

Cultural Differences in Conflict Management Styles in East and West Organizations

Employing Holism as a Cultural Theoretical Frame to Investigate South Korean and U.S. Employee Conflict Management Styles

Jihyun Kim

Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, USA

Renée A. Meyers

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee - USA

Abstract

This study employed a new theoretical frame, holism, to distinguish cultural differences in conflict management strategy preference. Results indicated that S. Koreans showed more holistic tendencies than U.S. employees, and higher scores on a holism measure were positively related to ratings of the collaborative style (S. Korean preferred style) and negatively related to ratings of the avoidant style (U.S. preferred style). In comparisons across the two cultures, S. Koreans preferred collaborating, compromising, and accommodating styles, whereas U.S. participants preferred the avoiding style. Although additional investigation is needed to further explore how holism can be used to explain cultural differences, these results point to the richness of this new cultural value as a theoretical framework and suggest its potential for future investigations.

Keywords: *conflict management style, culture, holism, organizational employees, U.S., South Korea*

Introduction

Increased globalization in the business environment is a motivating force behind many industries' expansion of trading partners. As of January 2008, the top ten U.S. industry partners included Canada, China, Mexico, Japan, Germany, United Kingdom, South Korea, Taiwan, France and Saudi Arabia. These countries represented 64.49% of U.S. imports and 60.47% of U.S. exports (www.census.gov). Clearly, organizations are in the middle of an important transition as their environments become more and more globally diverse.

Despite many benefits to this global expansion, the resulting increased diversity may also engender more conflicts. Different communication patterns or value systems among team members, managers, superiors, and subordinates can lead to misinterpretation and divergent viewpoints (Beebe and Mottet 2010 pp. 103-108). Moreover, cultural values can play a central role in how individuals perceive and manage conflicts (Tang and Kirkbride 1986 pp. 287-301; Thomas 1976 pp. 889-935). Still, if conflicts are handled effectively, culturally diverse teams and organizations can be both highly efficient and productive (Humes and Reilly 2008 pp. 118-137).

To understand conflict management style variances across cultures, it is imperative to understand fundamental cultural differences. Recently, a new cultural value, holism, was introduced as broadly

encompassing and potentially foundational for investigating cultural differences (Lim 2009 pp. 250-268; Lim and Giles 2007 pp. 349-364). Holism is the tendency to see everything as a whole. Individuals are more, or less, holistic in their worldviews. The idea of holism as a frame for understanding cultural differences has received support in recent studies (Kim, Lim, Dindia, and Burrell 2010 p. 543-566; Lim, Kim, and Kim 2011 pp. 21-38; Nisbett et al. 2001 pp. 291-310). However, investigations of holism's efficacy are still in their infancy. Thus, this study aims to add to this initial research by employing holism as a cultural value framework for investigating differences and similarities in conflict management styles between S. Korean and U.S. employees.

We begin by explicating the foundational tenets of holism. Then, we introduce conflict and conflict management styles as ubiquitous communicative activities likely impacted by the cultural value of holism. Next, we report the methods used to collect information about holistic tendencies, as well as conflict management styles, from U.S. and S. Korean organizational employees. Finally, we report results, and discuss the theoretical and practical implications of using holism to better understand global organizational conflict management.

Holism as a Frame for Understanding Cultural Worldviews

A variety of theoretical perspectives have been proposed to explain cultural differences between the East and the West, including the frameworks of High-Low contexts (Hall 1969, 1976), Individualism-Collectivism (Hofstede 1980, 1991), and self-construals (Markus and Kitayama 1991 pp. 224-253). Numerous scholars have adopted these frameworks to investigate cultural differences in various communication contexts (e.g., conflict management, relationship maintenance, among other contexts) and have greatly contributed to our understanding of cultural distinctions.

