



Conflict management among American and Chinese employees in multinational organizations in China

Conflict
management

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine how American and Chinese employees of multinational organizations deal with conflict between them.

Design/methodology/approach – In-depth interviews were conducted with 42 employees from 28 multinational organizations operating in China. A constant comparative method was used to analyze the data.

Findings – The paper finds that both American and Chinese employees used various strategies to deal with conflict, such as integrating, insisting on one's own solution, compromising, yielding to authority, avoiding, passive resistance, dissolving the relationship, and a third-party approach. In general, American participants were more likely to confront a conflict than Chinese participants. Findings of this study also indicate that differing motivations lead to the utilization of a common conflict management strategy.

Research limitations/implications – The validity of this study might be compromised due to self-reported responses. Future researchers need to further clarify definitions of conflict management styles and pay more attention to adaptation during the process of intercultural conflict resolution.

Practical implications – The findings of this study will help practitioners become more cognizant of conflict behaviors in multinational organizations, and thus be able to prepare more effective strategies to manage conflict.

Originality/value – This is one of few studies that examine conflict in multinational organizations from an intercultural perspective. This study is also one of few that utilize a qualitative approach to examine intercultural conflict management in a workplace.

Keywords National cultures, Conflict management, Employee behaviour, Multinational companies, China, United States of America

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

As the fastest growing economy in the world, China has achieved tremendous success in attracting foreign investment during the past two decades. China has been ranked first among developing countries in drawing foreign direct investment (FDI) since 1993 (*People's Daily*, 15 December 2001), and became the world's largest recipient of FDI in 2003 (*People's Daily*, 23 September 2003). Although multinational organizations continue to establish businesses in China, many of them have not achieved the success they expected. In fact, foreign managers "have often reported frustration and confusion" (Zhao, 2000, p. 209) when doing business in China. Kuhn and Poole (2000) concluded that the poor performance of multinational companies can often be attributed to culturally based misunderstandings. Due to language barriers, cultural differences, cultural prejudices and stereotypes, the potential for conflict in

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culturally diverse workgroups is greater than culturally homogeneous workgroups (Harrison *et al.*, 1998; Triandis, 2000; Vodosek, 2007). If not managed appropriately, such conflicts may result in mistrust, lack of cooperation, stress, low organizational commitment, and high turnover rates. On the other hand, appropriate management of conflict has been found to positively contribute to organizational performance (Amason and Schweiger, 1997). Since the outcomes of conflict management in multinational organizations can “have an impact on the survival of the organization” (Boonsathorn, 2007, p. 204), it is imperative to study conflict management in the context of multinational organizations.

Although there is a number of literature (e.g. Chua and Gudykunst, 1987; Leung, 1988; Ting-Toomey *et al.*, 1991; Singelis and Pedersen, 1994; Chen *et al.*, 2000; Knutson *et al.*, 2000) on conflict from a cross-cultural perspective (comparing people from different cultures), very few looked at conflict from an intercultural perspective (examining interaction between people from different cultures) (Boonsathorn, 2007), especially in an organizational setting (Liu and Chen, 2000). Additionally, many previous studies on conflict management are predominantly quantitative, whereby scholars would rely on statistics to compare conflict styles used by people of different cultures (Chen *et al.*, 2000). Yet sufficient explanations from participants describing why and how such styles were used remain to be researched. To address these needs, this study utilized a qualitative approach to examine how American and Chinese employees in multinational organizations (China based) manage conflict between them. Such a study will not only enrich literature on conflict management in multinational organizations, but also provide insights for cross-cultural managers, especially those who are working in China or planning to work there.

The paper proceeds as follows: first, it reviews literature on conflict management styles, and cultural influences on conflict management styles; second, it presents research methods; third, it outlines major findings; and finally, it discusses theoretical contributions and practical implications of this study as well as research limitations and future research directions.

