Exploring Interpersonal Harmony: A Cross-Cultural Comparison between Eastern and Western Societies

Zhizheng Zhang

Abstract

The concept of interpersonal harmony exhibits distinct cultural nuances between Eastern and Western societies, shaped by factors such as cultural variances, historical contexts, and societal norms. The field's current comprehension of these distinctions remains limited due to a focus on researching interpersonal conflict within Western societies, leaving the study of interpersonal harmony less informative. The present literature review analyzes research findings on interpersonal harmony within Eastern and Western cultural contexts to establish an understanding of the role of interpersonal harmony and the consequential impact on interpersonal relationships in different social contexts. This review highlights the role and effects of interpersonal harmony in Eastern societies, aimed at enhancing the understanding of interpersonal harmony regarding cultural influence.

keywords: interpersonal harmony, social harmony, cross-cultural comparison, workplace.

Exploring Interpersonal Harmony in Workplace: A Cross-Cultural Comparison between Eastern and Western Societies

Interpersonal harmony holds significant cultural value in Eastern countries, contrasting its comparatively lesser emphasis in Western cultures. This distinction can be attributed to various factors such as cultural norms, historical influences, and social dynamics. This paper delves into investigations of interpersonal harmony and conflict across representative countries in both Western and Eastern cultures. Eastern societies tend to lean towards collectivism, wherein individual ambitions and achievements take a back seat to group objectives and maintaining interpersonal harmony within the workplace (Wang et al., 2018). This inclination is closely tied to 'face culture,' which strongly emphasizes preserving harmony in interpersonal relationships through mutual respect and avoiding direct conflicts (Leung & Cohen, 2011). Conversely, Western countries tend to emphasize individualism, valuing independence and autonomy. Individuals in these cultures are more inclined to prioritize personal feelings and derive personal worth independently rather than being primarily oriented towards group dynamics (Leung & Cohen, 2011).

Furthermore, in the analysis of behaviors related to interpersonal harmony, two major approaches can be identified: harmony enhancement and disintegration avoidance. Harmony enhancement reflects a genuine desire for peaceful interpersonal relationships that bring mutual benefit to those involved. On the other hand, disintegration avoidance manifests as a tendency to safeguard one's self-interest by sidestepping conflicts in a relationship. Understanding these patterns is crucial in comprehending individuals' behaviors concerning interpersonal harmony and conflict. This paper will also evaluate the positive impacts of these strategies in Eastern workplace settings and delve into integrating the Chinese concept of harmony with the Yin-Yang cultural perspective.

Interpersonal harmony indicates an individual's capacity to establish and sustain long-term, mutually beneficial interpersonal relationships (Wang et al., 2018). To put it differently, achieving interpersonal harmony requires individuals to consider others' needs and follow social norms. Furthermore, the goals of interpersonal harmony include establishing, enhancing, or improving social relationships, which involves behaviors and the development of social skills, such as communication and agreeability, to enable these actions (Gherghel et al., 2023). In general, an individualistic culture, such as the United States, emphasizes independent self-construal and prioritizes the maximization of personal qualities. On the contrary, a collectivistic culture, such as China and Japan, focus more on social connectedness, thereby promoting interpersonal harmony (Lu & Gilmour, 2004).

Also, promoting interpersonal harmony could relate to face culture (Leung & Cohen, 2011). Face culture revolves around the respectability and deference one can assert based on their position within a hierarchy and the faithful fulfillment of their designated role, and it exists within settled hierarchies that are essentially cooperative. In a face culture, individuals may possess varying degrees

of the face due to their respective positions, and the major emphasis is not losing face, which is a more familiar expression than "saving face." People are obliged to work together to preserve each other's face, and because it is bad form to cause another to lose face, formalities are carefully observed, and direct conflicts are avoided. If an individual openly aggrieves another, it disrupts the harmony and order of the system, which the social norm cannot accept.

At the core of a face culture lie the three H's: hierarchy, humility, and harmony. Individuals are expected to accord due deference to the established hierarchy, exhibit humility by refraining from excessive status claims, and actively contribute to, or at the very least, refrain from disturbing the overall harmony of the system. In this way, face culture promotes interpersonal harmony by incentivizing cooperation, averting direct conflicts, and sustaining a balanced hierarchy wherein each member commands a certain level of respect and deference. Therefore, emotional suppression is the most effective approach to achieving interpersonal harmony.

