

Avoidance Brings Japanese Employees What They Care About in Conflict Management: Its Functionality and “Good Member” Image

Ken-ichi Ohbuchi¹ and Emi Atsumi²

1 Department of Psychology, Graduate School of Arts and Letters, Tohoku University, Sendai, Japan

2 Department of Rehabilitation, Faculty of Health Sciences, Tohoku Fukushi University, Sendai, Japan

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Correspondence

Ken-ichi Ohbuchi, Department of Psychology, Graduate School of Arts and Letters, Tohoku University, Kawauchi 27-1, Aoba Ward, Sendai 980-8576, Japan; e-mail: ken1_obu@sal.tohoku.ac.jp.

Abstract

Avoidance is preferred by Asian people in organizational conflicts. Even when self-assertion offers immediate rewards, it is viewed by collectivists as risky from the long-term perspective because it impairs group membership and future rewards associated with it. Instead, collectivists are concerned with being accepted by peers as “a good member (agreeable person).” We assume that avoidance in organizational conflicts is an identity strategy, by which collectivists seek to form an interdependent identity and secure future rewards. We asked 341 Japanese business employees to rate their conflicts with supervisors in terms of coping strategies and goal achievements. Consistent with our predictions, the results indicated that avoidance contributed to group harmony and interdependent identity while it hampered personal interests and fairness. The theory of the functionality of avoidance was validated, at least with collectivists, although this long-range strategy seems to depend on an individual’s belief that the organization is properly managed.

Resolution strategy has been a main topic in the research field of conflict management. Faced with a conflict, each party attempts to resolve it by considering both parties’ interests, appealing to justice, or using power. In terms of the effectiveness in conflict resolution, researchers have attended to integrative strategies, combinations of force and concession, and “if-then” strategies (e.g., Putnam & Poole, 1987). For constructive resolution of conflicts, also, researchers have emphasized the orientation toward problem solving that consists of sharing information, open discussion, innovation of new ideas,

and active communication (Shapiro & Kulik, 2004). In contrast to these active strategies, the functionality of avoidance has been less examined by the literature.

A dual-concern model widely known as a strategy selection theory assumes that avoidance is selected when both concerns of self and of other are low (Olekalns, Putnam, Weingart, & Metcalf, 2008; Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994). In such a situation, the party is not strongly motivated to change the situation because the conflict is very mild or trivial. According to the model, avoidance is a passive strategy to adopt only when a conflict is not serious.

Recently, Shell (2006) analyzed the processes of strategy selection from a new theoretical perspective, the situational matrix model. Crossing two axes (perceived conflict over stakes and perceived importance of the future relationship between the parties), he classified conflict situations into four types (balanced concerns, relationships, transactions, and tacit coordination) and postulated that there are different appropriate strategies for each type of conflict. According to his model, avoidance is a strategy to select in tacit coordination in which both axes are low. It is similar to a situation in which two drivers meet at a traffic intersection, where there is no need for conflict over space if they manage correctly and the parties are unlikely to see each other again. Tacit coordination situations do not call for any active interactions as much as tactful avoidance of conflict. In Shell's model, just as in the dual-concern model, avoidance is defined as a passive coping strategy to adopt only when the parties face a relatively simple and easy task.

Is Avoidance Unreasonable and Ineffective?

Avoidance is a non-confrontational strategy that includes keeping quiet about own views, ignoring disagreements, withdrawing from potential arguments, or avoiding topics that can be sources of disputes (Putnam & Wilson, 1982). In avoidance, a party suppresses complaints and refrains from self-assertion. As a result, it often entails abandonment of self-interests and resignation to unfairness, with feelings of internal frustration and hostility remaining. Empirical research dealing with conflict strategies has demonstrated that this is the case (De Dreu, 1997; Turner & Pratkanis, 1997). De Dreu asked managers in two organizations which strategies their work team usually chose to deal with conflict in the past. He also assessed the amount of cognitive conflict (work-related matters) and the amount of affective conflict (person-related matters) currently present in the team with a scale developed by Jehn (1994). The results showed that past avoidance increased the amount of affective conflict currently experienced but past problem solving decreased it, with no correlations of past strategies with cognitive conflict. This study indicated that avoidance does not lead to substantial resolution of conflicts, and leaves the seeds for future conflicts. Thus, both researchers and professionals of conflict management have viewed it negatively as an ineffective and unproductive response to conflicts (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991; Sillars, 1980).

