommodating style, but the young worker as most satisfied when using the problem solving style.

Overall, we would anticipate relatively low levels of perceived satisfaction in these encounters. Although older people's direct criticism of younger people may be viewed as acceptable given the status differences between young and old in China, it simultaneously challenges the Chinese value of harmony since criticism is an open display of disapproval (Westwood et al., 1992). As a result, both young and older people may perceive such communication as unsatisfactory. When the young person responds using the avoiding or especially the competing style we would predict particularly low levels of perceived satisfaction, given the further negative implications for harmony.

Method

Participants

Participants were 225 young (*M* age = 20.99, *SD* = 2.31, range = 18 - 26) and 218 older adults (*M* age = 63.74, *SD* = 6.42, range = 55 - 87) from the People's Republic of China. There were approximately equal numbers of female and male participants in each age group (48% females in the young sample and 52% females in the older sample). Young participants were college students from three universities in Beijing (*n* = 96) and Shandong province (*n* = 129). They were volunteers recruited through flyers and completed the questionnaires in groups under the supervision of a research assistant. Older adults were recruited through flyers, word of mouth, and snowballing techniques from Beijing (*n* = 32) and five local communities in

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Shandong province (61 were from Jinan - the capital city, 32 from a costal city, and 93 were from three other small towns). The majority of the older participants were retired and resided in independent living apartments. They received a small monetary compensation as reimbursement for their time. They finished the questionnaires either in small group or individually with the presence of a research assistant. An independent t-test indicated that the two age groups differed significantly in their years of education. Young adults had more years of education ($M = 13.89$, $SD = 1.89$) than older adults ($M = 11.56$, $SD = 3.66$), $t (441) = 6.44$, $p < .001$. [1]

Conflict Scenarios and Conversation Scripts

Two similar intergenerational conflict scenarios were created in Chinese involving co-worker dyads in an organizational setting. The scenarios described mundane conflict in which an older person gets upset after finding out that a young person did not fulfill his duty (i.e., forgot to close the windows or forgot to fetch hot water; see Appendix A for the English translation). The scenarios represent everyday living situations and were constructed based on conflict scenarios described by a focus group of Chinese young and older adults who resided in China. Zhang's (2004) Chinese respondents reported similar patterns of old-to-young criticism in intergenerational conflict.

The conflict management styles were manipulated through written conversation scripts in which the older person's communication was held constant and the young person's response was manipulated to reflect one of the four conflict management styles. In the *competing* condition, the young person confronts, questions and refutes the older person and defends his own position without taking any responsibility for the situation. In the *avoiding* condition, the young worker tries to withdraw from the conflict situation by sidestepping explicit discussion of the conflict, downplaying the disagreement and shifting the topic of the conversation. In the *accommodating* condition, the young worker takes full responsibility for the situation, apologizes profusely, and validates the legitimacy of the older worker's

position. In the *problem-solving* condition, the young person engages in a direct discussion of the

conflict, shows empathy for the position of the older worker, and seeks bilateral behavior change (see

Appendix B for English translations of the "Window" scenario scripts). Pilot studies confirmed the

realism of the situations and scripts to Chinese individuals and the validity of the manipulation of the

four styles.[2]

Procedures

Participants were randomly assigned to one of eight conversation scripts using a 2 x 4 (conflict

topic by conflict management style) design. After reading the script and providing some demographic

information, participants completed a questionnaire regarding their perceptions of the young and older

coworker in the script. The questionnaire included a manipulation check and assessments of five

dependent variables (outlined below). Because the dependent measures were adapted from scales

developed for use in Western cultures (U.S. and Canada), pilot testing was used to confirm their

reliability and interpretability for Chinese participants.[3]

Manipulation Check and Dependent Measures

Manipulation check. Twelve statements (3 for each conflict management style; 7-point Likert

scale: 1 = strongly disagree - 7 = strongly agree) were created in Chinese based on the definitions of the

four styles. Each group of three statements represented the key characteristics that distinguished the

competing (e.g., "Xiao Wang refuted Lao Zhao bluntly"), avoiding (e.g., "Xiao Wang tried to avoid talking

about the problem"), accommodating (e.g., "Xiao Wang apologized profusely"), and problem-solving

styles (e.g., "Xiao Wang tried to find a mutually satisfying solution to the problem"). Cronbach's alpha

ranged from .94 to .96 for the four conflict styles.

