

Relation between cultural dimensions and their impact on preference of conflict styles

Relacja pomiędzy wymiarami kultury, a ich znaczeniem dla wyboru stylu w konflikcie.

Summary: This paper proposes a broad perspective for studying the influence of cultural dimensions and their influence on the process of choosing conflict management styles. Definition of both culture and that of conflict are presented. Analytical review of research on the conflict styles and their relation with dimensions of culture are presented in this article. Within the paper following cultural dimensions are considered in the context of conflict management styles: individualism and collectivism, high and low power distance as well as high and low uncertainty avoidance. All models of cultural dimensions are considered within the cultural dimensions framework of Hofstede (1981). In case of individualism there is preference for an avoiding style of conflict management and in collectivist cultures typical choice is that of compromising and obliging conflict style. In case of high power distance avoiding conflict style is likely to be chosen by members of High Power cultures. Few studies cover the problem of power distance and conflict style preference, however, we may assume that the individual will choose conflict style that allows him to maintain either low or high power distance typical for his own culture. Finally the paper shows connection of low uncertainty avoidance and the choice of collaborative and compromising conflict styles. The implications of conflict resolution styles across cultures for the future research and implementation in organizations as well as in international relations are discussed.

Key words: intercultural communication, conflict management, international relations

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Streszczenie: Artykuł ten przedstawia szeroką perspektywę na relację pomiędzy wymiarami kultury a ich wpływem na wybór stylu w konflikcie. Zaprezentowano zarówno teorię kultury jak i konfliktu. Artykuł stanowi przegląd literatury w zakresie relacji wyboru stylu konfliktu a wymiarami kultury. W artykule wzięto pod uwagę wymiary kultury takie jak: indywidualizm, kolektywizm, wysoki oraz niski dystans władzy jak i wysoki oraz niski poziom unikania niepewności. Wszystkie wymiary kultury opisane są w kontekście ram wymiarów kultury proponowanych przez G. Hofstede (1981).

W wypadku indywidualizmu odnotowano preferencję wyboru stylu unikającego w konflikcie, natomiast w kulturach kolektywistycznych typowy wybór to styl kompromisowy lub ulegający. W wypadku wysokiego dystansu władzy preferowany jest styl unikający. Niewiele badań podejmuje temat dystansu władzy i jego relacji z wyborem stylu konfliktu, możemy jednak zakładać, iż jednostka skłania się do wyboru takiego stylu konfliktu jaki pozwala zachować dystans władzy typowy dla jej kultury.

Artykuł pokazuje ponadto związek niskiego unikania niepewności oraz wyboru kompromisowego lub kooperacyjnego stylu konfliktu.

Omawia również potrzebę dalszego badania relacji pomiędzy wymiarami kultury a wyborem stylu konfliktu, oraz pokazuje możliwe zastosowania wiedzy na temat relacji między wymiarem kultury a wyborem stylu konfliktu w zarządzaniu organizacjami, a także w relacjach międzynarodowych.

Słowa kluczowe: komunikacja międzykulturowa, zarządzanie konfliktem, relacje międzynarodowe

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1. Introduction: connection between culture and behaviour

To understand and individual's behaviour in an intercultural conflict situation and consequently his preference for style in conflict handling, one must start with analysing how culture and cultural background influence human actions. In order to do that we need to define the concept of culture. The first complete definition of culture was provided by anthropologist Edward Tylor, who defined the concept of culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired as a member of society." (1871). What is meant by acquisition is the fact that culture is learned. Unlearned behaviours are comprised in phy-

siological spectrum of responses of the body such as the knee-jerk reflex, the eye-blinking reflex, breathing, and the full range of social human behavioural patterns are otherwise learned through cultural learning. The concept of cultural learning and cultural background was explored as early at the turn of 20th century. Franz Boas argued that we need look to the causes of observed ethnological phenomena as embedded in the specific cultural context of the societies (1940). Cultural relativism resulting from work of Margaret Mead (1928), Ruth Benedict (1934), Franz Boas (1940), Melville Herskovits (1973) indicates that we cannot understand behaviour severing it from cultural background and cultural learning. The central idea in cultural relativism according to Melville J. Herskovits (1973), is that “judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation” i. e. as an individual is not able to choose the original culture he is born in, and learns to embrace the learned behaviours of those around us to belong and to feel connected with a group. To further consider how cultural learning and cultural background influence behaviour, we need to be aware that the definition of culture incorporates in itself all values, stereotypes, beliefs and rules, characteristic to the members of a society and differentiating it from other societies. Culture and cultural background refer therefore to fields such as education, history of a given culture, shared values by which we may define a group sharing similar language and traditions and behaviours.

Later definition of culture and cultural background is widely used in the business context till today. Created by G. Hofstede, it defines culture as the “collective programming of the mind which distinguishes one group from another” (Hofstede, 1980). That definition gives a basis to differentiation between cultures and it sets the core values and norms for cultures in the measurable form of dimensions. Hofstede went on to distinguish five opposing dimensions of culture i.e. individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance, power distance and short-term vs. long-term orientation (Hofstede, 1980).