Literature review

Conflict management styles

Putnam and Poole (1987) defined conflict as “the interaction of interdependent people who perceive opposition of goals, aims, and values, and who see the other party as potentially interfering with the realization of these goals” (p. 552). They believed that conflict is inevitable in an organization. A major focus in conflict research is conflict management style. Conflict management involves “designing effective strategies to minimize the dysfunctions of conflict and maximize the constructive functions of conflict in order to enhance learning and effectiveness in an organization” (Rahim, 2000, p. 5). Based on Thomas’ (1976) dual concern model of conflict-handling, Rahim and Bonoma (1979) defined five conflict styles: integrating, dominating, obliging, avoiding, and compromising.

Their dual concern model of conflict styles (Rahim and Bonoma, 1979, p. 1327) has been used as a framework in many subsequent conflict studies in various contexts. To be more specific, a domination-oriented person exhibits high concern for self and low concern for others. The dominant party will achieve goals by means of forceful behavior or ignoring the needs of others. This approach has been identified as a win-lose conflict resolution strategy. An integration-oriented person shows high concerns for both self and others, and collaborates with the other party to reach a mutually acceptable solution. This is recognized as a win-win approach. A compromising-oriented person focuses on

the intermediation of conflict. This involves a give-and-take situation in which both parties give up something in order to reach a consensus. This strategy is characterized as being no-win, no-lose. An obliging-oriented person displays low concern for self and high concern for others. Here, commonalities are emphasized and differences overlooked. This approach attempts to satisfy the other party and thus reach an agreement. An avoidant-oriented person has low concern for both self and other. Such an approach has been associated with the tendency to withdraw from or otherwise avoid conflict. It is considered as a lose-lose strategy.

Culture and conflict management styles

Previous research has shown that culture influences people's preferences of conflict management styles. Predictably, in multinational companies different cultural orientations will add complexities to conflict situations and conflict management. Since this paper focuses on examining conflict between American and Chinese employees, literature reviewed in the following will reflect this focus.

Tang and Kirkbride (1986) surveyed 50 senior government executives in Hong Kong, and found that Chinese executives favored less assertive strategies, such as compromising and avoiding, whereas British executives preferred more assertive strategies, such as collaborating and competing. Similarly, Jehn and Weldon (1997) also found that Chinese managers tended to adopt more passive conflict handling styles, such as avoiding, whereas American managers preferred direct or solution-driven styles.

Ting-Toomey and her colleagues (1991) compared people from five different regions (China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and the USA) and found that American participants used a higher degree of dominating style than their Japanese and Korean counterparts, whereas Chinese participants (from Mainland China and Taiwan) used a higher degree of obliging and avoiding strategies than American participants.

Tse *et al.* (1994) analyzed Canadian and Chinese executives' responses to several conflict situations, and concluded that Chinese executives were more likely to avoid conflict and use negative strategies, such as withdrawing or discontinuing negotiation. They further pointed out that harmonious relationships with group members are more valued in China than in Canada. Leung (1987) also reported that Chinese people prefer to bargain and mediate much more than Americans because the Chinese examined assumed that these two strategies can help reduce the animosity between disputants.

Based on the results of a comparative study of 318 Taiwanese and 245 American business employees, Knutson *et al.* (2000) concluded that compared to Taiwanese Chinese, American participants perceived the existence of conflict more frequently and preferred a direct, solution-driven conflict management style. In contrast, Chinese participants were more concerned about saving face and maintaining a pleasant relationship with their conflict counterpart, thus being inclined to ignore or play down the conflict.

The aforementioned studies all concluded that when in conflict Chinese people are more likely to use avoiding and obliging styles than Americans, and the latter tend to adopt a competing or solution-driven strategy. However, in recent years some studies have challenged these conclusions. For instance, Liu and Chen (2000) surveyed 82 Chinese employees with experience interacting with foreigners from four large joint ventures in northern China. Their results show that Chinese managers and employees tended to use a collaboration strategy more frequently than a controlling strategy, and a controlling strategy more frequently than a non-confrontational strategy.