Building upon these frameworks, holism has recently been introduced as one of the primary cultural values distinguishing the East and the West (Kim et al. 2010 pp. 543-566; Lim 2009 pp. 250-268; Lim and Giles 2007 pp. 349-364; Lim et al. 2011 pp. 21-38; Nisbett et al. 2001 pp. 291-310; Norenzayan et al. 2002 pp. 653-684). Holism is a tendency to see everything (i.e., the universe, nature, world, humans, physical elements, behavioral elements) as a whole rather than as separate components (Lim 2009 pp. 250-268; Lim and Giles 2007 pp. 349-364). The basic idea behind holism lies in Bertalanffy's (1968) argument that social systems are not merely the sum of their parts. That is, units and their interconnected relations are not separable; humans and the natural world are inherently connected. Thus, society is the continuity of linked human beings (Tu 1991).

Holistic cultures are undergirded by three unique relationship features (Lim 2009; Lim and Giles 2007 pp. 349-364). First, relations are prescriptive and people are not free to choose their relationships. Thus, relations pre-empt individual choices and determine the members' roles in the society. Second, relations are whole-oriented. Members are expected to work toward the goals of the whole, and individuals readily sacrifice their wants for the whole. Third, relations are complementary. Individual members work together, performing different tasks and roles that complement each other, in order to accomplish the larger group or societal objectives.

Easterners (who are typically more holistic than Westerners) thus tend to be more integrative and oblique than their Western counterparts. For example, Kume (1985 pp. 231-251) found that Japanese decision-makers employed more indirect and agreement-centered approaches whereas Americans used more direct and confrontational approaches. Additionally, Combs (2004 pp. 58-70) found that Eastern cultures tend to make judgments of others based on an overall (holistic) impression rather than breaking down an individual's qualities into separate attributes. Moreover, Eastern cultures view words as inseparable from the larger communicative context, the parties involved, and the relationships between them (Gudykunst and Kim 1984), and they place greater emphasis on context, relationships, and experience-based knowledge when speaking to others than on individual qualities (Masuda and Nisbett 2001 pp. 922-934)

Recently, a measure of holism was developed and used to examine S. Korean and U.S. participants' holistic tendencies (see Kim et al. 2010 pp. 543-566). Results showed that S. Koreans were overall significantly more holistic in their worldviews than were U.S. participants. Although more empirical support is needed before any firm conclusions about holism as a core cultural value can be drawn, these initial findings suggest its promise as a theoretical frame for better understanding cultural variations. Thus, the current study investigates the relationship between holistic tendencies and conflict management styles of S. Korean and U.S. organizational employees.

Conflict Management Styles and Culture

Conflict Management Styles

Past scholars have defined conflict in a variety of ways. Simons (1972 pp. 227-247) described conflict as the state of a social relationship with incompatible interests between two or more parties. Schmeer and Chanin (1987 pp. 575-590) portrayed conflict as a natural phenomenon involving individual perceptions among people with different values, ideas, or behaviors. Most conflict researchers assume that conflict arises when people in interaction disagree with each other.

A review of the conflict management style research reveals a variety of approaches and style labels (e.g., Blake and Mouton 1964; Rahim and Bonoma 1979 pp. 1323-1344; Thomas 1976 pp. 889-935). Still, conflict scholars have generally agreed that the labels can be synthesized to produce an integrated set of style types (Cai and Fink 2002 pp. 67-87; Nicotera 1994 pp. 592-621). The labels —accommodating, obliging, and yielding—describe a single style type, as do the labels—avoiding, inaction, and withdrawing. Additionally, the labels—collaborating and integrating—suggest a single conflict management style, and the labels—competing, dominating, and contending—yet another type. One of the more prominent conflict style assessment tools founded on this set of conflict types is Thomas' (1976 pp. 889-935) measure of five conflict management styles.

