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A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Lithuanian and Polish Adolescents' Conflict Styles

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Abstract

Based on the assumption that cultural orientations affect interpersonal conflicts, the study examined conflict styles across two national cultures of neighboring European countries, i.e. Lithuania and Poland. Whereas Poland and Lithuania score relatively high in terms of individualism, they differ in terms of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity-femininity. For the research purposes, a conflict resolving style questionnaire was applied, which was prepared by T. Wach according to the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument. The questionnaire was administered to 520 participants aged 13–15. Conflict style comparisons demonstrated that the Lithuanians chose dominating and accommodating styles more often than the Polish did, and the Polish chose integrating more often than the Lithuanians. The research findings can be a valuable source in predicting conflict resolution patterns.

Keywords: *conflict style, cultural dimension, Poland, Lithuania*

Introduction

When the term “conflict style” is discussed, the focus is on general tendencies of “patterned responses, or clusters of behavior” (Wilmot and Hocker, 2001, p. 130) which are used in the ongoing process of handling conflict interactions. Thus, a conflict management style provides an overall picture of a person’s communication orientation toward conflict (Oetzel and Ting-Toomey, 2003).

According to the dual concern model (Kilman and Thomas, 1977), an individual's conflict management styles are determined by whether the individual has a high or low concern for his/her own interests and outcomes relative to a high or low concern for his/her opponent's interests and outcomes. Based on this assumption, the following five conflict management styles are distinguished: *Avoiding* represents a low concern for oneself and others. This style is applied when individuals deny a conflict and withdraw from the communication required to deal with it. *Accommodating* means a low concern for oneself and a high concern for others. It is used when individuals focus on reaching agreement, sacrificing their own desires in the interest of satisfying the needs of others. This style is characterized by smoothing over differences and striving for harmony in order to preserve relationships with others. *Competing* describes a high concern for oneself and a low concern for others. The style is characterized by forcing one's own solutions on others. *Collaborating* displays a high concern for all. Individuals who apply this style attempt to integrate the needs of both parties, striving for a win-win solution. *Compromising* displays a moderate concern for all – oneself and others. This style is applied when individuals try to find a middle ground solution with a modest effort.

In the literature, together with personality trait and situation variables cultural background is labeled as one of the underlying factors influencing the ways of handling interpersonal conflicts (e.g., Oudenhoven et al., 1998; Oetzel and Ting-Toomey, 2003). As stated by Oberg (2006, p. 144), "people have a way of accepting their culture as both the best and the only way of doing things".

There is a relatively broad body of literature that goes beyond a simple cross-cultural comparison of differences in conflict management styles preferences of members of distinctive cultural groups. However, the mainstream studies on cross-cultural conflict management focus on cultures from Asia, Western Europe and America. The conflict management of the Central and Eastern European countries is almost unexplored. We know no study that compares conflict resolution styles in Lithuania with other countries. The presented study aims to compare conflict resolution style preferences of the Lithuanians and the Polish.

Research Methodology

Cultural differences and conflict management styles

Among the cultural factors that may strongly affect the way people attempt to manage conflicts are the values they seek to achieve and expectations regarding

the efficacy of strategies in achieving the values (Ohbuchi et al., 1999). Variations in conflict management as a function of a country can be understood in terms of the cultural dimensions in which these countries vary (Oudenhoven et al., 1998; Soeters, 1996). This study invokes four fundamental dimensions (masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism, and power distance), described by Hofstede (2001).

The *masculinity-femininity* dimension refers to social roles associated with gender (Oudenhoven et al., 1998). Masculinity reflects orientation on success and achievement, and femininity is associated with harmony, helpfulness, and humility (Tsai and Chi, 2009). Thus, members of cultures high in masculinity might be associated with assertiveness and aggression, whereas members of cultures high in femininity tend to express a high concern for others.

The *uncertainty avoidance* dimension refers to the individual's need for security. A large degree of uncertainty avoidance leads to a rather strong rule orientation (laws and regulations) and intolerance of differences (Soeters, 1996). In cultures characterized by low uncertainty avoidance, people tend to accept life as it comes, they get more easily engaged in new situations, and different religions or political views may coexist rather peacefully (Oudenhoven et al., 1998). In cultures with low uncertainty avoidance, individuals consider social conflict to be natural and inherent to daily life, and they tend to believe that social conflict can be approached constructively. In contrast, individuals in cultures with high uncertainty avoidance tend to consider conflict as undesirable and try to avoid it as much as possible.