2. Relation between culture and conflict and conflict styles.

However, to correlate person’s behaviour in the context of conflict with cultural dimensions we will use the definition of conflict as provided by Hocker and Wilmot (2010), “Interpersonal Conflict” (p.11), who defined conflict as an “expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from the

other party in achieving their goals". Relation between conflict and conflict styles was explored by research on conflict management by Blake and Mouton (1964) or Borisoff and Victor (1989), who defined five main conflict management approaches i.e. problem-solving, smoothing, forcing, withdrawal and sharing. Followed by other authors with a variation on the terminology of the concepts, such as Thomas-Kilmann (1974) who developed a model in which they speak of five dimensions of conflict management with their styles defined as competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding and accommodating.

In Thomas-Kilmann model Competing style is defined by assertiveness, yet lacking cooperation orientation, where power is stressed. Each party is involved in a perusal of own aims and concerns disregarding the needs and concerns of the other party. Power is used to win at all cost. Competing stands for upholding the rights of an individual, defence of an individual's position, believed to be the correct one, or prosaically – sheer need to win.

Collaborating style, on the other hand, is characterized by assertive approach, yet with simultaneous willingness for cooperation. Within a collaboration an individual undertakes to seek for possible solutions with the other party, trying to find solutions satisfying to both sides. Such collaborative style implicates deepened research into the problem for underlying concerns and needs of the parties. In such a style competing for resources or confrontation are replaced by mutual interest in the solution of the conflict. Avoiding style is characterized by approach which is both uncooperative as well as unassertive. An individual does not pursue neither his/her aims not that of the other party. No confrontation with the conflict situation takes place and it may take a form of postponing, or complete withdrawal from a potentially threatening situation.

Accommodating style is characterized by both cooperation oriented approach, yet at the same time it is unassertive. An individual abandons his individual needs and concerns to gratify the needs and concerns of the other party.

Compromising style, on the other hand, is characterized by cooperation orientation and being assertive at the same time. In compromising style, the aim is to find an acceptable solution for both conflict parties. In compromising style finding a middle ground is crucial which indicates less willingness to work out the conflict situation as in the collaborating style.

The relation between conflict style preference and cultural dimensions have been explored in the research of, among other, and Ting-Toomey (Ting-Toomey et al., 1991) who proved that our individual preferences of handling

conflicts are culture specific, and we may assume that individuals will adhere to conflict resolution styles which are consistent with their cultural values. Similarly, the research of Gunkel et al. (2014) shows there is a cultural fit meaning there is a direct effect preference of conflict handling styles and cultural dimensions.

In this paper I will undertake to present individualism, collectivism, power distance and uncertainty avoidance as being correlated to the preference for specific conflict style.

3. Individualism and Collectivism and their relation with conflict resolution.

As defined by G. Hofstede cultural dimensions (G. Hofstede, 1980) are reflecting in our behaviour due to cultural learning. By Individualism/Collectivism we mean the pursuit of private interests whereas by collectivists we understand the pursuit of the common interest of the collective, community (John W. Berry, 1997). Individualists' emphasis on independence and self-reliance as well as uniqueness, stress put on individual competence vary largely from collectivist focus on the other, self-restraint and respect for one's social group (G. Hofstede, 1980). Moreover, aspects of behaviour such as expressiveness and assertiveness are connected with individualism as opposite to preference for listening and silence and face/dignity saving behaviours in collectivist cultures. Individuals displaying an individualist orientation tended to give greater importance to satisfying personal needs and preferred a competing style, rather than an obliging or avoiding style. In contrast, collectivists seemed more likely to sacrifice personal needs for the sake of the group and preferred an integrating style.

Equally the concept face in Asian cultures has particular significance in conflict management and was already defined in 1935, by Chinese writer Yutang Lin. Face according to Lin can be "granted" and "lost" and "fought for" and "presented as a gift". In some instances, as defined by Brown, Face saving and face restoration in negotiation. In D. Druckman (Ed.) Sage. (1977) (pp.275-300): "protecting against loss of face becomes so central an issue that it swamps the importance of the tangible issues at stake and generates intense conflicts that can impede progress toward agreement and increase substantially the costs of conflict resolution". Similarly, Augsburger points that face saving does not solve conflict, particularly when it leads to conflict avoidance or fails to bring conflict in the open (Augsburger,1995).

Further, collectivists were more likely to prefer an obliging style and individualist cultures an avoiding style of conflict management. (Meera Komaraju, Stephen J. Dollinger, Jennifer L. Lovell, 2008). Study by Holt and DeVore (2005) proves similarly that collectivistic cultures show preference for compromising, avoiding conflict style to a greater extent than cultures considered individualistic. Dominating style preference is, on the other hand, more typical for individualistic cultures.

4.High and low power distance and their relation with conflict style preference

Power distance is understood as a manner in which society relates to inequalities. (Hofstede, 1980). The higher the distance of power the greater the deference to a person of authority. On the other hand, culture upholding ideals of small inequalities and similar treatment of each individual will be specific for Low Power Distance. In High Power Distance cultures, inequality is perceived as the basis of the order in society (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). In Low Power Distance cultures, inequality will be purposefully flattened and relationships equalized.

