Preferences for Third-Party Help in Workplace Conflict: A Cross-Cultural Comparison of Chinese and Dutch Employees

Ellen Giebels[1] and Huadong Yang[2]

1 Department of Psychology & Communication of Health & Risk, University of Twente, Enschede, The Netherlands
2 Department of Organizational Psychology and HRD, University of Twente, Enschede, The Netherlands

Keywords
conflict management, third-party intervention, cultural differences, individualism/collectivism.

Correspondence
Ellen Giebels, Department of Psychology & Communication of Health & Risk, Faculty of Behavioural Sciences, University of Twente, PO Box 217, 7500 AE Enschede, The Netherlands; e-mail: e.giebels@utwente.nl.

Abstract

This study examines conflict parties' preferences for different types of third-party help and how this may be influenced by cultural differences in terms of individualism/collectivism. We focus our analysis on process-related nonsubstantive help and identify three types of third-party help in interpersonal conflict situations: relational help, procedural help, and emotional help. In a pilot study with Chinese and Dutch students ($N = 93$), we first developed and validated three new scales to measure preferences for the three types of third-party help. To further test specific hypotheses we used another sample of Dutch and Hong Kong Chinese bank employees ($N = 71$). In line with our expectations, Chinese employees report a higher preference for relational help, while Dutch employees report a higher preference for emotional help. In terms of procedural help, there was no significant difference between Dutch and Chinese employees. Furthermore, additional analyses revealed a gender effect on the preference for emotional help, showing that—regardless of their cultural background—females prefer this type of third-party help more, presumably because they experience more conflict stress.

It is generally assumed that third-party intervention may facilitate conflict resolution between parties (Conlon & Meyer, 2004; see also Kressel & Pruitt, 1989). Recent research even suggests that the involvement of a third party may buffer long-term

We would like to thank Santje Geuze, Hilde Bolks, Aniek Christiaanse, Chrissy Tan, Sjoukje Giesing, and Wietske Posthuma for their help in collecting the data. We are also grateful to Evert van de Vliert for his valuable comments on an earlier version of this article.

Volume 2, Number 4, Pages 344–362
© 2009 International Association for Conflict Management and Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

negative effects of workplace conflict, such as emotional exhaustion, absenteeism, and turnover intentions (Giebels & Janssen, 2005). Consequently, third-party intervention in organizational settings has received considerable attention in the conflict management literature (e.g., Kressel & Pruitt, 1989; see also Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2005). We define third-party intervention as an extension or elaboration of the conflict management process that involves an acceptable third party who has no authoritative decision-making power (cf. Moore, 2003).[1] As such, third parties cannot issue binding settlements but merely try to guide the process of conflict handling by nonsubstantive rather than substantive help. While substantive help can be considered a mainly task-related outcome focused strategy, nonsubstantive help includes facilitative interventions such as enabling parties to express their feelings and emotions, to help them identify their real wants and to reach mutual understanding (Albert, Heisterkamp, & McPhee, 2005).

There is a growing body of evidence supporting the importance of nonsubstantive help employed by third parties. For example, research by Ohbuchi and colleagues (Ohbuchi, Fukushima, & Tedeschi, 1999; Ohbuchi & Tedeshi, 1997) shows that individuals experiencing interpersonal conflict place value on social goals far more than on economic goals, even if the conflict initially centered on a resource issue. Similarly, research within the domain of mediation shows that disputants were more satisfied with person-oriented, rapport-building strategies of third parties rather than task and solution focused ones (Carnevale & Conlon, 1988). Furthermore, several studies suggest that relationship issues rather than task-related issues are responsible for conflict taking a destructive course of action (e.g., Amason, 1996; Janssen, Van de Vliert, & Veenstra, 1999; Jehn, 1995). This evidence suggests that third parties should focus more on nonsubstantive than substantive forms of help, not only because it may result in more satisfied conflict parties, but also because they may be particularly connected with the quality of the outcome reached. To date, however, we know relatively little about the content of nonsubstantive third-party help, and about how social context, especially in terms of national culture, influences disputants' preferences for different types of nonsubstantive help. As the workforce is becoming culturally diverse, disputes and conflicts among employees with different values and beliefs often occur. This fuels the need to understand how to employ nonsubstantive third-party help in an effective manner. The purpose of the current study is therefore to identify different types of nonsubstantive third-party help and to further explore the influence of national culture on employee evaluations of different types of nonsubstantive third-party help.

In what follows, and based on a literature review, we propose three types of nonsubstantive third-party help. Next, we argue that national culture shapes individual preferences for the three types of third-party help. Subsequently, we report two studies that were both conducted in a predominantly collectivistic Chinese culture and a predominantly individualistic Dutch culture. In a first, pilot, study we will empirically test the structure of nonsubstantive third-party help, followed by a main study investigating the

[1]Thus, in terms of Sheppard's classical distinction we refer to third parties with process rather than outcome control (Sheppard, 1984).

impact of national culture on employee preferences for different types of third-party help.

Three Types of Nonsubstantive Third-Party Help

Existing research and theory suggests that nonsubstantive third-party help can contribute positively to the process of conflict management in three ways. First, third parties may be able to help conflict parties maintain a positive relationship with the other party. In conflicts, disputants are often hostile to and develop negative perceptions toward each other. As a consequence, the existing relationship can be severely damaged. *Relational help* from a third party can make sure that the parties treat each other respectfully, with the goal of maintaining or restoring harmony within the relationship. This might be particularly important when parties have an enduring relationship, for example, when conflict parties are friends or colleagues. Both field and experimental research indicate that relational interventions can work out positively because it improves the bond between disputants and increases cooperation (e.g., Conlon & Meyer, 2004).