However, it is possible that the negative view on avoidance is culturally biased because the models we discussed previously were constructed based on the observations and empirical findings on conflicts among Western people. A different cultural perspective may provide a different view. Research with Asian people has demonstrated that they often

choose avoidance to cope with conflict (Friedman, Chi, & Liu, 2006; Holt & DeVore, 2005; Trubisky, Ting-Toomey, & Lin, 1991). To measure their conflict management styles, Brew and Cairns (2004) administered the Organizational Conflict Communication Instrument (Putnam & Wilson, 1982) to Anglo-Australian and Chinese students who were working or had recently worked. The authors found that Anglos favored active strategies such as control or solution-oriented approaches, whereas Chinese favored nonconfrontational strategies such as avoidance. Also in a cross-cultural study on organizational conflicts, Ohbuchi, Imazai, Sugawara, Tyler, and Lind (1997) found that Japanese employees more frequently opted for avoidance than Western employees in within-culture conflicts.

Cultural psychologists explain that Asian people's preference for avoidance is because of their collectivistic cultures, in which group-oriented concerns (social harmony and group coherence) are given priority over individual concerns (personal interests and personal face) (Triandis, 1995). From this point of view, researchers have interpreted that Asian people refrain from personal self-assertion in conflict situations because it threatens social harmony and group coherence (Tjosvold & Sun, 2002). Brew and Cairns (2004) attempted to analyze determinants of avoidance based on Ting-Toomey's (1988) face-negotiation theory of conflict, which posits that communicative exchanges made between conflicting parties are regulated by concerns for self-face and other face. Their findings suggest that collectivists' avoidance is prompted by a concern for protection of other's face, not one's own face, that is, a priority is placed on minimizing any imposition on another's autonomy, having concern for not hurting the other's feelings, or giving respect to the other party's status. Further, they indicated that even individualists tended to use indirect communication (avoidance), rather than direct communication (assertion), when they were concerned with the other's face.

This research and theory suggest that avoidance is selected to maintain social relationships. Then, how does avoidance contribute to the maintenance of relationships? Those who take avoidance in conflict situations do not harm others, so they are less likely to be a target of hostility, negative evaluation, or exclusion by others (Olekalns et al., 2008). Based on this reasoning, we assumed that avoidance is an identity strategy by which one presents oneself as a good member or partner worthy of social relationships, and so it is an important conflict management strategy, especially for collectivists who place great value on the maintenance of social relationships. Brew and Cairns (2004) emphasized that those who are concerned with protection of other's face tend to choose avoidance, but we assumed that avoidance is also effective in the protection of one's own face (personal identity). Given this assumption, the next question is the type of identity it contributes to.

Avoidance as an Identity Strategy

Even if it is justifiable, self-assertion in group situations is sometimes perceived as undesirable by peer group members in collectivistic cultures because it threatens the social harmony of the group (Ohbuchi, 1998). In these societies, those who assert themselves are likely to be perceived by other members as being aggressive or deviating from the norm of group harmony, and thereby, sometimes they face exclusion from the group.

Belonging to an organization or group provides its members with a large number of benefits including economic and social rewards. By maintaining a group membership, an individual can expect to continue receiving these rewards from the group in the future. Even if self-assertion gives immediate rewards, it may be viewed by collectivists as risky from the long-term perspective because it impairs group membership and future rewards. However, the future reward is uncertain and not guaranteed. Therefore, an organizational conflict presents collectivists with the dilemma of taking a small but certain immediate reward or a large but uncertain future reward.

For those who are concerned with future rewards, it is crucial to be accepted by peer members as “a good member.” In collectivistic cultures, the good member, above all, is an interdependent person, who is characterized as agreeable, cooperative, observant, and kind (Kitayama & Markus, 2000). Therefore, we assumed that collectivists are concerned with the formation and maintenance of the interdependent identity in organizational situations, and avoidance is viewed as a long-range strategy to secure the future rewards through the formation of an interdependent identity.

There is another type of personal identity that seems to be highly appreciated in organizational situations. It is an independent identity that is characterized by independence and strong conviction. Individuals having these characteristics are relied upon by peers, and they tend to take leadership in group activities and the initiative in organizational reforms. In individualistic cultures, such a hero image is positively appreciated and required by people. However, we assumed that people in collectivistic cultures prefer the interdependent image to the independent one, and thus, they attempt to present themselves as agreeable individuals in organizational conflicts.

