

1. **Social Face and Open-Mindedness: Constructive Conflict in Asia**

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Abstract

Field and experimental studies reaffirm the importance of social face in conflict in Asia. Affronts to social face were found to induce competition and closed-mindedness and result in disrupted relationships. However, social face concerns, when they were confirmed and participants felt respected, were found to contribute to cooperative goals, open-mindedness, learning, and integration of people and positions. Harmony in Asia may not simply be conflict avoidance, but implicitly include confirmation of face and a commitment to cooperative goals and mutually beneficial relationships. Then Asian managers and employees are able to use conflict to explore issues, create solutions, and strengthen collaboration.

Under pressure to complete a profitable order from a valuable customer, Li was upset and felt his face was challenged because Shi, his subordinate, refused to work overtime because of his date to celebrate his girl friend's birthday. But when Shi understood the importance of the order for the company and for his year-end bonus, he felt embarrassed, apologized to Li, and completed the job. Li was happy and grateful.

Chinese people and other Asians are thought to be highly committed to harmony in their interpersonal relationships (Boisot & Child, 1996; Leung, 1987; Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990). They avoid conflict because they are particularly sensitive to social face and highly averse to interpersonal hostility and assertive ways of handling frustrations and problems. Avoiding conflict protects social face and thereby promotes interpersonal harmony (Ding, 1995; Kirkbride, Tang, & Westwood, 1991; Tse, Francis, & Walls, 1994). Although the impact of social face on conflict management has been thought to be powerful and general, little empirical work, especially in East Asia, has directly studied social face (Bond & Lee, 1981; Cocroft & Ting-Toomey, 1994). Strong needs for social face are invoked to understand results that Asians prefer avoiding and accommodating strategies.

Our research has investigated the processes by which social face has its theorized effects. We argue that social face values do not inevitably induce conflict avoidance. Social face concerns, when confirmed, contribute to open disagreement and productive conflict in Asian organizations.

Social Face and Conflict

Social scientists have argued that protecting social face, although not restricted to Asians, is especially valued in Chinese and other Asian societies to promote relationships (Bond & Lee, 1981; Earley, 1997; Ho, 1975). Asian people are considered collectivist with a strong emphasis on maintaining relationships. Given this sensitivity, they seek harmony and communicate that they respect their partners as capable and worthy (Ting-

Toomey, 1988). Their collectivism in general and their understanding of social face lead them to be hesitant about engaging in aggressive interaction that may challenge the face of others. They want to avoid conflict and, once engaged, use compromise and accommodating to deal with conflict (Ding, 1995; Kirkbride, et al, 1991; Tse, et al, 1994).

Although theories in the West cannot be assumed to apply in the East (Hofstede, 1993), research conducted in the West may suggest how social face affects conflict management in China. Social face assumes people attempt to project a desirable image and want assurance their image is one of strength and capability (Tjosvold, 1983). Goffman (1967, p. 2), a pioneer in social face research, proposed that face is “an image of the self delineated in terms of approved social attributes.” People use culturally approved ways to project a favorable image and in conflict that image should reflect strength (Deutsch & Krauss, 1962). Social face then can be defined as the image of strength persons want to project in conflict. Showing respect to people confirms face in that it communicates an acceptance of this positive image whereas disrespect affronts face.

Western research has concentrated on demonstrating how people respond to believing they have appeared weak, referred to as an affront, loss, or as a disconfirmation of face. People are expected to be both ready to prevent disconfirmation and make restitution after they have suffered an affront to face (Goffman, 1967). Those who have lost face do not act consistently with this image but attempt to assert themselves as strong. To make concessions in conflict is believed to confirm weakness whereas defiance and counter-attack are the aggressive actions used to reassert face (Deutsch, 1973).

Threats, negative concessions, claims of superiority and other aggressive strategies have been theorized to affront social face (Deutsch & Krauss, 1962, Tjosvold, 1974). Experiments have suggested that in response negotiators will retaliate, counterthreat, use aggression, make concessions slowly, deceive, and refuse to reach an agreement (Deutsch & Krauss, 1962; Tjosvold, 1983).

Social Face in Cooperation and Competition

We used Deutsch's (1973) theory of cooperation and competition to understand the dynamics and outcomes of social face in conflict. Defining conflict as incompatible activities, Deutsch argued that protagonists can emphasize cooperative or competitive goals. With cooperative goals, they believe that as one moves toward goal attainment, the other also moves toward goal achievement. They tend to view a conflict as a mutual problem that needs common consideration and solution. Protagonists who emphasize their competitive interests believe that as one succeeds, the other moves away from goal attainment. They tend to view the conflict as a win-lose struggle; if the other wins, they lose.

