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## A study of inter-cultural marital conflict and satisfaction in Taiwan

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## ABSTRACT

Research indicates that culture affects an individual's choice of conflict management strategies. The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of culture on conflict management styles and marital satisfaction in inter-ethnic marriages in Taiwan. Data for analysis were provided by 201 couples consisting of Taiwanese husbands and their foreign spouses from Southeast Southeastern Asia and China. Snowball and purposive sampling were chosen to recruit participants nation-wide in Taiwan. Self-report questionnaires were used. This study has examined the validity of Rahim's five styles of conflict management strategies in the context of inter-ethnic marital relations. The effect of culture on marital conflicts and satisfaction proved significant. Results suggest that cultural expectations of sex-appropriate behaviors influence men and women to socialize differently to conform to prevailing gender ideologies in marriage. The theoretical and practical implications of the effect of culture on conflict management strategies and marital satisfaction are discussed.

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Couples use strategies to manage their conflict in an effort to construct and execute meaningful and rewarding relationships. Research indicates that culture affects an individual's choice of conflict management strategies (Ting-Toomey, 1994; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). Relatively little conflict research has been reported on ethnically diverse marriages (Mackey & O'Brien, 1998; Miller, 1994) and even less, if any, on inter-ethnic marriages. Research on marital conflict focuses mainly on white, college-educated, middle-class couples (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000; Haferkamp, 1991; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Levenson & Gottman, 1985). Although different cultural groups may face similar issues in their interpersonal conflict, they may have different conflict needs, wants, and expectations (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2002). Although working-class and middle-class couples may face similar issues in their interpersonal relationships, there are differences in how diverse groups handle conflicts (Rubin, 1976). Factors that affect marital conflict among white, middle-class Americans may be different from those that affect other ethnic groups. With the world growing smaller, inter-ethnic intimate relations become a common phenomenon in the global village (Ting-Toomey, 1994). Hence, the purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of culture on conflict management and marital satisfaction in working-class inter-ethnic marriages in collectivist cultures.

In the past two decades, inter-ethnic marriages have dramatically increased in Taiwan. Many reasons have contributed to the high rate of exogamy: the imbalance of the ratio between men and women (Lu, 2001); the increasing number of women who are educated and therefore are emotionally and financially independent; and the traditional values of marrying someone with a good family background (Chen-Lee, 2002). For these reasons, men, especially working-class ones, have increased difficulties in finding a wife in Taiwan (Chen-Lee, 2002). Thus, a large number of Taiwanese men have obtained "foreign spouses," usually through a marriage-arrangement agency. These women marry Taiwanese men to improve their material life and help their families in their homeland (Chen-Lee, 2002). These foreign spouses mainly are from China, and Southeastern Asian nations, such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Philippines, Cambodia and Myanmar. The focus of this study

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is to examine the effect of culture on conflict management styles and marital satisfaction in foreign-spouse-marriages in Taiwan.

## 1. Rationale and hypotheses

One popular model of interpersonal conflict has been *Rahim's (1983)* five styles of conflict management which emerge from two orthogonal dimensions termed concern for self and concern for other. An integrating style involves a high concern for both self and other. This style refers to the use of problem–solution seeking methods to achieve an outcome that is preferred for both parties. A compromising style involves a moderate concern for self and other. When using this style, couples try to find an agreement that is acceptable to both parties, but the agreement may not be either party's favorite choice. The dominating style reflects a high concern for self and low concern for other. When using this style, an individual tries to control or dominate the other. An obliging style involves low concern for self and high concern for others. When using this style, people try to minimize conflict by accommodating the needs of the other person and giving into their wishes. When using the avoiding style, people avoid the conflict topic or situation. However, culture influences the way people view the avoiding style. From the individualist's view, an avoiding style involves a low concern for self and low concern for others. From the collectivist's view, an avoiding style might represent high concern for both self and other; people should avoid conflict and confrontation in order to maintain relational harmony and protect self and/or other's self-image (*Ting-Toomey, 1988*). Relational harmony is highly valued in most collective cultures. A great deal of interpersonal and inter-cultural research predicts gender (*Boonsathorn, 2007; Brahman, Margavio, Hignite, Barrier, & Chin, 2005*) and cultural (*Boonsathorn, 2007; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2002*) differences in conflict on the basis of these five styles of conflict. The focus of this study is to examine the utility of *Rahim's (1983)* theory of conflict styles for understanding inter-ethnic marriages.

