9. Managing cross-culture conflicts: A close look at the implication of direct versus indirect confrontation

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The leader of a multicultural software development team was frustrated. The American and European members of the team were delivering on time, but he was getting nothing from the Japanese members. Multiple meetings with the Japanese members generated seeming commitment but no follow-up. The team leader, an Indian, located in Singapore considered two alternative strategic approaches to resolve this conflict. One approach he considered was to contact the head of IT in Japan to find out why the work was not being done. Ultimately, however, he decided to try a different approach. He asked the European team members to prepare a presentation of their progress on the project. He then went to Japan and invited the entire Japanese IT division of the company to attend the Europeans' presentation. After the presentation he went back to Singapore without holding substantive meetings with the Japanese team members. Within a week he had a request from the Japanese team members to have the Japanese team's completed work featured in the next corporate presentation.

– An example of successful indirect confrontation from our research

This chapter is about the meaning, cultural significance, and consequences of direct versus indirect confrontation of conflict. The distinction between direct and indirect confrontation captures important culturally driven differences in how meaning is expressed and received when parties are in conflict. Conflict occurs when at least one party in an interdependent relationship perceives differences in interests (Carnevale and Pruitt, 1992). For example, conflict occurs when one party wants something that the other party is reluctant to give. Conflict exists in all cultures, as it is inherent to social life (Homans, 1950). Culture is a lens through which people interpret conflict and orient themselves when conflict occurs. Though culture can be the source of conflict, here we focus on how ongoing participation in a culture prepares people to express and respond to conflict in ways that reflect their prevailing cultural ideologies and practices. We begin by defining direct and indirect confrontation of conflict, and analyze why culture conditions people to confront conflict more or less directly. We then discuss the pros and cons of direct versus indirect confrontation of conflict and the forms that nonverbal, verbal, and third-party intervention take in indirect versus direct confrontation cultures. We conclude by discussing myths about differences in indirect and direct confrontation of conflict, arguing that labeling East Asian approaches to conflict management as "indirect" reflects a Western orientation toward conflict, and suggesting that East Asian approaches are quite explicit to one acculturated to them.

DIRECT VERSUS INDIRECT CONFRONTATION: CHALLENGES FOR CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

The opening example suggests that direct confrontation and indirect confrontation are distinct processes of conflict management. Direct confrontation is characterized by explicit communication between parties, with the aim of resolving the conflict without affecting others who are not immediately involved (Tinsley and Weldon, 2003). When a claim or conflict expression is direct, the literal and semantic meaning of the language used to express the conflict is the same (Grice, 1968). The process is also direct. One party will try to get the other party's attention, then tell the other what the problem is, and what the other should do to fix the problem. If the two parties are unable to work out the problem for themselves, they may involve a third party, for example, a friend, parent, neighbor, boss, or even a professional mediator or arbitrator.

When a claim or conflict expression is indirect, one party may signal that there is a problem through verbal or nonverbal communication, where the intended meaning of the communication must be inferred from the context rather than from its literal meaning (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Indirect confrontation, whether spoken or non-verbal, relies on cues (for example, a subtle expression of anger or contempt) that leave it to the other party to notice the problem and to decide what to do about it. Indirect confrontation may also involve a third party early in the process to carry the message of a problem to the other party. In general then, when one party is explicit about the claim and the expected response, confrontation is direct; when the claim and expected response are more implicit—left for the other to notice and infer from symbolic nonverbal cues—confrontation is indirect (Brett, 2007: 141).

This definition treats the distinction between direct and indirect confrontation of conflict as a dichotomy. More often, however, the back-and-forth exchange in the process of confronting conflict is arrayed along a continuum of direct/indirect because one or the other party may be more or less direct in making the claim or framing the response. In the simplest case, when both parties are direct or indirect, the process of conflict management is more likely to remain functional. However, the process of conflict management may become challenging if it is normative for one party to confront conflict directly and the other to do so indirectly. Such a procedural clash may be particularly likely in an intercultural encounter, resulting in conflict management being complicated by procedural conflict added to substantive conflict. In addition, one can easily imagine all kinds of procedural complications when the claim is made directly by one party and responded to indirectly by the other or vice versa. Our point is that culturally conditioned expectations for engaging in the conflict process via direct versus indirect confrontation may add procedural conflict to what is already task or relational conflict. In sum, when one party is culturally socialized to confront conflict directly and the other party is conditioned to confront conflict indirectly, the two may have difficulty understanding the content and intentions of each other's communications (Adair et al., 2001; Triandis, 2000).

From this introduction to the differences between direct and indirect confrontation to conflict, it is a little easier to understand that the Japanese team members in the opening example were signaling indirectly (by not producing anything) that they did not have buy-in for the project from their Japanese IT department. The Indian project manager said he would normally expect team members to tell him that they were having trouble

delivering their part of the project. Instead, he had to infer where the trouble lay from the disconnect between the team members seeming commitment to the project, but lack of follow-through. This disconnect cued the team leader to infer that there was a problem. His effectiveness in confronting the problem began when he figured out an indirect way to help the Japanese team members get support for their portion of the project without their losing face and without their explicit guidance.
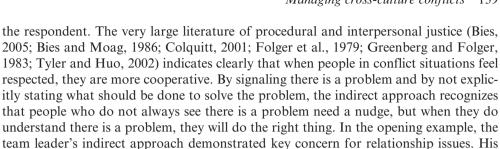
The example illustrates the point we have been making that, beyond the simple case in which both parties perceive the claim and response as similarly direct or indirect, communicating about conflict can be complex because people from different cultures communicate differently. Both in theory and in our example, the parties had to make sense of the procedure by which conflict was being communicated and also address the substantive conflict. They had to understand the meaning behind the way the other party was presenting and communicating information, and they needed to determine an appropriate way to communicate in response. Thus, the process of understanding and addressing conflict itself becomes a "conflict" which wraps itself around the substantive conflict.