Peng *et al.* (2000) found that in terms of conflict management approaches Chinese working in Sino-foreign joint ventures did not differ from Chinese working in

state-owned enterprises, yet Chinese employees did differ from their Western counterparts. Chinese employees opted to use more avoiding strategies than Western employees, and the latter tended to adopt more integrating strategies than the former. They also found that Chinese people were more likely to use a dominating style to resolve conflict than American or French employees.

Chen *et al.* (2005) interviewed 111 Chinese employees in Shanghai and found that a cooperative conflict management approach positively contributes to work productivity and relationships between foreign managers and Chinese employees, whereas a competitive or avoidance approach is negatively related to work productivity and relationships.

Wang *et al.* (2007) found that when dealing with affective conflict, Chinese top managers preferred to use integrating style first, mediating next, and then avoiding styles; when dealing with cognitive conflict, the managers chose integrating at first, followed by compromising and dominating styles. They also found obliging was the least used style by Chinese top managers.

Previous literature has offered an extensive review of conflict management styles across cultures, yet little has been written about why and how participants used certain strategies over others. In fact, some scholars (e.g. Ting-Toomey, 1985; Yu, 1997-1998) have argued that the interpretations of conflict styles vary across cultures. Thus, the following research question is posed in order to gain a deeper understanding about why people deal with conflict in a particular way:

RQ1: How do American and Chinese employees manage conflict between them?

Method

In order to better understand people's assumptions and motivations in conflict situations I conducted interviews to collect data. As Erlandson *et al.* (1993) noted:

[. . .] through interviews, the researcher often gains a first insight into the constructed realities that are wrapped up in the idiolect [the speech] of the respondent (p. 99).

Participants

Participants were American and Chinese employees who worked in a multinational organization and had experience communicating with their intercultural counterpart. I recruited all participants through referral from personal contacts and several participants I interviewed. I did not know any of the participants prior to the interview. In all, 42 people voluntarily participated in this study. Of the total, 20 were non-Chinese Americans, 19 were Chinese citizens, and three were Chinese Americans. Among the three Chinese Americans, one was born and grew up in the USA and only spoke English, the other two were naturalized American citizens and spoke both Chinese and English. Twelve participants were female and 30 were male. All participants had at least a Bachelor's degree. The majority of American participants had lived abroad before moving to China. Six of them were expatriate managers, and 14 were hired directly in China. Almost all these 14 American participants had studied in China before starting to work in their current organizations. Of the 19 Chinese participants, ten had studied or worked in a western country at some time; of the remaining nine participants, seven had been to the USA on business at least once. Most participants were less than 40 years old.

Participants were from 28 organizations. Nearly half of these organizations were among the top 500 companies in the USA. These organizations were in a variety of

industries, including accounting, advertising, agriculture, cosmetics, information technology, legal services, manufacturing, public relations, and telecommunications.

Data collection

I conducted face-to-face interview with each participant. A semi-structured interview protocol was used which allowed me to adjust some questions according to the interviewee's responses and the interviewing context. During the interview I tape recorded the conversations with permission from the participant. All but three interviews were tape recorded. Interviews with all Chinese participants and two Chinese Americans were conducted in Chinese, and interviews with all American participants and one Chinese American were conducted in English. The length of interviews ranged from 30 min to 2 h, with most interviews lasting approximately 50 min. I stopped doing interviews when the data became saturated, that is, no or little new themes emerged from continuous data collection (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002).

I collected all the data between August and November of 2005 in two cities in China: Beijing and Qingdao. I conducted 35 interviews in Beijing and seven in Qingdao. Both cities are in north China. Beijing is the political and cultural center as well as the largest science and technology center in China. Qingdao is one of the open coastal cities in China that enjoys preferential policies and has provincial-level economic management rights.

