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Who despairs of choosing strategies for conflict resolution among Japanese?
psychological consequences of opposing the predominant cultural value

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This study assessed different degrees of distress felt by Japanese people during conflict resolution. Participants with high regard for social harmony were predicted to be distressed by conflicts that involve assertive strategies. By contrast, those with low regard for the value of social harmony would be distressed by conflict both by taking assertive strategies and by taking avoidance. After assigning 57 Japanese people (25 men, 32 women) to one of two conflict conditions (assertion condition and avoidance condition), the extent to which they were distressed by resolutions of nine conflict situations (scenarios) was measured. Results supported the prediction only for people with low regard for the value of social harmony. Results suggest that people with a different stance from the cultural value avoid showing their opinions which might engender their maladaptation in society. Conversely, people conforming to cultural values might readily share their ideas with others.

Key words: Conflict resolution, Cultural value, Distress, Japanese, Social harmony

Introduction

Studies exploring conflict resolution have demonstrated that Japanese people tend to avoid conflict situations (e.g., Goldman, 1994; Ohbuchi, 1998). Cultural psychology research has demonstrated that Japanese people are highly motivated to maintain relationships and social harmony (e.g., Heine, Lenman, Markus, & Kitayama, 1999). This motivation might also affect conflict situations; results of several studies suggest that the motivation is related to a preference for conflict avoidance (Leung, Brew, Zhang & Zhang, 2011; Roloff & Ifert, 2000; Tjosvold & Sun, 2002). Ohbuchi and Atsumi (2010) reported that employees who opt for conflict avoidance are looked upon favorably by others in that they are regarded as cooperative members of the organization.

However, conflict management researchers have not regarded avoidance as an effective strategy for resolving conflict (De Drew, 1997; Shell, 2006; Turner & Pratkanis, 1997). It is particularly interesting that conflict avoidance is not regarded as effective even among Japanese (Ohbuchi & Takahashi, 1994; Ohbuchi, Suzuki, & Hayashi, 2000). Even though

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assertive strategies are effective for conflict resolution, they entail risks of escalating conflict by disturbing social harmony. Prevailing among Japanese people is encouragement to adopt strategies of avoidance. Therefore, apparently, Japanese people feel normative pressure to choose conflict avoidance to maintain social harmony.

Ohbuchi and Saito (2007) reported their results obtained for the choice of avoidance among Japanese people, inferring that its prevalence derives from the use of normative pressure. Ohbuchi and Saito (2007) hypothesized that perception of a cultural norm involves an erroneous belief. To test this hypothesis, Japanese students were asked to rate both their own and others’ covert and overt reactions to conflicts presented in different scenarios. The ratings revealed the students’ feelings that others judged avoidance as more preferable than they did. In fact, they chose the avoidance path more often than they privately wanted to do in conflict situations. These findings indicate that, although Japanese people privately do not believe strongly in the necessity of conflict avoidance, perceived social normative pressure leads them to resort to that strategy publicly to conform to a belief that others endorse the maintenance of social harmony.

Nevertheless, not all Japanese people feel normative pressure for avoidance. For example, Saito and Ohbuchi (2014) reported that people with high regard for the value of social harmony infer that others equally view avoidance as preferable for resolution, whereas people with low regard for social harmony feel normative pressure because of biased perceptions of others’ behaviors. These findings suggest that Japanese people generally regard social harmony as a predominant cultural value and believe that people who have a different stance from cultural values feel normative pressure to adopt avoidance. A shared cultural value that is predominant in a society induces those who do not internalize it to engage in consistent behavior (Vandello, Cohen, & Ransom, 2008; Zou et al., 2009), but the perceived idiosyncrasy of self from the predominant cultural value might engender a sense of isolation or loneliness (Coontz, 1992; Miller & Ratner, 1998; Saito & Ohbuchi, 2014). Results indicate that a perception of contradiction from the predominant cultural value indirectly causes social maladjustment by people who do not share the predominant cultural value (Ogihara & Uchida, 2014).

Presumably, people who do not value social harmony in Japanese society invariably confront a contradiction with the cultural value in conflict situations. People who value social harmony might avoid distress in conflicts by using avoidance, which is consistent with their concern for social harmony, and which is regarded as approval by others. By contrast, they might be distressed in conflicts by adopting assertion, which entails risk of disturbing social harmony. Alternatively, people who do not value social harmony might be distressed in situations of conflict by adopting avoidance and by being constrained by the value of social harmony as the cultural value, and unable to express their own beliefs and act according to them. Anticipating the hostility of others, they might be distressed in conflict situations when taking assertive strategies that accord with their own beliefs, if the beliefs are contrary to cultural values.
Hypothesis 1: Japanese participants with high regard for the value of social harmony are more distressed by adopting assertion than by adopting avoidance to resolve conflicts.

