

# The Good News about Honor Culture: The Preference for Cooperative Conflict Management in the Absence of Insults

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## Keywords

conflict, honor culture, conflict management, cultural differences, cooperation.

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## Abstract

People from honor cultures are generally seen as prone to react aggressively in conflict situations. The current research challenges this view and shows that people from honor cultures react more constructively to a conflict situation than people from dignity cultures, as long as they are not insulted. In an experiment in which 41 honor and 41 dignity participants reacted to a conflict situation with or without insult, we showed that—as long as they are not insulted—people from honor cultures handled potential conflict situations more constructively than people from dignity cultures. Thus, the good news about people from honor cultures is that they are willing and able to handle conflict situations constructively—even more so than people from dignity cultures—as long as they are not insulted.

In the current article, we draw attention to a largely ignored phenomenon concerning conflict behavior in honor cultures. Although people from honor cultures are known to show more escalating conflict behavior than people from dignity cultures after being insulted, we address their willingness to show more constructive conflict behavior. Previous work has mostly focused on aggressive conflict behavior favored by people from honor cultures, but this effect has only been demonstrated under conditions of being insulted. To complement this view, we argue that people from honor cultures may be highly willing and able to display constructive conflict behavior—even more so than people from dignity cultures—as long as they are not insulted.

We will also complement earlier studies by focusing on the psychological processes underlying constructive conflict behavior, as this is an important factor in conflict escalation versus conflict prevention. Specifically, we investigate how people subjectively feel about a potential conflict situation, what makes them interpret the situation as a conflict, and under which circumstances they are willing to display cooperative versus aggressive conflict behavior. By studying these processes that precede actual conflict behavior, we can find out *why* people act as they do and may find ways for early interventions that prevent conflict escalation. In this contribution, we first argue why and when people from honor cultures might be more constructive in their conflict management than people from dignity cultures. We then present a study that addresses these issues more specifically.

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## Culture and Conflict

In their research on within- and between-culture variation, Leung and Cohen (2011) described honor culture and dignity culture. First, in honor cultures, honor is the value of a person in his or her own eyes, but also in the eyes of society. In honor cultures, people base their self-esteem in large part on their social reputation and on how well they live up to the culturally defined *honor code* (Peristiany, 1965; Stewart, 1994). The honor code involves a set of norms that are defined by values that are emphasized within a culture and can refer to different domains, such as family honor, masculine honor, feminine honor, or integrity (Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2002a). For example, it is important for males to have a reputation of toughness and to be able to protect their families and possessions. For females, modesty and the avoidance of shameful behaviors—especially sexual immodesty or adultery—is key (Vandello & Cohen, 2003). Typical honor cultures can be found around the Mediterranean, in the Middle East, in Latin America, or in the southern states of the United States (Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, & Schwarz, 1996; Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2000; Rodriguez Mosquera, Manstead, & Fischer, 2002b).

A dignity culture is the general Western-American culture (Cohen et al., 1996; Leung & Cohen, 2011; Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2002b). The main idea is that people in a dignity culture have *inalienable worth*; they are born being as worthy as any other person, and this inherent worth and self-esteem does not depend on the esteem of other people, and it cannot be taken away by other people. In contrast, a person's worth is socially inferred in honor cultures. People in dignity cultures are supposed to behave according to their internal standards, and the presence or absence of other people should not influence the rightness of their behavior (Leung & Cohen, 2011).<sup>1</sup>

### Conflict and Insult

Conflict exists when one person perceives that someone is negatively affecting something that he or she cares about (De Dreu, Harinck, & Van Vianen, 1999; Thomas, 1992). This “something he or she cares about” can vary from relatively concrete resources, such as time or money, to more abstract concerns, such as values or honor (Harinck, De Dreu & Van Vianen, 2000). Someone's honor can easily be damaged in a conflict, especially if a person is insulted during the conflict. An insult is a sign that the “victim is inferior and undeserving of respect” (Kim & Smith, 1993, p. 39). Maintaining the respect of others is a core value in honor cultures, and if this value is thwarted by an insult, the conflict is likely to escalate (Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988). Insults can be uttered to intentionally hurt or offend another person, or people may accidentally and unintentionally say things that are insulting. In the current study, however, we do not study the insulter and his or her motivations to insult; instead, we focus on the reactions of the insultee and how the insultee intends to handle the conflict depending on whether he or she was insulted or not.

In honor cultures violence is considered a valid way to restore a person's self-worth, reputation, and lowered status due to an insult (Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2002a). Kim and Smith (1993) noted that a person's feelings of self-worth that are diminished by the insult of the other conflict party can be restored by taking revenge. Moreover, this behavior may also have special communicative functions; people who take revenge demonstrate to others that they are willing and able to protect their reputation and property.