Considerable research supports the proposition that the conclusion of competition has pervasive effects on the dynamics and outcomes of conflict (Deutsch, 1973; Tjosvold, 1998). Cooperative goals support direct controversy that induce epistemic curiosity. Epistemic curiosity occurs when individuals are confronted with a position that contradicts their present assumptions and the resulting internal uncertainty induces efforts to seek additional information. Protagonists, confronted with an opposing position, have been found to doubt the adequacy of their own perspective (Tjosvold, 1998). Feeling uncertain that their present views are complete and accurate, they are motivated to search the arguments and perspective of opposing positions. They have, for example, shown more interest in learning, asked more questions, demonstrated more understanding, and incorporated elements of the opposing position into their decision (Tjosvold, 1998). Avoiding disagreement and discussing with persons with a similar position induce a complacent acceptance of one's own view as complete and an illusion of understanding the other's arguments. Direct, open disagreement, not conflict avoidance, makes cooperative work more productive and enhancing.

From this theoretical standpoint, the processes of social face on conflict can be theorized. Disconfirming social face has its impact by strengthening competitive goals. Affronted negotiators believe that they must reassert themselves. Their goal of appearing strong is incompatible with the face goals of the other person. The protagonists compete over who is stronger rather than negotiate in ways in which both reach their goals of appearing strong. On the other hand, confirming social face has its impact by

reinforcing compatible goals. The protagonists help each other appear strong so that they can engage in an open discussion to develop a mutually beneficial solution.

Asian Context

If Chinese and other Asians protect face by avoiding conflict, an important issue is how they can resolve conflicts effectively that arise in such settings as international alliances. Is there a way western managers can induce their Asian counterparts to engage in direct, open conflict management? Can Asians who emphasize the protection of social face and harmony reap the benefits of open discussion in conflict situations?

Research on social face suggests that affronts to face can be disruptive but also that face can be confirmed and thereby very much contribute to conflict management. Valuing social face need not result in conflict avoidance. Recent cross-cultural research argues that cultural values do not affect behavior directly for they are manifested in various ways (Morris, Williams, Leung, Larrick, Mendoza, Bhatnagar, Li, Kondo, Luo, & Hu, 1998; Yamagishi, Kikuchi, & Kosugi, 1999; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). The expression of values and the situation alter the impact of any cultural value. We propose that social face values, when directly confirmed, can promote open, constructive conflict among Asian people.

Our field and experimental studies have explored whether Asian people can experience a confirmation of social face although they are in conflict. Confirmation of face is hypothesized to reinforce cooperative goals which in turn lead to an open-minded approach to conflict and constructive outcomes.

Research Methods in China

North American research methods to test theory, like the theory itself, cannot be assumed to apply in Asia. East Asian researchers have modified our North American methods. Trained both in the East and West and based in Hong Kong, Mainland China, Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and other East Asian countries, researchers have debated the theory and developed the methods.

The network itself has demonstrated the value of cooperative teamwork and constructive controversy! We are most grateful for our colleagues' openness and contributions to the research.

Interviews

Field studies have employed the critical incident methodology. Rather than trying to summarize a great number of examples by rating how they generally conflict with each other as demanded by most questionnaires, respondents describe concrete experiences. Interviewers can establish a relationship with the respondents, provide an informal and personal climate, clarify and answer questions, and encourage the respondent. Asian people, with their relationship-oriented cultures, were thought likely to respond positively to this climate.

The interview had a highly defined structure. Forty Chinese managers in one study (Tjosvold & Hui, 1998) and 81 in a second (Wong, Tjosvold, & Hu, 1999) were asked to identify a specific conflict that may have communicated that they were or were not respected. Then they answered specific questions that allow statistical tests of the framework and hypotheses. Interviewees specified their goals and the other's goals and using 7-point Likert-scale items indicated how much they perceive that their goals were positively, negatively, or independently related and described their reasoning for goal interdependence. They rated the extent they expressed their own views fully, considered the other's views open-mindedly, tried to understand the other's concerns, worked together for mutual agreement on this issue, and tried to put together the best of the various ideas expressed. After they rated themselves on these dimensions, the interviewers rated their colleague on the same items. The employees also described the consequences of the incident for themselves and the organization and rated the effects of the incident on their work relationship, task productivity, and commitment. These measures demonstrated good reliability.

