

## **A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF NATIONAL CULTURE ON INDIVIDUAL CONFLICT MANAGEMENT PREFERENCES AND ETHICAL DECISION MAKING: US VERSUS JAMAICA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this article, we explore the cultural dimensions of two cultures: Jamaica and the United States as it relates to individual conflict management preferences and their ethical decision making process. We also report significant MANOVA (Multivariate Analysis of Variance) results indicating differences among US and Jamaican subjects in terms of some cultural dimensions, individual conflict management preferences and ethical decision making. We discuss differences, consider possible causes, and suggest future research.

**Keywords: Conflict Management, Ethical Decision Making, and Cultural Study**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Culture to Manage Conflict**

There has been much review of individual nation's ethics and those decision making processes; there is a growing interest in comparing the ethics of individuals and the organizations they work for with the ethics of individuals and organizations from other countries and/or cultures. While most empirical research on the ethical principles behind business decisions has been made on U. S. samples, there is increased interest in international and comparative research. Building on that work of McGuire, Fok and Kwong, this article targets the ethical decision making process as impacted by well-recognized cultural dimensions in the management of organization and individual conflict. A fairly intense literature search has failed to yield a strong array of similar studies, so, with the present research, the hope is to aid in the resolution of conflict management by revealing how ethics and culture impact such management.

Resick, Hanges, Dickson and Mitchelson (2006) engaged in a cross-cultural examination of ethical leadership which spoke to the need to better understand the global economy. Indicating that competition for resources and customers was a global matter, as are the relationships in global organizations among co-workers and leaders, Resick et al assert that “(F)or leaders to be successful, it has become imperative for them to be aware of the cultural differences that influence business practices (p. 346).” Scholtens and Dam (2007) note that there are significant differences in ethical policies among global businesses; further, cultural values are an important, integral part of the differences: the major challenge is to craft a theory of how ethics and culture interact. Kaushal and Kwantes (2006) note that the world has become a much smaller place and, attendant upon this shrinking, the potential for conflicts across country and cultural boundaries is increasing, mandating the need for research in successful resolution of such conflict. Cultural factors influence conflict management; personality traits are also a part of the situation and can influence the success of the conflict resolution. They studied the styles of conflict resolution, culture, power and personality in their attempt to shape conflict management strategies.

All the research reported here points to the conclusion that culture plays a critical part in successful business management. To determine how culture, ethics and conflict management style interact and to determine how to use these things to bring more success to business operations is one purpose of this paper. The results of this analysis should provide a better understanding of the dynamics of these elements of business function.

### **Culture Described**

The importance of culture is that culture is composed of the shared implicit beliefs and tacit values that identify each culture as unique. There are many definitions of culture, similar in nature, yet with some nuances in the definitions. Culture has been defined as shared motives values, beliefs, identities and interpretations achieved from the common experience of the group over generations. It reflects a group’s ways of relating to their environment and to each other (Hofstede, 1980; Schein, 1985). Triandis (1995) has described culture as “a pattern characterized by shared beliefs, attitudes, norms, roles and values that are organized around a theme and that can be found in certain geographic regions during a particular historic period (p. 43).” Resick *et al.* ((2006) defined culture as the practices, norms and values commonly shared by members of a group; it provides a context from which to derive meaning and to make moral judgments. Kaushal and Kwantes (2006) described values, a basic part of culture, as being an evaluative tool, to determine whether something is good or bad; beliefs are slightly different in that they incorporate memory and consequences. Values and shared beliefs create culture. Alas (2006) defined values as something explicitly or implicitly desirable to an individual or group that influences decisions. Attitudes are expressions of values. Behavior is the final action of the decision-maker, for example, the final ethical decision made regarding a difficult moral question. Thus, values, attitudes and behaviors all combine to form an ongoing spiral of culture (Payne and Landry, 2005; Ma, 2010; Taras, Steel and Kirkman, (2011).