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<sup>1</sup>Face cultures constitute a third type of culture. Face is the respectability that a person has due to his or her position in the hierarchy and the proper fulfillment of his or her role (Hamamura, Meijer, Heine, Kamaya, & Hori, 2009; Leung & Cohen, 2011). A person can increase face by moving up in the hierarchy, but that is hard to do. A person can rather easily lose face by not living up to the expectations of others. Both face and honor are determined by how other people view a person. Face, however, occurs in a stable hierarchical environment, and people cannot increase their own face by taking other's face. Honor occurs in a more competitive environment, in which one person can take away and claim another person's honor.

People from honor cultures react differently in conflicts than people from dignity cultures, especially when they are insulted during conflicts (Beersma, Harinck, & Gerts, 2003; Cohen et al., 1996; IJzerman, van Dijk, & Gallucci, 2007; Rodriguez Mosquera, Fischer, Manstead, & Zaalberg, 2008; Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2002a; Vandello & Cohen, 2003). Indeed, prior research has shown that individuals who attach much value to honor are angrier and more willing to react aggressively in a conflict in which they were insulted than individuals who attach less value to honor (Beersma et al., 2003; Cohen et al., 1996; Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2002a).

Moreover, individuals from honor cultures are generally more accepting of violence when defending their home, status, or family than individuals from dignity cultures (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994). Cohen et al. (1996) investigated how individuals with high versus low honor values reacted to someone who was rude to them and insulted them by calling them an “asshole.” In this research, high-honor individuals more readily thought that their reputation was at stake, showed stronger physiological responses related to stress and aggression, and were more willing to engage in aggressive and dominant behavior after the insult than low-honor individuals.

In a similar vein, IJzerman et al. (2007) showed that honor values led to more aggressive behavior in a field study among Dutch male railway travelers, half of whom were insulted by a confederate who bumped into the participant in the train and made a degrading remark. They showed that insulted participants with high honor values were angrier, less fearful, and less resigned than insulted participants with low honor values.

### The Good News about Honor Culture

We argue that this focus on aggressive responses shown by people from honor cultures paints a one-sided picture and primarily pertains to situations that have already escalated due to explicitly insulting comments or actions. We complement this picture by drawing attention to evidence that people from honor cultures can also be *less* aggressive in conflicts than people from dignity cultures, that is, as long as they are not insulted. There are at least two theoretical arguments that can explain why this is the case. First, the politeness norms in honor cultures (Cohen, Vandello, Puente, & Rantilla, 1999) generally prescribe an avoiding or appeasing conflict management style, in contrast to a more confrontational conflict management style in dignity cultures where politeness norms are less salient (Brew & Cairns, 2004; Cai & Fink, 2002).

Indeed, Cohen et al. (1999) observed that in response to repeated annoyances, people from honor cultures initially reacted stoically and politely, trying to ignore the annoyances rather than telling the annoying person to stop. They argued that people from honor cultures are polite and try not to offend others, as these others could become dangerous when provoked. Indeed, it makes sense to tread carefully in cultures where revenge is seen as a way to regain honor and where violence and aggression are acceptable responses to insult. Thus, the polite behavior of people from honor cultures can be seen as instrumental in that it may help avoid a potentially dangerous confrontation with another person (Cohen & Vandello, 2004).

A second, related explanation is that a confrontational conflict style may be riskier for people from honor cultures than dignity cultures. A confrontational, dominating conflict style is likely to result in one party winning and one party losing the conflict (Cai & Fink, 2002). The social aspect of losing or winning a conflict might be more important for those from an honor culture than for people from a dignity culture as they may lose more than what is directly at stake in the conflict, and they may lose their honor as well.

To the extent that the need to maintain a positive social self-image is higher for people from honor cultures than for people from dignity cultures (Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2008), the former are more vulnerable in conflict situations. Thus, an open confrontation can be more threatening for people from honor cultures than for people from dignity cultures; as a result, they have more to gain by avoiding the conflict or by solving it before it becomes overt. Thus, we argue that people from honor cultures have more to lose when openly engaging in a conflict than people from dignity cultures. Therefore, they are

inclined to use less confrontational conflict styles than people from honor cultures, as long as they are not insulted (Hypothesis 1a).

After an insult, however, different concerns come into play. As mentioned above, an insult communicates that the target of the insult is an inferior person who does not deserve respect (Kim & Smith, 1993). At the same time, maintaining the respect of others is a core value in honor cultures. As a result, people from honor cultures will have a stronger affective reaction after an insult than people from dignity cultures because they have a higher need to restore their social image as honorable persons that can defend themselves, their family, and their property (Hypothesis 1b).