Second, assuming that inaccurate information processing lies at the heart of ill-handled conflict, third parties can simply promote more thorough and accurate information processing (Volkema, Farquhar, & Bergmann, 1996). As such, *procedural help* may focus on structuring the conversations, distinguishing main from side issues, and outlining procedures to follow in order to handle the conflict. These interventions may also benefit perceived procedural justice, referring to the perceived fairness of the means used to determine the outcomes (Folger & Konovsky, 1989). Fairness has often been identified as one of the main criteria for effective third-party intervention (see, e.g., Lissak & Sheppard, 1983).

Finally, third parties can help disputants deal with the emotional side of interpersonal conflict by, for example, expressing a willingness to listen, by letting parties vent their emotions, and by showing understanding for their situation (Volkema et al., 1996). While relational help focuses on the way parties treat each other, emotional help addresses the ego-focused emotions that individuals may experience in conflict situations. This *emotional help* may provide comfort and conflict parties may feel taken seriously and understood. Viewed from this perspective, this type of help can be regarded as an important source of social support, i.e., the general perception of whether one feels surrounded by others who can offer desirable comfort or advice (Quick, Quick, Nelson, & Hurrell, 1997). Social support has been previously identified as an important buffer for the long-term negative effects of stressors such as conflict, for example, in terms of burnout (e.g., Cohen & Wills, 1985; Greenglass, Fiksenbaum, & Burke, 1994).

Although each of the above mentioned types of nonsubstantive third-party help may contribute more or less to effective third-party intervention in handling interpersonal conflicts at work, employees may differ in their preference for each of them depending on the conflict context. In particular, we expect that national culture may influence these preferences. The next section introduces hypotheses about the impact of national culture on preferences for the three types of third-party help.

National Culture and Preferences for Nonsubstantive Third-Party Help

Culture is a learned system of meanings that fosters a particular sense of shared identity and community among its group members (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). Culture is an important determinant of people's attitudes, self-construals, and behaviors and, hence, is a determinant of the strategic choices made in conflict situations (cf. Rubin & Kim, 2004). Although culture can be defined and analyzed in various ways, independent national states often serve as the unit of measurement and analysis in the field of cross-cultural management (e.g., Hofstede, 2001). Smith, Bond, and Kagitcibasi (2006) define nations as political units with distinctive ecological, historical, political, educational, legal, regulatory, social, and economic characteristics. By showing that the within-country differences in values are smaller than the corresponding differences between countries, Schwartz (2004) has demonstrated that nations are meaningful units of cultural analysis. Therefore, we use nationality as the index of culture and reason how Chinese and Dutch employees may differ in their preferences for the three types of nonsubstantive third-party help. More specifically, we argue that these differences can be largely attributed to the fact that the Chinese culture primarily differs from the Dutch culture in terms of collectivism versus individualism (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1995).

In the collectivistic-oriented Chinese culture, people tend to identity themselves on the basis of group membership. Harmonious relationships with in-group members are expected to be maintained, and direct confrontation should therefore be avoided (e.g., Hofstede, 2001). When a person from a collectivistic society is in a dispute with others, especially with in-group members, relationship considerations prevail over task considerations and individual gains (Ohbuchi et al., 1999). As such, protagonists in a dispute may prefer a third party that can help them maintain, or at least not undermine, the relationship with the other party. In contrast, the individualistic-oriented Dutch culture shapes its members to focus on self-interests and self-gains. Although harmonious relationships are valued by Dutch people, it has a premise: maintaining harmony will not be at the cost of sacrificing self-interests. Emans, Laskewitz, and Van de Vliert (1994) have referred to this type of maintaining relationships as "to be tolerant," and pointed out that "the Dutch can take forceful action to defend their own interests, without being accused of attacking others" (p. 57). Based on these arguments, we hypothesize:

H1: Chinese employees have a stronger preference for relational help from a third party than Dutch employees.

Hall (1976) identified fundamental differences in the way people from individualistic versus collectivistic cultures communicate and labeled these differences as "low-context" versus "high-context," referring to the importance of the explicit content of the message versus the context. Low-context communication refers to a focus on sending and receiving accurate messages and defining the interaction principally in terms of message content. In contrast, high-context communication focuses on sending and receiving messages in which information is more hidden and meaning is located in the

social or physical context of the negotiation. Generally, low-context communication is predominant in individualistic cultures while high-context communication is found to be predominant in collectivistic cultures (Hofstede, 2001; Ting-Toomey, 1988). Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001, p. 31) explain this strong link, particularly in relation to conflict management, by arguing that for cultures that emphasize "I-identity" and self-initiative, the ideal way of resolving conflict is to talk and discuss it directly. In contrast, in cultures that emphasize values of relational harmony, the ideal way of conflict management is to talk around the point and not deal directly with the issues at stake. In line with this reasoning, recent research shows that individualistic, Dutch conflict parties depart from a rational-analytic perspective and respond more favorably to corresponding tactics than conflict parties originating from a variety of collectivistic societies (Beune, Giebels, & Sanders, 2009; Giebels & Taylor, 2009).

Furthermore, Hall and Hall (1990) suggest that in societies that endorse high-context communication, its members have many uncommon and unspoken assumptions about how the conflict management process will be conducted. Therefore, their need for process explicitness will be lower than for members of societies that use low-context communication. In these societies, parties expect and require detailed descriptions of procedures (see also Moore, 2003). Given this evidence, we hypothesize that:

H2: Chinese employees have a lower preference for procedural help from a third party than Dutch employees

Finally, differences in individualism/collectivism associated with Dutch and Chinese cultures may also influence conflict parties' preferences for help that deals with the emotional side of interpersonal conflict. Because members of collectivistic societies, especially East Asian ones, are concerned with fitting in with relevant others, this may discourage the expression of one's internal ego-focused feelings. This may be predominantly true for conflict situations because interpersonal conflict is usually associated with negative emotions, such as anger or fear (Giebels & Janssen, 2005). Particularly such negative emotions may be considered dangerous or even illness causing (Eid & Diener, 2001). As a result, Chinese conflict parties may not only be highly motivated to avert self-disclosure, but also keep emotions from shaping their mind and behavior (cf. Hamid, 2000; see also Triandis, 1995). This line of reasoning is supported by research by Eid and Diener (2001), who assessed the frequency and intensity of emotions experienced by college students in the United States, Australia, Taiwan, and China. The results showed that the frequency and intensity of emotions experienced by the Chinese students was the lowest among all four groups. These findings suggest that disputants from collectivistic societies may be accustomed to restrain their inner feelings and, consequently, may have less need for explicit emotional help from a third party.