When we look at the opening example from the point of view of someone who prefers a direct approach, we can see that the Japanese team members' failure to communicate directly could be misinterpreted—especially if compared to the communication and on-time delivery of their American and European counterparts. People are comfortable with behavior that is culturally normative, which may be why Westerners are prone to view the direct approach as more honest, as evidence of being engaged, and as more efficient (Tinsley, 2001). The indirect message from the Japanese, that they lacked support, generated conflict with the team manager and the rest of the team. Their indirect signaling could have also interfered with the conflict management if the manager, whose cultural preference was for direct confrontation, had addressed the conflict directly, perhaps by putting the Japanese team members on the spot in a weekly team call or by involving their managers.

The process of conflict management encompasses a wide range of activities, including communication, problem solving, dealing with emotion, and understanding positions (Pondy, 1992; Putnam and Poole, 1987). From the perspective of someone more accustomed to direct than indirect approaches, it may be difficult to accept that indirect approaches can be as efficient and effective. We think indirect approaches are quite efficient and effective for three reasons. First, indirect confrontation is widely used in many parts of the world. If it were not functional, it seems unlikely that it would survive as an approach to conflict management. Second, even though indirect confrontation leaves it up to the respondent to recognize and understand the problem, there appears to be no greater loss in message transmission when both parties are attuned to indirect cues as when both parties use direct forms of communication (Ambady et al., 1996; Sanchez-Burks et al., 2003). That is, the content of the expression may vary between direct and indirect expression, but the symbolic meaning is not lost when one is attuned to indirect forms of expression and communication. Third, indirect confrontation may actually serve as a higher-fidelity mode of conflict resolution than direct confrontation, because indirect confrontation inherently, but implicitly, addresses the relational context of the conflict as well as the substantive issue in dispute.

By implicitly addressing the relational context of the conflict, indirect confrontation may limit emotional escalation. This is because the indirect approach conveys respect for

the respondent. The very large literature of procedural and interpersonal justice (Bies, 2005; Bies and Moag, 1986; Colquitt, 2001; Folger et al., 1979; Greenberg and Folger, 1983; Tyler and Huo, 2002) indicates clearly that when people in conflict situations feel respected, they are more cooperative. By signaling there is a problem and by not explicitly stating what should be done to solve the problem, the indirect approach recognizes that people who do not always see there is a problem need a nudge, but when they do understand there is a problem, they will do the right thing. In the opening example, the team leader's indirect approach demonstrated key concern for relationship issues. His indirect approach saved face for the Japanese members within the team. It also saved face for the Japanese IT department that was not supporting its team members.

Contrast the implications of direct confrontation. Direct confrontation, as we have seen, identifies the problem and dictates the solution. There is no indirect nudging. The implication is that the respondent does not see the problem and should, and would not solve it effectively, if left to their own devices. Thus, even though relationship conflict is not directly addressed, disrespect is conveyed in the nature of the message. Furthermore, although the substantive conflict may get solved in response to this approach, the relationship conflict may not be addressed. Addressing relationship conflict directly is quite emotionally stressful, and people in direct confrontation cultures seem to be quite satisfied with solving the substantive conflict and ignoring the relational aspects of the conflict (Sanchez-Burks et al., 2003)—which may play havoc with future relationships.

CULTURAL ORIGINS OF DIRECT VERSUS INDIRECT CONFRONTATION

A preference for using direct versus indirect confrontation of conflict is associated with other characteristics that distinguish Eastern and Western cultures. These include the conceptualization of the self in collective versus individualistic cultures; status and deference patterns in hierarchical versus egalitarian cultures; communication patterns in high- versus low-context cultures; and analytical patterns in holistic versus analytic (linear) mindset cultures. Direct confrontation is characteristic of Western cultures which tend to be individualistic, egalitarian, low context, and analytical. Indirect confrontation is characteristic of Eastern cultures which tend to be collective, hierarchical, high context, and holistic.

Cultural Origins of Direct Confrontation

Direct confrontation is consistent with the promotion of self-interest that is characteristic of individualistic cultures (Buchan et al., 2004). In these cultures individuals tend to be action-oriented and solution-minded. They tend to propose specific alternative solutions and debate the merits of those solutions to themselves and the other party (Brett, 2007). This proclivity to propose and debate alternatives is characteristic of low-context (Hall, 1983) and analytical mindset cultures (Nisbett et al., 2001). People from low-context, analytic cultures tend to focus on the attributes of objects (Nisbett et al., 2001). By identifying multiple alternative solutions and debating their pros and cons (from a self-interested perspective, no less), people from these cultures are using standard

problem-solving and decision-making procedures to manage conflict. Direct confrontation is also consistent with egalitarian values that treat people as equals and social status as a dynamic. Challenging the status quo, therefore, is a right in egalitarian cultures and overt conflict is the way this is enacted. Direct confrontation is a way to establish a new or restore an old equilibrium (Goffman, 1959; Ting-Toomey et al., 2000).