Relevant to the present issue of conflict management, Elango, Paul, Kundu and Paudel (2010) assert that values form an important foundation of ethics: they are held by individuals and organizations. Culture influences ethical values, attitudes and behaviors (Ma, 2010). It is very well established that culture affects many decision-making processes. Hofstede’s (1980) original

four cultural values, individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity-femininity, have been used countless times in research on national culture in the workplace. In this effort, we seek to determine how Hofstede's original cultural values, augmented by others found in empirical research, relate to ethical decision making and individual styles of conflict management. This finding further begs the question of culture, ethical decision making and conflict management: how are they related and how do Western or other cultures impact any of these variables?

## Cultural Dimensions

Summarizing the work of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), McGuire *et al.* (2005) define five universal value orientations of all cultures. These orientations are related to five questions that all humans in society must answer: what is human nature (good or bad), what is the relationship of humans to their world (controlling or not), what is the nature of time (past, present or future), what is the nature of the relationship between people and their environments (active or passive) and, finally, how do we see ourselves relative to each other (as individuals or groups). Hofstede (1980; 1991; 2001; Hofstede and Bond, 1988) developed well documented and replicated research on cultural dimensions or characteristics: power distance, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, individual/collectivist and Confucian dynamism. To examine culture, ethical decision making and conflict management style preference, we have used a combination of orientations based on the work of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), Hofstede and Hofstede and Bond. These orientations are doing, determinism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and "facework." McGuire *et al.* (2005), Bowlby *et al.* (2011), Lopez *et al.* (2009), Alas (2006), Soares, Farhangmehr and Shoham (2006) and Taras *et al.* (2011) all present definitional material relevant to this discussion of cultural dimensions.

A culture's view of doing versus being is related to the degree to which a group embraces accomplishment rather than espousing the values found in leisure and family life (Alas, 2006; Resick *et al.*, 2006). Determinism is the second cultural dimension used in this research. This dimension encompasses the culture's view of world as fatalistic or "master of destiny." The fatalistic approach is the idea that the world controls the individual's environment (McGuire *et al.*, 2006; Kwong *et al.*, 2005). Power distance (Taras *et al.*, 2011) refers to the extent to which those less powerful in an organization expect and accept that power is distributed unevenly (Bowlby *et al.*, 2011). Power distance measures the extent to which less powerful members of the firm accept an unequal distribution of power. Uncertainty avoidance measures the extent to which people in a society feel threatened by ambiguous situations. This dimension measures the extent to which members of a culture try to avoid uncertain situations by seeking greater career stability, establishing more formal rules, rejecting deviant ideas/behaviors and accepting the possibility of absolute truths and the attainment of expertise (Lopez *et al.*, 2009; Alas (2006); Soares *et al.*, 2007). Individualism is the idea that the individual character is more assertive, more independent in attitudes and behaviors than members of collectivist cultures (Lopez *et al.*, 2009; Soares *et al.*, 2007; Taras *et al.*, 2011). On the opposite end of the spectrum, collectivism is characterized by tight social frameworks in which people distinguish between their own groups and other groups, rather than by individual association. Facework has been described as the tendency of a society's members to protect their own egos when interacting with others, at the expense of the others. Bowlby *et al.* (2011) identified the value of "face," the recognition

that direct disagreement is not considered harmonious conduct, where harmony is a most important social value. The importance of face-saving in cultures around the world cannot be overlooked (Earley, 1997; Ting-Toomey, 1988; Tung, 1996; Gudykunst, 1997).

### **Conflict Management: Roots and Styles**

In a cross-cultural study of ethics and leadership, Resick *et al.* (2006) found four components that characterize Western-style leadership: character/integrity, altruism, collective motivation and encouragement. They also identified hypernorms as fundamental principles of human existence that are universally held, such as physical safety and honesty; these are transcendent values endorsed by all cultures. If these components of leadership and hypernorms do indeed reflect universally held values, they should serve as effective tools in the perceptions about and the management of conflict. It may be that that is the way that culture affects a conflict management style choice. This is the setting for a discussion of the types of conflict that must be managed within organizations, as well as a discussion of the potential resolution choices to manage the conflict.

