

## Uncertainty Avoidance, Culture, and People's Reaction to Conflict

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### Abstract

People of every nationality possess values and culture that they believe in and follow. These cultures and values influence their attitudes and behavior, including reactions to conflict. This study used a randomized sample of 158 Javanese employees working at state-owned enterprises in Central and East Java. The objective was to identify the relationship between uncertainty avoidance and conflict management. Two types of questionnaire were used for data collection: one for uncertainty avoidance and one for styles of management conflict. Results showed that Javanese people had a passive conflict management style and high uncertainty avoidance. There was a positive and significant correlation between uncertainty avoidance and passive conflict management. We can thus assert that higher uncertainty avoidance leads to greater passivity in managing conflict. The results support underlying theories and concepts relating to Javanese culture, and can be applied to managing people's reactions to conflict situations.

*Keywords— conflict management style, culture, javanese people, values*

### 1. Introduction

Interpersonal conflicts occur at various levels: between individuals, between the individuals in a group, and between groups. These conflicts and the strategy to manage them have significant implications for the people and groups involved, as well as for organizations (Suri, Verma, and Sharma 2007). Conflict management is assumed to have a significant impact on both human relations at work and relationships within society. In other words, conflicts, when skillfully managed, can be of universal value; and, conversely, can be harmful if not managed effectively. Different people use different strategies for managing conflicts. These strategies are the products of family, society and culture, and as such may give the impression of functioning automatically. People are hence not always aware of how they act in conflict situations. They just do whatever comes naturally. Since this is an acquired skill, however, it can be changed at any time by learning new and more effective methods.

The Javanese are one of the major ethnic groups in Indonesia. They have their own culture, values, and norms, which have an impact on attitudes, habits and behaviors, including conflict management in social and/or organizational settings. According to Hofstede (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2015), uncertainty avoidance – the way people react to uncertain or ambiguous

situations – can be correlated to conflict management. People with high uncertainty are usually those who value stability and feel uncomfortable when faced with uncertain, unsure, or ambiguous situations. According to Wilmot and Hocker (2001), passive conflict management consists of avoidance and accommodation. The aim of this study is to identify Javanese people's attitudes to uncertainty avoidance and conflict management, and examine the relationship between the two variables, in order to discover whether values and culture have a significant correlation with the chosen style of management conflict.

### Conflict and Source of Conflict

All people are unique. They have different goals, perceptions, norms, and values, which have an impact on the source of conflict they may face. There are many factors involved in interpersonal conflict, including: a) differences in perception; b) informational differences; c) differences in personality; d) differences in value systems; d) differences in status; e) differences in resources or strengths; and f) divergent roles (Suri, Verma and Sharma, 2007). This study will focus on value systems and cultures. We will seek to show how these values influence attitudes and behaviors, including styles of conflict management.

## Conflict Management Strategies

Individuals may have preferences in terms of conflict management strategies. Organizational contexts and/or social settings, meanwhile, provide strong suggestions as to socially shared and normative ways of managing conflict (Johns, 2006; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996). While individuals have their own conflict management preferences, employees within the same organization may come to share similar attitudes about normative ways to manage conflict, or so-called "conflict culture" (Gelfand, Leslie & Keller, 2012). Individual conflict management preferences are developed, shared, and repeated within organizational contexts (Klein et al., 2000). Conflict management styles are patterned responses or behaviors that people use in conflict situations (Wilmot & Hocker, 2001). In general, people have two considerations in relation to conflict, namely:

- a) How important the personal goal is to the person;
- and b) How important the relationship is to the person.