Direct confrontation of conflict is also consistent with low-context communication (Hall, 1976). It involves making a claim (Felstiner et al., 1980–81) and justifying it. Both claim and justification are framed in terms of Aristotelian logic, which is characteristic of Western culture's analytic mindset (Nisbett et al., 2001). For example, claims are typically described as violations of interests, rights or power, or some combination thereof (Ury et al., 1993). The example of the claim about boots that instigated ultimately a wildcat strike illustrates this point. The claimant: "Someone stole my boots, it ain't fair!"—a claim expressing interests and rights. The respondent, "The company's not responsible for personal property left on the premises."—a rejection of interests framed in rights (Ury et al., 1993: 4). Thus, direct claims state rather baldly that social norms have been violated. Even though claims are framed by logic that refers to social norms of interests, rights, or power, the directness of the claim implies that the person to whom the claim is directed as a member of society should have known better. Thus, there is little room in a directly stated claim for the possibility that there is legitimacy in the other party's position.

In sum, direct confrontation is: (1) consistent with the promotion of self-interest, characteristic of individualism; (2) consistent with the assumption that parties can and should manage conflict themselves, characteristic of egalitarianism; (3) requires little in the way of inferential skills to understand what is being asked, characteristic of direct communication; and (4) based on the Aristotelian logic of argument, characteristic of the analytic mindset.

Cultural Origins of Indirect Confrontation

The purpose of indirect confrontation is to address substantive issues while maintaining or restoring harmony in the social context in which the disputants are rooted (Earley, 1997; Oetzel and Ting-Toomey, 2003). This value for harmony is closely held in collective and hierarchical cultures (Tjosvold and Sun, 2000). Therefore, a guiding principle in indirect confrontation is the protection of face—an individual's sense of social worth (Goffman, 1967).

We like the story told to us by an executive who was living in Japan. He and his wife were aware of complicated recycling rules in their neighborhood and were trying to comply. However, they realized that they were not succeeding when they noticed their neighbors were re-sorting their recycling before the truck arrived. By claiming indirectly (re-sorting), the neighbors gave face, signaling respect for the foreigners even while showing them that they had violated social norms. The foreigners lost neither face nor social status because their being associated with the event was an opportunity to learn the complex recycling rules. In another example, an American manager was surprised that a Chinese manager, temporarily reporting to him while on assignment in the US, repeatedly asked the American manager to intervene whenever the Chinese manager disagreed with a peer's planned course of action. "Why doesn't the Chinese manager just go

work through the different perspectives with the peer?" the American manager asked his professors. We suggested that the Chinese manager was just acting as he normally would in indirect, hierarchical Chinese culture, where direct confrontation with the peer could disrupt harmony and cause loss of face to the Chinese manager and his peer. Indirect confrontation often involves third parties with authority to make decisions so that lower-level people do not lose face. Indeed, taking responsibility for resolving problems is the social obligation of a higher-status party in hierarchical culture (Triandis, 1995).

Indirect confrontation may also rely upon stories, metaphors, or images to cue associative logic intended to provide enough insight such that the other party can craft an appropriate response. A Chinese student told her Western-cultured classmates who were struggling to understand indirect confrontation: "I would never tell a friend that I didn't like her dress. Instead I would tell her I liked her shoes, omitting reference to her dress. She would understand that I didn't like her dress, because I didn't mention it." Thus, indirect confrontation can elicit desired responses through mutually shared expectations about normative behavior within the context. The stories, metaphors, and images characteristic of indirect confrontation may also cue dialectal thinking which emphasizes analyzing the object (conflict) in its context and considering the possibility that there is merit to both parties' positions.

Thus, indirect confrontation of conflict is consistent with the promotion of harmony that is characteristic of collective and hierarchical cultures, and the promotion of face-saving because such communications place the onus of interpretation on the recipient characteristic of high-context communication (Hall, 1983). Indirect confrontation of conflict is consistent with Confucian reasoning that is dialectical and associative.

PROS AND CONS OF DIRECT VERSUS INDIRECT APPROACHES TO CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Given the differences described above, there are pros and cons of direct versus indirect conflict management and these pros and cons have implications for the nature of outcomes, both substantive and relational. For example, there are pros and cons associated with the degree to which the disputants control the outcome of the conflict. In direct confrontation such outcomes are far more likely to reflect the parties' interests rather than the interests of a larger social entity such as the organization, group, family, in which they are embedded. There also are pros and cons associated with the degree to which the process addresses the substantive versus the relationship issues in conflict and the roles of third parties. Understanding these pros and cons makes it clear that each approach has much to learn from the other.