Hypotheses

In this study, we attempted to examine the functionality of avoidance for organizational conflict management by comparing its outcomes with those of other strategies. Based on the cultural theory, we specifically predicted that avoidance would be useful in the formation of interdependent identity among cultural collectivists. How does avoidance promote such an identity? Collectivists may be oriented toward an interdependent identity because it is closely related to future personal rewards. Actually, research has indicated that avoidance contributes to the maintenance of group harmony (Ohbuchi, Hayashi, & Imazai, 2000). We assumed that those who contribute to group harmony by sacrificing personal interests are perceived by peer members as a good member, that is, personal sacrifice for group harmony is useful in the formation of an interdependent identity. Therefore, we predicted that the relationships between avoidance and interdependent identity would be mediated by the maintenance of group harmony.

We discussed before that avoidance often sacrifices self-interests in the short-term and leads to feelings of resignation about unfairness. In other words, avoidance may be positive for the achievement of collectivistic goals (interdependent identity and group harmony) but negative for the achievement of individualistic goals (self-interest,

fairness, and independent identity). In this study, therefore, we made the following four hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Avoidance would enhance the interdependent identity among cultural collectivists.

Hypothesis 2: Avoidance would increase the achievement of group harmony.

Hypothesis 3: Group harmony would mediate the relationship between avoidance and the interdependent identity.

Hypothesis 4: Avoidance would decrease the achievement of personal interests, fairness, and independent identity.

Method

Participants

We asked 40 Japanese business persons, who, in the past decade, graduated from a psychology department of a public university in Japan, to distribute a questionnaire containing items to measure strategies and goal achievement to their nonmanagerial colleagues. In a cover letter, we asked the employees to return the completed questionnaires directly to the department office by regular mail. By this method, we distributed the questionnaire to 600 Japanese business employees and obtained 341 respondents (196 men, 134 women, and 11 unidentified). The respondents' mean age was 27.3, ranging from 19 through 44, and they came from the following sectors: manufacturers (41.3%), service providers (37.0%), distributors (14.4%), mass media (3.2%), financial services (0.9%), and unidentified (3.2%).

Questionnaire

In the questionnaire, we asked participants to recall a recent conflict with their supervisors, which included disagreements regarding the participants' status or job, and to rate it in terms of their coping strategies and achievement of goals. Table 1 shows the items used to measure these two sets of variables.

Coping Strategies

We used the items to measure four different types of strategies (collaboration, confrontation, third-party intervention, and avoidance) from Ohbuchi et al. (1997). We asked the participants to indicate what they actually did to cope with the conflict by rating each of the items included in Table 1 on a 7-point scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *definitely* (7). Since alpha coefficients for confrontation, avoidance, and third-party intervention were satisfactorily high, we constructed the strategy scores by averaging the item scores. However, because of the low alpha of collaboration, we treated the two items as discrete collaboration strategies (persuasion and negotiation).

Table 1
Variables and Items Used in the Study and Their Reliability Coefficients

Variables	Items	Alfa
Resolution strategies		
Collaboration	You calmly and patiently persuaded the supervisor (persuasion); you bargained or compromised with the supervisor (negotiation)	.45
Confrontation	You showed anger toward the supervisor; you criticized the supervisor	.69
Avoidance	You avoided confrontation and restrained yourself; you complied with the supervisor	.61
Third party	You asked the third party to help you; you asked for help from the third party to resolve the conflict	.86
Goal achievement		
Personal interests	Your salary was raised (salary); your employment was improved (promotion)	.38
Fairness	You reach a fair solution; you were treated more fairly by the supervisor	.72
Independent identity	You were seen by others as an independent or assertive individual; you avoided being seen by others as a "yes man"	.76
Interdependent identity	You were seen by others as a friendly member; you avoided being seen by others as an aggressive person	.74
Group harmony	Harmony in your work group was maintained; a unity in your work group was maintained	.84

Goal Achievements

To measure achievement of five goals (personal interests, fairness, independent identity, interdependent identity, and group harmony), we constructed two items for each goal (see Table 1). We asked the participants to indicate the degree to which these goals were finally achieved by their coping strategies by rating each item on a 7-point scale ranging from *not at all* (1) to *perfectly* (7). Alpha was satisfactorily high for all the goals except personal interests. We constructed these goal achievement scores by averaging the item scores, but we used the two items of personal interests as discrete goals (salary and promotion).