In contrast, members from individualistic cultures tend to experience and express ego-focused emotions, including anger, frustration, pride, and guilt, which are associated with the fulfillment or nonfulfillment of individual goals or desires (Kumer, 2004; see also Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In support of this, an empirical study conducted by Mesquita (2001) showed that, compared to an African Surinamese group and a Turkish group (collectivist cultures), a Dutch group of respondents considered emotions a

personal matter with little social function, which allowed them to experience and express emotions in a direct and diverse manner. Therefore, we assume that:

H3: Chinese employees have a lower preference for emotional help from a third party than Dutch employees.

Pilot Study

Respondents and Procedure

We first tested the underlying structure of third-party help by using a convenient student sample. A group of 50 Chinese postgraduate students studying at the University of Groningen as part of an exchange program and a group of 55 Dutch Bachelor students from the same University voluntarily participated in this pilot study. In the Chinese group, 31 women and 15 men (response rate of 92%) returned the questionnaire; their mean age was 25 years, ranging from 17 to 40 years. In the Dutch group, 30 female and 17 male students returned the questionnaire (response rate of 86%); their mean age was 22 years, with a range of 17–33 years.

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. In the first part, participants read a conflict scenario (see below), and responded to different scales measuring their preference for the three types of nonsubstantive third-party help. In the second part, self-efficacy and conflict handling orientations were measured to examine the construct validity of the instrument for nonsubstantive third-party help. All these items were measured on 6-point Likert scales ranging from "1 = strong disagree" to "6 = strongly agree." In the third part, the participants were asked to fill in personal information such as gender, age, working experience, and country of birth.

The Chinese respondents received an English-version questionnaire because the teaching language they had in the Netherlands was English, and all of them had reached a proficient level in English before they were allowed to enter the postgraduate program at the university. The Dutch respondents received a questionnaire in Dutch. To ensure linguistic equivalence, all material was translated by a bilingual translator and then back-translated into English by a different person. A third person corrected some minor distortions in the translations. Questionnaires were distributed among the Chinese students during an activity organized by the Chinese Student Union at the University. For the Dutch group, questionnaires were distributed during class hours.

Measures

The questionnaire began with the presentation of the following conflict scenario:

Imagine That You Are Working for a Large Organization

A while ago, you and your colleague had been assigned to an important project. Until a week ago, your cooperation seemed to progress well. However, last week, it was announced that cuts would have to be made throughout the company. This would

also have its consequences for the budget made available for your project. Together with your colleague, you would have to make new estimates with a significantly reduced budget. It soon becomes apparent that your priorities are very divergent. You and your colleague disagree on the division of the budget, which consequently has led to a conflict between the two of you.

The Preference for Nonsubstantive Third-Party Help

We constructed an 11-item scale to measure respondents' preference for the three types of nonsubstantive third-party help. We first reviewed the literature on third-party help in conflict situations (e.g., Arnold & O'Connor, 1999; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001; Volkema et al., 1996) and formulated five to six items for each type of nonsubstantive third-party help. These items were discussed during research meetings and meetings with professional third parties. Based on the feedback, we kept four items for third-party relational help (Cronbach's alpha = .85 for the Chinese group and .92 for the Dutch group); three items for third-party procedural help (Cronbach's alpha = .77 for the Chinese group and .76 for the Dutch group); and four items for third-party emotional help (Cronbach's alpha = .68 for the Chinese group and .75 for the Dutch group).[2] The content of the items can be found in Table 1.

Conflict handling orientations were measured with the Dutch Test of Conflict Handling (Van de Vliert, 1997), including four items measuring a more distributive, fighting orientation and four items measuring a more integrative, problem-solving orientation. Reliability tests showed that alpha coefficients were above .70 in both groups.

Self-efficacy was measured with five items derived from Rosenberg (1965). An example of an item is "In general, I am pretty satisfied with my self." Cronbach's alpha was .75 for the Chinese group and .68 for the Dutch group.

Results

Structure of Nonsubstantive Third-Party Help

We conducted an exploratory factor analysis with the principal component method on the 11 items measuring the different types of nonsubstantive third-party help. Factors were extracted on the basis of Eigenvalue >1 and the scree plot. Three factors emerged, explaining 67.12% of the total variance. The minimum item loading on the corresponding factor was .57, and all cross-loadings were lower than .32 (see Table 1).

Next, we did a target rotation analysis to examine the construct equivalence between the Chinese and the Dutch samples (Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997). Results showed that Tucker's coefficient of agreement ranged from 0.98 to 1.00, and that the identity coefficients ranged from 0.98 to 0.99, suggesting that the three-factor structure of nonsubstantive third-party help is equivalent across the Chinese and the Dutch samples.

[2]The items we removed were either ambiguous in their content or wording or reflected substantive rather than nonsubstantive forms of help.