Substantive Outcomes

When parties confront each other directly, conflict resolution is in their hands. An agreement has to satisfy both parties, so it should address the interests underlying the parties' substantive issues in conflict. Typically, successful direct conflict management addresses the parties' analysis of the underlying causes of the conflict and includes plans for how they will interact in the future to avoid conflict (Brett, 2007). There are potential

negatives to direct confrontation of conflict between principals. The greatest risk is that the parties directly involved will focus exclusively on resolving their interests, when the conflict really raises larger organizational issues. Another risk is that conflict resolution will fail. When direct conflict resolution fails, substantive and relationship conflict are likely to escalate, and one or both parties may turn to power (Ury et al., 1993). There are costs to both parties when they use power (Brett, 2007). At a minimum, using power is likely to hurt both parties' reputations. If using power generates a negotiated outcome, that outcome is likely to be one-sided. If using power does not generate a settlement but a stalemate, and a third party becomes involved, the outcome is no longer in the control of the parties in conflict.

When one party confronts another indirectly, conflict resolution is in the hands of the second party or a third party. This is a subtle but important difference from the way conflict is handled in direct confrontation. As previously described, with direct confrontation, the claiming party typically states the claim, frames the claim logically explaining why it is a violation of social norms, and tells the respondent what should be done to resolve the claim. In indirect confrontation, as we have discussed, the claiming party typically signals the claim, may signal why it violates social norms, and may signal what should be done, or more likely leave the understanding of the nature of the violation and the appropriate response up to the respondent. Brett's (2007) bicycle story is a good example of this. Worried that the bicycles being manufactured in China to ship to a German buyer might have rattles, the story's protagonist went to the Chinese factory, asked the plant manager to take two bikes off the line to ride together in the countryside, and commented at the end of the ride that he might have heard a rattle or two (when in his opinion the bikes were definitely rattling), and went back to Hong Kong without saying anything further. A month later the bikes were shipped, the German buyer was pleased with the bikes, and ordered more.

A successful end to indirect confrontation should be the reestablishment of harmony and social equilibrium—the bikes that were shipped did not rattle; the plant manager did not lose face; the Hong Kong protagonist had confidence in placing a reorder with the same manufacturer. Consider the bicycle story from the perspective of a protagonist used to confronting directly. Assuming that an indirect approach will not be recognized, and anticipating a quality problem, the protagonist visits the Chinese plant and would be likely to start inspecting bikes coming off the line, identifying that the bikes rattled, and telling the plant manager in front of the line workers that the bikes rattled and needed to be repaired before shipment. Even if the intervention generated non-rattling bikes and a reorder from the Germans, the plant manager would have lost face in this direct confrontation. Furthermore, the protagonist had little reason to trust that the plant manager would, without intervention, ship non-rattling bikes in the future. Thus, with direct confrontation there is likely to be a short-term fix, but there may not be assurance that the fix would last through a reorder because of the loss of face, therefore leading to potential retaliation from the plant manager and suspicion from the protagonist. Working through the logical implications of direct versus indirect confrontation, as we have done in analyzing this example, implies a greater likelihood of restoring the harmonious status quo in indirect confrontation than in direct confrontation—a proposition that is fascinating in its implications, because it shows that there is a consequence to indirect confrontation that goes beyond saving the plant manager's face.

Indirect conflict resolution may mean that the offense or claim is never acknowledged outright, but it does not mean that the conflict is not perceived. What is hardest for people from Western cultures to comprehend is that indirect confrontation is typically understood (for example, as above, stating you like the shoes but never mentioning the dress). If indirect confrontation is not understood and acted upon, escalation is a distinct possibility, just as it is when direct confrontation is ignored.

Conflict confronted indirectly may not be explicitly acknowledged, but simply addressed in a manner that is acceptable to the claiming party and that preserves face for both parties. As in the bicycle story, there may be no discussion of the underlying causes of the conflict, since causal attribution is more of an analytical than a holistic mindset perspective. Instead, the conflict is likely to be viewed as a whole with its context, which cannot be easily manipulated by individual actors. Instead, successful conflict management implies that the social equilibrium resulting from indirect confrontation will absorb future conflict, and when it cannot, conflict management process will have to be restarted.

Using indirect confrontation to resolve conflict successfully should have the major positive outcomes of preserving harmony and integrating interests. However, to the extent that preserving harmony reconfirms the status quo in an environment that is dynamic, this approach to conflict management may cause a failure to innovate and lead to fundamental and potential catastrophic organizational problems ranging from loss of market share, to safety, and so on. At a more personal level, an indirect resolution of conflict that does not satisfy the claiming party may result in that party withdrawing from future interaction—for example, a customer taking business elsewhere; foot dragging; delayed response to future requests, and so on.

Relational Outcomes

In Western—direct confrontation—cultures, conflict management first and foremost addresses the substantive issues in conflict. Addressing the relationship comes second, if the relationship is addressed at all (Sanchez-Burks, 2005). Thus, direct approaches will not necessarily address the emotions underlying the conflict. This is because, in Western cultures, people strive to divorce social-emotional dynamics from the workplace (Sanchez-Burks, 2005), which is in part a reflection of the Western Enlightenment's focus on reason over emotion along with a prevailing ideology that defines professionalism in terms of maintaining a polite impersonal approach (Sanchez-Burks et al., 2008). From the perspective of cultures more accustomed to indirect confrontational styles, it can be difficult to appreciate that a lack of attention to the relational context stems not out of disrespect to others, but out of a respect for a norm wherein people tacitly put aside relational issues so as to focus exclusively on the substantive issues at hand. For example, apologies that serve to smooth conflict's relational fallout are much less likely to be used in Western than Eastern cultures (Maddux et al., 2011). The ideal in direct confrontation cultures is to separate the people from the problem (Fisher et al., 1991). People in cultures that follow a direct approach *do* care about relationships. It is just that, in these cultures, resolving the relationship conflict is not viewed as a means of resolving the substantive conflict, but resolving the substantive conflict should also take care of the relationship conflict. To be sure, when the relationship is the problem, for example,

conflict between family members or close friends, people in direct confrontation cultures may ultimately address the relationship directly, but typically after engaging in significant avoidance (Von Glinow et al., 2004).