Each of Thomas' (1976 pp. 889-935) five styles—competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating—has distinctive features based on a focus of self or other. The competing style is grounded in a high concern for oneself and a low concern for the other party. Typically, people using this style dominate in discussion and seek to achieve their own goals. Such people stress winning a conflict at the expense of losing the relationship with the other person involved. The collaborating style employs a problem solving strategy that involves both a high concern for oneself as well as the other participant(s) in the conflict. Individuals using this style view conflict as a problem to be solved and negotiate to achieve a positive solution for all involved in the conflict situation. The compromising style is positioned in the middle with moderate concerns for both oneself and others. A person who uses this style seeks the middle ground of a problem-solving strategy and is willing to give up something to get other things. It is often used when opponents with equal power are committed to mutually exclusive goals (Thomas 1977 pp. 484-490).

The accommodating style is typically used when there is a low concern for oneself and a high concern for others. Individuals who use this style easily give in to the demands of others because they want to be liked by others. When people involved in a conflict situation find themselves to be wrong, this style is often best used. Finally, the avoiding style arises when there is a low concern for both oneself and the other. People tend to use this style when they want to withdraw from conflict and side-step confrontation. This style is also preferred when people find conflict uncomfortable (Thomas 1977 pp. 484-490).

Cultural Differences and Conflict Management Styles

A number of researchers have observed cultural differences in conflict management styles. The majority of studies have found that Easterners are less confrontational, less assertive, and more cooperative than Westerners (Ting-Toomey 1988 pp. 213-235). Tang and colleagues (Kirkbride et al. 1991 pp. 365-386; Tang and Kirkbride 1986 pp. 287-301) investigated different uses of management styles between Chinese and British executives. Results showed that Chinese executives preferred less assertive strategies, such as compromising and avoiding behaviors, whereas their British counterparts preferred more direct styles

such as collaborating and competing styles. Similarly, Morris and associates (1998 pp. 729-747) found that Chinese managers preferred avoiding styles whereas U.S. managers preferred competing styles.

Brew and Cairns' (1993 pp. 27-56) sampled Anglo-Australian and East Asian ethnic Chinese college students with work experience and found similar results. Anglo-Australians rated assertive styles higher and non-confrontational styles lower than Chinese students. Likewise, Cushman and King (1985 pp. 114-133) found that Japanese tended to value a collaborative strategy whereas U.S. participants displayed a preference for competitive strategies.

Lee and Rogan (1991 pp. 181-199) investigated conflict management preferences of S. Korean and U.S. organizational employees. Consistent with previous findings, U.S. participants preferred a competitive style more than the S. Koreans did. Interestingly and contrary to other studies, U.S. participants also preferred the avoiding style more than did S. Koreans. The current investigation expands on Lee and Rogan's work by employing the cultural frame of holism to re-examine S. Korean and U.S. organizational employees' conflict management styles, and in so doing, to offer a theoretical explanation for any resulting differences.

Employing a recently developed measure of holism (Kim et al. 2010 pp. 543-566), this study investigated how holistic tendencies are related to choices of conflict management strategies. Based on past research and the tenets of holism, the first hypothesis posits that:

H1: South Korean organizational employees will show more holistic tendencies than will U.S. employees.

Secondly, we wanted to explore the relationship between holism and each of the conflict management styles. We hypothesized that, regardless of culture, the greater the holistic tendencies, the more the conflict management choices will reflect concern for others (accommodating, collaborating, and compromising). Alternatively, the lower the holistic tendencies, the more the conflict management choices will reflect concern for self (competitive, avoidant).

H2: Holism will be positively correlated with the conflict management styles of accommodating, collaborating, and compromising.

H3: Holism will be negatively correlated with the conflict management styles of competition and avoidance.

Third, we sought to examine relationships between culture and conflict management strategy preferences. Assuming H1 holds, we predicted that S. Korean employees would prefer using conflict management strategies that show a high concern for others. Conversely, U.S. participants will prefer using conflict management strategies that show a higher concern for self.