Ratings were analyzed in a MANOVA with conflict management style condition as the between-

subjects factor.[4] Results from this analysis revealed a significant multivariate main effect of conflict

management style, $F(12, 1314) = 741.79$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .87$. The univariate tests for the four style dimensions were all significant (competing: $F(3, 435) = 941.11$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .87$; avoiding: $F(3, 435) = 561.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .80$; accommodation: $F(3, 435) = 616.67$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .81$; problem-solving: $F(3, 435) = 750.76$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .84$). Tukey post hoc comparisons indicated that participants perceived the four styles as intended.

Respectfulness. Participants evaluated the respectfulness (respectful, impolite, and affirming; α = .78) of the conflict management style on three 7-point Likert scales (1 = not at all; 7 = extremely). Respectfulness has been used along with the other two dimensions (i.e., assertiveness and warmth) in previous research measuring the emotional tone of messages (Ryan, Hamilton, & Kwong See, 1994; Morgan & Hummert, 2000).

Appropriateness and effectiveness. Appropriateness and effectiveness of the young worker's response style were measured using single 7-point bi-polar scales (appropriate – inappropriate; effective – not effective) (Morgan & Hummert, 2000). These items asked participants to evaluate the "young worker's talk" rather than the young worker himself, and constituted global measures of perceptions of the young worker's conflict style. Although multiple item scales are generally preferred, the validity of single-item measures for global judgments of this type can be demonstrated by examining factor loadings for similar items on longer scales assessing the same construct (Spector, 1992). Our items were conceptually similar to the effectiveness factor (alpha = .93) and the general appropriateness factor (alpha = .82) in Canary and Spitzberg's (1987) scales assessing conversational competence, and resembled two items in those scales: "He or she was effective" (effectiveness factor loading .70, Canary & Spitzberg, p. 103), and "Everything he or she said was appropriate" (appropriateness factor loading .70, Canary & Spitzberg, p. 104).

Communication competence. Perceptions of the young worker's communication

competence were assessed using 8 statements adapted from Wiemann's (1977) Communication Competence Scale on 7-point scales (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree; α = .96). These statements were selected by a focus group of 5 Chinese young adults and 3 older adults as capturing the gist of the Chinese concept of communication competence in conversations (Xiao Wang is easy to talk to, is rewarding to talk to, is flexible in communicating with others, is an effective communicator, finds it easy to get along with others, can adapt to changing situations, generally says the right thing at the right time, and generally knows what type of behavior is appropriate in any given situation).

Conversational satisfaction. Participants assessed the conversational satisfaction of the workers in the scenario on ten 7-point scales (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely; α = .82 for the young worker and α = .89 for the older worker). Four items (angry, happy, frustrated, satisfied) were selected from Ryan et al. (1994) and one item (proud) was selected from Watson, Clark, and Tellegen (1988). The remaining five items (encouraged, disappointed, annoyed, respected, embarrassed), sensitive to the concept of conversational satisfaction in China, were created by the same focus group for use in this study.

Results

Hypothesis 1 predicted a participant age by conflict style interaction in evaluations of the respectfulness, appropriateness, and effectiveness of the young worker's conflict communication. Hypothesis 2 predicted a parallel interaction effect on the assessment of the young worker's communication competence. Young participants were expected to rate the problem-solving style and the young worker using that style most positively on these measures, whereas older participants were expected to rate the accommodating style and the young worker using that style most positively. The third hypothesis predicted that participants in both age groups would rate the older worker as most satisfied with the accommodating style, but the young worker as most satisfied with the problem-

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solving style.