There are five approaches to conflict management, all of which seem to be well-established in the literature (McGuire *et al.*, 2005; Bowlby *et al.*, 2011; Tsai and Chi, 2011; Ala and McGuire, 2005). These approaches have been named as animals, likening the perception of different animals to the style of conflict management adopted: Sharks, Teddy Bears, Foxes, Turtles and Owls. Each of these approaches to conflict management has elements of which party “wins or loses,” how a party approaches the other party/ies in terms of aggressive or passive behavior and how each party perceives achievement of his own goals.

**Research Question 1:** Subjects in the United States and in Jamaica will have different levels of cultural dimensions.

**Research Question 2:** Subjects in the United States and in Jamaica will have different levels of conflict management style and dimensions.

**Research Question 3:** Subjects in the United States and in Jamaica will have different ethical decision making.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Subjects**

There are 144 Americans and 39 Jamaicans in the study. Both samples are executive MBA students from a university in a large Southern city in the U.S. In the US sample, the subjects were 39% male and 61% female with an average age of 29 with 10 years of working experience and 5.4 years in management position. In the Jamaican sample, the subjects were 28% male and 72% female with an average age of 33 with 12 years of working experience and 4.4 years in management position.,

### **Instruments**

The conflict management preferences instrument used was a self-report questionnaire adapted from Thomas (1976). Respondents were asked to consider situations in which they found their

wishes differing from those of another person, and indicate how they would usually respond to such situations. Moreover, respondents were instructed to think of work situation, because “sometimes people behave differently at work than at home.” The Business Decisions Instrument was adopted from the Fritzsche and Becker (1984) and Whitcomb, Erdener and Li (1998) studies. The instrument includes vignettes, which described dilemmas about coercion, bribery, public good vs. corporate interests, paternalism, and personal integrity. For each of the five vignettes, respondents are asked to indicate on a 0 to 10 point Likert scale what their own decision would have been in the situation described. (Scores were transformed to a 1 to 11 scale for analysis.) The Cultural Values Instrument is a 150-item self-report questionnaire on cultural values and beliefs (McGuire, Fok and Kwong, 2006). Respondents indicated their agreement to statements about their ideal job (part 1) and their values and beliefs (part 2), using 7-point Likert-type scales. Brenner and McGuire (2003) found evidence of the Cultural Values Instrument’s scale reliability and construct validity on a sample of American respondents.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Our three research questions considered the possibility that managers from the two cultures (i.e., U.S. vs. Jamaica) are different with respect to their cultural values, conflict management preferences, and business decision-making. Table 1 provides the MANOVA results. The overall results are significant ( $p$ -value = .000). The results indicate that the respondents from the U.S. and the Jamaican samples are different in Being/Doing, Compromising, Accommodating, and decision-making of one vignette. With respect to cultural values, “doing” cultures seek to achieve/do the most in life while “being” cultures want to experience life. The American sample has significantly higher average than the Jamaican sample on the “being” culture. The finding implies that American managers are more inclined to experience life than Jamaican managers. For a developing country like Jamaica, middle and upper level managers often need to work very hard to be successful personally. They are also expected to work very hard to help the company to stay competitive. With respect to conflict management, American managers scored significantly higher in cultural accommodation and cultural compromise. This means American managers are more willing to the interests of others ahead of their own and more willing to make trade-offs with the other parties and to be “wheeler and dealer” to achieve the solution. For ethical decision making, the vignette that draws different responses is about a conflict of interest situation where a company wants a new employee to give software information about former employer. Despite the emphasis of ethics in business school curriculum in the US, American managers are more likely to give software information about former employer than Jamaican managers.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

Miller (2009) suggests construction a conflict management system. Our suggestion is that, with the information collected here to aid as a guide in matching cultural attributes with conflict management styles, such a system be developed for global business application.

**References available upon request from Lillian Fok (yfok@uno.edu).**