Based on these concerns, the following five styles of conflict management can be identified (Achua and Lussier, 2010):

- 1) *Withdrawing (Avoidance)* – these people withdraw into their shells in order to avoid conflict. They abandon their personal goals and relationships and feel helpless. They stay away from the people with whom they are in conflict. In passively ignoring the conflict, they are frequently unassertive and uncooperative.
- 2) *Accommodating* – the individuals feel that the relationship is of great importance compared to their own goals. Consequently, they are afraid that if the conflict continues, it will ruin the relationship. They abandon their goals to preserve the relationship and attempt to resolve the conflict by passively giving in to the other party. According to Wilmot & Hocker (2001), avoidance and accommodation can be categorized as "passive" conflict management styles.
- 3) *Forcing* – these people force others to accept their solution to the conflict. Their goals are highly important to them compared to their relationship with others. They attempt to use aggressive behavior to get their own way, and seek to satisfy their own needs at the expense of others, if necessary. They often exert their authority via threatening or intimidating behavior (Achua and Lussier, 2010).
- 4) *Collaborating* – these individuals place a high value their own goals and relationships. They view conflicts as problems to be solved and seek solutions that achieve both their own goals and the goals of the other person in the conflict. According to Wilmot & Hocker,

(2001), forcing and collaborating can be categorized as "active" conflict management.

- 5) *Compromising*. These people are moderately concerned with their own goals and their relationships with other people. In seeking to make a compromise, they give up part of their goals and persuade the other person involved in a conflict to give up part of their goals in turn. Their preferred solution is where both sides take the middle ground between two extreme positions. Wilmot & Hocker (2001) classify this style as in between active and passive conflict management.

## Conflict And Culture

As mentioned above, people believes, norms, values, and culture will influence their attitudes and behavior in regard to conflict. Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey (1988 in Francesco & Gold, 2005), and Ting-Toomey (1985 in Francesco & Gold, 2005) have connected people's attitude toward conflict with high- and low-context cultures. People in low-context cultures perceive conflict as instrumental oriented. They view the world in a more analytic, logical way, and are usually able to separate issues from individuals. These people use more explicit communication. They are action and solution oriented, and generally adopt a confrontational response to conflict. In high-context culture, meanwhile, people use more indirect strategies and implicit communication codes. Conflict is perceived as more of a spiral logic, with no separation of the person from the issue. This attitude toward conflict is more indirect and non-confrontational, leading to an inactive approach, the aim of which is to avoid or to ignore the conflict. In high-context culture, people are more group-oriented. Open disagreement and public confrontation are perceived as highly insulting, and may cause both parties to lose face and possibly end their relationship (Ting-Toomey 1985 in Francesco & Gold, 2005).

## Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; House, 2004). It relates to individuals who seek out statutory structures when feeling of threatened by unsure and ambiguous situations (Furnham, 2006). It also indicates to what extent a culture influences member to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations. A society with high uncertainty avoidance, for instance, contains a majority of people who do not tolerate risk, avoid the unknown, and are comfortable when the future is relatively predictable and certain. These people usually prefer well-structured and predictable situations. Meanwhile, in low uncertainty avoidance cultures, most people are comfortable with accepting of the unknown, and

tolerate risk and unpredictable situations (Achua and Lussier, 2000).

**Javanese People**

The main goal of Javanese people is to build and develop the welfare of their family. Family is the most important resource in developing a social identity for their children (Suseno, 2003). Koentjaraningrat (in Mulder, 1996) mentioned that all nuclear families essentially take care of their own welfare. They believe that people are not alone in the world, and that there are always others to help in times of need, especially close relatives. They try to take care of others’ feelings and well-being (*tepa selira*) (Sardjono, 1995). Furthermore, according to the concept of harmony (*Kerukunan*), all types of interaction among Javanese people should seek to avoid conflict (Suseno, 2003). Another Javanese principle is to maintain a healthy relationship with others: the so-called “honoring” of other people. The Javanese also value social hierarchies, and are highly aware of their social status. They tend to prefer stable and predictable conditions, and stick together in the neighborhood rather than going elsewhere in search of better conditions or a brighter future. The day-to-day lives of Javanese people are also highly focused on ritual activities.

**Conflict Management Conflict And Uncertainty Avoidance By Javanese People**

Based on the concept of “harmony” (*Kerukunan*), interactions between Javanese people generally seek to avoid conflict. Open conflict is to be eschewed in all circumstances (Suseno, 2003). Based on this concept, the following hypothesis is developed:

Hypothesis 1: Javanese people have a passive conflict management style.