## Prior Research

Interestingly, there are some prior research findings that speak to the above perspective. For example, Cohen and Nisbett (1994) found that, in the United States, southerners (honor culture) to be more likely than northerners (dignity culture) to condemn aggression across situations and noted that people from honor cultures perceive violence to be acceptable only in specific circumstances. Likewise, Cohen et al. (1996) studied how people from a dignity culture and people from an honor culture reacted to being insulted or not. Participants were insulted—or not—by a first confederate and then walked down a corridor. In the corridor, a second confederate was walking up to them on a collision course. The researchers measured at what distance the participant gave way to the second confederate, with smaller distances being the more dominant and aggressive response.

The results showed a crossover interaction. Participants from an honor culture gave way at a shorter distance than participants from a dignity culture when they were insulted. However, when they were not insulted, honor participants gave way at a larger distance than dignity participants, suggesting that honor culture participants showed a less dominant or aggressive response than dignity participants when they were not insulted. Similar patterns were found for an evaluator's rating of the firmness of the handshake of the participants or their ratings of the participants' dominance or submissiveness; when not insulted, honor participants were perceived as less dominant or behaving less aggressively than dignity participants (Cohen et al., 1996).

Beersma et al. (2003) found similar results. They investigated how insulted versus not insulted participants with high and low honor values reacted toward different conflict vignettes. They found that high-honor-value participants intended to show more aggressive and forcing behavior when they were insulted than when they were not insulted. However, the results reported by Beersma et al. (2003) also indicated that when no insult was uttered, high-honor-value participants were less inclined to engage in aggressive forcing behavior than low-honor-value participants. This study also found a significant negative correlation between honor values and intentions to behave aggressively, indicating that overall, people with higher honor values tend to use a *less* dominant and aggressive conflict style than people with lower honor values. Notwithstanding these positive findings about honor cultures, both Beersma et al. (2003) and Cohen et al. (1996) focused on the escalating effects that occurred when participants with high honor cultures were confronted with insults.

In summary, although aggressive responses by honor culture participants have been found to occur under specific circumstances, the polite side of honor culture conflict management has received very little explicit research attention. The current research fills this void by explicitly focusing on conflict resolution by participants with high honor values in the absence of insults.

## Current Research

Prior research has investigated many forms of conflict management behavior and indicators of conflict responses, varying from homicide and gun ownership (Cohen & Nisbett, 1994), cortisol and testosterone levels (Cohen et al., 1996), perceived anger by observers (Ijzerman et al., 2007), to verbal disapproval of

insulters (Rodriguez Mosquera et al., 2008). Research so far has not explicitly addressed specific forms of conflict behavior or negotiation styles favored by people from honor versus dignity cultures. Negotiation is a major form of conflict management (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993) and is considered a very constructive way to manage conflicts because it is “the main route to win–win solutions” (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993, p. xv). The current research will focus on constructive conflict management behaviors such as problem solving and compromising (Lewicki, Barry, & Saunders, 2010; Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993).

We will also complement earlier research by addressing the specific circumstances under which conflicts emerge, comparing situations with and without insult. We will address elements of the process that unfolds before displays of conflict behavior can be observed, such as deciding whether or not the situation is a conflict, seeing and interpreting the other party’s behavior in view of the context, and deciding upon a course of action or conflict strategy. We will focus on how people interpret the same conflict situation with and without insult, rather than comparing situations that differ in terms of objective characteristics or conflict issues, to examine the possibility that people with different cultural backgrounds give different interpretations to the same situation. We think this focus is important because different interpretations of the same situation may give rise to intercultural misunderstandings and communication problems that foster conflict escalation (Ting-Toomey, Oetzel, & Yee-Jung, 2001). Thus, by studying these early interpretations, we study the roots of a conflict cycle, which can inform the development of interventions.

## Method

### Design and Participants

We investigated our predictions about the moderating role of insults in an experimental field study comparing participants from an honor culture with participants from a dignity culture. They read conflict descriptions in which they were insulted or not, and then filled out questionnaires containing the dependent variables.

Forty-one honor culture participants (13 males, 28 females) and 41 dignity culture participants (10 males, 31 females) responded to situational descriptions in which they were either insulted or not. Their mean age was 22.2 years. Participants were recruited at two institutions of higher education in Leiden and The Hague, two major cities in the Netherlands.