### 1.1. Marital conflict

Most studies in marital conflict pertain to three particular dimensions of communication. The first dimension is affect which refers to messages that express positive or negative feelings about another person, such as supportiveness, hostility, confirmation, coercion, sarcasm, or global positiveness or negativeness (e.g., *Gottman, 1979; Sillars & Wilmot, 1994*). The second dimension to characterize conflict behaviors is whether they are constructive or destructive for the parties' relationship. Research in the United States indicates that exiting from the relationship and neglecting the partner are destructive problem-solving responses and are more powerfully predictive of couple distress than giving voice to problems and being passive loyal (e.g., *Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986*). The third dimension to characterize conflict management is engagement versus avoidance (e.g., *Hocker & Wilmot, 1991; Sillars & Wilmot, 1994*). Engagement is reflected in direct, overt verbal confrontation of conflict issues, while conflict avoidance is reflected in withdrawal and aversion to dealing directly with conflict issues (*Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995*) and includes circumscribed, irrelevant, or ambiguous communication. Since the purpose of this study is to examine the effect of culture on marital conflict strategies and marital satisfaction, the discussion will be limited to the third dimension of marital conflict, engagement–avoidance, along with *Rahim's* styles of conflict.

### 1.2. Marital conflict and culture

Two theoretical approaches have related to the study of gender in marital relationships (*Levant & Philpot, 2002*), the gender role identification paradigm (essentialism) and the gender role strain paradigm (constructionism). Deriving from constructionism, the gender role strain paradigm views gender roles as largely psychologically or socially constructed, rather than solely biologically determined. Although biological differences exist between men and women, much more is socially and culturally constructed to serve patriarchy and reinforce traditional gender roles to keep women in a one-down position (*Levant & Philpot, 2002*). The current study will be based on the gender role strain paradigm to examine the effect of culture on marital conflict and satisfaction. From this perspective, cultural expectations of sex-appropriate behaviors are internalized by men and women through socialization and they subsequently conform to prevailing gender ideologies in marriage.

Traditional Taiwanese society is a male-dominated culture with gender-specific marital roles: the husband is expected to be the breadwinner for the family, while the wife is expected to undertake conventional duties, such as house-keeping, giving a birth to carry on the husband's family name, taking good care of children and parents in law (*Tan & Wong, 2006*). According to *Amato and Booth (1995)*, "traditional attitudes stress the dichotomy between the husband–breadwinner and wife–homemaker–mother, and the differential power relations implied in these specialized roles, while nontraditional attitudes, in contrast, emphasize shared roles and egalitarianism" (p. 58). Although marital structure in Taiwan is in transition to the modified patriarchal status (*Xu & Lai, 2002*), a survey in 2002 indicated that 50% of Taiwanese men still expected women to fulfill the traditional role at home (*Tan & Wong, 2006*). With the increasing number of women who are emotionally and financially independent, men have experienced increased difficulty finding a traditional wife in Taiwan; and that motivates men in Taiwan to seek a spouse overseas (*Chen-Lee, 2002; Tan & Wong, 2006*). Although gender roles in Taiwan are gradually becoming more egalitarian (*Tan & Wong, 2006*), the expectations that men to be educated bread-winners, and women are to be domesticated housewives, are still rooted in Southeast Asian cultures (*Nghe, Mahalik, & Lowe, 2003*). A survey indicates

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