The interviews provided rich descriptive information about the communication of respect and disrespect in conflict. Data were coded and sorted to identify the reasons for cooperative, competitive, and independent goals, the interaction behaviors that occurred in them, and the consequences of the interactions. Careful training and supervision of interviewers, explicit

guidelines for conducting the interview, and the specific Likert-type questions were all designed to improve the validity of the data collected.

Experiments

Experiments have directly tested the hypotheses that open discussion of conflict need not affront social face in China and contributes to effective problem solving when face is confirmed. Eighty participants from a university in Guangzhou were randomly assigned to four conditions, open discussion--affront to face, open discussion-confirmation of face, avoiding discussion-affront and avoiding discussion-confirmation (Tjosvold, Hui, & Sun, 1998). A subsequent experiment contrasted affronts to person and position (Tjosvold & Sun, 1999).

The "open" participants read where their organization valued frank discussion of differences and could earn up to five chances in a lottery if they discussed their differences openly and directly. The "avoiding" participants would earn chances to the extent that they minimized their disagreement. After eight minutes of discussion, the "affront" participants read that the other thought they were ineffective and the "confirm" participants that they were seen as effective. After another 10 minutes, participant made the decision and were fully debriefed.

The number of questions the participants asked during the negotiation was used to measure curiosity. Participants also indicated on 7-point scales their interest in hearing more of the other's argument, the extent they had explored the opposing position, the extent they saw their relationship with the other discussant as cooperative, engaged in mutual give and take, and their confidence in the relationship. To measure learning, participants listed the arguments of the other discussant and these were scored for accuracy. They also rated the extent that they had learned from the discussion and found the opposing views useful. Their decisions were coded as to the extent that they integrated the opposing view into their decision.

Interviews and experiments each have their strengths and limitations. Our results are not method specific and deserve confidence because they have been developed through diverse methods. However, our studies on social face have been conducted in China and may not generalize to all of Asia.

Results

The results from the interview studies support the hypotheses that Chinese people can experience confirmation and respect although they are in conflict and that this communication of respect and cooperative goals promote open-minded discussion of opposing views. This open-mindedness strengthens relationship and facilitates productivity on present tasks and future performance. Structural equation analyses support the model that the communication of respect and cooperative goals lead to open-minded interaction which in turn strengthen relationships, promote productivity, and instill confidence in future performance. The model had a χ^2 of 26.89 (d.f.=13, $p<.01$). Both the comparative fit index (.98) and the normed fit index (.95) showed good fit for the model (Tjosvold & Hui, 1998). The second study also showed similar support for the model (Wong, et al, 1999). Respect and cooperative goals reinforce each other and in turn promote constructive open-minded exchange which in turn results in productive conflict outcomes.

Experiments have tested the internal validity of hypothesized social face dynamics. Chinese negotiators who confirmed social face were able to manage their conflict cooperatively (Tjosvold, Hui, & Sun, 1998; Tjosvold & Sun, 1998). Participants who were seen as effective compared to those seen as ineffective emphasized their cooperative goals with the other discussant and worked more to promote their mutual interests than did affronted participants. They demonstrated curiosity in that they indicated more uncertainty about whether their position was satisfactory, asked more questions, and were interested in hearing more of the other's arguments. Confirmed compared to disconfirmed participants were prepared to pressure the other and dealt with their disagreement collaboratively whereas affronted confronted in a tough manner. They also indicated that they learned in the discussion, considered the opposing views useful, and had come to agree with some of them. Confirmed participants indicated that they had made more effort to integrate than did participants who had lost face.

Affronts to position, in contrast, had very modest effects on the dynamics and outcomes of conflict. Participants whose position was confirmed compared to affronted indicated that they were more committed to pursuing mutual benefit. Results overall suggest that Asian negotiators can

constructively use disagreement and even strong negative evaluations of their position when their personal face is confirmed, rather than affronted.

Discussion

Our field and experimental studies help clarify harmony and relationship building in Asia and indicate that North American research on social face and cooperative and competitive conflict is useful for understanding conflict management in Asia (Tjosvold, Leung, & Johnson, in press). As suggested by previous theorizing about Asian organizations, social face concerns were found to play a significant role in managing conflict and developing relationships. When they felt respected and accepted as competent, Chinese managers and employees were more likely to believe their goals were cooperatively linked and were more open to the other person and position. Affronts to face induced closed-mindedness and rejection that disrupted attempts to integrate positions and undermined relationships.