H4: South Korean organizational employees will report a preference for using the compromising, collaborating, and accommodating styles over other styles.

H5: U.S. organizational employees will report a preference for using the competing and avoiding styles over other styles.

H6: South Korean organizational employees will report using the compromising, collaborating and accommodating styles significantly more than U.S. employees.

H7: U.S. organizational employees will report using the competing and avoiding styles significantly more than South Korean employees.

Method

Participants

A total of 193 full time organizational employees participated in this study including 93 S. Koreans residing in S. Korea and 100 U.S. employees residing in the U.S. All U.S. employees utilized in this study were Caucasian. The total sample was comprised of 92 men (48.4 %) and 97 women (51.1 %), and the average age was 35.13 years ($SD = 11.82$). On average, participants had 13.27 years of work experience ($SD = 13.02$) in various departments (see Table 1). Participants' positions also varied from CEO to entry-level employees (Table 2).

Table 1

Participants' Departments

	Human Resources	General Affairs	Education & Training	Management Planning	Accounting	M.I.S
Frequency	5	7	12	15	8	18
%	2.6	3.6	6.2	7.8	4.1	9.3
	Marketing	Advertising	Product Planning	E-Business	Sales	Other
Frequency	18	12	8	5	32	49
%	9.3	6.2	4.1	2.6	16.6	25.4

Table 2

Participants' Positions

	Owner/ CEO	Senior Executive	General Manager	Assistant Manager	General Employee	Other
Frequency	9	9	25	42	81	21
%	4.7	4.7	13	21	42	10.9

Survey Instrument

A survey that included measures of conflict management styles, holism, and demographics was used to collect data. The first part of the survey measured individuals' conflict management styles utilizing the Thomas-Killmann Conflict Mode Instrument [TKI] (Thomas and Kilmann 1974). Respondents were asked to think about the most recent conflict they had with a colleague at work and to answer the 30 TKI items based on how they behaved in the situation. The next section of the survey included a 12 item holism measure (Kim et al. 2010 pp. 543-566). See the Appendix for holism items. Reliability for the holism items showed a Cronbach's alpha of .92. The last section of the survey asked for participants' demographic information. The complete survey is available from the first author.

Procedures

The S. Korean employee sample was a convenience sample with organizations identified through contacts of the first author. The survey items were translated and back-translated by two Koreans who were fluent in both Korean and English to assure functional equivalence of meaning (Brislin 1970 pp. 185-216). Researchers brought hard copies of the survey to the selected S. Korean organizations and asked employees to fill it out during the months of June and July in 2008. To obtain the U.S. data, undergraduate students enrolled in a large public Midwestern university in the U.S. were asked to request full-time employees to complete the survey online during the months of September and October in 2008. Students who recruited survey participants received extra credit from their course directors. Survey respondents were randomly called to confirm their actual participation in the survey.

Results

Holism and Culture

The first hypothesis predicted that S. Korean organizational employees would show more holistic tendencies than U.S. employees. A *t*-test indicated that S. Korean respondents ($M = 5.03$, $SD = .80$, $n = 90$) showed significantly stronger holistic tendencies, $t(179) = 14.40$, $p < .001$, than U.S. respondents ($M = 3.17$, $SD = .93$, $n = 91$). H1 was supported.

Holism and Conflict Management Styles

H2 and H3 asked about the relationship between holism and conflict management styles. There was a significant and positive correlation between holism and the collaborating style, $r(179) = .18$, $p < .05$. Holism and the avoiding style were significantly and negatively correlated, $r(179) = -.41$, $p < .01$. There were no significant correlations between holism and the other conflict management styles. See Table 3. H2 and H3 were partially supported.