Few studies however show how Power Distance impacts conflict resolution.

It is suggested nevertheless, that High Power Distance may negatively influence possible conflict resolution situations. As pointed by Lazear & Rosen (1981) members of organization with top positions may be perceived as winners not only by other members of the team but also by themselves. Moreover, employees on top of the career leader may themselves be highly competitive and therefore conflict resolution may be obstructed (Garcia, 2006).

Whereas in teams where the concept of shared leadership, low power distance is promoted (e.g., Carson, Tesluk, & Marrone, 2007; Katz & Kahn, 1978), power distance is purposefully equalized, team work may result in better effectiveness as the individual members are more dedicated to achieving goals.

As proposed by Bruins & Wilke (1992) individuals with immediate access to power maybe less likely to giving the power up when working in a team setting. We may assume that individuals in High Power Distance cultures may be less likely to adhere to conflict resolution styles that would devoid them of power distance. The integrating style of conflict resolution, an obliging style, and a compromising style are not consistent with maintaining high power distance. Each of the previously mentioned conflict resolution styles rely on

cooperation which is not in line with high power orientation. The competing style is however, being likely to be connected with exertion of control, little tolerance for other types of views, preference for competitiveness and a rather uncooperative behaviour to meet own needs in a conflict (Rahim, 1983). Similarly, in avoiding conflict style, power distance with its inequalities may be maintained and it is likely to be chosen by members of High Power cultures.

As previously indicated few studies have been dedicated to relation between power distance and conflict resolution. Purohit and Simmers (2006) however, point that power distance is positively correlated to a competing style and the avoiding style as well.

5. Uncertainty avoidance and its relation with conflict style preference.

Uncertainty avoidance is understood as tolerance for handling uncertain and ambiguous situations (Hofstede, 1980). In High Uncertainty avoidance unregulated, often disorganized or sudden situations are perceived as uncomfortable, unpleasant. In High Uncertainty avoidance cultures possibility of dealing with uncertainty will be regulated by laws, procedures and regulations. In Low Uncertainty avoidance cultures tolerance for the unknown and uncertain is significant and relatively little protection from the uncertain and unknown will be offered in terms of laws and regulations concerning uncertainty (Hofstede, 1980). "Countries exhibiting strong UA index maintain rigid codes of belief and behaviour, and are intolerant of unorthodox behaviour and ideas." (Hofstede, 1980).

Few studies embarked on testing how uncertainty avoidance relates to conflict resolution and in particular the choice of conflict style, however, Purohit and Simmers (2006) proved that uncertainty avoidance relates negatively to the choice of a competing conflict style and it also correlates positively with the choice of an avoiding conflict style. In line with their theoretical prediction, He, Zhu, and Peng (2002) found that high uncertainty avoidance is negatively related to a collaborative style and positively related to a compromising style. As pointed out by W. L. Mangundjaya, Ayuningtyas Runi Putri (2018) relation between high uncertainty avoidance and avoiding conflict style preference is significant. This can be explained by the fact that in cultures with high uncertainty avoidance index there is a strong preference for situations that are regulated and organized and consequently situation which are unregulated and disorganized can be perceived as uncomfortable and a threat. Whereas study by Gunkel, M. Schlaegel, Ch. Taras, V. (2016) shows connection

of low uncertainty avoidance (particularly when combined with collectivism and long-term orientation) and the choice of collaborative and compromising conflict styles. Which consequently can be explained by the fact that in low uncertainty index cultures situations which are disorganized and unregulated are not perceived as posing a direct threat, are thus accepted with no strong preference for regulation (Hofstede, 2001).

What needs to be emphasized is that only four studies according to Gunkel, M. Schlaegel, Ch. Taras, V. (2016) explore the relation between uncertainty avoidance and preference for conflict style and the research determining this relation still needs to be undertaken for more conclusive evidence.

Conclusion:

This paper shows a significant relation between cultural dimensions created by Hofstede, in particular Individualism and Collectivism as well as High and Low Power Distance and their connection to the preference of conflict styles. It also provides relation between conflict style preference and Uncertainty Avoidance.

Further dimensions created by Hofstede such as Masculinity and Femininity as well as Long and Short Term Orientation, Indulgence and Restraint require additional and more conclusive study to draw definite relations between them and preference for conflict styles. In the light of presented theories and research this paper may be of interest for Managers in international teams where intercultural tensions within project can be handled with more awareness of preferences for conflict styles and their consistency with cultural values. It may serve as a reference in management of multicultural conflict situations particularly in global governance and management. Similarly it might be considered as guideline for conflict management in International relations. Furthermore, the paper may serve as a guideline for an analysis of preferences in intercultural conflict and as such enable increased awareness of conflict resolution management in multicultural projects.

However, further research of cultural dimensions and their role in preference of conflict styles needs to be undertaken in the future to be able to understand the connection between cultural values and their impact on situations of conflict in depth. As shown in the research of Gunkel, M. Schlaegel, Ch. Taras, V. (2016) there is need for more in depth studies on relation to conflict style preference needs more in depth study as only 17 such studies

were conducted via surveying and only one of them had been conducted on individuals from 31 countries.

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