Data analysis

All 39 tape-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. All transcribed Chinese scripts ($n = 21$) were translated into English for analysis. Data were analyzed using a constant comparative method in order to categorize and identify thematic patterns (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This method involves constant comparisons of different people, incidents, times, and categories (Charmaz, 2000) to capture the essence of the phenomenon under study. To be more specific, I started data analysis with open coding (unrestricted coding) in order to identify as many categories as possible. Next, I compared different categories and looked for connections among them, and then synthesized them into broader categories subsuming initial categories. Thus, categorization was moved to a higher level of abstraction and recurrent themes were also delineated (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). In the following stage, I examined each theme found in the data in accordance with the posed research question. I constantly reviewed and analyzed the data, the categories, and the themes in order to generate richer interpretations.

Findings

According to the interview results, both American and Chinese participants used various strategies to deal with conflict, including integrating, insisting on one's own idea, compromising, complying with authority, avoiding, passive resistance, dissolving the relationship, and a third-party approach.

Integrating

Some conflicts reported by participants were solved through constructive communication. For instance, an American manager mentioned that when there were problems due to miscommunication or misunderstanding, he would try to create a mutual way of thinking. As he explained, "When a problem comes up, you discuss it. The next time both parties will come to be a little bit more understanding about how the other person looks at things." A Chinese interviewee offered a specific example:

When we were discussing a sales report, our manager [an American] asked for specific numbers. One Chinese employee mentioned a number based on his estimation. The American manager was not happy with that because he believed that people should not make up a number if they don't know the right answer. But Chinese people think not knowing the answer is a shame.

He said eventually through more interactions the American manager learned that Chinese employees did not intend to cheat him and the trust level between them had increased. Another Chinese participant stated that conflicts between American and Chinese partners in his organization became less and less because after communicating with each other both sides had gradually realized that they share the same goal although there are cultural differences.

Insisting on one's own idea

This strategy was used when participants believed that they were right, or when they had more power. An American interviewee said when he had conflicts with his Chinese coworkers over English translation of Chinese commercials, he just changed the translation in his way, and he would tell them, "Look, this is the best way." He said because his job was to produce good English, basically he always won because his English was better than theirs. Another American interviewee mentioned that he usually asked his Chinese assistants to do things without explanations. As he stated:

If I say "I need to get this, this is because X," if I give them a bigger picture, I will get responses like "*bu hao shuo*" [hard to say], or "that is not available," or "I can't find it," or "you don't understand the work situation here." So I have to say, "Just do it and don't ask why." I ultimately get better products.

When a disagreement arose due to Americans' unfamiliarity with situations in China, many Chinese employees said they would try to persuade their American supervisors or coworkers to conform to the Chinese standards. For instance, a Chinese interviewee said:

When Chinese journalists write a news report for your organization, they expect the organization to pay for them or provide them some types of benefits. My American boss did not understand this and thought it was bribing. I explained to him that this is a commonly accepted norm in China. Finally my boss accepted it.

Another Chinese participant, however, pointed out that if it was just a technical issue, the American managers usually would adopt Chinese employees' suggestions, but if it was related to major principles, the managers would not compromise.

Compromising

Sometimes both parties in conflict give up some of their interests in order to reach a mutually acceptable decision. An American interviewee reported that at the early stage the American and Chinese partners often had conflicts because "the Americans were more interested in entering the Chinese market, building up some market share, having some revenues," whereas "the Chinese partner was hoping to earn profit immediately." According to him, this kind of conflict was solved by giving the Chinese partner fixed profits and letting the American partner control the operation of the company so that each side would have a vested interest.

A Chinese participant said that one of her subordinates was not satisfied with his salary and sent an email to the (American) boss. The boss then forwarded his email to her asking if his request was reasonable. In the end, they raised that person's salary a

bit, but did not give him exactly what he asked for. Another Chinese participant said that sometimes both the American manager and the Chinese employees compromised in order to solve a conflict. He suggested, “We [Chinese] don’t need to be too flexible, and they [Americans] don’t need to be too rigid.”