Table 3

Correlations between Holism and Conflict Management Styles

	Competing	Collaborating	Compromising	Avoiding	Accommodating	Holism
Competing	1					
Collaborating	-.04	1				
Compromising	-.36**	-.14	1			
Avoiding	-.31**	-.47**	-.29**	1		
Accommodating	-.71**	-.26**	.07	.13	1	
Holism	.04	.18*	.14	-.41**	.10	1

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Culture and Style Preferences

H4 posited that S. Koreans would show a preference for the accommodating, compromising, and collaborating styles over the other two styles. The order of preferences for conflict management styles for S. Koreans was: compromising ($M = 7.81$, $SD = 1.91$), collaborating ($M = 6.48$, $SD = 1.94$), accommodating ($M = 6.39$, $SD = 2.34$), avoiding ($M = 5.22$, $SD = 1.77$), competing ($M = 4.03$, $SD = 3.16$). See Table 4.

In order to test for significant differences in these preferences, paired *t*-tests were employed. Because multiple paired *t*-tests were used, the cut-off level for statistical significance was adjusted at .005 to be more conservative. Results showed that compromising was significantly preferred over collaborating, $t(92) = -4.00$, $p < .001$; collaborating was not significantly preferred over accommodating, $t(92) = .28$, $p > .005$; accommodating was significantly preferred over avoiding, $t(92) = -4.34$, $p < .001$; and avoiding was not significantly preferred over competing, $t(92) = -2.79$, $p > .005$. Hence, these results show that S. Korean employees' most preferred conflict management style was compromising, followed by collaborating or accommodating styles, and then followed by avoiding or competing styles. H4 was supported.

Table 4

Preferences for Conflict Management Styles among S. Korean Employees

Conflict Management Styles	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Paired t-test	
			Paired Styles	t-value
Compromising	7.81	1.91	Compromising -Collaborating	-4.00**
Collaborating	6.48	1.94	Collaborating -Accommodating	.28
Accommodating	6.39	2.34	Accommodating -Avoiding	-4.34**
Avoiding	5.22	1.77	Avoiding -Competing	-2.79
Competing	4.03	3.16		

Note: * $p < .005$, ** $p < .001$

H5 posited that U.S. participants would show a preference for the avoiding and competitive style over the other three styles. Results indicated that U.S. employees most preferred the avoiding style ($M = 7.31$, $SD = 2.28$), followed by the compromising style ($M = 7.08$, $SD = 2.15$), accommodating style ($M = 5.47$, $SD = 2.31$), collaborating style ($M = 5.27$, $SD = 2.16$), and competing style ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 3.20$). See Table 5

Table 5

Preferences for Conflict Management Styles among U.S. Employees

Conflict Management Styles	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Paired t-test	
			Paired Styles	t-value
Avoiding	7.31	2.28	Avoiding -Compromising	-.65
Compromising	7.08	2.15	Compromising -Accommodating	4.95**
Accommodating	5.47	2.31	Accommodating -Collaborating	-.53
Collaborating	5.27	2.16	Collaborating -Competing	-1.63
Competing	4.64	3.20		

Note: * $p < .005$, ** $p < .001$

Paired *t*-tests (cut-off level at .005) were employed to test significant differences between the styles. Results showed that avoiding was not significantly preferred over compromising, $t(99) = -.65$, $p > .005$; compromising was significantly preferred over accommodating, $t(99) = 4.95$, $p < .001$; accommodating was not significantly preferred over collaborating, $t(99) = -.53$, $p > .005$; and collaborating was not significantly preferred over competing, $t(99) = -1.63$, $p > .005$. Hence, among these U.S. employees, the

avoiding or compromising styles were the most preferred, followed by accommodating, collaborating or competing. H5 was partially supported.

Culture and Style Usage

MANOVA and follow-up univariate F tests were used to investigate H6 and H7 which examined the comparative style preferences of S. Korean and U.S. participants. H6 posited that S. Korean employees would report using the compromising, collaborating, and accommodating styles significantly more than the U.S. employees. H7 predicted that U.S. employees would report using the avoiding and competing styles significantly more than the S. Korean employees. MANOVA analyses indicated statistically significant differences in the conflict management styles between the two cultures, Wilks' Lambda = .69, $F(5,187) = 16.86, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .31$. See Table 6.