However, Western cultures, which fall into honor and dignity cultures, do not prioritize interpersonal harmony in the same manner as face cultures (Jiang & Gore, 2015). A study by Wei and her colleagues (Wei et al., 2013) suggested that while the correlation between emotional suppression and interpersonal harmony was notably positive among Chinese participants, it was not statistically significant for European Americans. This study comprised 154 Japanese and 121 U.S. students, employing a mixed-methods approach to gain precise insight into the prevalence of interpersonal harmony goals across cultures. In this part of the study, participants were asked to freely list eight of their strivings, which were then categorized based on whether they reflected interpersonal harmony pursuit. The experiment results confirmed Wei and her colleagues' hypothesis that individuals from Eastern, interdependent societies (e.g., Chinese) tend to place a higher value on emotional suppression in preserving interpersonal harmony, and they tend to prioritize goals associated with maintaining interpersonal harmony to a greater extent than U.S. participants. Conversely, individuals from Western, independent cultures may or may not suppress their emotions.

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize the role of interpersonal harmony in coworkers' workplace relationships. A positive coworker interaction can enhance coworkers' well-being (Sloan et al., 2013) and improve job performance (Chen et al., 2013), while a negative coworker interaction can lead to more conflicts and have negative impacts (Gelfand et al., 2001). Interpersonal harmony takes on distinct interpretations in Western and Eastern workplaces (Oyserman et al., 2002). The study by Liu et al. (2018) delves into cross-cultural and cross-national variations in the relationship between coworker interpersonal justice and conflict, as well as the subsequent impact on employee effectiveness. Moreover, this study also demonstrated the different cultural values of harmony in China and the United States. This discrepancy becomes particularly evident in how Chinese and American employees may respond differently to low levels of coworker interpersonal justice, given the critical importance of interpersonal harmony in China compared to its relatively less significance in the U.S. The research data yielded three significant findings: first, there was a negative correlation between interpersonal justice and coworker conflict; second, for the employee effectiveness variables of task performance, organizational citizenship behaviors, and counterproductive work behaviors, coworker conflict was stronger than moderate coworker interpersonal justice; third, harmony played a significant role in reducing the indirect effect of coworker interpersonal justice on employee effectiveness through coworker conflict in the Chinese sample, whereas harmony significantly amplified such impact in the U.S. sample. This result suggests companies may implement strategies that resonate with their diverse workforce, ultimately enhancing productivity and employee satisfaction.

Additionally, Western and Eastern societies tend to approach interpersonal disagreements differently. The research conducted by Leung et al. (2011) examined the relationship between harmony and conflict in China and Australia. Participants were asked to complete a survey regarding conflict solutions in their first study, and a 32-item harmony scale was developed, which was used to evaluate the questionnaire from the second study. The dual-concern conflict model (Pruitt, Carnevale & Lituchy, 1995; Rahim, 1983) was also used to measure conflict style. Their first study classified three distinct harmony factors in Hong Kong: disintegration avoidance, harmony enhancement, and harmony as a hindrance. Disintegration avoidance was positively related to conflict avoidance and negatively related to negotiation in a conflict situation. The second study looked at how these harmony factors related to various conflict styles differently in China and Australia. Three factors were all identifiable in Australia, but the Chinese samples scored higher in disintegration avoidance and harmony enhancement. For both groups, disintegration avoidance was related positively to avoiding and dominating and negatively to integrating, while harmony enhancement was related positively to compromising and integrating. Compromising was more strongly associated with harmony enhancement than

disintegration avoidance. Then, disintegration avoidance was positively correlated with compromise and obedience for the Chinese but not for the Australians.

The research done by Lena and Lim (2009) also confirmed that nonconfrontational conflict styles are more common in collectivistic Asian societies. As mentioned above (Leung et al., 2011), harmony enhancement is a strategy focused more on integrating and compromising; it shows a sincere desire for interpersonal harmony. Besides, disintegration avoidance is a strategy used more often in avoiding and obliging; it represents harmony maintenance in relationships. In this study, participants were asked to rate items using a 1 to 5 scale for harmony motives, implicit theory of personality, and conflict styles. The results of harmony enhancement motivation's prediction of integration suggest the importance of fostering interdependent collectivist values and a sense of solidarity and trust to encourage integrating to debate opposing ideas openly and productively. Their findings also emphasized the advantage of being receptive to others' positive adjustments and seeking to improve the relationship and the circumstances during a conflict.