Results

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of all the variables. There were significant differences between the five strategies, $F(4, 1,144) = 24.11, p < .01$. Persuasion was significantly higher than all the other strategies (all $ps < .01$). Avoidance was significantly higher than negotiation and third party ($p < .01$) and nonsignificantly higher than confrontation ($p = .07$). Consistent with the other studies using Asian samples (Holt & DeVore, 2005; Ohbuchi et al., 1997), these results indicated that avoidance was actually a strategy commonly taken by Japanese employees to cope with organizational conflicts.

Table 2
Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SDs) of all Variables

Variables	M	SD
Coping strategies		
Collaboration (persuasion)	3.62	1.72
Collaboration (negotiation)	2.74	1.86
Confrontation	2.97	1.61
Avoidance	3.24	1.56
Third party	2.34	1.68
Goal attainment		
Personal interests (salary)	1.40	0.80
Personal interests (promotion)	2.37	1.45
Fairness	3.33	1.36
Independent identity	3.56	1.30
Interdependent identity	3.09	1.13
Group harmony	3.71	1.36

Table 3
Regression of Goal Attainments by Coping Strategies: Betas and R²

	Salary	Promotion	Fairness	Independent identity	Interdependent identity	Group harmony
Persuasion	-.03	.03	.15**	.10	.02	.00
Negotiation	.07	.08	.12*	.17*	.16†	.07
Confrontation	.15	.07	-.36** (-.09**)	.10 (.08)	-.11 (-0.12)	-.17** (-.18**)
Avoidance	.15	-.17*	-.18** (-.22**)	-.14† (-.19*)	.20* (.17*)	.14* (.13*)
Third party	.04	.22*	.03 (.03)	.09 (.09)	.16† (.19*)	.16** (.18**)
R ²	.04	.12*	.19** (.14**)	.12** (.07*)	.11** (.08**)	.08** (.08**)

Notes: Figures in parentheses are the statistics when the analysis was re-conducted eliminating unreliable variables.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

† $p < .10$.

Effects of Resolution Strategies

To examine the effects of resolution strategies, we conducted a series of regression analysis using each of the six goals as dependent variables and five strategies as independent variables. The results are shown in Table 3. Although persuasion significantly contributed only to the restoration of fairness, negotiation significantly contributed to the restoration of fairness and the formation of both identities. Studies conducted in both Asian and Western countries have demonstrated that collaborative strategies are useful in organizational conflict resolution (Canary & Lakey, 2006; De Dreu, 1997; Ohbuchi & Suzuki, 2003; Tjosvold, 1997). These results indicated that the collaborative strategies were effective in both the achievement of social and interpersonal goals.

In contrast, the confrontational strategy was negative in the achievements of fairness and group harmony. Studies by Van de Vliert (1997; Van de Vliert, Ohbuchi, Van Rossum, Hayashi, & Van der Vegt, 2004) showed that it is effective when used in combination with the collaborative strategy, but this study suggested that using the confrontational strategy alone was harmful to organizational conflict resolution.

Consistent with *Hypotheses 1 and 2*, avoidance significantly increased the achievements of interdependent identity and group harmony. Further, consistent with *Hypothesis 4*, it significantly lowered the achievements of personal interests (promotion), fairness, and independent identity. Investigators of organizational conflict have regarded avoidance as harmful or, at least, ineffective (De Dreu & De Vries, 1993; Hocker & Wilmot, 1991). In contrast, this study indicated that it is positive in terms of collectivistic goal achievements. The finding that it contributed to the formation of interdependent identity and maintenance of group harmony suggests that avoidance is taken to enhance one's relationship with the group.

The third-party strategy significantly contributed to the achievements of personal interests (promotion), interdependent identity, and group harmony, suggesting that it was useful in terms of both individualistic and collectivistic concerns.

As noted, reliability of the measures of collaboration (persuasion and negotiation) and personal interests (salary and promotion) were low; hence, we used each item of these scales as a separate variable in the regression analysis. However, there is a possibility that this treatment biased the statistical relationships between strategies and goal achievements. To examine the possibility, we re-conducted the regression analysis by eliminating these unreliable variables. We presented Betas obtained by the re-analysis in the parentheses of Table 2. It shows the same patterns of Betas as the initial analysis, so we regarded that the effects of avoidance, as well as those of other strategies, on goal achievements were substantial, but not artificial.

