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## Conflict styles within individualistic, low power distance, and low context nations: a four nation comparison

Stephen M. Croucher , Stephanie Kelly , Douglas Ashwell, and Shawn M. Condon

### ABSTRACT

This study compared conflict styles approaches of four nations with similar cultural dimensions. Prior literature assumes similar cultural dimensions produce similar approaches to conflict. Four nations were examined: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States. Results reveal the conflict approaches of individuals from these nations differ despite similar cultural dimensions. In addition, the four nations scored relatively high on solution-oriented approaches to conflict (integrating and compromising). This is the first study to compare conflict styles across traditionally individualistic, low-context, independent self-construal, and low power distance nations.

### KEYWORDS

Conflict styles; culture; national comparison; MANOVA; individualism

Conflict is a “struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals” (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991, p. 12). How individuals manage or resolve conflict is manifested through a variety of conflict styles or “responses to conflict” (Ting-Toomey et al., 1999, p. 48). Various models of conflict styles have been proposed. However, most researchers use the typology developed by Blake and Mouton (1964), which proposes five styles: avoiding, compromising, dominating, integrating, and obliging. Preferences for these styles have been studied in relation to situational, relational, cultural, and other variables (Croucher et al., 2016; Oetzel, 1998).

Researchers have explored the extent to which cultural variables, such as individualism-collectivism and power distance (Hofstede, 2001) influence conflict style preference. Studies have shown more individualistic individuals (focus on the self) prefer the dominating style, while collectivistic individuals (group orientation) prefer the avoiding, integrating, and obliging styles (Cai & Fink, 2002). Moreover, conflict style preference differs based on degree of power distance within a culture. Power distance is the extent to which members of a society accept and expect power inequalities (Hofstede, 2001). Nations with low power distance prefer more equal treatment across individuals. The link between

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power distance and conflict styles is not clear. Research has shown high power distance cultures are more likely to prefer a dominating style, as inequality is more accepted and expected in such cultures (Gunkel et al., 2016). However, low power distance and low context cultures are also more likely to prefer the dominating style, as such cultures tend to be more individualistic and individually focused (Kaushal & Kwantes, 2006). Hall (1959) defined context as a continuum of how explicit the messages are in communication. High context cultures tend to prefer more indirect verbal and non-verbal communication, while low context cultures tend to prefer more direct or explicit verbal and non-verbal communication.

This study tests the assertion that culture affects conflict style preference (Ting-Toomey, 2005). This study explores conflict styles in four individualistic, low-power distance, low-context, and independent self-construal nations<sup>1</sup>: the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Unlike previous studies comparing distinctly culturally different nations, such as the U.S. and China (Guan & Li, 2017), this study compares four nations that are relatively similar culturally, economically, and politically. Such a comparison of four “similar” nations adds to our understanding of culture’s influence on conflict styles by showing culture’s influence on “similar” groups versus traditionally bipolar groups. When cross cultural research is conducted among nations with bipolar cultural dimensions, differences found between nations are attributed to those cultural dimensions by default. Only by studying nations with similar cultural dimensions, controlling for these differences, can cross cultural research identify influence beyond Hofstede’s (2001) dimensions. In addition, conflict style approaches in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand are understudied and in need of further investigation (Wilson & Power, 2004).

## **Conflict styles**

Conflict style is the preferred pattern one takes in approaching a conflict. Conflicts can be community-oriented, intercultural, interpersonal, and/or organizational (Oetzel et al., 2001). There are five generally agreed on conflict styles: avoiding, compromising, dominating, integrating, and obliging. The avoiding style is when one tends to withdraw from the conflict situation. The compromising style is a style that attempts to find a middle ground resolution to the conflict. The dominating style is when one participant attempts to win the conflict at the expense of the other(s). The integrating style is when both parties try to fulfill the needs of all members involved in the conflict. Finally, the obliging style where one party denies their own interests to benefit the other(s), a self-sacrificing approach (Rahim, 1983).