Table 1
Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analysis on Nonsubstantive Third-Party Help

When I call in a third party, I feel the need for a third party that ...	Relational	Procedural	Emotional
Brings about a harmonious	.88		
relationship between	.78 (.14)		
my colleague and me.	.94 (.15)		
Contributes to a peaceful	.83		
resolution to the conflict.	.70 (.11)		
	.92 (.14)		
Maintains a peaceful interaction	.81		
between my colleagues and me.	.75 (.12)		
	.90 (.14)		
Makes sure that my colleague	.80		
and I treat each other respectfully.	.60 (.16)		
	.89 (.15)		
Helps to make clear what the		.81	
conflict is about.		.60 (.13)	
		.63 (.13)	
Provides clarity and		.76	
structure in the situation.		.71 (.12)	
		.76 (.11)	
Sets out procedures in such a		.75	
way that it will help		.58 (.16)	
to solve the conflict.		.75 (.11)	
Sympathizes with my situation.			.82
			.99 (.20)
			.77 (.11)
Is a good listener.			.67
			.69 (.13)
			.60 (.11)
Shows understanding	.32		.64
for my situation.			.71 (.12)
			.60 (.09)
Allows me to let off steam.	.30		.57
			.58 (.14)
			.80 (.21)
Variance explained per factor (%)	31.50	18.40	17.27

Notes. Values in the first row of each item are the factor loadings from exploratory factor analysis. Blank space in the first row means that the cross-loadings were below .30.
Values in the second and third rows of each item are from confirmatory factor analysis and refer to the corresponding loadings and the error variance (between parathenses).
Values in the second row of each item correspond to the Chinese employee subsample.
Values in the third row of each item correspond to the Dutch employees subsample.

Table 2
Mean, SDs, and Intercorrelations, Broken Down for the Chinese‡ and the Dutch§ Student Groups

	M‡	*SD*‡	*M*§	*SD*§	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	1.32	0.47	1.33	0.48	–	−.29*	.11	−.01	.06	−.18	.07
2. Relational help	4.63	1.04	4.22	1.15	.14	–	.36*	.57**	−.09	.35*	.08
3. Procedural help	4.74	0.88	4.88	0.77	.03	.59**	–	.44**	−.07	.24†	.11
4. Emotional help	4.49	0.82	4.82	0.61	.26†	.62**	.41*	–	−.07	.20	.23
5. Fighting	4.07	0.90	3.17	0.88	.27†	.33*	.36*	.45**	–	−.45**	.13
6. Problem solving	4.77	0.68	4.89	0.79	.15	.41*	.34*	.39*	.44**	–	.16
7. Self-efficacy	4.84	0.83	4.70	0.54	−.01	.05	.11	.13	−.03	.16	–

Notes. †$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.
‡Data for the Chinese student group ($n = 46$) and the correlations are below the diagonal.
§Data for the Dutch student group ($n = 47$) and the correlations are above the diagonal.
For gender, male was coded as 1 and female as 2.

Correlation Analysis

To evaluate the construct validity of the instrument, we examined association among the three types of nonsubstantive third-party help and the other three measures (the fighting and problem-solving orientation, and self-efficacy). Table 2 shows that the three types of nonsubstantive third-party help were positively correlated with each other in both the Chinese sample ($r = .59$, .62, .41, *p*s < .05) and the Dutch sample ($r = .36$, .57, .44, *p*s < .05). The positive correlations between the three types of nonsubstantive help and problem solving (*r* ranges from .20 to .41) demonstrate the convergent validity of the scale. In both samples, the three types of nonsubstantive third-party help were not significantly correlated with self-efficacy (*r* ranges from .05 to .23, *ns*). These results provide evidence for the discriminant validity of the scale.[3]

Main Study

Method

Respondents and Procedure

To test our hypotheses within a work setting, we recruited an employee sample, including 36 staff members of an internationally oriented bank in the Netherlands and 35 staff members of an internationally oriented bank in Hong Kong.

[3]Interestingly, the three types of third-party help were positively correlated with fighting in the Chinese sample, but not in the Dutch sample. We suspect that this inconsistent pattern is caused by the opposite correlations between fighting and problem solving in the two samples. The positive correlations between fighting and problem solving as well as the three types of third-party help in the Chinese sample may reflect the importance of distinguishing active from passive ways of dealing with conflict for respondents from collectivistic cultures (cf. Cai & Fink, 2002).

The two samples were quite equivalent in terms of demographic variables. The Dutch subsample contained 23 men and 12 women (one participant's biographical data were missing), with a mean age of 36 years (range = 23–54 years). On average, the participants had 10 years of work experience and they were in their current job for 9 years. The Hong Kong sample contained 18 men and 17 women, with a mean age of 30 years (range = 23–50 years). On average, the participants had 8 years of work experience and they were in their current job for 6 years. All participants had received an educational level of Bachelor or higher.

The questionnaire was presented to the (Hong Kong) Chinese respondents in English, because they had indicated that they spoke primarily English at work. The Dutch respondents received a questionnaire in Dutch. The questionnaire contained three parts. In part one, we measured independent and interdependent self-construals as an index of Individualism/Collectivism. Part two began with the same conflict scenario as presented in the pilot study. Next, we included two additional scales referring to the extent to which respondents would feel stressed under the hypothetical situation and their preference for third-party intervention in general. These scales were followed by the scales resulting form the pilot study and measuring the preference for the three types of nonsubstantive third-party help. Again, all items were measured on 6-point Likert scales ranging from "1 = strong disagree" to "6 = strongly agree." We concluded the questionnaire with some questions on demographics.

Measures

Self-Construals

To check whether the Dutch and Chinese samples are representative in terms of national culture, especially on the individualism/collectivism dimension, we measured independent and interdependent self-construals with five items each. These items were adopted from the scale developed by Gudykunst et al. (1996; see also Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). An example of an item measuring independent self-construal is "I prefer to be self-reliant rather than depend on others." An example of an item measuring interdependent self-construal is "My satisfaction depends on the satisfaction of significant others." Cronbach's alpha of the independence scale was .85 for the Chinese sample and .83 for the Dutch sample. Cronbach's alpha of the interdependence scale was .72 for the Chinese sample and .70 for the Dutch sample.