Complying with authority

Sometimes participants gave up their interest or position not because they were wrong, but because the other party had more power. One American participant noticed that in the face of authority the Chinese style traditionally has been more passive than the American approach. A Chinese participant pointed out that in multinational organizations Chinese employees usually compromise more than American employees because the core managers are American. Another Chinese participant also mentioned that when the issue is about policies, the supervisor has the final say. As he explained:

Sometimes you [Chinese employees] thought a decision is stupid, but because you did not have strong communication and persuasion skills, you could not persuade him [the American supervisor]. In the end, you had to follow his decision although you were unhappy.

One Chinese participant argued that employees should not confront their boss directly and say “you are wrong” because “he [the boss] earns more money than you do and is more powerful. If you act against your boss, he may transfer you to another position.” He suggested employees to use better communication tactics to sell their ideas rather than directly confront the supervisor.

Although Chinese employees are more likely to comply with their supervisors, an American participant stated that no matter whether in China or in the USA, a person’s status in the company certainly influences their conflict styles. As he stated, “I think in a situation of serious conflict, if you are higher in the company, you probably will feel more at ease to say your opinion.”

Avoiding

Avoidance occurs when disputants do not want to confront the other party and try to avoid direct communication. According to participants, this approach was usually adopted by Chinese employees. As one American participant stated, “I think the stereotype is that most Chinese people are not confrontational, but to some sense almost non-confrontational.” He mentioned that an American employee in his company was very tough on his Chinese colleagues. It was apparent that people in the office did not like him, but they did not report his bullying behaviors.

Another American participant also stated that there was a huge push to not have conflict in China. He thought that if people did not solve small problems, it would eventually lead to bigger problems. A Chinese interviewee also admitted that avoiding conflict is not a good thing:

Chinese people don’t like conflict and accept whatever is said. They just compromise and control their feelings. I had this problem before. Even though I knew the decision made by my boss was wrong, I would not point it out. In fact, this would hurt both the company and myself.

Another Chinese interviewee found more conflicts among the Americans than between the Chinese and American employees because Americans directly speak out what they think and accept the “challenge-others” attitude, whereas Chinese people are more reserved and care more about their face. Some Chinese participants did not think it is necessary to have conflict. As a Chinese-American participant commented, “many

Chinese do not want to confront others and hope the conflict will dissolve itself.” An American interviewee found this strategy actually worked in China. According to him, American people need to bring conflict to a closure: “Unless you go ahead and apologize, you are still in conflict.” While in Beijing he noticed that “it seems that conflict has a tendency to resolve itself without you having to get there and resolve it. All you have to do is wait a couple of days and see each other, smile.” He said that although the American way is much more natural for him, because he was very busy and did not have time to talk with people and apologize, he found it easier to just wait a couple of days and it usually worked.

Passive resistance

Passive resistance occurs when people pretend that conflict does not exist, but in private they still have negative feelings towards the other party or choose not to be cooperative. For instance, a Chinese-American participant noticed that when there was a conflict, some Chinese employees just complained to each other. One American participant also mentioned that “sometimes people will smile to your face but talk behind your back.” Another Chinese participant said Chinese employees are more likely to keep silent and passively resist when in conflict because “in American companies, Americans are the boss. Sometimes even you speak out, it won’t make a big difference.”

Dissolving the relationship

This situation occurs when the two parties involved in a conflict are unable to reach an agreement or when there is a serious violation of company policies, and as a result one party chooses or is forced to leave the organization. For example, an American employee said in his previous company, the Chinese partner stole technology and tried to set up a parallel company that sold the same product. When the American partner found it out, they bought out the Chinese partner. Another example is an American manager saying that when she found out one of her Chinese employees got paid by the suppliers under-table, she fired him immediately because she set the rules clearly at the beginning.

