

**A Paradoxical Perspective and Dialectical Approaches to Managing Conflict:
The Moderating Role of Ambiguity**

ABSTRACT

We attempt to broaden the conventional theory and practice on conflict management by introducing ideas of conceptualizing conflicts from a paradoxical perspective and managing conflicts through dialectical approaches. We propose that three types of ambiguity in conflict situations – vagueness in preferences, alternatives, and anticipations – will impel culturally divergent approaches of conflict management. We empirically test these ideas through three studies. Study 1 used open-ended questions to solicit the conceptualization of conflicts from MBA students in China and the U.S. and found more paradoxical attributes among Chinese perceptions of conflict. In Study 2, we surveyed key informants of organizational conflicts in two large, multi-subsidary organizations in China and the U.S. and found culturally divergent approaches to conflict management under the three types of ambiguity. Data from this study also present needs and potentials in the U.S. for more options beyond conventional conflict management approaches. Study 3 is designed to isolate and manipulate the moderating effects of ambiguity in conflict scenarios. Together we hope to contribute an “ambicultural” layer to the current literature on cross-cultural conflict management.

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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. A Paradoxical Perspective of Conflict

Western literature defines conflict as incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance between two or more parties (Putnam & Poole, 1987; Rahim, 1992; Wall & Callister, 1995) and a clear triumph of one over the other has been a major theme in strategy, literature or films (Suber, 2006).

But eastern literature perceives conflict in a more paradoxical lens: the simultaneous presence of contradictory, inconsistent, yet interrelated elements that seems to be untrue but is in fact true (Lewis, 2000; Quinn & Cameron, 1988; Eisenhardt, 2000; Gannon, 2008; Smith & Berg, 1987; Naisbitt, 1994).

The paradoxical perspective of conflict expands and blurs the boundaries between friend and foe, cooperation and competition (Chen, 2008), and embeds potential solutions within seemingly insoluble situations.

Traditionally, Chinese society has been characterized as collectivist, with an emphasis on interdependence among members of in-groups (Tu 1985). Confucian and Taoist views of the world stress recognizing one's place in the social order and not striving to deviate from it but rather harmonizing with others for the betterment of society (Tu 1985). With this collective orientation, Chinese tend to avoid conflicts and are more tolerant with contradiction (e.g., Aaker & Sengupta, 2000; Briley, Morris, & Simonson, 2000; Leung, 1987; Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Yet we observe extremely individualist behaviors and heavy bargaining in daily life. Across or within contexts, East Asians lack stability in the self-concept and exhibit low self-concept consistency whereas Westerners tend to define the self in relatively stable, global terms and exhibit high self-concept consistency (Cousins, 1989; Kashima, et al., 1992; Choi & Choi, 2002; Sedikides, et al., 2003).

To explain this Eastern and Western difference, cultural difference in thinking helps. In general, Western thought emphasizes analytical thinking and East Asian thought emphasizes holistic thinking (Spencer-Rodgers, Williams, & Peng 2010). For instance, when it comes to the relationship between pleasant and unpleasant emotions (Bagozzi, Wong, & Yi, 1999; Heine, Lehman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999), westerners are likely to perceive frequency judgments of happiness in opposition to frequency judgments of sadness (Schimmack, Oishi, & Diener 2002). In short, in Western cultures pleasant and unpleasant emotions "are conceived as oppositional categories. One is either happy or sad but not both" (Bagozzi et al. 1999, p. 646). In contrast, East Asians are dialectic (Bagozzi et al., 1999; Peng & Nisbett, 1999, 2000), and they hold a higher tolerance for apparently contradictory beliefs than North Americans (Peng & Nisbett, 1999). Hence, people in these cultures may feel less compelled to provide opposing ratings for pleasant versus unpleasant emotions (Schimmack et al. 2002). Besides in emotion literature, the cultural difference between holistic and analytic thinking also exists in belief in change (Choi et

al. 2007), self-belief (Spencer-Rodgers, Srivastava, et al., 2010), change in the stock market (Ji, Zhang, & Guo, 2008), attitudes toward out-groups as well as in-groups (Endo et al., 2000; Heine & Lehman, 1997b; Hewstone & Ward, 1985; Ma et al., 2010), judgment and decision making (Ji et al., 2008), dyadic negotiations (Keller, Loewenstein, & Jin, 2010).

In the context of interpersonal conflict management, we expect to see these ideas integrated in the affective experiences and dialectical cognitive mechanisms that individuals can marshal to neutralize culturally paradoxical situations. In particular, due to the globalization processes, how cultural paradox reacts to the increased interaction has become a tense topic. According to previous studies (e.g., Kanagawa et al., 2001; Kashima et al., 2005; Suh, 2002, Chiu, Hong, & Dweck, 1997; Norenzayan, Choi, & Nisbett, 2002), the abovementioned dialectic thinking has led to more contextualized and less fixed conflict reconciliation patterns.