## ***Conflict styles and national culture***

Studies have shown U.S. participants prefer the dominating style more than Asian cultures/nations (Cai & Fink, 2002; Croucher et al., 2012). Within the U.S., Asian-Americans tend to prefer the avoiding style more than Whites (Ting-Toomey et al., 1999). In the Canadian context, researchers have found mixed results when studying conflict styles and when comparing styles cross-culturally. Canadian respondents have a higher preference for compromising and dominating styles than Chinese respondents (Ma, 2007; Ma & Kao, 2007), and Canadian business students score highest on integrating and lowest on dominating styles (Petersen & Ford, 2019). Research in the Australian context has largely compared Anglo-Australian (White) preferences versus Asian or Chinese preferences. Anglo-Australians have a higher preference for direct or dominating approaches than Asians or Chinese participants (Brew & Cairns, 2004a, 2004b). In a comparison of Australian Christians and Muslims, Wilson and Power (2004) found differences in preference between the integrating and compromising approaches based on an individual's level of religious practice. In the New Zealand context, researchers have yet to explore the conflict style preferences of the dominant White or Pākeha culture. Research has shown Chinese migrants prefer to integrate or compromise (Wang, 2015), or will learn to be more dominating in business conflicts (Wang, 2015). However, research on the larger New Zealand population is sparse.

Research has shown differences between the U.S., Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and East-Asian nations, such as China and Japan. However, research has not demonstrated differing conflict styles among these four nations, which are classified as individualistic, low power distance, and low context. Additionally, Ting-Toomey (2005, 2017) and Chau and Gudykunst (1987) argued context predicts conflict style preference. Thus, the following research question explores differences in conflict styles across these national cultures:

RQ: To what extent will conflict style preference differ among participants from

Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States?

## **Method**

### ***Procedures and participants***

After receiving ethical approval, data were collected in 2023 via Qualtrics in Australia ( $n = 213$ ), Canada ( $n = 459$ ), New Zealand ( $n = 453$ ), and the United States ( $n = 873$ ). Surveys were anonymous. To participate, participants had to be over the age of 18, native English speakers, and native-born to the nation. Participants received the equivalent of \$4USD for their participation. The average completion time for the study was less than 5 minutes. The

Australian sample included 100 males, 113 females and a mean age of 33.78 ( $SD = 12.99$ ; range 18–64). The Canadian sample included 195 males, 264 females, one Other, and a mean age of 33.61 ( $SD = 11.88$ ; range 18–73). The New Zealand sample included 215 males, 238 females and a mean age of 33.69 ( $SD = 13.57$ ; range 18–65). The U.S. sample included 396 males, 477 females, 6 Other, and a mean age of 33.31 ( $SD = 14.75$ ; range 18–65).

### Instrument

Conflict styles were assessed using Oetzel's (1998), pp. 38-item Conflict Style Instrument. This instrument combines the 28-item Organizational Conflict Inventory II (Rahim, 1983) with 10 additional items assessing ethnic identity and conflict styles from Ting-Toomey et al. (1999). Items are assessed on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 *strongly disagree* to 7 *strongly agree*. In terms of survey prompting, participants were asked to think about conflict in general. Reliabilities have ranged from .75 to .97 in prior cross-cultural research (S. M. Croucher et al., 2012). The scale was reliable in each nation.<sup>2</sup>

## Results

### Measurement models

The sub-measures were subjected to confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). This process of verifying factor structures of a measure is important when utilizing a measure in a culture where it was not originally developed (Croucher & Kelly, 2019). The internal consistency test of the CFA identifies when items are causing measurement noise, a phenomenon likely to occur when items are considered through alternative cultural lenses. The CFA ensures only items measuring the same variable across nations are utilized to make comparisons across groups. CFA from this dataset using a maximum likelihood parameter estimation algorithm identified that while the obliging items were interpreted the same across nations, there was