Third-party approach

A third party may be called to mediate the conflict situation when the two disputants cannot solve the conflict themselves. As one Chinese participant stated, “If I can’t solve the conflict, I will escalate it to the upper level. If I think I am right, I will talk directly with the other person’s supervisor and let his supervisor judge the issue.” Another Chinese participant also stated that when he and his coworkers could not figure out a middle-range solution, they would let the upper-level manager to make the decision, which was usually done in a cooperative manner.

One Chinese participant mentioned that the American way of problem-solving is to ask relevant parties to sit together and express their own opinions. Yet he did not think this approach works well for Chinese people. He suggested that a more effective approach for Chinese people would be letting an authoritative figure coordinate the situation. An American participant expressed a similar opinion. He thought that using a mediator in China is very useful because of the face concern. He noted that “it is a lot easier for people when they have a conflict with you, that they send somebody else to deal with the conflict.”

Discussion

Findings of this study clearly indicate that interpretations of the same conflict style vary across cultures. The dual concern model (Rahim and Bonoma, 1979) can only

partially explain people's motivations and behaviors in conflict (Cai and Fink, 2002). For instance, to many American participants, avoidance is not an effective way to deal with conflict. But to some Chinese participants, avoiding conflict can be functional and contribute to relationship maintenance (Tse *et al.*, 1994; Tjosvold and Sun, 2002). Under the influence of Confucianism, Chinese people attach great importance to maintaining harmony within a group and consider conflict as a detractor from harmony (Chen and Starosta, 1997-1998). Thus, sometimes Chinese people avoid conflict in order to protect both parties' face and maintain interpersonal harmony (Hwang, 1997-1998). In this circumstance, avoidance shows high concern instead of low concern for both self and others. Chinese employees' tendency to avoid conflict in an intercultural context can also be attributed to language barriers. Most Chinese employees communicated with their American supervisors or coworkers in English, which is not a native language to the Chinese. They may withdraw from a conflict situation if they do not have strong English skills to persuade their counterpart. Second, domination is often labeled as showing high concern for self and low concern for others. Yet some participants (including both American and Chinese) said they insisted on their own idea because it would benefit their organization rather than serve their own interests. In addition, compliance with authority (which may be viewed as one form of "obliging") can be interpreted as pleasing the supervisor. Yet, it may show high concern rather than low concern for self in some cases because if an employee acts against the supervisor, his or her job may be put at risk. Noticeably, this strategy was mainly used by Chinese employees. This reinforces Confucius' idea of obedience to authority.

Another important finding of this study is that most American and Chinese participants preferred a pragmatic stance when dealing with conflict at work. In a business context the best strategy is not always the most ideal choice but the most feasible strategy considering existing resources. Understandably, when there are disputes the solution that will benefit the organization most is more likely to be adopted. As Boonsathorn (2007) pointed out, "a focus on task and goal achievement" in multinational organizations "might have encouraged employees to exhibit conflict styles that were more solution-oriented" (p. 213).

In addition, although American participants are more likely to confront the conflict, both American and Chinese participants reported that how they solve a conflict is dependent upon situations. As an American participant said, "You pick your battles. Be confrontational when it matters. Don't when it doesn't." This supports Rahim (1985)'s claim that the appropriate use of conflict management styles is situation based. Compared to American participants, Chinese participants are more likely to take several factors into consideration when dealing with conflict, among them stakes, power, relationships, situations, and possible consequences. As Hwang (1997-1998) and Yu (1997-1998) found, Chinese people have used different conflict management styles according to different circumstances. Due to the rapid economic development and increasing openness in China, China is no longer a homogenous society and disparities among Chinese people have become wider. Especially the younger generation Chinese who have been exposed to Western cultures, are less likely to conform to traditional Chinese values. As Wang *et al.* (2007) argued, the social transformation in China makes Chinese people's conflict management styles less predictable.