The scale for *Intrapersonal Conflict stress* was measured with four items (Giebels & Janssen, 2005; see also Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983). Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they would feel "nervous and stressed out" or "upset" either during or directly after the conflict with their colleague (Cronbach's alpha = .81 for the Chinese sample and .83 for the Dutch sample).

The preference for third-party intervention in general was measured with four items (cf. Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001; see also Giebels & Janssen, 2005). An example of an item measuring third-party help is "I would use a third party to help us resolve the conflict" (Cronbach's alpha = .85 for the Chinese sample and .86 for the Dutch sample).

The *three types of nonsubstantive third-party help* were measured with the scales developed in the pilot study. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the four items measuring procedural help were .77 (the Chinese sample) and .84 (the Dutch sample), were .85 (the Chinese sample) and .90 (the Dutch sample) for the four items measuring relational help, and were .73 (the Chinese sample) and .72 (the Dutch sample) for the four items measuring emotional help.

Results

Independent–Interdependent Self-Construal Across Two Samples

A one-way ANOVA of nation on the measures of independent/interdependent self-construal was conducted to check whether the two subsamples are representative of their national culture, especially in terms of individualism/collectivism. The results indicated that the Dutch participants reported higher independent self-construals ($M_{\text{Dutch}} = 4.80$, $SD = 0.57$; $M_{\text{Chinese}} = 4.55$, $SD = 0.51$; $t = 1.95$; $p < .05$), and marginally significant lower interdependent self-construals ($M_{\text{Dutch}} = 4.24$, $SD = 0.40$; $M_{\text{Chinese}} = 4.41$, $SD = 0.54$; $t = 1.50$, $p < .10$).[4] Paired-sample t tests showed that within the Dutch subsample, the respondents reported having a higher independent than interdependent self-construal ($t = 4.76$, $p < .01$). Within the Chinese sample, however, the difference between independent and interdependent self-construal was not significant ($t = 1.12$, *ns*). On the basis of these across- and within-subsample comparisons, we conclude that our subsamples are representative of their national culture, especially in terms of individualism versus collectivism.

Structural Equivalence Analysis

We conducted a structural equivalence analysis (Van de Vijver & Leung, 1997) to examine whether the three-factor structure is equivalent across the Chinese and the Dutch employee groups. By using LISREL 8 (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1993), we first conducted confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in each subsample separately. The results showed that the three-factor model can be applied to both the Chinese employee group ($\chi^2 = 53.41$, $df = 50$, *ns*) and the Dutch employee group ($\chi^2 = 63.26$, $df = 50$, *ns*). The model of equal-number factors was also evidenced when a multiple-sample CFA was conducted ($\chi^2 = 118.35$, $df = 100$, *ns*; see the first row in Table 3). When we set factor loadings invariant across the two groups (see the second row in Table 2), the results showed a nonsignificant chi-squared change ($\Delta\chi^2 = 17.57$, $\Delta df = 12$, *ns*), indicating the factor loadings tend to be equal across the two groups. The test for equal factor covariances (see the third row in Table 3) suggest that the correlations among the three factors are equal across the two groups ($\Delta\chi^2 = 6.47$, $\Delta df = 3$, *ns*).

[4]Previous research by Gelfand et al. (2002) also suggests that differences in individualism–collectivism are better represented by scores on the independent rather than interdependent self-construal scale. It is also important to note that both independent and interdependent self-construals exist in individualistic and collectivistic cultures; however, within-country variation on the two types of self-construals are smaller than the variation between countries (Triandis, 1995).

However, when equality of the error variances across the two groups was imposed, the results produced a significant increase of chi-square ($\Delta\chi^2 = 59.78$, $\Delta df = 12$, $p < .01$), suggesting the measurement errors associated with the items differ across the two groups.

Overall, the results from the structural equivalence analysis demonstrate that the constructs of the scale had an equal number of factors, equal factor loadings, and equal factor correlations. Only the measurement errors associated with the items were different across the two groups. Based on these findings, we conclude that the three-factor model was nearly equivalent for the Chinese and the Dutch employee groups.

Descriptive Analysis

Table 4 reports the mean, standard deviations, and intercorrelations among gender, age, conflict stress, the general preference for third-party intervention, and the three types of nonsubstantive third-party help for the two employee samples, separately.

Table 3
Results of Structural Equivalence Analysis for Nonsubstantive Third-Party Help

Model	χ^2	*df*	$\Delta\chi^2$	Δdf	TLI	RMSEA
1. Equal-number factor model	118.35	100	NA	NA	0.95	0.06
2. Equal factor loadings	135.92	112	17.57	12	0.94	0.07
3. Equal factor covariance	142.39	115	6.47	3	0.93	0.08
4. Equal factor variance	202.17	127	59.78**	12	0.85	0.13

Notes. TLI, Tucker–Lewis Index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation.
**$p < .01$.

Table 4
Mean, SDs, and Intercorrelations, Broken Down for the Hong Kong Chinese Group‡ and the Dutch Group§

	M‡	*SD*‡	*M*§	*SD*§	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gender	1.49	0.51	1.35	0.48	–	−.42*	.29†	−.06	.20	.35†	.21
2. Age	29.90	7.07	35.90	8.84	.07	–	−.14	.16	.14	.21	.09
3. Conflict stress	3.45	0.93	3.07	0.87	.31†	.04	–	.26	.13	.14	.36*
4. General preference for third-party intervention	3.64	0.85	3.52	0.89	−.14	.21	.22	–	.16	.06	−.02
5. Relational help	4.47	0.71	4.11	0.95	−.25	−.29†	.02	−.02	–	.55**	.68**
6. Procedural help	4.38	0.72	4.49	0.76	−.11	−.17	−.12	−.19	.65**	–	.54**
7. Emotional help	4.37	0.82	4.85	0.67	.26	−.10	.13	.10	.27†	.17	–

Notes. †$p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.
‡Data for the Chinese employee group ($n = 35$) and the correlations are below the diagonal.
§Data for the Dutch employee group ($n = 35$) and the correlations are above the diagonal.
For gender, male was coded as 1 and female as 2.