The *individualism-collectivism* dimension reflects the strength of the links between the individual and all kinds of groups. An individualistic orientation reflects weak ties as individualists focus on their own interests, and individual success is considered a source of well-being. A collectivistic orientation gives priority to group goals more than personal goals in decision making (Ohbuchi et al., 1999), reflects loyalty of group members (Oudenhoven et al., 1998, 441), emphasizes relatedness and the needs of others (Tsai and Chi, 2009). This means that members of individualistic cultures are characterized by high assertiveness (attempt to satisfy one's own concerns), whilst members of collectivistic cultures show low assertiveness. However, the collectivistic cultures' high avoidance and accommodation approaches to conflict correspond to the individualistic cultures' high competitiveness and collaboration approaches, resulting in a similar degree of cooperativeness (Vollmer and Wolf, 2015).

The *power distance* dimension is defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally (Soeters, 1996). Individuals from small

power distance cultures value equal power distributions across different social roles (Ting-Toomey, 2005, as cited in Merkin, 2006). They assess participation in decision making, question authority and challenge the status quo for the sake of being fair (Ohbuchi et al., 1999). They also tend to express themselves directly for the sake of clarity (Merkin, 2006). Cultures high in power distance tend to stress conformity and submissiveness and tend to be more authoritarian societies (Hofstede, 2001). Thus, a preference for obedient, conforming, and cooperative communication is related to cultures high in power distance.

The national cultures of Lithuania and Poland

Both similarities and differences can be established when comparing the national cultures of Lithuania and Poland. The data (Hofstede, 2001; Huettinger, 2008) clearly indicate that both cultures favor *individualism* – both score moderate-high (60). On the 76 countries list, both countries are ranked 23rd–26th together with Luxembourg and Estonia (Huettinger, 2008, 369). Moreover, both countries represent a culture characterized by moderate *power distance*. The Lithuanians score low-moderate (42), the Polish score high-moderate (68). Thus, Polish culture presents a greater acceptance of the hierarchical differences than Lithuanian culture. The cultures of Lithuania and Poland differ primarily in terms of *masculinity-femininity*. Lithuania scores very low in masculinity (19). However, Poland scores moderately for masculinity (64). In terms of *uncertainty avoidance*, Lithuania scores moderately (65), Poland scores very high (93). The high score for Poland suggests less tolerance of ambiguity and less inclination to change.

Based on the findings of the empirical studies outlined above, for this study we formulated the following *hypotheses*. The *masculinity-femininity* dimension leads to the assumption that the Lithuanians, as the representatives of a more feminine nation, would show more accommodating in conflict than the Polish, from a more masculine nation (Hypothesis 1). According to the *uncertainty avoidance* dimension, the Polish would tend to avoid conflict more frequently (Hypothesis 2). Based on the *power distance* theoretical framework, we hypothesize that the Lithuanians would prefer the competing conflict management strategy to a higher degree than the Polish (Hypothesis 3).

Research Sample

Our empirical research was carried out on a group of 263 lower secondary school students from Poland and 257 lower secondary school students from Lithuania. In the group of students from Poland, 138 girls and 125 boys were studied, and in the group from Lithuania, there were 131 girls and 126 boys. They

were adolescents aged 13 to 15 (the average age for the Polish youth was $M=14.36$, $SD=0.75$, for the Lithuanian youth $M=13.95$, $SD=0.79$).

The research was conducted in groups at schools and participation in it was voluntary. The students signed questionnaires with their nicknames or initials. Before filling in the questionnaire, the respondents were instructed precisely what to do. The participants were allowed to ask questions in unclear situations. It should be emphasised that the young people responded positively to the research, showed interest in it and willingly answered the questionnaire questions.

Instrument and Procedures

Polish and Lithuanian translations of the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) were applied. This research tool includes thirty pairs of statements, which characterise behaviour in a conflict situation. It consists of five scales, which correspond to five styles of responding to conflict situations. The statements which belong to the particular styles are matched in pairs so that each of the styles is compared with each of the remaining styles three times. Pairs are selected in such a way that both statements are equally judged in terms of social approval, which is intended to eliminate its influence on the choices made by respondents.

In the instructions, the subject is asked to choose a statement from the pair which describes his or her reactions in a conflict situation in the best way. This tool, compared to other similar measures, is fairly reliable. The mean Cronbach α coefficient is 0.60, whereas the reliability of the test repeatability is between 0.61 and 0.68 for different scales. The questionnaire also shows satisfactory correlations with other measures of the conflict resolving styles, which indicates its relevance. Other empirical proofs of the method relevance are described by the authors in the article on its construction (Kilmann, Thomas, 1977).

Data Analysis

Comparison of mean scores according to the questionnaire scales was made by means of a one-factor analysis of ANOVA variance (statistics F). A specialised method, the so-called Tukey RIR test (it is included in the computer data analysis package called 'Statistica') was applied in order to detail research of the differences found.