Data Analysis

To test these predictions, ratings on the dependent measures were analyzed using analysis of variance procedures (multivariate for Hypothesis 1 and univariate for Hypotheses 2 and 3) in a 2 (participant age) x 4 (conflict style) factorial design. For all analyses, post hoc tests for conflict style main effects used Tukey's HSD, while those for significant interaction effects examined the simple main effects of conflict style within age groups followed by within age group pairwise comparisons of conflict style means. For the pairwise comparisons, Bonferroni adjustments were made to alphas to control for Type I error (Green & Salkind, 2003).

Evaluations of the Young Worker's Conflict Management Style

Significant multivariate effects included the conflict style by participant age interaction predicted in Hypothesis 1, $F (9, 1054) = 3.21$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$, and the two main effects: conflict style, $F (9, 1054) = 53.09$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .26$; participant age, $F (3, 433) = 4.35$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$. Univariate effects are reported separately for each measure.

Respectfulness. The main effects for conflict management style ($F (3, 435) = 119.74$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .45$) and age ($F (1, 435) = 5.99$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .01$) were significant, but the interaction effect predicted in H1 was not, $F (3, 435) = 1.78$, $p = .15$. Post hoc analysis of the conflict management style main effect indicated that participants in both age groups rated the accommodating style as most respectful, followed by the problem-solving style, the avoiding style and the competing style (see Table 1 for this and subsequent analyses). The participant age main effect indicated that young adults rated the young workers' response styles as more respectful than did the older participants.

Appropriateness. The main effects for conflict management style ($F (3, 435) = 133.85$, $p < .001$,

η^2 = .48) and age (F (1, 435) = 11.06, p < .001, η^2 = .03) were significant, and the interaction effect predicted in H1 approached significance, F (3, 435) = 2.55, p = .06, η^2 = .06. Supporting H1, examination of simple main effects indicated that older participants rated the accommodating style as the most appropriate, followed by the problem-solving style, the avoiding style, and the competing style, F (3, 435) = 74.11, p < .001, η^2 = .34. However, young participants did not differentiate between the appropriateness of problem-solving and accommodating styles in the predicted fashion, judging these two styles as equally and highly appropriate, the avoiding style as less appropriate, and the competing style as least appropriate, F (3, 435) = 62.11, p < .001, η^2 = .30.

Effectiveness. As predicted in H1, the interaction effect was significant, F (3, 435) = 8.39, p < .001, η^2 = .06. In addition, the main effect for conflict management style was significant, F (3, 435) = 95.24, p < .001, η^2 = .40, but the effect for age was not (F (1, 435) = .95, p > .05). Simple main effects analysis indicated that both age groups' results supported H1 (see Table 1). Older participants rated the accommodating style as most effective, followed by the problem-solving style, the avoiding style, and the competing style, F (3, 435) = 62.48, p < .001, η^2 = .30. In contrast, young participants rated the problem-solving style as most effective, followed by the accommodating style, and the avoiding and competing styles, F (3, 435) = 41.08, p < .001, η^2 = .22.

Evaluations of the Young Worker's Communication Competence

Results confirmed the predicted conflict style by participant age interaction, F (3, 435) = 4.06, p < .01, η^2 = .03, as well as significant main effects for conflict style, F (3, 435) = 122.37, p < .001, η^2 = .46, and participant age, F (1, 435) = 11.54, p < .01, η^2 = .03. Simple main effects analyses supported H1 in regard to older participants, indicating that they evaluated the worker using the accommodating style as most competent, followed in order by the workers using the problem solving, avoiding, and competing styles, F (3, 435) = 74.98, p < .001, η^2 = .34 (see

Table 2). Young participants displayed the same overall pattern, except that they rated workers using accommodating and problem-solving styles as equally competent, F (3, 435) = 51.06, $p <$ .001, η^2 = .26. Thus, young participants did not differentiate between the competence of workers using the accommodating and problem-solving styles as predicted in Hypothesis 2.