Similar to the pilot study, we observed moderately positive relationships among the relational, procedural, and emotional third-party help scales in both the Dutch and Chinese subsamples (the only exception is that procedural help is not correlated with emotional help in the Chinese group, $r = .17$, *ns*). The correlation patterns furthermore showed that conflict stress was positively correlated with gender in both samples, suggesting that when faced with a workplace conflict, females feel more stressed than males. The results did not reveal any significant correlation between the general preference for third-party intervention and the three types of nonsubstantive third-party help, indicating that the general willingness to involve a third party may involve different psychological mechanisms than the specific types of third-party help referred to in this study.

Hypotheses Testing

Our hypotheses state that, compared to Dutch employees, Chinese employees favor third-party relational help more, and procedural and emotional help less. We conducted ANCOVAs to test these assumptions. The dependent variables were the three types of third-party help. The independent variable was employee nationality, coded as a dummy variable (0 = Dutch; 1 = Chinese). Gender and age were entered as control variables. The results show that national culture had a marginally significant effect on relational help, $F(1, 65) = 2.56$, $p = .07$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$, indicating that Chinese participants have a higher preference for relational help than the Dutch participants. National culture also showed a significant effect on emotional help, $F(1, 65) = 7.70$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$, suggesting that the Dutch participants have a higher preference for emotional help than the Chinese participants. These findings are in line with Hypotheses 1 and 3. However, the results did not reveal a significant effect of national culture on procedural help, $F(1, 65) = 0.35$, *ns*, $\eta_p^2 = .00$, indicating that the Chinese and the Dutch participants do not differ from each other in terms of their preference for procedural help from a third party. Thus, we found no support for Hypothesis 2.

In addition, the results showed that gender as a control had a significant impact on emotional help, $F(1, 65) = 4.02$, $p < .01$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$, indicating that women have a higher preference for emotional help than men do.

Additional Analysis

We also conducted ANCOVAs on conflict stress and general preference for third party intervention across the two subsamples. Regarding conflict stress, no effect of nation was found, $F(1, 65) = 1.55$, *ns*, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. However, and in line with correlational analysis, we found a significant effect of gender, $F(1, 65) = 6.15$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$. This effect showed that females feel more stressed when faced with a workplace conflict than males do. In terms of general preference for third-party intervention, the results did not show any significant effect of nation, $F(1, 65) = .31$, *ns*, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, or of gender and age.

Discussion

Considering the oftentimes detrimental nature of workplace conflict for both individuals and organizations (De Dreu, Van Dierendonck, & De Best-Waldhober, 2002; Frone, 2000; Giebels & Janssen, 2005; Spector & Jex, 1998), it is important to increase our knowledge of interventions by outside parties that may buffer these negative effects. Departing from the assumption that particularly nonsubstantive third-party help may prove fruitful, we first proposed and tested a three-factor structure for nonsubstantive third-party help in a pilot study with Dutch and Chinese students. As expected, both the Dutch and the Chinese respondents could meaningfully distinguish between the three types of nonsubstantive third-party help, i.e., relational, procedural, and emotional forms of third-party help. Furthermore, the three scales for nonsubstantive third-party help showed moderately positive correlations among each other. Finally, all three scales correlated with a general problem-solving orientation but not with the individual's general sense of self-efficacy. These findings support the internal and external validity of our scales.

Our main study was designed to investigate the impact of differences in individualism/collectivism on employee preferences for the three different types of third-party help. Our hypotheses were partly confirmed. As expected, collectivistic Chinese employees reported a higher preference for relational third-party help than individualistic Dutch employees. This highlights the fact that people from a collectivistic culture are highly concerned with maintaining, or at least not undermining, the relationship with the other party. We also found support for our expectation that Dutch employees favor emotional help in a dispute to a higher degree than Chinese employees do. This is in line with findings from previous research showing that people from individualistic cultures experience ego-focused emotions to a larger extent and have a higher need to express them than people from collectivistic cultures, who tend to suppress their emotions and to avert self-disclosure (Hamid, 2000; see also Triandis, 1995). Additional analyses revealed a gender effect on the preference for emotional help, showing that females prefer this type of third-party help more. This is in line with previous research (Nelson, Hitt, & Quick, 1989; Verbrugge, 1989). Our study suggests that this effect exists regardless of cultural background and presumably because women experience more conflict stress.

Finally, we found no support for our expectation that procedural help is valued more by Dutch than Chinese employees. Our expectation was that particularly Dutch disputants depart from a rational-analytic viewpoint (cf. Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001), and therefore have a higher need for process explicitness. We can think of several explanations for this unexpected finding. First, it may well be that people who depart from an analytic viewpoint are not necessarily served by procedural help per se. An analytic viewpoint may be better served by more flexible issue-focused advice or by actions that are specifically designed to promote perceived social justice or fairness, a concept that is generally considered more important in individualistic rather than collectivistic societies (Ohbuchi et al., 1999). Instead, the application of rules and regulations may be less linked to the cultural dimension of individualism/collectivism, and more to the

cultural dimension of uncertainty avoidance. Another explanation may be that our Chinese sample consisted of employees of an international bank in Hong Kong, who spoke primarily English at work. It might well be that these employees are more Western orientated. An indication for this is the absence of a difference in independent and interdependent self-construals within the Chinese employee sample. Moreover, disputes in a work setting in general may prompt a more analytic, business-like perspective for both groups of employees that operates relatively independent from notions of interconnectedness.

