

# BEYOND EXAMINING THE CONCEPTUAL DUALITY OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES IN ORGANISATIONS OF WORK IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Andreas HILD<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bangkok University International, Bangkok University, Thailand;  
andreas.h@bu.ac.th

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## ABSTRACT

Contemporary conflict management emphasises interventions to mitigate emotional conflicts while allowing for moderate substantive conflicts to enhance organisational learning and effectiveness. Classifications for such interventions, however, is commonly restricted to the conceptual confines of dual concern frameworks, for example concern for self and concern for others. The research aims to explore conflict management dynamics in specific organisational and regional contexts, without relying on such a priori constructs. Using an ethnographic style of investigation, it will focus on conflict management practices in the hospitality industry, particularly in commercial kitchens in Southeast Asia. Fieldwork will involve practical observations and interviews with industry professionals, aiming for detailed descriptions to understand conflict management enactments within organisations that goes beyond the conceptual constraints of duality.

**Keywords:** Conflict Management Styles, Hospitality Industry, Ethnography

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## INTRODUCTION

There has been a significant interest in conflict management as evident in the extensive increase in management studies in conflict management in recent times (Caputo et al., 2019; Ma et al., 2008). Although relying on common conceptual foundations, there are many aspects to conflict management which is indicative of an increasing diversification of the topic (Caputo et al., 2019). One of these aspects is conflict management styles that has been described as behavioural patterns that individuals prefer when dealing with conflict (Moberg, 2001; Shih & Susanto, 2010; Trudel & Reio Jr., 2011; Yin et al., 2020). Accordingly, conflict management styles are usually aligned and intersect with broader managerial and organisational issues such as emotional intelligence, job satisfaction and leadership. Similarly, some studies on culture have investigated topics relating to conflict management styles; Zhang et al. (2014), for example, found that conflict styles differ across cultures, especially how some types of emotions have mediating effects on conflict resolutions depending on cultural values.

Nonetheless, many studies on conflict management styles tend to rely on predefined classifications of a fixed number of solution types when facing conflict, for instance as developed by Rahim (2002, 2023). While some authors have suggested that styles of conflict management are subject to an interplay of cultural, situational, and individual factors (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001, 2013), studies in conflict management styles often tend to be underpinned by ridge dual notions, such as self and other.

The aim of this study is to further examine how styles of conflict management are subject to specific situational and cultural factors. Based on an ethnographic style of investigation of workplace settings in the hospitality industry, especially in commercial kitchens in Southeast Asia, this research aims to explore how in practice professionals resolve various forms of conflict and the styles they deploy depending on their changing circumstances.

In order to succeed, this paper will first commence with a literature review on the development of conflict management styles from its onset to the present day with a particular focus on the underpinning dualism that create a conceptual frame for the various styles (strategies) of managing conflict. This is followed by an overview of the occupational environments and practices relevant to commercial kitchens by reviewing hospitality management related literature. Finally, this paper will sketch out aspects of the foundation of a methodological approach that rejects a priori theory and presents an ethnomethodology inspired form of ethnographic research method.

## LITERATURE REVIEWS

### **Duality in Conceptualising Conflict Management Styles**

In contemporary thought, conflict management does not imply the elimination of conflict in organisations that occur at interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup levels. Instead conflict management involves various styles (strategies) of interventions that aim to reduce affective conflicts while attaining or maintaining moderate amounts of substantive conflicts in nonroutine tasks in order to enhance organisational learning and effectiveness (Rahim, 2002; Rahim, 2023). Although the diagnosis and handling of organisational conflict has become a prominent area in the studies of human relations and management organisation, the conceptualisation of conflict management styles usually appears underpinned by various types of dualism.