Research Results

Differences between genders in terms of strategies for coping with a social conflict situation due to the age of the researched youth from Poland and Lithuania are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean (*M*), standard deviations (*SD*), and significance of differences (*F*) in strategies for coping with age-related social conflict situations for girls and boys from Poland and Lithuania

Scales	Age of Subjects	Girls from Poland (N=138)		Boys from Poland (N=125)		Girls from Lithuania (N=131)		Boys from Lithuania (N=126)		F	p
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Competing	13	3.53	2.00	6.89	2.81	5.78	3.07	6.28	2.73	5.13	0.002
	14	6.00	3.47	6.20	2.49	7.06	2.91	6.96	2.67	1.50	n.i.
	15	5.48	2.79	6.30	2.91	6.00	2.78	7.63	2.12	4.87	0.003
Avoiding	13	4.67	1.59	4.32	2.50	4.76	1.96	4.94	1.98	0.55	n.i.
	14	4.85	2.27	5.15	2.39	4.39	2.25	4.68	2.07	0.93	n.i.
	15	5.01	2.73	4.32	2.20	4.67	2.53	5.19	2.63	1.13	n.i.
Accommodating	13	7.80	2.18	5.61	2.44	7.41	2.01	6.78	2.14	4.81	0.003
	14	6.32	2.72	5.59	2.57	6.44	2.70	6.00	2.09	1.00	n.i.
	15	5.95	2.42	6.11	2.46	6.67	2.54	6.41	1.90	0.94	n.i.
Compromise	13	7.20	2.11	6.32	1.72	6.51	1.61	6.30	1.53	1.21	n.i.
	14	6.44	2.37	6.73	2.00	6.60	2.23	6.71	2.37	0.15	n.i.
	15	6.95	1.92	6.61	2.32	6.88	2.16	6.06	2.26	1.47	n.i.
Collaboration	13	6.80	1.47	6.61	2.30	5.57	2.14	5.68	1.81	2.68	0.05
	14	6.27	6.27	6.22	1.94	5.69	2.02	5.57	1.84	1.41	n.i.
	15	6.59	6.59	6.52	2.05	5.81	1.83	4.72	1.92	7.19	0.0001

Key: p-statistical significance, n.i.-insignificant

The results presented in Table 1 show that the 13-15-year-old girls and boys from Poland and Lithuania do not differ significantly in the mean level of using avoiding and compromising strategies for coping with a social conflict situation. Also, the arithmetic means of the results for competing, accommodating, and collaboration do not significantly differ in relation to the 14-year-old girls and boys from Poland and Lithuania. Moreover, by analysing the mean result level in the accommodating strategy in a social conflict situation, it is to be concluded that there is a significant lack of differentiation in their values in relation to the 15-year-old girls and boys from Poland and Lithuania.

An interesting result of the analysis is the fact of finding the significance of differences between the 13-year-old girls and boys from Poland and Lithuania at the mean level of using the strategy of competing ($F=5.13$), accommodating ($F=4.81$), and collaboration ($F=2.68$). The differences are statistically significant at the level lower than 0.003. Diversification of the mean result values was also found in the collaborating strategy ($F=7.19$) in the group of 15-year-old girls and boys from Poland and Lithuania. Statistics F proved to be highly significant statistically at the $p < 0.0001$ level.

By applying Tukey's RIR test it was found that among the 13-year-old boys from Poland ($M=6.89$), the girls from Lithuania ($M=5.78$), and the boys from Lithuania ($M=6.28$) there was a definitely higher mean level of the strategy of competing compared to the 13-year-old girls from Poland ($M=3.53$). In turn, the 15-year-old boys from Lithuania ($M=7.63$) were characterised by a significantly higher mean level of the strategy of competing compared to the 15-year-old girls from Poland ($M=5.48$). Moreover, a higher mean level of the strategy of accommodating was noticed among the 13-year-old girls from Poland ($M=7.80$) and the girls from Lithuania ($M=7.41$) compared to the 13-year-old boys from Poland ($M=5.61$). With regard to the strategy of collaboration, particularly the 13-year-old girls from Poland ($M=6.80$) were characterised by a significantly higher mean level compared to the girls from Lithuania ($M=5.57$) and the boys from Lithuania ($M=5.68$). Moreover, the mean level of the strategy of collaboration was higher among the 15-year-old girls from Poland ($M=6.59$) and the boys from Poland ($M=6.52$) compared to the boys from Lithuania ($M=4.72$).

Discussion

In accordance with Hypotheses 1 and 3, the results indicate that the Lithuanian students preferred the dominating and accommodating styles more than the Polish ones. Contrary to expectations (Hypothesis 2), the Polish preferred not the avoiding style but the integrating one significantly more than the Lithuanians. The finding can be explained by the taxonomy of the four cultural dimensions. Differences in preferences for accommodating and dominating might be due to the different scores on masculinity-femininity and power distance dimensions. Tsai and Chi (2009) pointed out that femininity is associated with avoiding and accommodating approaches while masculinity increases the use of dominating and collaborating approaches because of their emphasis on harmony and achievement, respectively. Power distance is correlated with the tendency for employing

dominating or accommodating approaches since people's attitudes toward social status identity or equality are different.