**Table 1.** Fit statistics and correlations.

		Fit Statistics			
Original		GFI	CFI	RMSEA	SRMR
	Integrating	.70	.63	.24	.15
	Avoiding	.83	.88	.17	.07
	Dominating	.93	.89	.16	.07
	Obliging	.96	.96	.09	.04
	Compromising	.85	.80	.21	.08
Modified	Integrating	.98	.97	.11	.03
	Avoiding	.91	.94	.15	.04
	Dominating	.97	.96	.12	.03
	Compromising	.99	.99	.06	.01

measurement noise within the integrating, avoiding, dominating, and compromising measures. Table 1 shows the fit statistics for the original measures and when refined by removing problematic items. Fit is acceptable with a goodness of fit index (GFI)  $\geq .9$ , a comparative fit index (CFI)  $\geq .9$ , a standard root mean residual (SRMR)  $\leq .08$ , and a root mean square error approximation (RMSEA)  $\leq .1$  (Bryne, 2016). RMSEA is susceptible to measurement noise. However, measures can still be used for testing if only RMSEA indicates misfit (Chen et al., 2008). Integrating lost four items, avoiding lost two items, dominating lost one item, and compromising lost two items. Fit statistics are shown in Table 1.

### Research question

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted, and there was a significant difference among the nations on conflict style preference,  $F(15, 5372.45) = 111.05, p < .001$ , Wilk's  $\lambda = .47$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .22$ . Furthermore, there was a significant effect of nation on each conflict style: avoiding:  $F(3, 1950) = 32.21, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .05$ ; compromising:  $F(3, 1950) = 12.59, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .02$ ; dominating:  $F(3, 1950) = 38.38, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .06$ ; integrating:  $F(3, 1950) = 194.14, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .23$ ; and obliging:  $F(3, 1950) = 20.14, p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .03$ . Games-Howell, post-hoc comparisons revealed differences between the nations on each conflict style. Means, standard deviations, and multiple comparisons are shown in Table 2.

For the avoiding style, post-hoc analysis revealed significant differences between Canada and every other nation, as well as between Australia and every other nation, but no difference between the U.S. and New Zealand. Distributions were such that the U.S. is highest ( $\bar{X} = 4.67, SD = 1.23$ ), followed by New Zealand ( $\bar{X} = 4.59, SD = 1.18$ ) and Canada ( $\bar{X} = 4.37, SD = .98$ ), and then Australia ( $\bar{X} = 3.85, SD = 1.09$ ). For the compromising style, post-hoc analysis showed Canada scored lower than all other nations. Distributions were such that the U.S. ( $\bar{X} = 5.09, SD = 1.08$ ), Australia ( $\bar{X} = 5.06, SD = .79$ ), and New Zealand ( $\bar{X} = 4.93, SD = 1.05$ ) were all higher than Canada ( $\bar{X} = 4.75, SD = 0.76$ ). For the dominating style, post-hoc analysis revealed significant differences between all the nations. Distributions were such that Canada ( $\bar{X} = 4.83, SD = 0.92$ ), the U.S. ( $\bar{X} = 4.68, SD = 0.96$ ), were highest, followed by New Zealand ( $\bar{X} = 4.40, SD = 1.12$ ), and then Australia ( $\bar{X} = 4.03, SD = 1.12$ ). For the integrating style, post-hoc analysis revealed each nation's score is different from one another. Australia is highest ( $\bar{X} = 5.78, SD = 0.81$ ), followed by the U.S. ( $\bar{X} = 5.58, SD = 0.74$ ), Canada ( $\bar{X} = 5.33, SD = 0.65$ ), and New Zealand ( $\bar{X} = 4.55, SD = .92$ ). Finally, for the obliging style, post-hoc analysis showed the nations were divided into two groups: the U.S. and New