Ratings of Conversational Satisfaction

Perceptions of the young worker's conversational satisfaction. Analysis revealed significant main effects for conflict management style, F (3, 435) = 29.43, $p <$ .01, η^2 = .39, and participant age, F (1, 435) = 10.28, $p <$ .01, η^2 = .03, along with a significant interaction between conflict style and age, F (3, 435) = 4.44, $p <$ .01, η^2 = .03. Simple main effects analysis indicated the perceptions of young participants were consistent with Hypothesis 3, but those of older participants were not (See Table 3 for means and pairwise comparisons). Young participants rated the young worker as more satisfied when he used the problem solving than the accommodating style, and more satisfied with both of these styles than the avoiding and competing styles, F (3, 435) = 11.10, $p <$ .001, η^2 = .07. Older participants, however, rated the young worker as equally satisfied using the accommodating and problem-solving styles, with the other two styles again rated less positively, F (3, 435) = 22.74, $p <$ .001, η^2 = .14. Both age groups rated the young worker as least satisfied when he used the competing style.

Perceptions of the older worker's conversational satisfaction. Analysis revealed only the predicted significant main effect of conflict management style, F (3, 435) = 51.06, $p <$ .001, η^2 = .26. Post hoc analyses showed that participants rated the older worker receiving the accommodating style and the problem solving style as equally and most satisfied, and the older worker receiving the competing style as least satisfied (See Table 3). These results offer only partial support for Hypothesis 3, in that participants did not distinguish between the older worker's satisfaction with the accommodating and

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problem-solving styles.

Means for young and older workers' satisfaction were generally below or at the midpoint of the scale indicating that the participants did not believe that the workers would be very satisfied with any of the styles.

Discussion

Participants' perceptions of the conflict management styles both supported and challenged our hypotheses. We found strong support for our prediction that older participants would favor the accommodating style over the problem solving style, but less support for the prediction that young participants would prefer the problem-solving style to the accommodating style. Contrary to our expectations, young participants evaluated the problem-solving and accommodating styles similarly. For example, they rated the problem solving style and the accommodating style as equally appropriate, and the young worker using the two styles as equally competent. In addition, we found only limited support for the hypothesis that assessments of the conversational satisfaction of the old and young workers would show that participants were aware of intergenerational differences in preferred conflict management styles. Finally, as we had anticipated, participants in both age groups judged the accommodating and problem-solving styles more positively than the avoiding and competing styles, and, on most measures, reserved their most negative assessments for the competing style. Together these results reveal critical points of difference and agreement between Chinese young and older adults regarding conflict management that provide insights into the relationships among cultural values, politeness theory, and intergenerational conflict.

Chinese Values and Politeness as Influences on Conflict Management Style Preferences

The first clear message of these results is that our understanding of conflict management

styles must take into account cultural norms. Further, although politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) seems to have particular salience in explaining how Chinese individuals negotiate face in intergenerational conflict, Chinese cultural values of harmony, hierarchy and filial piety also inform politeness standards (see Kim, 2002 for a similar argument). Our respondents' evaluations indicate not only an awareness of these values, but also an understanding of the ways in which both parties' face must be appropriately managed within the context of the values. Hence, as expected, negative evaluations of the competing style, the most face threatening strategy, were a consistent finding in this experiment.

The competing style is driven by self-interest rather than a concern for the other's needs (Lakey & Canary, 2002; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974; Putnam & Wilson, 1982). In Chinese culture, young people's pursuit of self-interest in intergenerational communication must be balanced against the respect of filial piety, age hierarchy, and harmony necessary to maintain their self-esteem as Chinese individuals (Kim et al., 1996; Kim, Shin, & Cai, 1998). Although findings in the West showed that the competing style was moderately effective in interpersonal conflict (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987) and sometimes the preferred style of young persons (Bergstrom & Nussbaum, 1996), its consistently low evaluation by the participants in this study – regardless of their age – shows that maintaining harmony, hierarchy, and filial piety are more important than pursuing self-interest within Chinese culture.

