

Negotiating China: The shift to individualism

Deborah McCurdy

April 2, 2012

CMST 4899: Senior Project

Abstract

The paper analyzes culture in China as compared to America through the lens of one of the most widely used concepts for studying cross-cultural communication: Individualism and collectivism. Cultural and social influences on individualism and collectivism are investigated and emphasis is placed on parents as being the primary socializing agents. The causal relationship between cultural individualism-collectivism and conflict behavior is examined as well as its influence on self-construal and face, which is a concept including prestige, honor and reputation, common in Chinese culture. Ingroup-outgroup status, power distance and gender are discussed as they are also found to have influence in a conflict setting. Researchers have found a socioeconomic mix of individualism and collectivism among emerging nations, which indicates a shift from traditional collectivism to contemporary individualism. Implications of the findings are discussed in terms of China's One Child Policy as that may affect a change in traditional social behavior.

Keywords: individualism, collectivism, face, self-construal, ingroup/outgroup, power distance, gender, conflict

Introduction

In America, the squeaky wheel gets the grease. In China, the nail that sticks out the farthest gets pounded down. America and China have been designated as the standard models for cross-cultural research because of their cultural diversity and economic growth. America is labeled as individualist, putting one's personal goals ahead of the group; whereas China is labeled as collectivist, putting the group's goals ahead of one's personal gain (Parker, Haytko & Hermans, 2009). Historically, these labels have been widely accepted without challenge, until now. Researchers have identified certain variables that suggest a cultural change is happening. The new generation of Chinese is experiencing dialectic tensions where tradition is being challenged by modernization (Hamamura, 2012). They find themselves giving in to contemporary ways while still feeling the pull of tradition. This disparity is especially evident in conflict behavior, which is influenced by individualist and collectivist practices. This paper discusses how culture shapes individualism and collectivism, the effect that individualism and collectivism have on conflict behavior and how modernization is changing the playing field.

Literature Review

Individualism-Collectivism

Socialization is learned behavior (Kitzmann, Cohen, & Lockwood, 2002). In a collective society, there is a complex system of social relationships. Parents are the primary socializing agents responsible for teaching behavior that has been carried across generations as part of one's cultural heritage (Kitzman, 2002; Hamamura, 2012). Cultural heritage is a collection of beliefs, attitudes, norms, roles, values and behaviors that are associated with the group in which one has been raised (Hamamura, 2012; Warden, 2009). People's exposure to culture shapes who they are, and how they perceive and behave (Liao & Bond, 2011). Culture shapes how people view

themselves (Oetzel et al., 2001) and forms the concept of individualism and collectivism (Parker et al., 2009).

Conflict Behavior

Oetzel et al. (2001) defines conflict as an incompatibility of values in which there is a perceived interference with the realization of goals. Conflict behavior is a give-and-take interaction that is associated with attempting to reach a mutually beneficial outcome (Liu, 2009). Conflict can either be perceived or actual, which influences the individual's assessment of the situation and selection of conflict behavior. Individual and collective cultural variables influence how people perceive conflict and choose conflict behavior (Oetzel et al., 2001).

In individualist societies, a person sees his or herself as a unique, distinctive whole, whereas in collectivist societies, the person sees his or herself as serving the group (Oetzel et al., 2001). This culture difference presents a challenge to negotiation and conflict behavior. Dyadic relationships between Chinese and American individuals are occurring more frequently due to economic growth, giving the parties involved the ability and opportunity to influence each other. Peer social competence is the degree to which an individual can maneuver through society and it is becoming more important to a successful negotiation outcome (Kitzmann et al., 2002).

Facework. Face is a learned conflict behavior that originated with the Chinese culture (Oetzel et al., 2001). Face is the public image people display that is instilled in Chinese children by their parents. Face involves prestige, honor and reputation. It is a social value that functions differently across cultures.

There are four types of facework discussed in this paper. Self-face is a concern for one's self image. Other-face is a concern for another's self image. Mutual face is a concern for both self

and another's image. Face loss is a sense of worth of one's self that is lost in interpersonal communication (Liao & Bond, 2011).