Finally, it is inappropriate or even counter-productive to use a win-lose framework to analyze conflict in an organization. Competing employees often do not achieve the collective goals. As an American participant said, the main objective is to "find the right path, the agreement, understanding, and what needs to be done to improve our

business.” Therefore, it is not an issue of right or wrong, but an issue of getting everybody on the team to go in the same direction and act in unison. Even in cases where there is competition among colleagues, ultimately employees still need to conform to organizational interests. Otherwise, they may have to leave the organization.

Limitations of the study

This study has a few limitations. First, this study relied on self-reported data. Accuracy may be questionable as participants may have filtered information before reporting it. Frey *et al.* (2000) pointed out that the validity of self-reports is compromised when people “aren’t able and/or willing to provide complete and accurate information” (p. 96). It is understandable that what people recall may be different from what actually happened, for various reasons.

Second, the researcher effect may have introduced some bias. I met all my participants for the first time during our interviews. Lack of familiarity or our interaction during the interview may have influenced their perceptions or responses. I tried to lessen this effect by being professional and attentive during the interviews, and also attempted to be accommodating to their needs. But it is possible that our interactions might have affected their attitudes and selection of narratives.

Third, findings of this study should be generalized with caution due to the demographics of participants. Most Chinese participants were bilingual, in their twenties or thirties, working in multinational organizations and had overseas experiences. Their backgrounds may make them more receptive to Western cultures and communication practices. In addition, this study was conducted in north China. It is possible that southern Chinese may have different viewpoints on conflict management. As one American participant noticed, northern Chinese are more open and more likely to confront conflict than southern Chinese.

Suggestions for future research

Based on findings of this study, I wish to suggest a few directions for future research. First, more qualitative studies are needed to explore the diverse interpretations of conflict management styles. Findings of this study indicate that differing motivations lead to the utilization of a common conflict management strategy. The reasons for this remain unclear. Researchers also need to further clarify definitions of conflict management styles and explain whether we define a conflict management strategy based on the process or the outcome of conflict resolution.

Second, more studies should be done in an intercultural context so that we can gain a better understanding of how people react and adapt when in conflict with a person from a different cultural background. Some Chinese participants reported that they used the American style to communicate with American people and the Chinese style to communicate with Chinese people. A few American participants also mentioned that they tried to adapt to the Chinese way when working with Chinese people. It would be advantageous to study the effects of cultural adaptation as well as to know if and how such adaptation serves organizational or personal interests.

Third, it would be beneficial to interview intercultural disputants in pair. In this study many Chinese participants said they preferred to or tried to communicate directly when dealing with a conflict, however, very few American participants reported that their Chinese coworkers were as direct as they were. Interviewing intercultural disputants in pair would thus help us better understand how they

perceive and react to the same conflict and how they interpret their own and their counterpart's conflict behavior.

Practical implications

Findings of this study have important implications for multinational corporations operating in China. This study not only examined how employees of multinational organizations reacted to conflicts in a workplace, but also explored the motivations for such behaviors. Detailed explanations from participants will help cross-cultural managers better understand employees' assumptions and motivations in conflict situations. For instance, employees may select the same strategy to solve the same conflict, but their motivations and expectations for such a choice of action may be different. Managers can incorporate findings of this study into some on-the-job training programs. Noticeably, although there were some differences between American and Chinese employees in terms of their conflict management styles, they also showed some similarities, such as their preference of a cooperative strategy to deal with conflict. Thus, it is necessary to be culturally sensitive in a workplace; meanwhile, it is also important to avoid amplifying cultural differences.

Effective management of conflict is important to the success of multinational organizations. It is hoped that this study will help practitioners become more cognizant of conflict behaviors in multinational organizations, and thus be better prepared to manage conflict in ways that help build confidence in future performance (Tjosvold and Sun, 2001) and contribute to a pleasant work environment.

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