While evaluations of the competing style were consistent with both Chinese cultural values and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), the assessment of the avoiding style as disrespectful and inappropriate by those in both age groups highlights the ways in which cultural values inform politeness standards. Because avoiding preserves negative face, a Western perspective on politeness would predict more positive assessments of the respectfulness and appropriateness of avoiding than found in this study (Cai & Fink, 2002). In preserving negative face, however, an avoiding style fails to attend to

positive face as mandated by the Chinese value of harmony (Kilmann & Thomas, 1975). When an avoiding style is used by a young person in an intergenerational conflict, it also violates the Chinese values of hierarchy and filial piety. Filial piety norms require that younger adults not only avoid imposing on their older partners (i.e., negative face) but also display appropriate deference and attend to their older partner's positive face. Similarly, Lee and Rogan (1991) found that, as the power status of the other increased, young Korean participants' use of the avoiding style decreased. Leung (1988) also found that Chinese participants used avoiding more with friends than strangers. However, it is possible that the avoiding style might be a conflict management option in situations in which the age hierarchy was not as salient as the current one (e.g., a conflict between age peers or between young and older family members) (Westwood et al., 1992).

Cultural values and intergenerational differences in conflict preferences

Although participants in both age groups rated the accommodating and the problem-solving styles as preferable to the avoiding and competing styles, older participants were generally more positive toward the accommodating style and young participants more positive toward the problem-solving style, as we had predicted. In contrast, Bergstrom (1997; Bergstrom & Nussbaum, 1996) found that preference for the problem-solving style increases with age in the United States. We believe that our participants' evaluations of the problem-solving and accommodating styles may reflect age cohort differences in the strength of certain cultural values. In particular, the Chinese intergenerational context is a situation which requires younger persons to be respectful of older persons and attentive to their wishes and needs, even when the older person is being critical. The accommodating style used by the young worker fully reflects these norms, whereas the problem-solving style does so only partially. Hence our older participants' preference for the accommodating style was consistent with traditional Chinese values.

Young participants, on the other hand, indicated either a preference for the problem-solving

style over the accommodating style, or judged the two styles as equally advantageous. Specifically, they

viewed the problem-solving style and the accommodating style as equally *appropriate*, but evaluated

the problem-solving style as more *effective* than the accommodating style. Our young participants

showed a clearly more "Western" profile than their older counterparts. We would suggest that this is

due to a more general shift in Chinese culture towards the Western ideology of equality and

independence (Ng et al., 1997; Giles, McCann, Noels, & Ota, 2002; Yue & Ng, 1999; Zhang & Hummert,

2001), and a lessening of commitment to the Chinese value of hierarchy among younger people. The

adoption of the problem solving style may provide Chinese young people opportunities to demonstrate

that they are able to maintain equal status with Chinese older adults in communication without violating

the traditional social norm of filial piety (as would occur with the competing style, for instance). That

said, young people's evaluation of the problem-solving and the accommodating styles as equally

appropriate also indicated their awareness of the rules and norms manifested in filial piety (Yue & Ng,

1999). Indeed, it is worth noting that the size of the age by conflict style interaction effects and the age

group main effects were relatively small throughout, particularly relative to the conflict style main

effects. In other words, the data do not illustrate that these two age groups have fundamentally

different *understandings* of these conflict management styles. Rather, they indicate that the two age

groups differ only in their assessment of the *advantages* of the two most positively evaluated styles.

Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations and directions for future research need to be noted. First, all scenarios

involved an intergenerational conflict between two coworkers, which may have contributed to the low

evaluations of the avoiding style. Future study should extend the design to examine whether conflict

management style preferences vary with the closeness of the intergenerational relationships (Kim &

Leung, 2000; Leung, 1988). Second, the older person used a direct and bossy communication style in all four scenarios. Although this style is a valid representation of intergenerational interaction in the Chinese workplace, future studies should vary the older worker's communication to include more cooperative communication to examine how such variations affect perceptions of the appropriate style for the young worker. Third, this experimental research controlled and manipulated certain message characteristics and focused on evaluations of conflict management styles. Although our results carry implications for conflict style choices in interaction, the study did not examine those choices. Future studies should explore dyadic conflict behaviors in conversation in order to understand style choices and patterns of style shifts within and between communicators (e.g., Sillars, Roberts, Leonard, & Dun, 2000; Sillars & Zietlow, 1993). Fourth, results suggested that the cultural values of harmony, hierarchy, and filial piety – all rooted in Confucianism – influenced participants' perceptions of styles, but this study did not assess participants' endorsement of those values. Future research should examine the link between perceptions of management styles and endorsement of cultural values in order to understand how intra-cultural variations in value endorsement are related to style use and preferences (Kim et al., 1996).