Table 6

Comparisons of Conflict Management Styles of S. Korean and U.S. Employees

Conflict Management Styles	S. Korean		U.S.		Univariate F
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Compromising	7.81	1.91	7.08	2.15	6.13*
Collaborating	6.48	1.94	5.27	2.16	16.81**
Accommodating	6.39	2.34	5.47	2.31	7.51**
Competing	4.03	3.16	4.64	3.20	1.76
Avoiding	5.22	1.77	7.31	2.28	50.30**

Note: MANOVA comparison for conflict management style categories, Wilks' Lambda = .69, $F(5,187) = 16.86, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .31$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

The follow-up univariate F tests showed that S. Korean respondents ($M = 7.81, SD = 1.91$) indicated significantly greater use of the compromising style, $F(1,192) = 6.13, p < .05, \eta_p^2 = .031$ than did U.S. respondents ($M = 7.08, SD = 2.15$). Moreover, S. Korean respondents ($M = 6.48, SD = 1.94$) reported significantly greater use of the collaborating style, $F(1,192) = 16.81, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .08$, over U.S. respondents ($M = 5.27, SD = 2.16$). Finally, S. Korean respondents ($M = 6.39, SD = 2.34$) reported significantly greater employment of the accommodating style, $F(1,192) = 7.51, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .038$ over the U.S. respondents ($M = 5.47, SD = 2.31$). Thus H6 was supported.

Regarding H7, results showed that U.S. respondents ($M = 7.31, SD = 2.28$) reported significantly greater use of the avoiding style, $F(1,192) = 50.30, p < .01, \eta_p^2 = .208$, than did S. Korean respondents ($M = 5.22, SD = 1.77$). However, there were no significant differences in preference of the competing style, $F(1,192) = 1.76, p > .05$, between S. Koreans ($M = 4.03, SD = 3.16$) and U.S. employees ($M = 4.64, SD = 3.20$). Thus, H7 was partially supported.

In sum, S. Koreans reported using the compromising, collaborating, and accommodating styles significantly more than did U.S. employees. On the other hand, U.S. participants reported employing the avoiding conflict style significantly more than did the S. Koreans. However, no significant difference was found regarding use of the competing style between the two cultures.

Discussion

Findings

This study employed a new cultural frame—holism—to examine preferred conflict management styles of S. Korean and U.S. organizational employees. Three conclusions are warranted. First, holism as a cultural value suggested important distinctions in cultural preferences, and, as predicted, S. Korean employees demonstrated stronger holistic tendencies than did U.S. employees. Second, as predicted by a holistic framework, differences in conflict management style preferences were evident. S. Koreans most preferred the compromising style, then collaborating or accommodating styles, and finally the avoiding or competing styles. U.S. employees, on the other hand, preferred the avoiding or compromising styles, followed by the accommodating, collaborating, or competing styles. Finally, a holistic framework suggested that the two cultures would differ in their reported usage of the conflict styles, and results showed that to be true. S. Koreans reported using the collaborating, compromising, and accommodating styles significantly more than did U.S. employees. U.S. employees reported using the avoiding style significantly more than did S. Koreans. Interestingly, there was no significant difference in reported preference for the competing style between the two cultures with neither culture favoring this style. These findings are discussed in more detail next followed by explication of their theoretical and practical implications.

Holism as a Theoretical Frame

This study employed a new theoretical frame, holism, to distinguish cultural differences in conflict management strategy preferences. As predicted, S. Koreans showed more holistic tendencies than U.S. employees, and higher scores on a holism measure were positively related to ratings of the collaborative style (S. Korean preferred style) and negatively related to ratings of the avoiding style (U.S. preferred style). These findings support and extend those found by previous research (Kim et al. 2010 pp. 543-566) and provide additional early reinforcement for the holism value as a means for distinguishing and explaining cultural differences on communicative dimensions. Much more research is needed to confirm the relevance, power, and exhaustiveness of this value, but these results offers an initial step toward that goal.