Hypothesis 2: Japanese participants with low regard for the value of social harmony will be more distressed by avoidance than participants with high regard for the value of social harmony.

Hypothesis 3: Japanese participants with low regard for the value of social harmony will show no difference in distress when using assertion and avoidance as conflict management styles.

Method

Participants
This scenario study was completed by 57 Japanese people (47 Japanese university students (21 men, 26 women) and 10 high school teachers (4 men, 6 women)). Their mean age was 21.75 years (SD = 2.08). Participants were assigned randomly to one of the two conditions: assertion (N=27: university students (7 men, 12 women), high school teachers (4 men, 4 women)) or avoidance (N=30: university students (14 men, 14 women), high school teachers (0 man, 2 women)).

Procedure
For nine constructed scenarios, an actor of the same sex as the participant was involved in a conflict with friends, colleagues or neighbors, and was subsequently faced with choosing either assertion or avoidance to resolve the conflict. Half the participants were assigned randomly to a condition in which actors were presented consistently as confronting the choice of assertion. Half were presented consistently as confronting the choice of avoidance. To establish generalizability, conflict scenarios of three types were prepared for each relationship: cognitive, resource, and norm conflicts (Thomas, 1976). Cognitive conflict is a discussion of some controversial issue. Resource conflict is a competition over tangible assets or personal interest. Normative conflict is some interpersonal trouble involving transgression of a social norm. The scenarios were ordered randomly to remove any order effect. Participants were then asked to imagine each of the following scenarios.

1. Cognitive conflict (friend): You have lunch with close friends almost every day. However, there are times, occasionally, when you want to have lunch with other friends or eat alone. You are worried about telling these close friends.
   Assertion: One day, you really want to be alone, declining the lunch invitation of close friends.
Avoidance: One day, you decide that you really want to be alone, but you cannot decline the lunch invitation of close friends.

2. Resource conflict (friend): You live in an apartment with a roommate. One day, the roommate’s friends come to visit the apartment. One of the roommate’s friends stains your carpet by spilling a cup of coffee. You want the friend who spilled the coffee to pay the expensive cleaning fee for your favorite carpet.

Assertion: Even though your roommate appears to advocate forgiving the roommate’s friend because the coffee was not spilled intentionally, you tell the roommate’s friend clearly to pay the cleaning fee.

Avoidance: Your roommate appears to forgive the friend because the coffee was not spilled on purpose. After all, you choose not to tell the roommate’s friend to pay the cleaning fee.

3. Norm conflict (friend): Your friend’s phone starts ringing, making a loud noise when you and your friend are on the train. You believe your friend should stop bothering others, but your friend appears to be talking about an important presentation tomorrow. Looking around, it appears that there are few passengers on the train.

Assertion: Nevertheless, you think manners on trains are important. You tell your friend to hang up.

Avoidance: Even though you think manners on trains are important, you say nothing to your friend.

4. Cognitive conflict (colleague): You discuss whether to go to a training camp in July with your basketball team. However, because of a periodic exam immediately after the suggested dates for the training camp, most teammates appear to think that it is not good to go to a training camp before the test. Your team has a chance to advance to the final round of competition in the summer. Even though you believe it is the right time to have a training camp in preparation for the championship, other team members appear to be gradually reaching a decision not to hold a training camp before the exam.

Assertion: However, you tell your teammates to hold the training camp before the exam.

Avoidance: After all, you say nothing about your opinion to your teammates.

5. Resource conflict (colleague): A club you belong to holds drinking parties irregularly to boost exchanges among members. Part of the cost of drinking parties is the membership fee for the club. Nevertheless, you believe it is not fair because some members who cannot participate in drinking parties must share some expenses.
Assertion: Although most members think that this method of using funds is a good way to share the expenses of drinking parties using a membership fee, you strongly urge in a club meeting that the club had better not pay for drinking parties from membership fees.

Avoidance: However, most members think that using the membership fee is a good way to share drinking party expenses. After all, you say nothing to other members about the fee for drinking parties.

6. Norm conflict (colleague): A club to which you belong has a rule that club members must remove mud from their shoes before entering the club room. However, one club member always enters the room with muddy shoes. You think someone should order the club member to obey the rule because the room always gets dirty because of the inconsiderate member. Invariably, other club members must go to great trouble to clean the room.

Assertion: Although you also believe you are too fussy, you tell the member that the inconsiderate member must remove the mud before entering the room.

Avoidance: However, you also think you might be being too fussy. Finally, you do not say anything to the club member.

7. Cognitive conflict (neighbor): Even though your town hosts a town-sponsored festival every year, it appears that some member of your town is making plans to cancel this year’s festival because of a decreasing trend in the number of participants. However, you think that, no matter what, the festival must be held because the festival is a traditional event.