In line with the development of the human relations approach in the first half of the twentieth century, various attempts of a systematic classification of conflict management styles emerged over time. Notably here the social psychologist Morton Deutsch who pioneered an understanding of conflict based on a dichotomy of cooperation and competition within interpersonal and intergroup relations (Deutsch, 1949, 2012). Subsequently other conceptual schemes for classifying the modes for handling interpersonal incompatibilities emerged with

Blake and Mouton's work on leadership. It is a dual concerns framework that proposed two prime motivations in interpersonal conflicts: I.e. people's desire to realise one's own goals (concern for production) and the desire to meet interpersonal relationships (concern for people). For Blake and Mouton (1964), the mixture of the concern for production and the concern for people were the foundation of five discrete styles of conflict management: smoothing, problem-solving, compromising, withdrawing, and forcing (Burke, 2017).

Currently, dual concern frameworks remain a common conceptualisation for the handling of interpersonal conflicts. According to Vokić and Sontor (2009), the most widely deployed conceptual approaches to managing organisational conflicts are the ones developed by Thomas and Kilmann (1974) and Rahim and Bonoma (1979). Thomas and Kilmann's five discrete styles of conflict management are competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising and collaborating; these styles are underpinned by a duality of behavioural pattern of assertiveness and cooperativeness (Thomas, 1976). In a similar vein, Rahim and Bonoma developed five discrete styles of conflict management, namely: avoiding, obliging, integrating, dominating and compromising, while their styles are underpinned by a duality of concern for self and concern for others. The concern for self refers to the extent at which individuals attempt to satisfy their own needs, whereas the concern for others is the degree at which individuals attempt to satisfy the needs of others at the expense of their own concern. This consequently, according to Rahim (1983, 2023) converges in the following manifestation: 1) the avoiding style as both having low concerns for self and others; 2) the obliging style having low concern for self and high concern for others; 3) the integrating style having high concerns for self and others; 4) the dominating style having high concern for self and low concern for others; 5) the compromising style having intermediate concern for self and for others

### **Occupational Environments and Practices in Hospitality Settings**

There is a strong occupational identity and culture prevalent among today's head chefs (Santamarina, 2023), while strict rules and discipline are usually in place for lower kitchen staff (Cooper et al., 2017). Some authors have suggested that the culture, practices, and tradition among chefs and kitchen brigades are similar to military practices (Salin & Hoel, 2010), especially the occupational socialisation of new members being seen as analogous to the military induction (Cooper et al., 2017). Despite teamwork play a crucial role in kitchen brigades (Gomez & Quintos, 2023), a strong hierarchy within the kitchen tends to remain very common, with lower positions having to endure particularly harsh and difficult working conditions (Cooper et al., 2017; Bloisi & Hoel, 2008; Balazs, 2002). Moreover, micro-scaled competition and hidden politics in the workforce are not unusual and often inform occupational identities of chefs (Burrow et al., 2015).

It has been highlighted that kitchen environments not only imply strict control and discipline as a means to maintain high standard operating procedures (Balazs, 2001; Wilcoxson & Moore, 2020), but also that nature of this type of workplace is characterised by high intensity, extreme mental and physical exhaustion, and stress inducing temporal constraints. In such high pressure and stressful workplace settings unconstructive or disruptive behaviour is not unusual (Lin et al., 2023). Bloisi (2012) argues that negative behaviour especially in form of bullying among chefs in commercial kitchens tends to increase with a rise in power imbalance. Alexander et al. (2012) highlight that bullying behaviour seems to be a cohesive aspect of kitchen culture and is mostly experienced by younger, more junior chefs, often in the form of joking and mockery and to some extent as manifests itself physically. Giousmpasoglou et al. (2017) suggest that banter and bullying are deeply embedded in chefs' occupational culture and seem to play a significant role in the induction and occupational socialisation of the new recruits. Yet, Hamre et al. (2021) argue that a strong conflict management climate can neutralise the escalation and development of workplace bullying, especially if employees perceive conflicts are handled well and fairly in the organisation (Rivlin, 2001).

