Culture and Interpersonal Conflict Resolution Styles: Role of Acculturation

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Abstract

This study explored the role of acculturation and bicultural identity processes in the interpersonal conflict resolution preferences of monoculturals (Koreans and European Americans) and biculturals (Korean Americans). Koreans and European Americans differed in their conflict resolution styles in a manner congruent with individualism-collectivism theory. Korean Americans displayed a complex bicultural pattern of conflict resolution: They endorsed "competing" (a traditionally individualistic style) more than Koreans and similar to European Americans, while also endorsing "avoidance" (a traditionally collectivistic style) more than both European Americans and Koreans. The authors discuss the results in light of biculturalism and cultural encapsulation theories.

Keywords

conflict resolution styles, biculturalism, acculturation, cultural encapsulation, Korean Americans

Interpersonal conflict is a common and often inevitable element of personal relationships. Interpersonal conflict per se is not a negative or destructive phenomenon; however, the manner in which it is resolved or dealt with strongly impacts the quality of most relationships (Gottman, 1993). Conflict resolution behavior, therefore, has been the subject of extensive research, and work in this area provides a wealth of evidence suggesting that the way an individual deals with interpersonal conflict is influenced by culture (e.g., Ting-Toomey et al., 2000). Research investigating conflict resolution styles of Koreans, however, is scarce. Furthermore, there is surprisingly no empirical research examining how individuals exposed to more than one culture (e.g., biculturals) handle interpersonal conflicts. Given a large percentage of Americans are in all likelihood bicultural (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005) and more than 1 million Korean Americans reside in the United States (Korean American Census Data), understanding the way in which biculturals in general, Korean Americans in particular, handle interpersonal conflicts is thus of great importance.

The present study, therefore, aims to compare the conflict resolution style preferences of monoculturals (Koreans and European Americans) and biculturals (Korean Americans). We do so by relying on Thomas's (1976) "dual-concern" model of conflict resolution styles, which encompasses the two dimensions of assertiveness (i.e., concern for own needs) and cooperativeness (i.e., concern for other person's needs).

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Individualism-Collectivism and Interpersonal Conflict Resolution Style

Cross-cultural studies on interpersonal conflict clearly indicate that the competing style (i.e., high assertiveness, low cooperativeness) is more favored by members of individualistic cultures (e.g., the United States) than it is by members of collectivistic cultures (e.g., South Korea, China) and that the opposite pattern occurs for the avoiding (i.e., low assertiveness, low cooperativeness) and accommodating (i.e., low assertiveness, high cooperativeness) styles (e.g., Elsayed-Ekhouly & Buda, 1996; Holt & DeVore, 2005). Cultural comparisons on the compromising (i.e., intermediate assertiveness and cooperativeness) and collaborating styles (i.e., high assertiveness, high cooperativeness) have yielded inconclusive results (e.g., Ting-Toomey et al., 2000; Trubisky, Ting-Toomey, & Lin, 1991). Because there is little consistent evidence for cultural differences on the collaborating and compromising styles, and the reliabilities for these two styles were below desirable levels in our study, our study focuses on the other three styles.

Based on the individualism-collectivism theoretical framework and previous research, we hypothesize that European Americans in our study will report greater use of competing style than Koreans (Hypothesis 1) and that conversely, Koreans will report greater use of avoiding and accommodating styles than European Americans (Hypotheses 2 and 3).

Biculturalism and Interpersonal Conflict Resolution Styles

The cultural studies reviewed previously are not informative, however, about the issue of how individuals who have been exposed to and internalized both collectivistic and individualistic cultures (e.g., Asian Americans) resolve interpersonal conflicts. For instance, do these individuals average across these two different ways of handling conflicts, resulting in a conflict resolution style that is somewhat collectivistic and somewhat individualistic? Or do they simply adopt either a collectivistic or an individualistic conflict resolution style?

Acculturation research conducted in the past two decades provides strong support for the idea that acculturation is bidimensional in that acculturating individuals (e.g., immigrants and their descendents, colonized populations, long-term sojourners) can successfully internalize and be competent in a new culture while remaining involved with the original ethnic culture (e.g., Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005; Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000; Ryder, Alden, & Paulhus, 2000).