Culture and Style Preference

Results found that S. Koreans preferred using the compromising style, followed by collaborating or accommodating, and then by avoiding or competing styles. In the U.S. sample, employees preferred using the avoiding or compromising styles the most, followed by the accommodating, collaborating, or competing style.

These results support and extend previous research in this domain. Many previous studies have concluded that compromising is a style more preferred by Easterners than Westerners (e.g., Kirkbride et al. 1991 pp. 365-386; Tang and Kirkbride 1986 pp. 287-301). In support of past research, our results showed that indeed, S. Korean participants preferred the compromising style over all other conflict strategies. Interestingly, U.S. employees also ranked compromising as one of their most preferred strategies along with the avoiding style. These findings regarding U.S. participants differ somewhat from previous studies that have shown competing to be one of the preferred styles of U.S. respondents (Kirkbride et al. 1991pp. 365-386; Morris et al. 1998 pp. 729-747). Still, Lee and Rogan (1991 pp. 181-199) found that U.S. participants reported preferences for the avoidant style as well. Our results appear to support and extend these latter findings.

Both cultures indicated a strong preference for the compromising style, which may suggest a view of conflict management (across cultures) that more strongly favors efficiency and shorter-term results. In our fast-paced global organizational world, it may be difficult to manage conflicts in the more time-consuming collaborative format (which requires extensive problem-solving and solution-seeking). So, compromising may be an alternative strategy that better fits today's fast-paced, global organizational environments.

Culture and Style Usage

The current study found significant differences in reported use of conflict management styles across the two cultures. Results indicated that S. Korean employees significantly preferred using collaborating, compromising, and accommodating styles more so than did the U.S. employees. The U.S. employees preferred using the avoiding style significantly more than did the S. Korean employees. There was no difference in the reported use of the competing style across the two cultures with both cultures indicating little preference for this strategy.

Based on previous research, the lack of preference for the competitive style among U.S. employees was unexpected. This may signal a change in U.S. employees' attitudes and values as globalization brings them into contact with cultures or situations where, we speculate, this confrontational strategy is viewed as inappropriate. We were also surprised to find that U.S. employees reported using an avoiding strategy significantly more often than did their S. Korean counterparts. Perhaps, the team orientation adopted by many U.S. organizations has softened U.S. employees' individualistic tendencies. Because team members must work together closely, employees may be more often adopting an avoidant style (instead of a competitive style) to maintain harmony and cohesion. Or it may be that as global organizations enact more virtual business transactions, employees are learning to use less confrontational strategies which have been shown to be positively related to satisfaction with the decision making process, decision quality, and participation in online venues (Paul et al. 2004 pp. 303-321). Hence, it may be that U.S. employees are adopting less aggressive strategies as their work environments become both more global, virtual, and team-oriented. In doing so, they may be rewriting what we know about predominant U.S. conflict management style preferences of the past.

Implications for Theory and Practice

The results of this study have both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it appears that the cultural value of holism can provide a new framework for identifying and explaining cultural differences. As predicted, S. Korean participants in this study scored higher on holism than did the U.S. participants. In addition, higher scores on the holism measure were positively correlated with the collaborative style preferred by the S. Koreans, and negatively with the avoiding style preferred by the U.S. participants. This investigation is one of the first studies to apply the holism concept to a specific communication context (conflict management). Hopefully, future investigations will continue to develop and test the holism frame as a measure of cultural differences.