Assertion: You tell town residents that we should try to hold the festival.

Avoidance: Finally, you do not say anything to town residents.

8. Resource conflict (neighbor): The area in which you live has few parks and few places for children to play. Some people in the area are actively trying to demolish a for-profit rental parking lot to make a new park. However, you would be inconvenienced if the monthly parking lot were demolished because you use the parking lot. You are opposed to the new park. Some neighbors who use the parking lot just as you do think that there is no choice but to make a park for children who live in the area.

Assertion: However, you clearly show your opposition against constructing the park at a meeting in the area.

Avoidance: Finally, you say nothing regarding installation of the new park.
9. **Norm conflict (neighbor):** You live in a quaint town with narrow streets. The area is a no-parking zone because illegal parking not only annoys pedestrians; it also blocks ambulances and fire trucks. However, a neighbor illegally parks on the street every night. Even though you believe someday that you should warn the neighbor, you hesitate to do so because of fear of the neighbor’s hostility.

**Assertion:** One day, you come across the illegally parking neighbor. You clearly advise the neighbor not to park in the no-parking zone.

**Avoidance:** One day, you come across the illegally parking neighbor. You say nothing to the neighbor.

Each participant was presented with the nine scenarios in random order to remove the order effect. After reading each scenario, the participants rated the inferred confusion of others and their own distress for taking a conflict management style. The perceived conflict resolution strategy was chosen as a manipulation check.

Two items were used to assess participants’ distress about taking a conflict resolution strategy. Participants were asked to respond to some questions. (a) “How much distress would you feel by taking a conflict management style in the situation?” as measured on a scale of 1 “not at all” to 6 “very much.” (b) “How much discomfort would you feel by taking a conflict management style in the situation?” as measured on a scale of 1 “not at all” to 6 “very much.” In the measurement of the perceived conflict resolution strategy as a manipulation check, participants were asked to report “how assertive they would feel with their choice if they were the character in the situation” by rating on a six-point scale of 1 “strongly assertive” to 6 “not assertive at all (avoidance).”

Finally, to ascertain the value of social harmony, participants were presented with a social harmony scale (Saito & Ohbuchi, 2014) comprising eight items. The value of social harmony consists of a belief that the maintenance of harmony with others is a good, preferable thing. Participants were asked to indicate the degree to which each of the items described themselves by responding with a rating on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 “not at all” to 7 “very strongly.”

**Results**

**Value of Social Harmony and Conflict Management Styles**

After computing each participant’s social harmony score by averaging the eight items, the participants were divided by the median (4.25) into a low social harmony group ($N=26$, 12 assertion conditions (10 university students, 2 high school teachers) and 14 avoidance conditions (14 university students, 0 high school teacher)) and a high social harmony group ($N=31$, 15 assertion conditions (9 university students, 6 high school teachers) and 16 avoidance conditions (14 university students, 2 high school teachers)).
Manipulation Check

The perceived conflict management style scores were analyzed using ANOVA with conflict management style (assertion vs. avoidance) and the value of social harmony (low and high) as independent variables in the respective scenarios. The main effects of conflict management in all scenarios were found to be significant ($F$s $(1, 53) = 67.15–145.67$, $ps < .01$, $\eta^2_p = 0.51–0.70$). For this result, all scenarios in the following analyses were used.

Own Distress

For correlation with participants' responses to the own-distress items ($r = .89$), they were averaged to create a summary own-distress score for each scenario. The own-distress scores were computed by averaging the ratings across the nine scenarios. The own-distress score was analyzed using ANOVA with a conflict management style (assertion vs. avoidance) and the value of harmony (low vs. high) as independent variables. The main effect of the conflict management style was significant ($F (1, 53) = 7.41$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2_p = 0.12$). Interaction between the conflict management style and social harmony was also significant ($F (1, 53) = 4.37$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2_p =0.03$). The figure indicates that low social harmony participants felt more distressed by taking an assertive posture than high social harmony participants did ($p < .05$), but no difference between low and high social harmony participants ($ns$) was found in terms of distress by taking an avoidance posture. Furthermore, high social harmony participants felt more distressed by choosing avoidance than by choosing assertion ($p < .01$). Nevertheless, the ratings of the low social harmony participants reveal no discrepancy in distress found between respondents choosing avoidance and those choosing assertion ($ns$) [1].

![Figure](image.png)

*Figure.* Ratings of own-distress when adopting avoidance and assertion, as ranked by social harmony value.
Discussion

The present study examined individual differences of distress that is felt during conflict resolution. Japanese people commonly share a social reality in which avoidance is a normative response to conflict for the maintenance of social harmony, irrespective of the importance assigned to the value of social harmony (Saito & Ohbuchi, 2014). For this study, it was predicted that Japanese participants with high regard for the value of social harmony would be distressed by conflicts only when adopting assertive strategies because such strategies disturb social harmony. In contrast, Japanese participants with low regard for the value of social harmony were predicted to be distressed by conflicts both by taking assertive strategies in following their own beliefs and by adopting avoidance strategies for the maintenance of social harmony.