Interestingly, our results revealed no difference in preference for third-party help in general between the Dutch and the Chinese employees. Previous cross-cultural research suggests that in collectivistic cultures where confrontational strategies are less common, third-party help in itself is used more than in individualistic cultures (Kozan & Ilter, 1994; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). Research by Leung (1987) also shows that collectivists display a stronger preference for conflict mediation than individualists. An explanation might be that our study provides no information on what kind of third party is chosen and preferred. Therefore, the Chinese and Dutch respondents might think of different kinds of third parties. For example, in East Asian societies, one might primarily think of informal third parties for a conflict intervention, while in Western European societies, people may automatically associate third parties with formal institutions, such as unions and ombudspersons (cf. Ohbuchi et al., 1999). Different types of third parties may prime disputants with different expectations for intervention. This may also explain why the general preference for third-party intervention was not related to the three types of nonsubstantive third-party help in our study. Future research should try to link the preferences for the three types of nonsubstantive third-party help to different types of third parties, particularly since research shows that the type of interventions made by informal parties differ substantially from the type of interventions made by more formal third parties (Pinkley, Brittain, Neale, & Northcraft, 1995).

An important limitation of our research is that participants' reactions in this study were based on a hypothetical conflict situation. When interpreting the results of this study, one should take into account that self-reports may not reflect actual behavior and perceptions in a real conflict situation, although research usually reports rather high correlations (De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer, & Nauta, 2001). Furthermore, our specific conflict scenario concerned a conflict with a colleague. Research suggests that hierarchical conflicts with either subordinates or supervisors may elicit different processes (cf. Frone, 2000). Future research might look into this, for example, by comparing egalitarian and hierarchical cultures.

Finally, we want to mention the relatively small sample size. Therefore, we would like to encourage future studies to replicate our findings with a larger sample, preferably in a more traditional Chinese environment and with translated Chinese questionnaires.

To conclude, our research supports the idea that conflict parties can meaningfully distinguish between three types of nonsubstantive third-party help, i.e., relational, procedural, and emotional help. This three-factor structure was confirmed in different samples. Furthermore, our research suggests that preferences for the different types of third-party help are dependent upon national culture.

References

Albert, J. K., Heisterkamp, B. L., & McPhee, R. M. (2005). Disputant perceptions of and satisfaction with a community mediation program. *The International Journal of Conflict Management*, *16*, 218–244.

Amason, A. C. (1996). Distinguishing the effects of functional and dysfunctional conflict on strategic decision making: Resolving a paradox for top management groups. *Academy of Management Journal*, *39*, 123–148.

Arnold, J. A., & O'Connor, K. M. (1999). Ombudspersons or peers? The effects of third-party expertise and recommendations on negotiation. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *84*, 776–785.

Beune, K., Giebels, E., & Sanders, K. (2009). Are you talking to me? Influencing behaviour and culture in police interviews. *Psychology, Crime and Law* (in press).

Cai, D. A., & Fink, E. L. (2002). Conflict style differences between individualists and collectivists. *Communication Monographs*, *69*, 67–87.

Carnevale, P. J., & Conlon, D. E. (1988). Time pressure and strategic choice in mediation. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, *42*, 111–133.

Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., & Mermelstein, R. (1983). A global measure of perceived stress. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, *24*, 385–396.

Cohen, S., & Wills, T. A. (1985). Stress, social support, and the buffering hypothesis. *Psychological Bulletin*, *98*, 310–357.

Conlon, D. E., & Meyer, C. J. (2004). Contractual and emergent third-party intervention. In M. J. Gelfand & J. M. Brett (Eds.), *The handbook of negotiation and culture* (pp. 258–279). Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

De Dreu, C. K. W., Evers, A., Beersma, B., Kluwer, E. S., & Nauta, A. (2001). A theory-based measure of conflict management in the workplace. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *22*, 654–668.

De Dreu, C. K. W., Van Dierendonck, D., & De Best-Waldhober, M. (2002). Conflict at work and individual wellbeing. In M. Schabracq, J. A. M. Winnubst, & C. L. Cooper (Eds.), *The handbook of work and health psychology* (pp. 495–515). Chichester, UK: Wiley.

Eid, M., & Diener, E. (2001). Norms for experiencing emotions in different cultures: Inter- and intranational differences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *81*, 869–885.

Emans, B., Laskewitz, P., & Van de Vliert, E. (1994). The Netherlands. In A. A. Blum & M. A. Rahim (Eds.), *Global perspectives on organizational conflict* (pp. 53–66). Westport, CT: Praeger.

Folger, J. P., & Konovsky, M. (1989). Effects of procedural and distributive justice on reactions to pay raise decisions. *Academy of Management Journal*, *32*, 115–130.

Folger, J. P., Poole, M. S., & Stutman, R. K. (2005). *Working through conflict: Strategies for relationships, groups, and organizations*. Boston, MA: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon.

Frone, M. R. (2000). Interpersonal conflict at work and psychological outcomes: Testing a model among young workers. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, *5*, 246–255.

Gelfand, M. J., Higgins, M., Nishii, L. H., Raver, J. L., Dominguez, A., Murakami, F., et al. (2002). Culture and egocentric perceptions of fairness in conflict and negotiation. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *87*, 833–845.

Giebels, E., & Janssen, O. (2005). Conflict stress and reduced wellbeing at work: The buffering effect of third-party help. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, *14*, 137–155.

Giebels, E., & Taylor, P. J. (2009). Interaction patterns in crisis negotiations: Persuasive arguments and cultural differences. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *94*, 5–19.

Greenglass, E. R., Fiksenbaum, L., & Burke, R. J. (1994). The relationship between social support and burnout over time in teachers. *Journal of Social Behavior and Personality*, *9*, 219–230.