However, contrary to common theorizing about conflict in China, direct discussion of opposing views, not avoiding, was found to support relationships and, in general, to be more beneficial. In an experiment, when they learned that the organization they worked for valued open discussion, they engaged in open discussion and reaped its benefit. Compared to the avoiding conflict participants, those who disagreed felt more cooperatively aligned, engaged in give-and-take influence, and developed liking and confidence. They considered others who disagreed directly capable negotiators and strong persons. Managers and employees reported in interviews that respect could be communicated in conflict and then they used the conflict more openly and productively.

Experimental evidence supports the causal reasoning that affronts to social face lead to competitive goals and closed-minded interaction that disrupt attempts to integrate positions and undermine relationships. When they felt accepted as competent, Chinese respondents were more likely to believe their goals were cooperatively linked and were more open to the other person and position. Negative evaluations of the position, rather than of the person, were not disruptive of conflict management and relationship building.

Social face researchers have theorized a wide range of effects of affronts on interaction and outcomes. This study builds upon previous research to suggest that open-mindedness is a useful way to characterize the interaction that results from confirmation of face and that close-mindedness characterizes affronts to face. Open-mindedness is a social psychological way of understanding the interaction; the specific concrete behaviors that reveal open and close-mindedness vary across situations and cultures.

Practical Implications

Our studies demonstrate the value of managing conflict in Asia to strengthen relationships, develop confidence in future performance, and learn with and from each other (Leung & Tjosvold, 1998). But to manage conflict requires the challenging task of confirming social face and openly expressing opposing views. Although employees may be in conflict and upset, results indicate that they must also confirm their protagonist social face. Communication of a confirmation of face while disagreeing appear to be important conflict management capabilities, the training of which would pay off for organizations and their employees.

Building cooperative, compared to competitive and independent goals, can also facilitate constructive conflict. Employees can together develop shared goals, integrated roles, common tasks, and shared reward distributions that build cooperative goals (Tjosvold & Tjosvold, 1995). Then they feel that they are on the same side so that as one succeeds, others succeed; as one fails, others too are threatened.

Various methods foster an open-minded discussion of opposing views (Tjosvold & Tjosvold, 1995). Openness norms encourage everyone to express his or her opinions, doubts, uncertainties, and hunches. They invite each other to discuss their opposing positions and recognize the value of a critical evaluation of the current preference. To make the discussion of differences constructive, they stop defending their own views long enough to ask each other for more information and arguments. They put themselves in each other's shoes, and see the problem from other perspectives. They recognize that they want to resolve the controversy so they can make a decision and accomplish common tasks. They avoid "either my way or your way" thinking and try to use as many ideas to create new, useful solutions.

The theory of cooperation and competition may develop our understanding how Guanxi as well as social face function in conflict situations in China. Researchers in the West, as in the East, have begun to argue that relationship building is an important contributor to and outcome of conflict management (Kramer & Messick, 1995). Recognizing the value of "quanxi," or relationship, for business and conflict resolution in China, researchers and managers have characterized Chinese management as one of people and relationships (Chang, 1976; Hui & Lin, 1996). Guanxi and social face are arguably the two most important social elements in China.

Guanxi in China is highly particularistic (Jacob, 1979; King, 1991). The relational network of Chinese is governed by *wu lun*, or the five fundamental relationships: emperor-subject, father-son, husband-wife, elder-younger siblings, and friend-friend. Associated with each relationship is a set of role requirements and prescriptions (Yang, 1993). Guanxi in the Chinese context thus refers to particular, deterministic ties between people with different types of relationships, for example, emperor-subject (boss-subordinate) or a father-son relationship. In conflict in China, it is common to resort to Guanxi when one's face is affronted; a mediator with important Guanxi to the parties involved may settle the conflict by asking the parties to honor his or her face. How can Western managers use Guanxi in conflict situations? One possible approach is to develop cooperative goals as a means to promote a more personal Guanxi. Cooperation may build face and guanxi, thereby resulting in constructive conflict.

Communication of respect, as well as developing cooperative goals, were found to facilitate open-minded discussions, understanding, learning, and relationship development in China. A future challenge is to develop the understanding and methods so that people from the East and West can together confront their differences directly as they confirm face in credible ways and discuss issues open-mindedly to capture the benefits of conflict.

Social face studies suggest that interpersonal harmony in Asia need not be avoiding open discussion of conflict but may implicitly include confirmation of face and maintaining cooperative goals. To be in harmony is to give personal face and establish a mutually beneficial relationship as well as to avoid affrontive disagreement. Confirming face and developing cooperative goals, not avoiding open discussion, may be central ingredients for interpersonal harmony and productive work in Asia.

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