Javanese daily life is largely centered on ritual activities. In general, the Javanese prefer steadiness, a stability, and predictability. As stated above, uncertainty avoidance is the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). A second hypothesis is thus developed:

Hypothesis 2: Javanese people have high uncertainty avoidance.

People with a low tolerance for ambiguity (low uncertainty avoidance) are usually more flexible and adaptable to change and uncertain conditions. However, those with high uncertainty avoidance are more rigid and uncomfortable when faced with uncertain conditions. With their preference for stability and dislike of ambiguity, Javanese people hence prefer to manage conflict passively. Based on this concept, a third hypothesis is developed:

Hypothesis 3: There is a positive and significant correlation between high uncertainty avoidance and passive conflict management.

**2. Methodology**

**Participants**

This research consisted of 158 employees who worked at a state-owned enterprise (permanent employees, both staff and non-staff). Respondents were categorized as Javanese based on their parents’ ethnicity, place of upbringing, and day-to-day norms and values. Non-probability sampling or convenience sampling was the chosen method. There was a total of 158 respondents (113 men (71.5 %) and 57 women (28.5%)), the majority of whom had worked for more than 10 years (152; 96.2%). The most common level of education was Senior High School graduate (127; 80.4%).

**Table 1. Respondents' Profile**

Characteristics of Respondent	Classification	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Man	113	71.5
	Woman	45	28.5
Age	20-40 years old	55	34.8
	>41 years old	103	65.2
Longevity	2-10 years	6	3.8
	>10 years	152	96.2
Education	Senior High School	127	80.4
	Bachelor degree	31	19.6

**Materials**

Two types of data collection tools were used. First, the Hocker-Wilmot Conflict Assessment Guide (Wilmot and Hocker, 2001), modified and translated into Bahasa Indonesia, was used to measure attitudes toward conflict. Only active and passive conflict management styles were considered. The questionnaire consisted of 10 items and employed a 5-point Likert scale, with a Cronbach’s alpha score of 0.72. Range of validity was 0.25 to 0.56, which can be regarded as

valid and reliable (Nunnally & Berstein, 1994; and Cronbach, 1960). To measure uncertainty avoidance, we used Hofstede’s 1994 Value Survey Module (VSM-1994) (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005), translated into Bahasa Indonesia. This 7-item measuring instrument employed a 5-point Likert scale, with a Cronbach’s alpha score of 0.61. Range of validity was 0.23 to 0.44, which can be regarded as valid and reliable (Nunnally & Berstein, 1994; and Cronbach, 1960).

**Data Analysis**

Descriptive statistical analysis and Pearson’s Product Moment Correlation Analysis were both used in this study. Descriptive analysis is used to identify the general description of sample characteristics, including the average score for each variable, frequency, and standard deviation. Pearson’s Product Moment Correlation Analysis was used to determine whether there is a significant relationship between the two variables (uncertainty avoidance and the style of conflict management).

**3. Results and Discussion**

**Descriptive Analysis**

Research was carried out at state-owned companies in Central and East Java. Participants included 158 Javanese employees, who responded to questionnaires. To determine whether their scores were categorized as high or low, we used categorizations based on z score, with the following results (see Table 2 below)

**Table 2. Categorization**

Variable	Raw Score	z-score	Categorization
Uncertainty Avoidance	2 – 3.5	0.03 – 2.59	High Uncertainty Avoidance
	1 – 1.83	-1.67 – 0.25	Low Uncertainty Avoidance
Style of Management conflict	2.88 – 4.0	0.19 – 2.31	Active Conflict Management
	1.0 – 2.75	-3.37 – 0.05	Passive Conflict Management

Based on the above categorization, Table 3 shows the result of the profile.

**Table 3. The results of Uncertainty Avoidance and Conflict Management Style**

	Mean	SD	Categorization
Conflict Management Style	2.77	0.53	Passive Management Style
Uncertainty Avoidance	1.98	0.59	High Uncertainty Avoidance

From Tables 1, 2, and 3 above, it can be concluded that Javanese people have a passive style of conflict management (the first hypothesis was supported), and high uncertainty avoidance (the second hypothesis was supported).