In line with this bidimensional model of acculturation, we propose Korean Americans, as a result of having internalized many of the U.S. norms, will endorse competing style more than Koreans (Hypothesis 4: mainstream culture adaptation). Furthermore, we hypothesize that Korean Americans, as a result of retaining many of their original cultural values, will endorse the avoiding and accommodating styles more than European Americans (Hypotheses 5 and 6: heritage culture retention).

It is not very clear, however, how competitive Korean Americans will be compared to European Americans and how avoidant and accommodating Korean Americans will be compared to Koreans. A few available empirical studies on the conflict resolution styles of Asian Americans suggest that Asian Americans can be as competitive as European Americans. For example, in a comparative study of four U.S. ethnic groups (i.e., European Americans, Asian Americans, Mexican Americans, and African Americans), Ting-Toomey et al. (2000) found that Asian Americans were as competitive as European Americans, but significantly more avoidant than European Americans. Interestingly, Ting-Toomey et al.'s study didn't provide any interpretation for the nonsignificant ethnic group differences in competing style. We argue that these findings shouldn't go unnoticed because they can be a valuable source in predicting conflict resolution patterns of biculturals. The evidence of this phenomenon, however, is not very strong and thus we will explore whether Korean Americans will be as competitive as European Americans.

The processes by which acculturating individuals conserve their original culture are much less understood. Some recent acculturation work suggests that independently of how much the mainstream culture is internalized, immigrants and U.S.–born ethnic minorities often adhere to the ethnic cultural values even more strongly than members of their home country (Kim-Jo, 2003; Matsumoto, Weissman, Preston, Brown, & Kupperbusch, 1997). For instance, Matsumoto and colleagues (1997) found that Japanese Americans endorsed collectivistic values more than Japanese nationals. These effects have been described under the rubric of *cultural encapsulation* (Kim, Yang, Atkinson, Wolfe, & Hong, 2001; Kim-Jo, 2003). In other words, immigrants and U.S.–born minorities can become gradually "encapsulated" within the norms and values of an earlier era in their homeland and thus adhere more strongly to their original cultural values than members of their home country (Kim et al., 2001; Kim-Jo, 2003). Because there is no empirical research examining cultural encapsulation phenomenon with regard to conflict resolution, we will explore whether Korean Americans will endorse avoiding and accommodating conflict resolution styles more strongly than Koreans.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 494 psychology undergraduate students from a large public university in Southern California and a large private university in Southern part of South Korea. Of the participants, 121 were European Americans (62 male, 59 female, mean age = 19.8), 112 were Korean Americans (47 male, 65 female, mean age = 20.6), and 261 were Koreans (70 male, 191 female, mean age = 21.9). In the Korean American subsample, 66 were first-generation and 46 second-generation.

Instruments

Management of Differences Exercise Instrument (MODE; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). This questionnaire consists of 30 sets of paired items; each item describes one of the five conflict resolution styles (competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating). Participants are asked to choose the statement in each pair that would be their typical behavioral preference during a conflict situation. Each style is paired with each other style three times, and a person's score on each style is the number of times he or she selects statements representing that style over other statements. Each style is scored from 0 to 12, with a 12 indicating extensive use of the style and 0 indicating no use of the style.

Korean and U.S. cultural identification. Participants rated the strength of their identification with Korean culture and/or U.S. culture with two separate items that read "I feel North American (Korean)." Responses were measured on a 6-point scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*).

Results

As it can be seen in Table 1, Koreans reported the lowest levels of identification with U.S. culture, followed by Korean Americans and European Americans. Furthermore, Koreans and Korean Americans did not statistically differ in their levels of identification with Korean culture. Notice also that Korean American participants displayed a bicultural pattern of identification, showing substantial levels of identification with both U.S. and Korean cultures.