The results demonstrate that participants who do not value social harmony felt distressed when they used both assertion and avoidance to resolve their confronted conflicts. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported. Those consecutive results suggest that they have no choice for conflict resolution without suffering distress. Facing their conflicts, they are forced to pursue avoidance, which is not personally endorsed in accordance with the cultural value as a norm (Saito & Ohbuchi, 2014). Even if they choose assertive strategies based on their beliefs, they might have felt a sense of isolation or loneliness because they regard their choice of assertive strategies as not endorsed by others (Saito and Ohbuchi, 2014).

Contrary to our prediction, participants who value social harmony felt more distressed by adopting avoidance than by being assertive to resolve conflicts. They felt distressed to the same degree as participants who do not value social harmony. Therefore, neither Hypothesis 1 nor Hypothesis 2 was supported. Although people who value social harmony view avoidance as more preferable than those who do not value social harmony (Saito & Ohhuchi, 2014), those findings indicate that they do not regard avoidance as the best means of resolving conflicts. The main purpose of maintaining social harmony escapes any risk of disturbing their relationships: it is not necessary to maintain harmony by taking avoidance as an ineffective resolution if they have little risk of disturbing their relationships with others. Producing support for this suggestion, Saito and Ohhuchi (2010) demonstrated that women concerned about social harmony adopt assertive strategies for resolving conflicts with close relationships because little risk exists of threatening their relationships. This finding indicates that their use of avoidance for conflict resolution is a tactical choice. Therefore, it is possible to express their assertion consistently with maintenance of social harmony in conflict situations. It might be true that they judged their belief as being accepted in their society because they regard their value as being consistent with the cultural value. For that reason, in spite of facing some risks of disturbing social harmony, they did not feel more distressed by taking assertive strategies than people who do not value social harmony.

Amid calls for globalization in recent years, Japanese society, being under the influence of the globalization, is increasingly moving to competitive market principles and intensive price
Japanese Conflict Resolution, Harmony and Distress

wars. Consequently, Japanese people must confront reduction in personnel expenses, increased diversity of employment formats, and increased economic inequality (Yamada, 2009). Although those changes in the Japanese social structure might yield prevailing cultural values toward adaptation to globalization (Tovionen, Norasakkukit, & Uchida, 2011), recent evidence indicates that individuals display behaviors that are consistent with a perceived cultural value as predominant in a society more than internalizing their own values (Saito & Ohbuchi, 2014; Zou et al., 2009). Those circumstances lead to a contradiction of thought between the predominant cultural value and the new values (Kitayama, 2013). Consequently, people who have a different stance from that of the perceived cultural value must confront “difficulties in life” (Ogihara & Uchida, 2014).

These findings suggest that people who have a stance that differs from cultural values must avoid revealing their everyday indications when faced with conflicts. Those experiences might lead to their maladaptation in society. Conversely, those who conform to cultural values readily display their choices. Those findings imply that the choices adopted by people who act consistently with cultural values are shared readily with others, and that their ideas adapt easily to decisions on an interpersonal level, a group level, and an organizational level. Results obtained from this experiment suggest that existing Japanese cultural values and renewed values mutually struggle, leading to a hybrid mode of Japanese conflict resolution, and suggest that some mechanisms which once fixed institutional environments have been easily maintained or enhanced. Given the recent increase of global interaction in every field, non-traditional and more direct conflict-resolution strategies such as negotiation and assertion are being encouraged in eastern Asian countries, including Japan (Friedman et al., 2006; Ohbuchi & Takahashi, 1994; Tjosvold, Hui, Ding, & Hu, 2003; Tjosvold, Law & Sun, 2003). Nevertheless, most eastern Asian people apparently favor avoidance in conflict situations to maintain social harmony in the belief that disturbing social harmony will evoke hostility, negative evaluation, and exclusion from other members (Olekalns, Putnam, Weingart & Metcalf, 2008). Future studies should be conducted to elucidate methods of resolving distortions of this sort.

In addition, the scenario method has limited applicability to the present study because the scenario method only provides insight into how people actually behave. Therefore, future studies must be undertaken with a new research method to examine distress in conflict situations.

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References


**Footnote**

1. To examine whether the effects of conflict management styles and the value of harmony on the distress for taking conflict strategy were qualified by relationships and conflict types, ANOVA was conducted for this study using conflict management style, the value of harmony, relationships, and conflict types. However, no significant interaction included relationships or conflict types.

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