As mentioned above, Eastern societies are more concerned with harmony than Western societies; individuals from different cultural backgrounds could react differently. This research (Kingsley Westerman et al., 2007) discussed the effect of anger in blended friendships (both coworker and friend relationships), and harmony plays an important role in the differences. The research was conducted in Korea and compared with the U.S. workplace environment. The research showed that Koreans were more likely to change their behaviors when angry, whereas Americans were less likely to change their behaviors. This finding was explained by Koreans, who are more interested in maintaining social harmony, but anger disrupts the harmony; therefore, angry people are often more motivated to act to solve the issue that is causing the anger. More specifically, collective objectives and interpersonal harmony precede individual objectives and success in Korean workplaces, a major difference from American organizations.

Moreover, another factor that can potentially impact interpersonal harmony in the workplace is the psychological contract (P.C.). This concept captures employees' beliefs regarding mutual obligations between themselves and their employer (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998). It is worth noting that psychological contracts can vary significantly between cultures, and cultural values may be one of the primary driving forces behind these disparities (Thomas, Au, & Ravlin, 2003). Du and Vantilborgh (2020) conducted a comparative study in Belgian and Chinese contexts to delve into these differences. The research result shows that Belgian participants had a horizontal collectivist culture, whereas Chinese participants had a vertical collectivist culture. The researchers concluded that cultural values are influential to individuals in these countries; Chinese culture focuses more on emphasizing hierarchy and harmony in interpersonal relationships, which combines collectivistic orientation with asymmetric power in interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Belgian culture, in comparison, has a reputation for being more moderate because it strikes a balance between components of collectivism and egalitarian interpersonal interactions of the horizontal dimension. Moreover, although mainland China and Hong Kong share some cultural elements, there are still cultural differences. For instance, greater exposure to Western culture in Hong Kong than in mainland China may have encouraged self-improvement and a desire for challenge, resulting in different perspectives on coworker relationships.

Furthermore, another research has also shown that harmony reduces conflict between employee and their supervisors in China (Liu et al., 2022). This research focused on determining employee-to-supervisor and supervisor-to-employee harmony and how it mitigates conflicts. Besides the moderating impact of supervisors' and employees' values for interpersonal harmony, researchers also analyzed the relationship between supervisor-employee task conflict, supervisor ostracism, employee depression, and job performance. This study is a long time interval; employees and supervisors are asked to rate their harmony enhancement and disintegration avoidance in different intervals. The results showed that supervisors are less favorable (higher ostracism) when there are more supervisor-employee conflicts, which causes increased employee depression and poorer job performance. The two motives for maintaining interpersonal harmony played an important role; harmony enhancement promoted relationships, while disintegration avoidance prevented relationship breakdown. From the supervisors' perspective, harmony enhancement decreased supervisor-employee conflicts and supervisor ostracism. From the employees' perspective, the adverse effects of supervisor ostracism on employee depression and job performance were mitigated by the employees' harmony enhancement. Still, the employees' disintegration avoidance would amplify this negative effect.

Conclusion

Overall, harmony enhancement and disintegration avoidance strategies were widely used in Eastern culture in many circumstances other than coworker relationships.

Through the studies discussed above, there is a certain commonality of culture. For instance, Eastern countries such as China and Korea are commonly perceived as more collectivist, where individuals within relationships tend to seek harmony and relatively hide personal feelings. In contrast, Western countries such as the United States, Belgium, and Australia are more individualist, where individuals tend to express their feelings and communicate with others about them more. The application of emotional suppression in the face culture could also be a factor since it requires individuals to avoid direct conflicts and preserve face for both sides. Moreover, the Chinese traditional culture and Yin-Yang perspective play an important role in the differences between Eastern cultures, and they are major factors in discussing this topic. Considering the differences in cultures and social norms, it is predictable that the same harmony enhancement and disintegration avoidance strategies will have positive effects in Eastern countries but neutral or adverse effects in Western countries. As discussed above, interpersonal harmony can also benefit employees' creativity and enhance relationships between employees and supervisors in Eastern countries.

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