In indirect confrontation cultures, conflict management is intended to address the substantive issues, insofar as possible given the constraints of the relational context. Here, there are virtually no settings—professional or otherwise—where it is deemed appropriate to "put aside" the relational context or the indirect approach (Sanchez-Burks et al., 2003, 2008). For this reason, third parties are used frequently to buffer conflicting parties from potential loss of face. When a third party makes a decision as to what is to be done to resolve the conflict, neither conflicting party is deferring to the other, both are deferring to the third party as is normal in a hierarchical society. In addition, third parties can, via expressions of empathy (Goldberg et al., 2009), help conflicting parties maintain face. Empathy conveys respect for the person, which may be threatened in conflict situations. Probably for these reasons third parties are frequently involved early in indirect approaches to conflict resolution.

Although both direct and indirect confrontation of conflict can be successful approaches to conflict management, there are benefits and perils inherent in each approach. These benefits and perils affect the nature of the substantive outcome, whether and how relationship issues are addressed, and the timing and role of third parties. In the next section, we discuss the forms that direct and indirect approaches to conflict management may take.

FORMS OF DIRECT VERSUS INDIRECT APPROACHES TO CONFLICT

Table 9.1 provides examples of indirect versus direct confrontation of conflict in the form of nonverbal behavior, verbal behavior, and third-party intervention. Nonverbal behavior consists of one or more types of signaling, whether direct or indirect, for the purpose of getting the other party to become aware of and responsive to the conflict. Verbal behavior in indirect confrontation extends signaling to stimulate associative thinking for the purpose of getting the other party to understand the conflict. Verbal behavior in direct confrontation eschews signaling for "tell and sell," that is, making a claim and logically justifying the claim. Third-party intervention differs in terms of timing when it typically occurs in the indirect (early) versus the direct (late) confrontation cycle. Although the purpose of third-party intervention in both indirect and direct confrontation cultures may be similar—to facilitate the resolution of the conflict, the research shows that the effectiveness of third-party intervention in direct confrontation cultures has a lot in common with the face-saving characteristic of indirect confrontation cultures. We elaborate on each of these forms of direct and indirect confrontation of conflict below.

Displays of Emotion in Nonverbal Indirect and Direct Confrontation

Nonverbal forms of indirect and direct confrontation of conflict rely on the interpretation of emotions. Interestingly, displays of emotion are interpreted similarly across
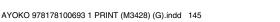
Table 9.1.   Examples of the contrast between direct and indirect confrontation

Modes of confrontation	Examples of indirect confrontation	Examples of direct confrontation
Verbal	Ask a question	Make a claim
	Tell a story	Elaborate the claim, explain the reasons why you are claiming
	Share an experience	Elaborate the claim, explain why the other party should accede to your claim
		Threaten: explain what will happen to the other party, if the claim is not granted
Nonverbal	Use subtle signals like emotional expressions (for example, withdrawal) and behavioral cues (arms crossed) to convey disagreement	Use hard to miss signals like elevated vocal pitch, faster speech patterns, enlarged postural stances
	Signal–anything from putting up posters, to postponing meetings, to missing deadlines without identifying yourself	Act to hurt the other party–anything from punch them out to withdrawing funds from a joint bank account
Third party	Involve a hierarchical third party early in the process	Involve a third party late in the process
	Goal: to get a resolution of the conflict in which parties are not responsible for each other's potential loss of face	Goal: to get a resolution of the conflict when the parties cannot resolve it themselves

cultures. For example, displays of anger convey that a target is perceived to be responsible for harming one's preferences (Frijda, 1987). Cues of embarrassment signal deference. These and other emotional displays are used across cultures to communicate one's interpretation of a context and to elicit complementary responses (Morris and Keltner, 2000).

The cultural differences arise because of different thresholds for the open display of emotion. Western European cultural values, such as independence and self-assertion, promote open emotional expression (Butler et al., 2007). Direct confrontation may include displays of anger or irritation designed to put pressure on the other party (Gelfand et al., 2002). East Asian values, such as interdependence and relationship harmony, promote the suppression of especially negative emotions (Gross and Levenson, 1997). For example, compared to North Americans, East Asians are less likely to display negative emotions (Friesen, 1972; Gross, 1998; Matsumoto and Kupperbusch, 2001). This is because emotional display may be viewed as a face-threat or identity assault by those who are culturally accustomed to indirect confrontation with its emphasis on harmony (Gelfand et al., 2002), maintenance of low-arousal positive affect (Tsai et al., 2006), and limitations on emotional display (Triandis, 2000). These different preferences

can understandably lead to negative attributions about the character and honor of the other party—or cause relationship conflict. Thus, the major cultural differences are not the actual emotional behaviors people use to signal conflict but the threshold at which emotional behaviors are displayed. Interestingly, one reason that Westerners may benefit from emotional intelligence training is that they are not socially conditioned to recognize indirect cues and regulate emotions according to norms of indirect confrontation. The ability to recognize cues that trigger associative reasoning are nevertheless desirable leadership traits in Western contexts (Wolff et al., 2002).