Face plays an important role in regulating interpersonal communication. Culture shapes self-construal which influences face (Liao & Bond, 2011). Self-construal is how one views oneself (Oetzel & Toomey, 2003). Independent self-construal is associated with self-face concerns and dominating conflict behavior that is linked to individualist cultures. Interdependent self-construal is associated with other-face concerns and avoiding and integrating conflict behavior that is linked to collectivist cultures. Liao and Bond (2011) found that in individualist cultures people with higher status are usually more face protective. Alternatively, Chinese people experience more face loss because of their concern for mutual face. However, Oetzel and Toomey (2003) found opposite results for collectivist cultures: The Chinese displayed a shift to independence and self-face which have, up until now, always been associated with individualist cultures.

Ingroup/Outgroup status, power distance and gender are variables that have an influence on conflict behavior because of their cultural components.

Ingroup/Outgroup Status. Ingroup status is the group one feels a part of and outgroup status is the group where one does not feel they belong (Forbes, Collinsworth, Zhao, Kohlman, & LeClaire, 2011).

In Chinese culture, conflict with ingroup members is generally forbidden. However, with outgroups, conflict is not only tolerated but sometimes even encouraged (Forbes et al., 2011). In China, group harmony takes priority over personal concerns. There is an expectation of the Chinese people to avoid conflict (Liao & Bond, 2011). Liu (2009) suggests that when conflict occurs with outgroups, the behavioral tendency is to use typical conflict management style usually associated with learned behavior.

Power Distance. Power distance is the degree to which a culture accepts or rejects unequal distribution of power (Forbes et al., 2011). Power distance influences facework (Oetzel et al., 2001). America is a small power distance culture. It is believed that authority is earned, power is equally distributed and everyone's opinion matters. The individual is highly valued. China is a large power distance culture. It is believed that authority is inherited, power is from the top to the bottom and opinions are guarded. The good of the group is highly valued. The difference in power distance among cultures suggests a difference in the importance placed on status (Liao & Bond, 2011). When rights and status are equal, self-face concerns and dominating facework are used (Oetzel et al., 2001).

Gender. Forbes et al., 2011 defines gender as being either male or female and reports that it greatly influences facework and conflict behavior. It was found that conflict behavior in men is more aggressive and is influenced by gender especially in outgroup situations. These behaviors are based on the tendency in society for men to hold positions of higher authority than women (Bowles & Flynn, 2010). Men behave more competitively than women and Chinese men favor other men when it comes to other-face conflict behavior (Warden & Chen, 2009). In fact, Bowlby, McDermott and Obar (2011) revealed that Chinese men have a high inclination toward Machiavellianism. Machiavellianism is defined as using whatever means possible to maintain power through the use of craft, deceit and cunning. This appears to be incompatible with traditional values. They also found a significant disconnect between personal values and financial success.

Modernization

The complex nature of the influence of cultural individualism and collectivism on conflict behavior continues. With an increasing worldwide economy, national cultures may be slowly converging due to globalization and modernization.

Modernization is the change, which occurs in the cultural landscape due to social and economic development (Hamamura, 2012). It was found that following Chinese tradition is seen as less important and has become an obstacle to the goals of the younger generation. Smaller family size, urban living, technology, consumption, mobility and Western influence are consequences of modernization that change cultural individualism-collectivism. China's current cultural contradictions are complicated by the economic trends of industrialization and the cultural strains imposed by modernization. Bowlby et al. (2011) found underlying differences in attitudes based on culture. This supports the findings of Parker et al. (2009) in that cultural, social and psychological changes may be indicative of a shift toward a more individualist society in China. They believe that as China experiences rapid economic growth and progresses as an industrialized nation, their culture will be under pressure to adopt individualist ways.

However, not everyone within a culture is alike. Ralston, Egri, Stewart, Terpstra and Yu (1999) found that the generation one grows up in is crucial to further understanding modernization. There are three areas of modernization: Convergence, which is the acceptance of new values as a result of economic growth; divergence, which is the theory that culture dictates values; and crossvergence, which is a mix of both: Acceptance of new values while holding on to tradition. These theories are used to compare change in individuals who are exposed to a modern lifestyle.

Different values may change at different rates for different people. Bowlby et al. (2011) concur as they found that convergence, divergence and crossvergence play a role in the changing

rates of individualism and collectivism. The evidence of the Chinese “me generation” and the reporting of similarities in Chinese and American Machiavellian scores further indicate that traditional roles are changing. Chinese men were found to have a disconnect between traditional family values and money, which suggests a shift to individualism. It was also found that traditional Confucian values remain an important part of younger Chinese, which supports a convergence of tradition and individualism.