**Table 2.** Means, standard deviations, and multiple comparisons.

Australia			Canada			New Zealand			United States		
Variable	M	SD	Variable	M	SD	Variable	M	SD	Variable	M	SD
Avoid <sup>abc</sup>	3.85	1.09	Avoid <sup>cde</sup>	4.36	.98	Avoid <sup>be</sup>	4.55	1.16	Avoid <sup>ad</sup>	4.67	1.23
Compromise <sup>f</sup>	5.06	.79	Compromise <sup>gh</sup>	4.75	.76	Compromise <sup>g</sup>	4.88	1.07	Compromise <sup>h</sup>	5.09	1.08
Dominate <sup>ik</sup>	4.03	1.11	Dominate <sup>klm</sup>	4.84	.93	Dominate <sup>lmn</sup>	4.37	1.11	Dominate <sup>lin</sup>	4.68	.96
Integrate <sup>opq</sup>	5.78	.81	Integrate <sup>qrs</sup>	5.33	.65	Integrate <sup>opq</sup>	4.53	.98	Integrate <sup>ort</sup>	5.58	.73
Oblige <sup>u</sup>	4.59	.94	Oblige <sup>vw</sup>	4.42	.72	Oblige <sup>uvw</sup>	4.86	1.02	Oblige <sup>v</sup>	4.77	1.03
Correlations											
Australia											
Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1) Avoid	—					(1) Avoid	—				
(2) Compromise	.18*	—				(2) Compromise	.50**	—			
(3) Dominate	.06	.22**	—			(3) Dominate	-.18**	-.22**	—		
(4) Integrate	-.03	.75**	.15*	—		(4) Integrate	.22**	.80**	-.05	—	
(5) Oblige	.42**	.58**	.38**	.35**	—	(5) Oblige	.66**	.76**	-.20**	.59**	—
New Zealand											
Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
(1) Avoid	—					(1) Avoid	—				
(2) Compromise	.57**	—				(2) Compromise	.73**	—			
(3) Dominate	.51**	.55**	—			(3) Dominate	-.35**	-.48**	—		
(4) Integrate	.25**	.75**	.39**	—		(4) Integrate	.49**	.85**	-.37**	—	
(5) Oblige	.75**	.74**	.55**	.55**	—	(5) Oblige	.81**	.89**	-.45**	.73**	—

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . Superscripts reflect mean differences between groups,  $p < .05$ .

Zealand versus Canada and Australia. Distributions were such that New Zealand ( $\bar{X} = 4.88$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) and the U.S. ( $\bar{X} = 4.77$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ) were higher than Australia ( $\bar{X} = 4.60$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) and Canada ( $\bar{X} = 4.42$ ,  $SD = .71$ ).<sup>3</sup>

## Discussion

The four nations have all been identified as individualistic, low power distance, low context (Hofstede, 2001), and on an individual level favor an independent self-construal. In such cultures, individuals in conflict situations are more likely to explicitly communicate and use direct conflict strategies (Ting-Toomey, 2005). The results of this study confirm these cultural hypotheses, while offering contrary arguments. First, as with Chau and Gudykunst (1987), the four nations scored relatively high on solution-oriented approaches to conflict (integrating and compromising). Each of these nations are growing global economies, and thus, as their economics continue to grow, more solution-oriented approaches to conflict are appropriate.

Second, the least preferred conflict styles in the U.S. were the avoiding and the dominating styles. Research has shown individualism is positively correlated with the dominating style, while collectivism is positively correlated with the avoiding style (Oetzel et al., 2003). In this study, the U.S., a highly individualistic nation, scored lower on the dominating and the avoiding style, when compared to the other styles. This result may be attributed to the orientation of avoiding and dominating styles both being self-focused. The avoiding style is when one withdraws from a conflict and the dominating style is when one tries to win a conflict at the expense of the other(s). Both styles are focused on the self and self needs, unlike other styles (integrating and compromising), which are group or multi-person oriented. Future research should explore the extent to which these two divergent styles similarly appeal to self-driven individuals. In the U.S. context, it is possible that within the business setting, employees are finding such approaches to conflict are less favorable.