Preferences of the Polish respondents for the integrating style may be attributed to both uncertainty avoidance and power distance dimensions. Oudenhoven et al. (1998) found that individuals from high uncertainty avoidance cultures are more problem solving oriented in conflicts than individuals from low uncertainty avoidance countries. To explain these findings, the researchers argued: "Perhaps the very need to avoid uncertainty may have led to the implementation of procedures for handling conflict. If there are clear procedures for how to handle conflicts, it may be easier to approach conflict in an open way, so that in uncertainty avoidance cultures, problem solving approaches may also be common" (p. 453). Consistent with this idea, Tsai and Chi (2009) argued that uncertainty avoidance is mostly related to the tendency for employing the collaborating approach or avoiding approach otherwise, since the willingness to pursue a better possibility or to stay put avoiding worsening the status quo governs, respectively.

The research revealed differences in the strategies for coping with a conflict situation employed by the adolescents from Poland and Lithuania as regards their age and gender. Among the 13- and 15-year-olds, it is the girls from Poland that more often try to find solutions to disputable issues. They seek to communicate with their partner in order to find a common and mutually beneficial solution to a problem that emerged in the form of a conflict. So, as adolescent girls acquire social experiences, they constructively learn to deal with the situation which is a social conflict and seek mutual understanding. The result of this research coincides with the findings by Pisula and Sikora (2008), Noakes and Rinaldi (2006), and Ayas et al. (2010).

It should be noted that in conflict situations, the Lithuanian girls at the age of 13 show a greater tendency to abandon their personal goals, tolerate threats to their own interests, and do not take any actions to defend their situation, whereas they meet the goals that the partner imposes. It can be assumed that a female teenager perceives a partner in a conflict situation as a physically strong person with a great advantage over her and is afraid to object to him/her. In accordance with the existing social norms and patterns or traditional gender roles, a woman is required to be gentle, show restraint and make concessions. Perhaps the greater obedience of these girls to conflicting interactions is due to social consent (Poraj, 2002; Frączek, 2003; Ayas et al., 2010). It must also be added that the 13-year-old Lithuanian girls solve a conflict situation by undertaking attacking actions towards the partner who is perceived as the one who triggered this conflict. By applying attacking behaviours, an adolescent girl wants to harm a person and to make it

difficult or impossible to implement the other person's plans (e.g., Card et al., 2008; Frączek, 2003; Guskowska, 2004).

Another fact that is worth noticing is that among the 13- and 15-year-olds, it is the Lithuanian boys who are more likely to involve aggressive actions while defending their own interests in a conflict situation. This may indicate that with the increase in the need for autonomy during adolescence, the partner has less influence on an adolescent's decisions. The presented result is reflected in some of the data existing in the literature, which demonstrate a higher tendency of boys to aggressive behaviour in difficult situations, motivated by the desire to confirm their gender (e.g., Guskowska, 2004; Noakes and Rinaldi, 2006). However, it must be stressed that the 15-year-old boys from Poland more often choose creative solutions to a conflict, i.e. solutions that lead to mutual satisfaction of both parties of the conflict and that enable full satisfaction of their needs. It can be assumed that the intellectual capacity of boys at the age of 15 allows them to properly assess difficult situations and to see the possibility of solving it. Hence, they are willing to cooperate in a conflict situation (Pisula, Sikora, 2008; Missotten et al., 2011). And apart from this, while gaining social experience, boys learn how to constructively deal with the situations of social conflict by seeking mutual compromise.

Conclusions

The way adolescents cope with conflict situations depends on their sex and age. The 13- and 15-year-old girls and 15-year-old boys from Poland are more likely to resolve and overcome conflict situations by changing their own actions or surroundings that threaten their goals. The 13-year-old girls from Lithuania are definitely more likely, while in a conflict situation, to give up on their own goals, allowing the partner to pursue his/her interests or pursue their goals at the expense of the partner's desires by attacking him/her to make concessions. On the other hand, the 13- and 15-year-old Lithuanian boys and the 13-year-old boys from Poland chose to respond to a conflict by undertaking attacking actions towards the partner who is perceived as the one who triggered the conflict.

The findings highlight the influence of culture on conflict behavior. The Lithuanians choose the dominating and accommodating styles more often than the Polish do, and the Polish choose the integrating style more often than the Lithuanians. The study extended the understanding of conflict behavior in Lithuania and Poland and provided a valuable comparison of conflict management style preferences in both countries.

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