Mediation Analysis

In *Hypothesis 3*, we predicted that group harmony would mediate the relationship between avoidance and interdependent identity. To test this, we conducted a mediation analysis by using a series of regression (Baron & Kenny, 1986). As illustrated in Figure 1, avoidance significantly increased both group harmony and interdependent identity (Betas = .21 and .18, both $ps < .05$). However, when we used both avoidance and group harmony to predict interdependent identity, group harmony was a significant predictor (Beta = .51, $p < .01$) but avoidance was no longer significant (Beta = .12), and this reduction was significant in a Sobel test ($z = 2.40$, $p < .01$). It means that the effect of avoidance on interdependent identity was mediated by group harmony, as we predicted in the hypothesis.

Test of a Common Method Bias

In this study, we measured all the variables by a questionnaire. Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003) argued that since the data collected by such a method are likely to be

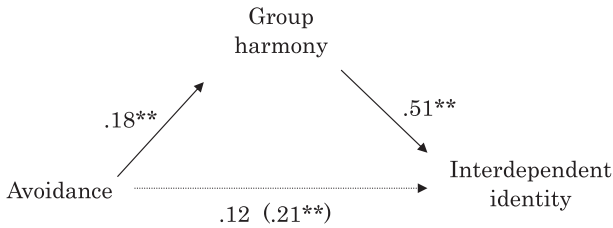


Figure 1. Mediation analysis of the effects of avoidance. Note: In the regression of interdependent identity, Beta of avoidance was reduced from .21 to .12 when group harmony was added to it as an independent variable: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

affected by a common method variance, the statistical relationships between the variables are often biased. Herman's single-factor test postulates that if a factor analysis using all of the variables produces a large general factor, it suggests a substantial amount of common method variance (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). In this study, we conducted a principal component analysis using all the variables including five resolution strategies and six goal achievements. It produced four dimensions and the first principal component accounted for only 22.31% of all the variances and its factor loadings were scattered (.83, .78, .66, .56, .37, .32, -.32, .18, .15, -.14, and -.04), suggesting that there was no general factor. This indicates that the common method variance was small in this data, if ever, and so the results on the relationships between strategies and goal achievements we reported before were not substantially affected by the common method bias.

Discussion

Consistent with *Hypotheses 1 and 3*, the results showed that avoidance contributed to the formation of interdependent identity and this effect was mediated by the maintenance of group harmony. In contrast to the negative views on avoidance which have been strengthened by research and theories produced in the Western cultures, this study clearly indicated positive functionality of avoidance in conflict resolution among Japanese employees.

The results further supported *Hypothesis 4*, indicating that avoidance decreased the achievement of self-interest (e.g., promotion), fairness, and independent identity, although a conclusion must be refrained with promotion because of its single item measurement. These findings suggest that avoidance produced both positive and negative outcomes in organizational conflict resolution; that is, avoidance is positive for the achievement of collectivistic goals (the interdependent identity and group harmony), whereas negative for the achievement of individualistic goals (self-interest, fairness, and independent identity). This seems logically very consistent with the cultural differences in the use of avoidance found by previous cross-cultural studies (Ohbuchi et al., 1997, 2000). Further, this seems to provide a good explanation why Western researchers and professionals have evaluated avoidance negatively. The point is the ambivalence in the effects of the avoidance on organizational conflict resolution, and this study showed its functionality, at least for collectivists, in that an interdependent person may be more likely to be accepted by a group in collectivistic cultures. This leads to a conjecture that

avoidance may be effective as a long-term strategy to receive large future rewards even if some other personal benefits are reduced in the short-term. Recognizing that an organizational conflict is a dilemma for collectivists, this study suggests that avoidance is a strategy to resolve the dilemma by focusing on the long-range rewards.

We constructed the scale of interdependent identity as a means to measure a good member of an in-group. In addition to its high face validity (see Table 1), it was verified by the mediation analysis as indicated in Figure 1. Since avoidance contributes to group harmony in the sacrifice of personal interests, an individual taking avoidance in organizational conflict situations may be perceived by others as a good member. However, even if an employee takes avoidance in expectation of obtaining a “good member” reputation, it does not produce any merit when the group does not value this type of membership and group harmony. Therefore, the functionality of avoidance depends on what values are dominant in the management of a group, that is, the culture of the group.