Gudykunst, W. B., Matsumoto, Y., Ting-Toomey, S., Nishida, T., Kim, K., & Heyman, S. (1996). The influence of cultural individualism-collectivism, self-construals, and individual values on communication styles across cultures. *Human Communication Research*, *22*, 510–543.

Hall, E. (1976). *Beyond culture*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday.

Hall, E. T., & Hall, M. R. (1990). *Understanding cultural differences*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

Hamid, P. N. (2000). Self-disclosure and occupational stress in Chinese professionals. *Psychological Reports*, *87*, 1075–1082.

Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions, and organizations across nations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Janssen, O., Van de Vliert, E., & Veenstra, C. (1999). How task and person conflict shape the role of positive interdependence in management teams. *Journal of Management*, *25*, 117–142.

Jehn, K. (1995). A multimethod examination of the benefits and detriments of intragroup conflict. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *40*, 256–282.

Joreskog, K., & Sorbom, D. (1993). *LISREL 8: Structural equation modeling with SIMPLIS command language*. Chicago, IL: Scientific Software.

Kozan, M. K., & Ilter, S. S. (1994). Third-party roles played by Turkish managers in subordinates'conflicts. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *15*, 453–466.

Kressel, K., & Pruitt, D. G. (1989). Themes in the mediation of social conflict. *Journal of Social Issues*, *41*, 179–198.

Kumer, R. (2004). Culture and emotions in intercultural negotiations: An overview. In M. J. Gelfand & J. M. Brett (Eds.), *The handbook of negotiation and culture* (pp. 95–113). Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.

Leung, K. (1987). Some determinants of reactions to procedural models for conflict resolution: A cross-national study. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *53*, 898–908.

Lissak, R. I., & Sheppard, B. H. (1983). Beyond fairness: The criterion problem in research on dispute resolution. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *13*, 45–65.

Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, *98*, 224–253.

Mesquita, B. (2001). Emotions in collectivist and individualist contexts. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *80*, 68–74.

Moore, C. W. (2003). *The mediation process: Practical strategies for resolving conflict*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Nelson, D. L., Hitt, M. A., & Quick, J. C. (1989). Men and women of the personnel profession: Some differences and similarities in stress. *Stress Medicine*, *5*, 145–152.

Nisbett, R., Peng, K., Choi, I., & Norenzayan, A. (2001). Culture and systems of thought: Holistic versus analytic cognition. *Psychological Review*, *108*, 291–310.

Ohbuchi, K., Fukushima, O., & Tedeschi, J. T. (1999). Cultural values in conflict management. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *30*, 51–71.

Ohbuchi, K., & Tedeshi, J. T. (1997). Multiple goals and tactical behavior in social conflicts. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, *27*, 2177–2199.

Pinkley, R. L., Brittain, J., Neale, M. A., & Northcraft, G. B. (1995). Managerial third-party dispute intervention: An inductive analysis of intervenor strategy selection. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *80*, 386–402.

Quick, J. C., Quick, J. D., Nelson, D. L., & Hurrell, J. J. (1997). *Preventive stress management in organizations* (2nd ed.). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Rubin, J. Z., & Kim, S. H. (2004). *Social conflict: Escalation, stalemate, and settlement*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Schwartz, S. H. (2004). Mapping and interpreting cultural differences around the world. In H. Vinken, J. Soeters, & P. Ester (Eds.), *Comparing cultures: Dimensions of culture in a comparative perspective* (pp. 43–73). Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill.

Sheppard, B. H. (1984). Third party conflict intervention: A procedural framework. In B. M. Staw & L. L. Cummings (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior* (vol. 6, pp. 141–190). Greenwich, CT: JAI press.

Smith, P., Bond, M., & Kagitcibasi, C. (2006). *Understanding social psychology across cultures*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Spector, P. E., & Jex, S. M. (1998). Development of four self-report measures of job stressors and strains: Interpersonal conflict at work scale, organizational constraints scale, quantitative workload inventory, and physical symptoms inventory. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, *3*, 356–367.

Ting-Toomey, S. (1988). Intercultural conflict styles: A face negotiation theory. In Y. Y. Kim & W. Gudykunst (Eds.), *Theories in intercultural communication* (pp. 213–235). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Ting-Toomey, S., & Oetzel, J. G. (2001). *Managing intercultural conflict effectively*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Triandis, H. C. (1995). *Individualism and collectivism*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Van de Vijver, F. J., & Leung, K. (1997). *Methods and data analysis for cross-cultural research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Van de Vliert, E. (1997). *Complex interpersonal conflict behaviour*. London, UK: Psychology Press.

Verbrugge, L. (1989). Gender, aging, and health. In K. S. Markides (Ed.), *Aging and health: Perspectives on gender, race, ethnicity, and class* (pp. 23–78). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Volkema, R. J., Farquhar, K., & Bergmann, T. J. (1996). Third-party sensemaking in interpersonal conflicts at work: A theoretical framework. *Human Relations*, *49*, 1437–1454.

Ellen Giebels (PhD, University of Groningen, 1999) is Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology and Communication of Health and Risk, at the University of Twente, the Netherlands. Her research focuses on conflict, negotiation, and mediation, particularly in a crisis context. She is (co-) author of numerous peer-reviewed articles and several books, including “Crisis negotiations: A multiparty perspective” (with Sigrid Noelanders). Three of these articles received a best paper award, including her work on

cultural differences in crisis negotiations (with Paul J. Taylor), which won the 2007 Best Applied Paper award of the International Association for Conflict Management conference.

Huadong Yang received his PhD in organization psychology from the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. He is currently an assistant professor at the group of Organizational Psychology and HRD, the University of Twente, the Netherlands. His research interests in conflict management include third-party intervention and cross-cultural negotiation.