**Profile of Descriptive Analysis**

Tables 4 and 5 show results for mean, SD, t-test, and ANOVA. The aim was to check for significant differences in terms of uncertainty avoidance and conflict management.

**Table 4: The Results of t-test for Uncertainty Avoidance**

Characteristics of Respondent	Classification	N	Mean	SD	df	F	t-test/anova	Sign.
Gender	-	-	-	-	156	1.80	-1.07	0.28
	Man	113	1.95	0.55				
	Woman	45	2.06	0.67				
Age	-	-	-	-	156	0.32	-3.18	0.002**
	20-40 years old	55	1.78	0.54				
	>41	103	2.08	0.57				
Longevity	-	-	-	-	156	0.10	-0.74	0.46
	2-10 years	6	1.81	0.51				
	>10 years	152	1.98	0.59				
Education					157	0.37	-	0.83

Senior High School	127	1.99	0.60	School			
Undergraduate	31	1.90	0.55	Undergraduate	31	2.71	0.50

From Table 4, it can be seen that there is no significant positive correlation between gender, longevity, and education in relation to uncertainty avoidance. However, there is a positive and significant correlation between age and uncertainty avoidance: the older somebody is, the more passive their conflict management style.

**Table 5: The Results of t-test/anova for Management of Conflict**

Characteristics of Respondent	Classification	N	Mean	SD	df	F	t-test / anova	Sign.
Gender	-	-	-	-	156	2.64	1.06	0.29
	Man	113	2.80	0.50				
	Woman	45	2.70	0.60				
Age	-	-	-	-	156	0.01	0.14	0.89
	20-40 years old	55	2.78	0.55				
	>41	103	2.77	0.57				
Longevity	-	-	-	-	156	0.50	-1.99	0.05
	2-10 years	6	2.34	0.46				
	>10 years	152	2.80	0.53				
Education	-	-	-	-	157	0.48	-	0.75
	Senior High	127	2.78	0.55				

Table 5 shows that there is no significant correlation between age, gender, longevity, and level of education in people's strategic conflict management. Age, gender, and level of education thus have no significant positive correlation with passive conflict management styles.

**Pearson Correlation Analysis**

Results showed that there was a significant and positive correlation between high uncertainty avoidance and a passive conflict management style (r 0.22, R2 0.05, with a level of significance of 0.007 (p > 0.01)). It can thus be concluded that a higher perception of uncertainty will lead to a more passive management style being used (the third hypothesis was supported).

The objective of this study was to identify the profile of uncertainty avoidance and conflict management style of Javanese people, as well as the relationship between the two variables, in order to know whether values and culture have a significant correlation with chosen conflict management styles. Results showed that Javanese people have a passive style of conflict management. This finding is supported by Suseno (2003), who has stated that Javanese people hate open conflict, and generally place their needs and wants below those of others, even if the products or services in question are important to them. The second finding indicates that Javanese people have high uncertainty avoidance. This finding supports Suseno's (2003) assertion that Javanese people prefer stable and predictable conditions. Results also showed that there is a significant and positive correlation between high uncertainty avoidance and a passive management style. The more uncomfortable a person is with conditions of uncertainty, the more passive the conflict management style employed.

In this regard, there are costs to a conflict not being managed properly, including relationships costs, costs to the individual, and costs to the organization (McConnon & McConnon, 2002). The benefits of positive confrontation, meanwhile, are that people know what is bothering them what they want from the other party. Understanding both our own position that of the other allows us to make the conscious choice to say something directly and respectfully (Patcher & Magee, 2007).



## 4. Conclusions

The study has the following limitations. First, it was conducted in Central and East Java – regions where individuals may have different profiles compared to other Javanese people. Second, this study used self-reporting data, which may have the potential for bias (Podsakoff, 2003). The study also used a 5-point Likert scale, which may have created social desirability in respondents when answering the questionnaire. Given these limitations, generalization cannot be made, and further research should be conducted.

The results of the study support existing theories and concepts about Javanese culture, and could be applied in the future for managing people's reactions to conflict situations. However, in light of the above-stated limitations, care should be taken when generalizing these results.

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