Third, these results expand our understanding of conflict in the Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand contexts. In Australia and Canada, the integrating style was the most preferred. The integrating approach is known for its problem-solving approach to resolving conflict, which is most likely to produce a win-win situation due to its high concern for one's own outcomes and concern for the other party's outcomes (Cai & Fink, 2002). A report by the Government of Canada in 2012 stated that Canadian companies are increasingly teaching problem-solving skills as forms of conflict resolution. Such training has led to improved market outcomes (Government of Canada, 2012). In Australia, the decline of unions, and the importance of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) as a mediator in conflicts has increased conflict

management/resolution in the workplace. Specifically, the AIRC has worked with businesses to encourage problem-solving approaches to conflict (Van Gramberg et al., 2014).

New Zealand scored high on obliging and compromising. Obliging is when a person emphasizes similarities not differences. One member will yield or accommodate to the other over time (Rubin et al., 1994). This preference for the obliging style can be attributed to the New Zealand workplace's emphasis on consultation. It is often expected, and in some cases mandated, that key decisions involve rounds of stakeholder consultation to derive, if possible, a mutually beneficial outcome. Often this outcome involves members yielding to others (Ombler et al., 2016). Compromising is when both parties work to reach a mutual consensus by dividing up resources; often alternative solutions are not sought (Cai & Fink, 2002). This style is often used when individuals have low interest in the situation, or time constraints are present. It is possible New Zealanders preferred this approach to conflict due to the time in which the data was collected. Data were collected in mid-2023. The nation was coming out of two years of COVID-19 fatigue, and it is possible many participants had little interest in engaging in conflict, and thus compromise was the easiest route to conflict management/resolution.

Fourth, the Conflict Style Instrument (Oetzel, 1998) used in this study explored general conflict, not linked to a particular context. Future research should explore the extent to which conflict within particular contexts, such as organizational, social, cultural, ethnic, political, etc. differ. In addition, research should explore the extent to which social policies and organizational norms within these cultures, and others might influence differences in conflict style preference.

A limitation of this study is sampling. Only native English speakers were solicited for participation to limit measure validity threats, but this means not all members of each nation were eligible to participate. Future research should strive for more representative samples that include linguistic and ethnic/racial diversity. In New Zealand, there is a large Māori (indigenous) population not adequately represented in this study. Also, the French speaking population was not adequately represented in the Canadian sample. A second limitation of this study is the respecification of the conflict measures. Although it was necessary to remove items whose wording did not maintain meaning through the cultural lens of each nation, respecification prevents equivalent comparisons between conflict scores observed in this study and other studies that utilized the full measures.<sup>4</sup>

This study explored the link between national culture and conflict styles in the U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Results revealed conflict style differed significantly across the nations, supporting previous research. Work should continue to explore these differences in these nations and in others to improve our overall understanding of conflict styles and conflict.

## Notes

1. Self-construal refers to how individuals see themselves at a basic level; whether individuals perceive themselves as intrinsically connected and dependent on others (interdependent self-construal) or separate from others (independent-self construal).
2. Omega reliabilities for the Australian sample ( $\omega$ ): avoiding = .86, compromising = .70, dominating = .85, integrating = .93, and obliging = .86. Omega reliabilities for the Canadian sample: avoiding = .90, compromising = .75, dominating = .81, integrating = .83, and obliging = .82. Omega reliabilities for the New Zealand sample: avoiding = .87, compromising = .85, dominating = .80, integrating = .84, and obliging = .78. Omega reliabilities for the U.S. sample: avoiding = .93, compromising = .90, dominating = .82, integrating = .85, and obliging = .92.
3. At the request of a reviewer, we explored the extent to which race/ethnicity was a relevant covariate. A multiple analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted. The covariate, race/ethnicity was not related to conflict style preference and nation,  $F(5, 1945) = 1.65, p = .14, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .004$ .
4. The following items were dropped from the measure: 3 (dominating), 6 and 31 (integrating), 7 and 23 (obliging), 9 and 34 (avoiding), 12 and 18 (compromising). These items did not have a consistent linguistic or contextual pattern.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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