Mohammed et al. (2016) argue that conflicts in the kitchens relate to temporal diversity and temporal disagreements; disagreements over how temporal resources should be allocated as well as when work should be completed are often exacerbated when kitchen teams contain a mixture of time-urgent and time-patient as well as monochronic and polychronic members. While chefs often function in diverse time urgency (high-pacing performance versus low-pacing performance), performance not only differs in time urgency, but also in single-tasking and multitasking style (Mohammed et al., 2016; Mohammed & Nadkarni, 2014). The underlying dissimilarity of employees tends to contribute significantly to temporal conflicts, as well as task conflict (Gigol, 2019).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The proposed research for this research neither aims to test various existing dual concern theory of conflict management styles nor to generate a “Grand Theory” of managing organisational conflict. Instead it aims to investigate dynamic processes of managing conflict by developing insights into the practices of conflict management within specific organisational and regional contexts. While based on in-depth analysis in form of detailed descriptions without appeal to a priori theory (Latour, 2005; Merino, 2023), it will deploy interweaving concepts (Law, 2004) that emerged in various academic discussions surrounding the practices of managing organisational conflict.

The fieldwork research for this study will entail practical observations and to some extent participatory observations hospitality industry, especially in commercial kitchen settings. Access to companies will be gained via a network of professional connections that the authors have established during previous work placements and other practitioner-based collaborations. In addition to observations, this study will deployed informal conversational interviews (Spradley, 1979; Weeks, 2020) as well as standardized, non-scheduled, open-ended question-based interviews (Briggs, 1986, 2007) with various practitioners and professionals from the hospitality industry. The location of the companies where the fieldwork will be in Thailand, with potentially supplementary interviews with professionals with relevant industry experience in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. The rationale of this regional limit is practical in terms of a broad similarity in business practices of these four countries in Southeast Asia (Hipsher, 2012).

To clarify this project does not aim to undertake a cross-cultural comparisons of styles of conflict management across a region, instead it aims to provide in-depth descriptions that allow to generalise within cases (Geertz, 1975), especially how objects are continuously enacted (Mol & Law, 1994; Law & Mol, 2002) and how orderings are accomplished (Pollner & Emerson, 2001) that contribute to the management of conflict within organisations.

Similarly the choice of industry for this investigation is incidental in as far it provides an occupational environment where conflict not only inevitably happens, but may also have notable impact on organisations due to its intense and stressful nature of work. This is further examined below in a review of existing literature related to the industry in order to provide interweaving concepts (Law, 2004) that will facilitate an effective exploration in preparation of the fieldwork investigation.

## **DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION**

Conflict management is a well-established field within the discipline of management studies, with styles of conflict management being a significant cluster in this field. Over the last two decades the literature on conflict management styles has significantly increased and diversified. In particular the alignment and intersection with wider managerial and organisational issues such as emotional intelligence, job satisfaction and leadership, has been rather notable. Similarly, studies in the discipline of cultural communication have made significant

contributions to the literature on conflict management styles, especially in terms of the mediating effects of cultural values.

Despite these developments, the conceptualisation of conflict management usually tends to be underpinned by various types of dualism. This can be traced back to the first half of the twentieth century in the pioneering work of social psychologist like Morton Deutsch who framed conflict as a dichotomy of cooperation and competition and continued to evolve during the second half of the twentieth century in Blake and Mouton's work on leadership and conflict that relied on a dual framework concern for production concern for people. Similarly, more recent dual concern frameworks remain prominent, such as the conceptualisation of conflict management styles initially developed by Thomas and Kilmann (1974) and Rahim and Bonoma (1979) and further refined by Rahim (1983, 2023) in to five distinct styles on along the duality of concern for self and for others.

While these developments have indeed been prolific in advancing the field of conflict management styles, it remains within rather fixed confines along ridged dual frames of thinking. In contrast to management studies, some authors in the discipline of cultural communication have highlighted the interplay of cultural and situational aspects that shape conflict management styles. Hocker et al. (2022) argue that individual conflict management styles undergo change to adapt to the demands of new situations. It this contextual and situational fluidity that seems a promising avenue of exploration outside dualistic thinking. The proposed ethnographic research on managing conflict in the hospitality industry aims to investigate dynamic processes by developing insights into the practices of conflict management within specific organisational and regional contexts. It aims to contribute to a detailed understanding, without the aid of a priori theory, how change affect conflict management styles.

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