Verbal Indirect and Direct Confrontation

Verbal forms of indirect and direct confrontation of conflict lead to conflict resolution by rather different means than nonverbal forms. Verbal forms of indirect confrontation cue associative logical thinking; verbal forms of direct confrontation use linear logic.

In an indirect confrontation culture, for example, verbal confrontation may take the form of one party asking a question to which both parties already know the answer, telling a story with a not-so-hidden-to-the-other agenda, or sharing an experience that puts her into the other party's shoes. Conflict is then resolved by the respondent, who has saved face, but nonetheless has been notified that action is expected so as to restore harmony. A recent example occurred in 2012 in Shanghai on the anniversary of Tiananmen Square (see Bradsher, 2012). The web was full of commentary about the data indicating that the Shanghai stock index fell on opening exactly 64.89 points. The date of Tiananmen Square was June 4, 1989. Experts concluded that this precise drop was unlikely to have been a naturally occurring event. The Chinese government took the notification seriously and began blocking searches with the keywords "Shanghai exchange."

Verbal forms of direct confrontation turn perceived conflict into a dispute, which is formally a rejected claim (Felstiner et al., 1980–81), usually logically justified by "rights" or "fairness" arguments. Both parties are very much engaged in disputes, one party makes the claim, and the other party rejects the claim. This mutual engagement typically leads to direct negotiations between the two parties to integrate interests, determine who is right and who is wrong under some application of a social norm (for example, law, contract, precedence), or determine who is more powerful, hence capitulation (Ury et al., 1993).

Interestingly, apologies—"an admission of responsibility accompanied by the expression of regret" (P. H. Kim et al., 2004)—are used in both indirect and direct confrontation cultures, but their function, meaning, and the frequency with which they are used are quite different (Maddux et al., 2011). In indirect confrontation cultures (which are also typically collective), apologies are understood to be general expressions of remorse but do not signal blame or responsibility (Ide, 1999). Thus, in indirect confrontation cultures, apologies function to restore harmony and so are used very frequently (Maddux et al., 2011). In direct confrontation cultures (which are also typically individualistic), apologies are understood to signal acceptance of culpability. They are used to reestablish personal credibility, and so are used much less frequently (Maddux et al., 2011).

Third Parties

Around the world, third parties who do not have authority conveyed by government or society to determine the outcome of a conflict, nevertheless intervene in conflict and facilitate conflict resolution (Wall, 2012). There are few instances in which researchers find no evidence of third-party facilitation or mediation: when conflict occurs but disputants are living in such poor circumstances that they seemingly have no energy for conflict resolution (for example, Haiti); when conflict is perceived as a valuable resource, for example, to promote fundamental political change (such as the Arab Spring); when other means (for example, bribes) are more effective than mediation; or when a group has had terrible experiences with mediation that has generated appeasement (for example, France in the Vichy government during World War II) (Wall, 2012).

Not surprisingly, even though mediation is used globally, it is practiced quite differently in different parts of the world. Wall's cultural effects model proposes that mediators' behaviors are affected by cultural norms. For example, the amount they emphasize harmony restoration in indirect confrontation cultures; or whether they are chosen because of consistency or generalization from their major social role to play the mediation role (for example, priest or boss used as a mediator); and their involvement is influenced by the nature of institutional mandates for conflict management (for example, Chinese community mediators have significant authority conveyed by the state, or Imam have significant moral authority due to their role in their religious institutions) (Wall, 2012). In a study comparing simulated third-party intervention into an organizational dispute, managers from the U.S., China, and Japan tended to behave autocratically when in the third-party role of boss, but when in the role of peer, U.S. and Chinese managers compared to the Japanese managers tended to be more democratic by involving the disputants and facilitating settlements that integrated interests (Brett et al., 2007b).

In the early years of research on the effects of third-party dispute resolution procedures, there was uncertainty whether mediation procedures that did not give third parties the authority to impose a settlement on disputants, could actually resolve disputes. Thibaut and Walker (1975), in their seminal work on procedural justice, dismissed non-binding procedures (which in their simulations were essentially non-binding arbitration) as ineffective. It was only some years later, when scholars began experimenting with mediation of labor grievances (Brett and Goldberg, 1983), that evidence was accumulated in that sector and ultimately in many sectors of family, community, and even commercial law (Brett et al., 1996) for the effectiveness of interest-based mediation in resolving disputes (McEwen, 1992).