Conclusion

This experiment revealed substantial support for the hypothesis that appropriate intergenerational conflict behaviors and defining characteristics of politeness are shaped by specific cultural rules, norms and contexts, just as are other communication behaviors (Gudykunst et al., 1988), and that such evaluations shift as part of broader generational and cultural dynamics. In this transitional era of Chinese cultural and economic reforms, this study provides insights into how Chinese young people are balancing new egalitarian ideals with their allegiance to traditional filial norms in intergenerational relations. From a theoretical standpoint, this study illustrates the importance of incorporating cultural values into conflict theory and

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intergenerational communication theory. Through these contributions, this study provides a

strong foundation for future communication research on intergenerational conflict within the

Chinese culture, as well as for cross-cultural research on intergenerational conflict.

Endnotes

[1]Two one way ANOVA results indicated that years of education were equally distributed across the conflict style conditions for both younger, $F(3, 221) = .10$, $p > .05$, and older adults, $F(3, 214) = .83$, $p > .05$. Therefore, any potential effect of education on perceptions of conflict should be minimal. This was confirmed by an initial analysis, which included years of education as a covariate in the 2 (age group) x 4 (conflict style) MANOVA on perceptions of the conflict styles. Results demonstrated that years of education did not account for a significant variance in perceptions of the conflict styles, $F(3, 432) = 2.04$, $\eta^2 = .01$, $p > .05$. Therefore, years of education was not included in any further analyses.

[2]In the first pilot study, young participants ($N = 94$, M age = 19.26, $SD = 1.87$) evaluated the realism (i.e., realistic – not realistic and believable – not believable) and the seriousness (i.e., serious -- not serious) of the conflict scenarios, and the realism of the conversation scripts on 7-point bipolar scales. Participants judged the conflict scenarios (i.e., window vs. hot water) as similar and highly realistic [$t(91) = 1.38$, $p > .05$]. The realism mean ($M = 5.04$, $SD = 1.33$) was significantly above the midpoint of the scale (4), one-sample $t(92) = 7.54$, $p < .001$. Participants also judged the conflict scenarios as similarly [$t(91) = 1.41$, $p > .05$], but only moderately serious. The mean of rating of seriousness ($M = 4.04$, $SD = 1.48$) was not significantly different from the midpoint of the scale, one-sample $t(92) = .28$, $p > .05$. Analyses also established the realism of the conversation scripts. A 2 (conflict scenario: window vs. hot water) x 4 (conflict management style: competing, avoiding, accommodating, and problem-solving) factorial ANOVA indicated that the realism of the conversation scripts was not affected by the scenario type, $F(1, 86) = .38$, $p > .05$, conflict management style, $F(3, 86) = 2.60$, $p > .05$, or the interaction between the two factors, $F(3, 86) = 1.37$, $p > .05$. Further, a one sample t-test indicated that the mean realism score for the conversation scripts was significantly above the midpoint of the scale [$M = 5.05$, $SD = 1.45$; $t(93) = 7.02$, $p < .001$]. Finally, to test the validity of the

style manipulation, participants were provided with definitions of the conflict management style and asked to choose the one that matched the conversation script they had read (Canary & Spitzberg, 1987). The manipulation check supported the validity of the style manipulation in the conversation scripts, with an 83% agreement between the scripts and the definition selected by participants. After a few clarifications of the definitions, a second pilot study (N = 40, M age = 20.57, SD = 1.92) indicated 100% agreement between the conversation scripts and participants' selection of the appropriate style definition.