To test our hypotheses regarding cultural variations in conflict resolution styles, two-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were computed on each conflict resolution style using culture and

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for European Americans, Korean Americans, and Koreans

	European American (n = 121)			Korean American (n = 112)			Korean (n = 261)			
	M	*SD*	α	*M*	*SD*	α	*M*	*SD*	α	*F*
Culture identification										
U.S.	4.96_a	1.07		4.19_b	1.44		2.84_c	1.00		155.37***
Korean				4.42	1.23		4.61	0.98		2.28
Conflict resolution										
Competing	4.57_a	2.93	.73	3.79_a	2.93	.76	2.68_b	2.21	.64	19.93***
Accommodating	6.55_a	2.58	.69	7.13_a	2.51	.58	8.18_b	2.38	.64	19.90***
Avoiding	6.36_a	2.38	.55	7.12_b	2.33	.51	6.02_a	1.84	.48	10.55***

Note: The results are based on two-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) computed on each conflict resolution style using culture and gender as factors. A gender main effect was found only for competing style. No culture and gender interaction was found. Means in the same row that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$ in Bonferoni's tests.
***$p < .001$.

gender as factors (see Table 1). We added gender to the analyses because previous studies report gender differences in conflict resolution styles (e.g., Holt & DeVore, 2005).

With regard to the competing style, the culture main effect was significant, $F(2, 482) = 19.93$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.08$. Supporting Hypothesis 1, European Americans reported significantly greater use of competing style than Koreans, $F(1, 379) = 48.14$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.11$. Supporting Hypotheses 4 (mainstream culture adaptation), Korean Americans reported significantly greater use of the competing style than Koreans, $F(1, 369) = 16.1$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$, but did not significantly differ from European Americans. There was a gender main effect for the competing style, $F(1, 482) = 6.02$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$, indicating that males ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 2.97$) were more likely to use this style than females ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 2.46$). Additional hierarchical regression analyses indicated that the cultural effects on this style were significant over and above gender.

With regard to the accommodating style, the culture main effect was significant, $F(2, 482) = 19.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.08$. Supporting Hypothesis 3, Koreans endorsed this style significantly above European Americans, $F(1, 379) = 37.55$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$. Hypothesis 6 (heritage culture retention) was only marginally supported: Korean Americans reported slightly more accommodating style than European Americans, $F(1, 230) = 3.03$, $p = .08$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$. A cultural encapsulation effect was not found for this style: Korean Americans endorsed accommodating style less than Koreans, $F(1, 369) = 15.01$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$.

With regard to the avoiding style, the culture main effect was significant, $F(2, 482) = 10.55$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.04$. Hypothesis 2 was surprisingly not supported: Koreans and European Americans did not differ in their use of this style. Hypothesis 5 (heritage culture retention) was supported: Korean Americans endorsed avoiding style more strongly than European Americans, $F(1, 230) = 5.84$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$. A cultural encapsulation effect was found for avoiding style: Korean Americans endorsed avoiding style more than Koreans, $F(1, 369) = 23.38$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.06$.

Discussion

Our general predictions about the influence of culture on conflict resolution styles were largely supported. A noteworthy finding in our study was the bicultural pattern of conflict resolution styles displayed by the Korean American subsample. Consistent with our predictions, Korean Americans reported engaging in both characteristically American ways of resolving conflicts

(e.g., use of the competing style) and characteristically Korean ways of resolving conflicts (e.g., use of the avoidant style). Specifically, Korean Americans were significantly more competitive than Koreans and similar to European Americans, yet at the same time significantly more avoidant than European Americans and Koreans. This pattern suggests a successful internalization of specific psychosocial processes that are adaptive in the United States (e.g., being competitive to fulfill one's own concern) while retaining important features of their ethnic values and norms (e.g., being avoidant).

Of special interest was the finding that Korean Americans use avoiding style more than Koreans in conflict resolution. This finding provides some initial support for the idea that some biculturals, in this case, Korean Americans, may adhere more strongly to their ethnic cultural values than members of their home country (i.e., cultural encapsulation). Future studies should examine this understudied phenomenon.

Our study has some limitations: conceptualization of culture as a nominal, exogenous variable; decontextualized nature of the conflict resolution style measurement; and low reliabilities obtained for two scales. Despite these limitations however, the present study has important implications for the study of culture and conflict resolution. Namely, we have demonstrated that Asian Americans display both Western and ethnic competency in resolving interpersonal conflict.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Bios

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