The evidence that third-party mediation effectively resolves disputes, and the subsequent research that has determined why it does so, folds the two processes of direct and indirect confrontation of conflict into one. Recent research on what effective mediators and other types of third parties do in direct confrontation cultures (Goldberg et al., 2009) takes us beyond the vast literature on procedural and interactional justice (Bies, 2005; Bies and Moag, 1986; Colquitt, 2001; Folger et al., 1979; Greenberg and Folger, 1983; Tyler and Huo, 2002) and brings us full circle back to the implications for face-saving in indirect confrontation cultures. Third-party intervention in disputes in direct confrontation cultures is effective because the third party reestablishes disputants' face. When direct confrontation has failed, third-party intervention actually succeeds largely

due to the third party being able to develop an empathic relationship with the disputants (Goldberg et al., 2009; Swaab and Brett, 2012)—a relationship of respect for the claimant and the claim, and for the respondent and the denial. When direct confrontation has failed, what a third party does is try to establish the face-saving, respectful relationship between the third party and each disputant that is so carefully preserved in the initial stages of indirect confrontation of conflict. The third-party's task therefore may be much more difficult in the direct confrontation than the indirect confrontation culture. This is because, in the indirect confrontation culture, the third party "gets to" the conflicting parties before they have confronted and face has been lost. In the direct confrontation cultures, the third party "gets to" the conflicting parties after they have reached a negotiated impasse. Face has been lost!

This review of direct versus indirect approaches to conflict describes parties' culturally prescribed procedural options and is helpful in understanding cultural differences in the manifestation of parties' underlying motives. The direct approach really focuses on resolving the conflict which, at least on the surface, is where "direct confronters" are most comfortable. In contrast, the indirect approach focuses primarily on the maintenance of face and social harmony. What is fascinating is that each approach, whether indirect or direct, can be manifested in so many different ways.

A CRITIQUE: MYTHS ABOUT INDIRECT CONFRONTATION

Given that most of the research and writing about culture and conflict management has been done by Westerners and published in Western-edited journals (see Ting-Toomey's lifetime work as a major exception), there is the potential for significant bias in trying to describe and understand indirect confrontation of conflict as it is practiced in Eastern cultures. Pruitt (2004) has commented that social science theory would be quite different if it had originated in China rather than in the West. He goes on to say, however, that a non-Western origin social science theory, although unlikely to be a perfect description of Western society, should nevertheless help us understand a lot about Western society. In this section, recognizing our Western culture biases, we offer a critique of commonly held assumptions in the Western culture literature about indirect confrontation of conflict.

#1: Indirect Confrontation is Avoidance

We do not believe that indirect confrontation is avoidance in the sense that avoidance is used in the dual concern model (Blake and Mouton, 1964; Kilmann and Thomas, 1977; Pruitt and Rubin, 1986; Rahim, 1983; and see M.-S. Kim et al., 2004, for a critique of the model). The dual concern model uses two constructs: concern for own outcomes and concern for others' outcomes to generate five conflict management styles: integrate (high concern for both), compromise (moderate concern for both), avoid (low concern for both), dominating (high self, low other), obliging, (low self, high other). Avoid in the dual concern model really means ignoring the conflict, doing nothing, or "lumping it" in Ury et al.'s terms (1993). In the dual concern model, avoid is operationalized: I tried to ignore the conflict and behaved as if nothing had happened; I tried to pretend that the conflict didn't happen; I pretended as if the conflict didn't exist (Oetzel and Ting-
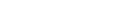
Toomey, 2003). There is substantial research showing that people from Asian cultures endorse the conflict style of avoidance in dual concern model studies at a much higher rate than people from Western cultures (see Oetzel and Ting-Toomey, 2003, both for a review and empirical data). This finding does suggest that avoidance is more socially normative in Asia than the West. However, what may look like literal avoidance may actually reflect quite a different underlying motivation (Friedman et al., 2006). Tjosvold and Sun (2002) distinguish between avoidance motivated by a desire not to hurt one's interests, which they call outflanking or working behind the scenes to get what you want, versus avoidance motivated by a desire to maintain harmony, which they point out will take the form of conforming—ignoring the conflict, doing nothing, or lumping it. Traditional measures of conflict styles remain too blunt to pick up these finer distinctions between literally avoiding a conflict altogether and taking a more subtle approach that nonetheless directly deals with the conflict at hand. Thus, the fact that Asians endorse the conflict style of avoidance at a much higher rate than Westerners does not mean that there is no conflict in Asia. Nor does it mean that walking away from conflict is the only strategy Asians use. Like Westerners, Asians use an array of strategies to confront conflict verbally and nonverbally. They also use third parties. An indirect expression, such as questioning or telling a story, sends a very clear signal that can be directly interpreted through association and inference. Although this approach is indirect when contrasted with the direct approach, indirect expression is still clearly communicating meaning to those who have been conditioned to recognize it.

Recent East–West cross-cultural experiments on perceptions of conflict support this notion that cultures that typically deploy indirect approaches are very much interested in addressing the conflict. In one study (Sanchez-Burks et al., 2008), Koreans and Americans considered a situation in which a group of highly talented people, working on a team project, experienced task or relationship conflict. Across types of conflict, Koreans believed it was important that the conflict in the team should be addressed. Moreover, when the conflict revolved around interpersonal issues, Koreans were significantly more likely than Americans to believe the conflict should be resolved. Although this study did not capture the method each culture would use to address the issue, the results are consistent with the notion that addressing conflict, rather than avoiding it, is a preferred strategy.