[3]The reliability of the dependent measures was established in two pilot studies. A third pilot study (N = 40, M age = 19.57, SD = 1.95) tested the reliability of a 12-item manipulation check scale. Cronbach's alphas indicated satisfactory reliabilities for the statements constituting the four conflict management style dimensions.

[4]Because two different scenarios (window and hot water) were used to operationalize the conflict management styles, preliminary analyses included scenario type as a between-subjects factor for all the analyses. No scenario type main effects were significant and only 2/50 possible interaction effects involving scenario type were significant. These effects were weak and did not change the results pattern for any hypotheses. Therefore, scenario type was excluded from the reported analyses.

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Appropriateness, Effectiveness, Respectfulness, and Competence of the Young Worker by Conflict Style and Participant Age

	Participant Age					
	Young Adult		Older Adult		Conflict Style Total	
Conflict Style	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Respectfulness						
Competing	2.04	.98	1.88	1.12	1.96 [a]	1.05
Avoiding	3.65	1.19	3.05	1.48	3.36 [b]	1.37
Accommodating	5.13	1.51	5.23	1.43	5.18 [d]	1.47
Problem-solving	4.63	1.22	4.06	1.60	4.35 [c]	1.44
Total Respectfulness*	3.88	1.70	3.56	1.88	3.72	2.63
Appropriateness						
Competing	2.42 [a]	1.33	1.96 [a]	1.53	2.19	1.43
Avoiding	3.82 [b]	1.56	3.15 [b]	2.05	3.49	1.81
Accommodating	5.91 [c]	1.30	6.06 [d]	1.21	5.99	1.26
Problem-solving	5.46 [c]	1.28	4.54 [c]	1.75	5.00	1.52
Total Appropriateness*	4.43	1.94	3.93	2.25	4.17	2.10
Effectiveness						
Competing	2.67 [a]	1.59	2.04 [a]	1.40	2.36	1.49
Avoiding	2.84 [a]	1.53	2.70 [b]	1.86	2.77	1.70
Accommodating	4.63 [b]	1.91	5.69 [d]	1.30	5.16	1.61
Problem-solving	5.39 [c]	1.03	4.52 [c]	1.71	4.96	1.37
Total Effectiveness	3.88	1.94	3.74	2.25	3.81	2.10

Note. For each dependent variable, column means with different superscripts differ significantly at *p* <

.05.

*Age group means differ significantly at $p < .05$.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for Communication Competence of the Young Worker by

Conflict Style and Participant Age

	Participant Age					
	Young Adult		Older Adult		Conflict Style Total	
Conflict Style	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Competence						
Competing	2.56 [a]	1.05	2.09 [a]	1.11	2.33	1.08
Avoiding	4.26 [b]	1.22	3.27 [b]	1.26	3.77	1.24
Accommodating	5.21 [c]	1.37	5.37 [d]	1.25	5.29	1.31
Problem-solving	4.98 [c]	1.16	4.65 [c]	1.55	4.82	1.36
Total Competence*	4.27	1.58	3.85	1.81	4.06	1.70

Note. Column means with different superscripts differ significantly at *p* < .05.

* Age group means differ significantly at *p* < .05.

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations for Perceived Communication Satisfaction of the Young and Older Workers' by Conflict Style and Participant Age

	Participant Age					
	Young Adult		Older Adult		Conflict Style Total	
Conflict Style	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Young Worker Satisfaction						
Competing	2.78[a]	.88	2.76[a]	1.03	2.77	.95
Avoiding	3.37[b]	.85	3.52[b]	.84	3.44	.84
Accommodating	3.18[b]	.95	4.01[c]	1.00	3.59	1.06
Problem-solving	3.78[c]	.95	4.04[c]	.92	3.90	.94
Total*	3.28	.97	3.58	1.08		
Older Worker Satisfaction						
Competing	2.15	.64	2.29	.99	2.22[a]	.83
Avoiding	2.64	.94	2.91	.99	2.77[b]	.97
Accommodating	4.30	1.18	4.45	1.20	4.37[c]	1.19
Problem-solving	4.22	1.15	4.09	1.24	4.15[c]	1.19
Total	3.34	1.38	3.43	1.41		

Note. For each dependent variable, column means with different superscripts differ significantly at *p* < .05.