2. Dialectical Approaches to Managing Conflict

'Dialectic', from the Greek *dialektike*, originally referred to the art of conversation, dialogue, discussion, controversy, and debate (Doel, 2008). It involved an exchange of arguments and counterarguments, propositions and counterpropositions, and theses and antitheses. It is "the study of contradiction in the very essence of objects" (Lenin 1961, p.253). In other words, "what makes [a] logic specifically dialectical", notes Castree (1996, p.351), "is that it is a logic of internal contradiction." It pits antagonistic and conflicting positions against one another. Beyond this, it also transforms the conflicted positions through the introduction of supplementary terms such as *being*, *nonbeing*, *becoming*. (Doel 2008) "The dialectical opposition neutralizes or supersedes ... the difference" Derrida (1995, p.101). It thus becomes a powerful way of engaging with our conflicted world and a method for neutralizing disagreements.

Across or within contexts, East Asians lack stability in self-concept and exhibit low self-concept consistency whereas Westerners tend to define the self in relatively stable, global terms and exhibit high self-concept consistency (Cousins, 1989; Kashima, et al., 1992; Choi & Choi, 2002; Sedikides, et al., 2003). The lack of stability in self-concept and low self-concept consistency signal embeddedness of an individual in social harmony (Hwang, 1987, 1999), which dictates an indirect approach to managing conflict with the main object of preserving long-term relationship (Leung et al., 2011).

Four principles of dialectic reasoning address paradoxes in conflict and are critical in understanding & managing conflicts

- a) Everything is transient and finite, existing in the medium of time
- b) Everything is composed of contradictions (opposing forces)
- c) Gradual changes lead to crises or turning points when one force overcomes its opponent force (quantitative change leads to qualitative change)
- d) Change is helical or spiral

For example, these ideas also appeared in the Art of War (Sun Tzu, 500 BC) on fluid transformation of contradictory forces, friends vs enemy, the strong vs the weak, and contextualized strategies . E.g. "Empty City Stratagem."

The above **ideas** give rise to the three dialectical or “transparadoxial” approaches in managing conflict

- 1) **Independent** opposites (either cooperation or competition)
- 2) **Interrelated** opposites (overlaps between cooperation and completion)
- 3) **Interdependent** opposites (both cooperation and competition) (Chen, 2008)
- 4) **Consultation** that transcends competition to cooperation

The second, **third**, and fourth approaches reflect holistic and long-term view on managing the dynamics of **conflict**. Examples in Chinese literature are “conquer the enemy without a battle” or “take one **step back**, the view is as wide as the sea and as high as the sky.”

John Llewelyn (1986) noted, “Contradiction is the principle that moves the world.” (p.7). It is universal as “everything hangs together with everything else” (Olsson 1991, p. 158). It is caused by opposing positions. Every position conflicts with itself and is estranged from itself from the off. That is **to say**, every position is given in motion and set in motion. “The animating force of confliction **cannot** be resolved or contained, least of all through a synthesis of contrary positions. Confliction **can** only be displaced from one position to another.” (Doel 2008, p.2635) “The white dot **will** become the black dot over time (and vice versa), in a never-ending cycle of change and **renewal**” (Spencer-Rodgers et al. 2010, p. 298). In short, conflict is dynamic and complex and it can only be reconciled. The end result of this reasoning process is synthesis and the resolution of seeming contradiction.

3. Moderating Role of Ambiguity

The tolerance in ambiguity reflects cognitive capacity in processing complexity, which refers to intricacy and compound in data. Reducing complexity in cognition is associated with the magic number of **seven** that human can process (Miller, 1956) and the sensemaking paradox (Weick, 1995; Simonds & Chabris, 1999).

Under Augier & March’s (2011) categorization, three types of ambiguities are relevant to a paradoxical perspective and dialectical approaches to conflict management: 1) vagueness about preferences, 2) vagueness about the definition of alternatives, and 3) contradictions in anticipations.

Since there is a higher degree of uncertainty in the Chinese culture (Gelfand et al, 2011; Hall, 1982; Peng & Nisbette, 1999), Chinese individuals embrace ambiguity more comfortably and are better at transforming ambiguity into flexibility in decision making and conflict management than Americans.

General Hypothesis: The types of ambiguity moderate cultural differences in managing conflicts such that

- 1) When there is a high degree of vagueness about preferences, both American and Chinese would avoid conflict;
- 2) When there is a high degree of vagueness about definition of alternatives, Americans would manage conflicts by “independent opposites” (either cooperation or competition) while Chinese would manage conflicts by “interrelated opposites” (overlap of cooperation and competition) and “interdependent opposites” (both cooperation and competition).

3) When there is a high degree of contradictions in anticipations, Americans would tend to manage conflict directly while Chinese would manage conflict indirectly through consultation.