One way in which East Asians may avoid conflict more than Westerners is not in how they deal with conflict when it emerges but in their preferences to opt out of situations in which conflict is likely. In another experiment, individuals were asked to choose which of two teams they would join for an upcoming project (Sanchez-Burks et al., 2008). Both teams were described as having the best and brightest teammates given the nature of the project. In one condition, the team was described as likely to get along just fine. For this type of team, both East Asians and Westerners were highly interested in joining the team. In a second condition, however, the team members were described as likely not to get along interpersonally based on prior experience with each other. The vast majority of East Asians in this condition indicated that they would pass on the opportunity to work with this team of experts. In contrast, a significantly greater proportion of Westerners remained interested in joining the team, despite this likelihood of relational conflict. These findings show a more nuanced strategy for dealing with conflict—void situations in which conflict is likely.

What underlies these cultural differences in reactions to conflict or potential conflict is a psychologically deep folk theory about the influence of conflict on collaboration. Whereas the folk theory among East Asians appears highly aligned with empirical studies showing how relational conflict hampers the success of a team, Westerners remain surprisingly optimistic that relational conflict can be finessed (Sanchez-Burks et al., 2008). This is surprising insofar as the majority of studies establishing the robust negative effects of conflict have been conducted with Western samples (see De Dreu and Weingart, 2003, for a review.) This divergence in beliefs versus reality in Western culture, however, reflects a broader psychological commitment to the theory that the task and interpersonal dynamics can be successfully kept separate. Whereas in East Asian cultures, people and work are viewed as elements of a whole, in the West— particularly in the U.S.—the very notion of professionalism is to put aside personal issues and focus on the task (Uhlmann et al., 2013). Although this ideal may never be achieved, there is an up-side. Recent evidence shows that those attuned to the relational context are more prone to mistaking any disagreement as relationship-oriented (Bechtoldt et al., 2011).

In sum, indirect is not equivalent to avoidance, in the sense of doing nothing about a conflict. Indirect conflict confrontation means engaging conflict in more subtle ways than Westerners typically understand. Indirect confrontation reflects a deep underlying concern for engaging conflict more holistically than is typical in the West.

#2: Indirect Approaches Are Not Confrontational

Empirical research on face negotiation theory suggests that face-giving, but not face-attacks, is generally effective in resolving conflicts (Oetzel and Ting-Toomey, 2003; Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998). Giving face in conflict negotiations by signaling trust, providing causal accounts, or other information cues reciprocity leading to problem solving and agreements, whereas face attacks in negotiations, such as claims, threats, and other aggressive strategies generate retaliation, counter threats, deception, and impasses (see papers reviewed in Tjosvold and Sun, 2000; empirical studies of Brett et al., 2007a; Friedman et al., 2004). This research suggests that despite the possibility that people in some cultures may be more concerned with face than people in other cultures, the nature of the relationship between face giving, face attacks, and conflict resolution are similar across cultures. Both indirect and direct confrontation cultures are interested in preserving face, but value different underlying approaches (Earley, 1997; Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, 1998; Ting-Toomey et al., 2000).

The major difference between indirect and direct nonverbal and verbal behavior in confrontation is that the former focuses on signals and the latter on action. Cultures that rely on indirect confrontation of conflict also pride themselves on controlling emotional expression (Friesen, 1972; Gross and John, 1998; Matsumoto and Kupperbusch, 2001). Thus, initially, it is appropriate to hide emotion and signal privately to indicate the underlying claim. However, in order to get the respondent's attention, signaling can sometimes turn into public shaming. There is nothing subtle about public shaming; note the Shanghai Exchange Index. It is extremely confrontational and it definitely causes a loss of face, even if the manner in which it is done is indirect. In contrast, direct nonverbal behavior is all about sneaky actions that have not been warned about in advance by a threat. It is one thing to threaten clearly indicating what rational response will turn

off the threat; it is quite another thing to act without threatening first. Acting without previously threatening, like public shaming, is very confrontational behavior. Thus, both indirect and direct nonverbal behaviors can be extremely confrontational.

#3: Third Party Intervention is Different in Indirect and Direct Conflict Management

To be sure, the involvement of third parties in direct and indirect forms of conflict management typically comes at different stages of the conflict. However, we suggest that ultimately, third-party intervention into conflict in direct as well as in indirect confrontation cultures is effective because the third party reestablishes disputants' face. To be sure, disputants in Western culture approach third-party intervention after direct negotiations have failed, and may use the process as an opportunity to convince the third party to favor his or her position. However, the recent research on mediator (Goldberg et al., 2009) and third-party effectiveness (Swaab and Brett, 2012), which is wholly consistent with the interactional justice research (for example, Bies and Moag, 1986; Bies, 2005), shows that effective mediators—ones that have plenty of work in a very competitive business (due to oversupply of mediators)—are those who are effective in developing empathic relationships with parties in conflict (Goldberg et al., 2009).

CONCLUSION

We have discussed the meaning, cultural significance, and consequences in terms of resolution of conflict and preservation of face, and reputation of direct versus indirect confrontation of conflict. Our analysis shows that scholars should not oversimplify the deep distinctions between direct versus indirect confrontation in terms of the motives underlying the use of direct versus indirect approaches, or in the forms of nonverbal behavior, in verbal behavior, and third-party intervention that are characteristic of each. Furthermore, we suggest that labeling an approach as "indirect" is somewhat of a Western bias because only those primed to take a direct approach view it as indirect: Those who are primed to notice indirect communication find very clear messages in all forms of indirect confrontation. Different preferences for acknowledging, expressing, and engaging in conflict do not mean that real confrontation is not happening.

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