Summary

In summary, socialization is the process of learning a cultural behavior, which happens within the family structure (Kitzman et al., 2002). Exposure to the cultural environment further shapes the individual (Hamamura, 2012) and teaches them how to perceive and behave (Liao & Bond, 2011). Culture forms self-construal and the concept of individualism and collectivism (Parker et al., 2009).

Individualism and collectivism influence conflict behavior. People with independent self-construal use self-face concerns and dominating conflict behavior, and people with interdependent self-construal use other-face concerns, and avoiding and integrating conflict behavior (Oetzel & Toomey, 2003). Ingroup/outgroup status, power distance, and gender also influence conflict behavior, adding to the complexity of the topic (Forbes, 2011; Liao, 2011; Liu, 2009; Oetzel, 2001). There is evidence of independence and the use of self-face in China, which is typically associated with individualist cultures.

Modernization influences learned behavior through societal change (Hamamura, 2012) and a trend of crossvergence in China has been identified (Bowlby, 2011; Ralston, 1997). The new generation of Chinese is more likely to act independently and take risks in the pursuit of profits, which conflict with traditional ways (Bowlby et al., 2011). They have greater mobility and go

where opportunity knocks (Hamamura, 2012). The integration of individualism into collectivism is evident through crossvergence (Bowlby, 2011; Ralston, 1997). Chinese values are clearly more individual, less collective and less committed to the traditions of previous generations. Their values do reflect the influences of the past; yet, they are becoming more similar to Western cultures than previous generations (Ralston et al., 1997).

H1: Culture predicts individualism-collectivism.

H2: Individualism-collectivism influences conflict behavior.

H3: Modernization influences conflict behavior.

H4: Modernization influences individualism-collectivism.

Limitations and Future Research

While these articles did a fair job at dissecting cultural variables, there is a need for a closer examination of variables within cultures as opposed to cross- or pan-culturally. The articles did not address sibling status and the possible effect status may have on conflict behavior. In addition, the articles also did not address sibling status and gender as a combined effect.

Kitzman et al. (2002) found that behavior learned from family interaction creates the guidelines for conflict behavior. Only children have less social competence than children who have siblings, may be better versed in adult interaction, and tend to be dominated by more self-seeking interests. Children with siblings may be better versed in conflict negotiation due to interaction with more family members.

Bowles and Flynn (2010) studied adult social interaction in negotiation and found that differences between men and women were more pronounced in same-gender situations. Men are considered competitive and women are considered cooperative. Strategy and choice of conflict behavior depends on the gender and status of the opponent. China is considered a masculine

country, which prefers men in positions of power, as opposed to America, which is considered a feminine country due to an increase of women in the workplace (Fernandez, Carlson, Stepina, & Nicholson, 1997).

China has become an economic and social laboratory for research. It is a country that is home to the largest population on the planet: 1.3 billion people (Harrison, 2006). In an effort to control the population, China instituted the One Child Policy (OCP) in 1979, which limits one child per family. This law is the largest ever population control effort (Myers, 2005). It has greatly modified the household formation and family composition, which is responsible for socialization (Kitzman et al., 2002). In addition, cultural ties to tradition remain important (Bowlby et al., 2011) so much so that boys are still viewed as more valuable than girls because they will carry on the family name (Myers, A., 2005). If a daughter is born, she is most likely given up for adoption or abandoned. One out of every four children who are adopted in America come from China and almost all of them are girls.

S. Zhu (personal communication, March 13, 2012) agrees. She moved to America from China so she could have more than one child. She worries about the OCP and its effect on China. She says “the new generation of only children is self-centered and not traditional. There are many more boys than girls. There is discrimination in the workplace if you are an only child because only children have no team concept and are very hard to manage.” She believes that the OCP is mostly responsible for current changes in Chinese cultural behavior.

There is intense pressure to have a son in China. Gender selection is a strategic part of family planning, which has caused a gender imbalance (Ebenstein, A., 2011). In 2007, a higher ratio of male to female births was reported, which meant that for every 118 boys, there were only 100

girls. Myers (2005) reported there were 13 million more boys than girls in China. This means that out of 39 children in a classroom, 28 were boys.