Although this study established a functionality of avoidance as an identity strategy among collectivists, it may be generalized to other cultural groups. Avoidance may be functional for those who are concerned with belonging to a group. The preference of avoidance is based on their belief that the organization will continue to be appropriately managed in the future, that is, it will provide each member with the appropriate treatment he/she deserves. Those who believe in the organization in this sense may select the long-range strategy of focusing on future rewards rather than on immediate rewards. In other words, those who do not have confidence in the organization may prefer short-range strategies in an organizational dilemma situation.

Research has emphasized that Japanese employees generally have stronger loyalty and commitment to their organization than Western employees (Ohbuchi, 1998). This gives some validity to our theory that an employee’s identity strategy for conflict resolution depends on the belief that the organization is properly managed. From this theory, we expect that the avoidance strategy will be found even among Western employees who have the same belief and a strong commitment toward the organization. Future research should address this issue in a cross-cultural context.

Researchers and professionals on conflict management have argued that the best strategy should be collaboration (Canary & Lakey, 2006; Hocker & Wilmot, 1991). However, in this study, collaborative strategies (persuasion and negotiation) did not produce very remarkable positive outcomes, as compared with other strategies, although it contributed to fairness and independent identity. It seems that an active engagement in conflicts, however justified or mild-mannered it may be, does not necessarily lead to positive outcomes in collectivistic societies. This could be the reason why participants in this study often decided to avoid conflicts.

However, Brew and Cairns (2004) found that collaborative strategies were effective and productive for conflict resolution even among Asians (Chinese). Seeing such an inconsistency, we should be cautious in interpreting the low effectiveness of collaborative strategies found in this study, especially because of the low reliability of the measures of collaboration.

Besides the low reliability of several measures, this study has a methodological limitation in that we focused only on conflicts with supervisors. This might have strongly

induced participants to select avoidance, which, as a result, might have overstated its functionality. Leung and Chan (1999) remarked that subordinates tend to take great care in communication with supervisors and are reticent in voicing opinion (avoidance) because they are concerned with the protection of other's face. Further, as they lived in a society where power distance is relatively high (Hofstede, 1991), the Japanese employees might have complied with supervisors in conflict situations. However, Brew and Cairns (2004) found that Chinese employees, who were ranked by Hofstede as higher than Japanese on both the collectivism and power distance dimensions, preferred high level of indirect communication in organizational conflict situations, regardless of the other's status. Further, by a content analysis of reported conflict episodes, Ohbuchi and Takahashi (1994) also found that Japanese participants generally more often took avoidance than American participants independently of relationships. Based on these empirical findings, we expect that Japanese are concerned with "a good member" image regardless of the other's status, but it must be examined in future studies.

Another methodological weakness of this study is that we measured all the variables by a single questionnaire, causing a risk of the common method bias. Although our test of the bias suggested that it was not serious, we must be cautious in interpreting the findings because the data were not completely free of it.

These findings may have some practical implications for constructive organizational conflict management. Most people in managerial positions are familiar with the view that employees from different cultural backgrounds prefer different resolution strategies, and such diverse preferences often call for sensitive, delicate management of organizational conflicts. Avoidance may be especially problematic because the motivations for and perceptions of this strategy choice differ across cultures. Managers generally regard avoidance by employees as an indication of a low level of concern about conflict issues or even a sign of personal weakness. However, this study suggests that those having collectivistic values actively choose avoidance with the expectation that it will contribute to group harmony and relationships. If a manager fails to recognize these positive concerns owing to the influence of the avoidance stereotype, it may lead to inappropriate conflict resolution such as lingering feelings of internal frustration and hostility, just as Western researchers and professionals have repeatedly documented (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991; Sillars, 1980). However, if these concerns are recognized and coped with properly, the relationship between the parties can be reinforced and group management may be improved (Friedman et al., 2006).

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Emi Atsumi is professor of Department of Rehabilitation, Faculty of Health Sciences, Tohoku Fukushi University. Her research concerns include: conflict management and social skills in clinical settings. Her recent article is “Cross-cultural study on victim’s responses to apology in interpersonal and intergroup conflicts” (*Tohoku Psychologica Folia*, 2008, Vol. 76, pp. 53–60).

Ken-ichi Ohbuchi is professor of Department of Psychology and head of Human Resource Development Office of the Center for the Study of Social Stratification and Inequality, Graduate School of Arts and Letters, Tohoku University, Sendai, Japan. He received his Ph.D. from Tohoku University. His research concerns include: interpersonal and intergroup aggression, conflict management, forgiveness, and justice. His recent edited book is *Social Justice in Japan* (2007; Melbourne: Trans Pacific Press).