Practically, the findings of this study provide useful guidelines for international business communication. In this global era, organizations increasingly seek more diversity in their business partners. This trend toward globalization and diversity increases the potential for conflict (Tang and Kirkbride 1986 pp. 287-301). Understanding different conflict management styles across cultures can help both employees and their organizations to better understand difficult discordant situations. In addition, if managers could determine employees' holistic tendencies, it might be easier to tailor training interventions to best fit a given individual or group. Hopefully, this type of customized training would lead to increased learning, skill development, and knowledge transfer.

Limitations and Future Research

Three limitations characterize this investigation. First, the convenience sample selected for this study may not be representative of each culture. All U.S. participants resided in the Midwest, and all S. Korean participants were recruited from organizations in Seoul, S. Korea. It is possible regional differences exist within each country. Therefore, future research should select a more diverse sample from different parts of each country.

Second, this study did not investigate other factors that may play roles as mediating or moderating variables. Individuals' conflict management strategies may vary depending on the types of organizations in which they work, their occupation, or their interpersonal relationship quality with colleagues. Thus, a more complex model is needed in future research.

Finally, the current study asked participants to describe their behavior *during* a conflict situation (i.e., a conflict in which they recently participated). Thus, this study's results may only indicate how individuals manage conflict once it explicitly erupts. Future research should explore strategies used before conflict

actually develops. For example, S. Koreans may intentionally avoid difficult situations whenever possible, but once conflict explicitly erupts, they may switch to strategies such as compromising or collaborating to resolve the issues and maintain their relationship with the counterpart. On the other hand, U.S. employees may not intentionally evade potential conflicts, but once they find themselves in an unpleasant conflict situation, they may then turn to avoiding strategies. Knowing more about how stages of conflict may evoke different strategies across the two cultures would add to our knowledge of the complexity of these situations.

Conclusion

This study employed a new cultural frame—holism—to investigate conflict management styles of S. Korean and U.S. organizational employees. Results showed that S. Koreans were more holistic than U.S. employees, and holism was positively correlated with a S. Korean preferred style (collaborating) and negatively correlated with a U.S. preferred style (avoiding). An examination of culture and strategy preferences showed that S. Koreans' most preferred conflict style was compromising, while for U.S. employees, avoiding or compromising were the most preferred styles. Results also showed that S. Koreans, significantly more so than U.S. employees, preferred collaborating, compromising, and accommodating styles, whereas U.S. employees preferred the avoiding style significantly more so than did S. Koreans. Although additional investigative work is needed to confirm these findings and further explore how holism can be used to predict and explain cultural differences, these results point to the richness of holism as a theoretical frame and suggest its potential for future investigations.

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Appendix

Measure of Holism

1. If one member of a family fails, the whole family fails.
2. In a family, one has to fill his or her role rather than develop his or her individuality.
3. We can guess how good a daughter would be once we know how good her mother is.
4. Children are mirror images of their parents.
5. A child's success is a direct reflection of their parents.
6. There always are excellent parents behind successful children.
7. Knowing the background of a person is a very important factor to deciding how likeable the person is.
8. Abnormal adolescents are products of abnormal families.
9. Children have to listen to their parent when they plan their future.
10. It would be reasonable to give a good grade for a paper that is overall well-done, even though some specific parts are not.
11. My parents might be prouder of me, if I were attending a higher ranked college. To understand who I am, you must see me with members of my group.
12. To understand who I am, you must see me with members of my group.

Note: Each item was measured based on 7-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree)

About the Authors

Jihyun Kim (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2012) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania. Her primary research interests include the intersection of new media/communication technology and health communication with additional interests in cross-cultural comparisons. Her work has been published in a variety of journals.

Renee A. Meyers (Ph.D., University of Illinois, Deceased) was a Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Her research interests included small group decision-making and argument, and the role of communication in organizational and learning groups. Published widely, she also served on the editorial boards of several Communication journals, and on the board of the Interdisciplinary Network for Group Research (INGROUP).

Authors' Address

1102 McCormick Center, Department of Communication Studies, Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, Bloomsburg, PA 17815, U.S.A.

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