* Age group means differ significantly at *p* < .05.

Appendix A: Conflict Scenarios (English Version)

Window Scenario. Lao Zhao is in his early sixties. He works with seven others in a big office. Xiao Wang, who is in his twenties works with Lao Zhao in the same office. They are coworkers. One morning, Lao Zhao, as usual, arrived at the office first. When he opened the office door, a gust of wind blew against his face and he saw office documents everywhere on the floor. It was obvious that last night's thunderstorm showed no mercy to the documents beside the two open windows. He rushed to pick up the papers from the floor finding that a stack of materials on one of the windowsills was soaked. "These young people are hopeless", he murmured with a deep sigh. He moved the stack of materials and started to dry the windowsill. At this time, his colleagues entered the office one by one. Lao Zhao was upset and questioned Xiao Wang to discover if he was the last person who left the office and forgot to close the windows.

Hot Water Scenario. Lao Zhao is in his early sixties. He works with seven others in a big office. Xiao Wang, who is in his twenties works with Lao Zhao in the same office. They are coworkers. At 10:00 o'clock in the morning, Lao Zhao was, as usual, ready for his first cup of tea. He reached for a thermos bottle for hot water and it was empty. He did not have any luck after shaking all the other three thermos bottles. "These young people are hopeless", he murmured with a deep sigh. He grabbed the empty thermos bottles and headed out of the office to fetch hot water from another building. At this time, Xiao Wang was entering the office with two other colleagues who work in the same office. Lao Zhao was upset, he put the thermos bottles down and questioned Xiao Wang as to why he forgot to fetch water when it was his duty that day.

Appendix B: Conversation Scripts (English Version)

Competing

Lao Zhao: (with anger) Xiao Wang, were you the last person who left the office?

Xiao Wang: What happened? (he looked around), Oh, was the window not closed?

Lao Zhao: (yelling) How could you do such a thing? How could a young person be this

irresponsible?! This tells us something about you! Now what, what do we do with this big mess?

Xiao Wang: (raised his voice) Yes, I did forget to close the windows! What is it with you? If you

are responsible, why didn't you close them before you left. This is your office and you have

responsibilities too. Besides, you get upset with everything. You have to remember that nobody

is perfect, you don't have to react this way! This is so annoying!

Avoiding

Lao Zhao: (with anger) Xiao Wang, were you the last person who left the office?

Xiao Wang: Huh.., well (looked around), was the window not closed?

Lao Zhao: (yelling) How could you do such a thing? How could a young person be this

irresponsible?! This tells us something about you! Now what, what do we do with this big mess?

Xiao Wang: (lightheartedly, jokingly) Hey, No big deal. Do not be so serious. This will be taken

care of. "Oh, you know what, I really have something urgent to take care of and I will be

right back." After that, Xiao Wang left office quickly.

Accommodating

Lao Zhao: (with anger) Xiao Wang, were you the last person who left the office?

Xiao Wang: Oops! The window was not closed. I forgot to close it.

Lao Zhao: (yelling) How could you do such a thing? How could a young person be this

      irresponsible?! This tells us something about you! Now what, what do we do with this big mess?

Xiao Wang: (apologetically) I am really sorry about this, it is all my fault. I do apologize. I

      understand why you are so upset. Please forgive me.

Problem-solving

Lao Zhao: (with anger) How could you do such a thing? How could a young person be this

      irresponsible?! This tells us something about you! Now what, what do we do with this big mess?

Xiao Wang: (calmly) I understand, but getting mad at me won't fix the problem. How about this?

      I will put a note up on the door so I can see it when I walk out. Could you also remind me to

      close the windows? Let's agree that nobody should put papers on the windowsills since they can

      be blown away easily and we do not look professional. Should we also assign a person each day

      to check the windows? What do you think is the best way?