China's population of only-children is just coming of age since the OCP was instituted in 1979 and behavioral research is virtually non-existent.

RQ1: Will China's OCP have an effect on conflict behavior, particularly as it applies to its creation of a society of male-dominant only children?

RQ2: Will China's OCP be partially responsible for a shift from traditional collectivism to contemporary individualism?

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper reviewed how geographic region and modernization affect cultural individualism-collectivism in China and America and how social behaviors are changing. These cultural changes influence self-construal, which affect one's perception of conflict and their choice of behavior.

There is a cultural crossvergence taking place in the new generation of Chinese. The Chinese are being influenced by modernization and Western ways but still feel an obligation to remain true to their heritage. Individualism is being integrated into the Chinese culture (Bowlby, 2011; Ralston, 1997) and similarities between once very differing cultures are emerging (Bowlby et al., 2011).

The absence of any data on the effect of sibling status on conflict behavior, to include a combined effect of sibling status and gender, would suggest the need for future research, especially in light of the large-scale socioeconomic growth in China and its institution of the OCP.

References

- Bowlby, K., McDermott, E., & Obar, R. (2011). Personal values, behavior and conflict resolution styles: A study of contemporary mainland Chinese business students. *Journal of International Business Ethics*, 4(1), 42-59.
- Bowles, H., & Flynn, F. (2010). Gender and persistence in negotiation: A dyadic perspective. *Academy of Management Journal*, 53(4), 769-787.
- Ebenstein, A. (2011). Estimating a dynamic model of sex selection in China. *Demography*, 48(2), 783-811.
- Fernandez, D., Carlson, D. S., Stepina, L. P., & Nicholson, J. D. (1997). Hofstede's country classification 25 years later. *Journal of Social Psychology*, 137(1), 43-54.
- Forbes, G. B., Collinsworth, L. L., Zhao, P., Kohlman, S., & LeClaire, J. (2011). Relationships among individualism-collectivism, gender, and ingroup/outgroup status, and responses to conflict: A study in China and the United States. *Aggressive Behavior*, 37(4), 302-314.
- Hamamura, T. (2012). Are cultures becoming individualistic? A cross-temporal comparison of individualism-collectivism in the United States and Japan. *Personality & Social Psychology Review (Sage Publications Inc.)*, 16(1), 3-24.
- Harrison, C. (Director). (2006). *Discovery Atlas* [Motion picture]. United States: Discovery Channel.
- Kitzmann, K. M., Cohen, R., & Lockwood, R. L. (2002). Are only children missing out? Comparison of the peer-related social competence of only children and siblings. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 19(3), 299-316.
- Liao, Y., & Bond, M. (2011). The dynamics of face loss following interpersonal harm for Chinese and Americans. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 42(1), 25-38.

Liu, M. (2009). The Intrapersonal and interpersonal effects of anger on negotiation strategies:

A cross-cultural investigation. *Human Communication Research*, 35(1), 148-169.

Myers, A. (Director). (2005). *China's Lost Girls* [Motion picture]. United States: National Geographic.

Oetzel, J., Ting-Toomey, S., Masumoto, T., Yokochi, Y., Xiaohui, P., Takai, J., & Wilcox, R.

(2001). Face and facework in conflict: A cross-cultural comparison of China, Germany, Japan, and the United States. *Communication Monographs*, 68(3), 235.

Oetzel, J. G., & Ting-Toomey, S. (2003). Face concerns in interpersonal conflict: A

cross-cultural empirical test of the face negotiation theory. *Communication Research*, 30(6), 599-624.

Parker, R., Haytko, D. L., & Hermans, C. M. (2009). Individualism and collectivism:

Reconsidering old assumptions. *Journal of International Business Research*, 8(1), 127-139.

Ralston, D. A., Egri, C. P., Stewart, S., Terpstra, R. H., & Yu, K. (1999). Doing Business in the

21st Century with the new generation of chinese managers: A study of generational shifts in work values in China. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 30(2), 415-427.

Warden, C., & Chen, J. (2009). Chinese negotiators' subjective variations in intercultural

negotiations. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 88529-537.

Zhu, S. (personal communication, March 13, 2012).