To represent honor culture participants we chose a particular ethnic minority in the Netherlands: Hindustan people. People from this group—or their parents—originated from British India, worked in a former Dutch colony, and then moved to the Netherlands. Hindustan Dutch people are generally well integrated in the Dutch society, making them comparable to dignity culture participants in terms of Dutch language ability, average level of education level, and socio-economic status. To check whether the ethnic minority members could be considered as members of an honor culture, all participants completed the 27-item Honor Values Scale of Rodriguez Mosquera et al. (2002a) ( $\alpha = .88$ ), before the main study. Examples of items are as follows: “To what extent would you feel bad if you (a) would betray others, (b) you could not defend yourself when others would offend you, or (c) you could not support your own family?” (0 = *not at all*, to 6 = *very bad*). As intended, the ethnic minority participants showed higher scores on the honor scale ( $M = 4.11$ ,  $SD = .70$ ) than native Dutch participants ( $M = 3.57$ ,  $SD = .89$ ),  $F(1,80) = 8.99$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .10$ .

### Procedure

The procedure was similar to the procedure reported in Beersma et al. (2003), but we used a different conflict description. Participants received a booklet containing the questionnaires and the conflict description. They were asked to think of themselves as being in a situation in which they

had to do an assignment together with a fellow student. The participant supposedly had not done his or her part of the assignment, which caused an argument between the participant and the fellow student. In the insult condition, the description of the situation ends with the fellow student calling the participant a “free rider.” In the no-insult condition, this final insult was omitted. After reading these instructions, participants completed a second questionnaire containing the manipulation checks and the conflict interpretation and conflict management measures.

## Dependent Variables

### *Feeling Offended*

The extent to which the participants would feel offended in the described situation was measured with seven items ( $\alpha = .94$ ). Examples of items were as follows: In this situation, (a) I was offended by my fellow student, (b) I was humiliated by my fellow student, or (c) I was hurt by my fellow student. (0 = *not at all* to 6 = *very much*.)

### *Perceived Conflict*

The extent to which participants perceived the situation as a conflict was assessed with three items ( $\alpha = .77$ ). The items were as follows: In this situation, (a) there was a conflict, (b) there was an argument between me and my fellow student, and (c) there was tension between me and my fellow student (0 = *not at all*, 6 = *very much*). We used principal component analysis with Varimax rotation to check whether the items of insult and perceived conflict could be distinguished from each other (see Table 1). Results showed two factors with eigenvalues above 1, with all items concerning insult loading on the first factor (eigenvalue = 5.61,  $R^2 = 50.26\%$ ) and all items of perceived conflict loading on the second factor (eigenvalue = 1.64,  $R^2 = 22.18\%$ ).

### *Conflict Behavior*

Conflict behavior was measured with the Dutch questionnaire for conflict handling (De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer, & Nauta, 2001) asking to what extent participants would use certain conflict behaviors in the situation described (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very much*). After removing some items that did not show consistent clustering patterns for the two subsamples in preliminary analyses, factor analysis revealed four subscales of the conflict behaviors: the forcing subscale ( $\alpha = .77$ ), the yielding subscale ( $\alpha = .74$ ), the avoiding subscale ( $\alpha = .77$ ), and a broader cooperative conflict management scale incorporating compromising as well as problem-solving items ( $\alpha = .79$ ; see Table 2 for items and factor loadings).

Table 1

*Factor Loadings for Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation of the Insult Items and Perceived Conflict Items*

Items	Feeling offended (FO)	Perceived conflict (PC)
There was a conflict (PC)	.10	<b>.84</b>
We had an argument (PC)	.29	<b>.74</b>
There was tension (PC)	.11	<b>.85</b>
I was insulted (FO)	<b>.80</b>	.23
I was hurt (FO)	<b>.79</b>	.29
My honor was hurt (FO)	<b>.83</b>	.26
The other person's behavior was unacceptable (FO)	<b>.86</b>	.12
I was embarrassed (FO)	<b>.86</b>	.14
The other person did not show respect (FO)	<b>.88</b>	.06
I was humiliated (FO)	<b>.86</b>	.14

Note. Factor loadings  $>.50$  are in boldface.

Table 2

Factor Loadings of Principal Component Analysis with Varimax Rotation for Forcing (F), Yielding (Y), Cooperative Conflict Management (CCM), and Avoiding (A)

Items	F	Y	CCM	A
I forced my own point of view (F)	<b>.60</b>	-.34	-.16	-.31
I tried to make profit (F)	<b>.78</b>	.15	-.17	.05
I fought for a good outcome for myself (F)	<b>.78</b>	-.26	-.07	.16
I did anything to win (F)	<b>.79</b>	-.05	-.12	-.22
I gave in to wishes of the other party (Y)	-.09	<b>.83</b>	-.08	.17
I said the other party was right (Y)	-.11	<b>.82</b>	.14	.10
I adapted to the other's goals (Y)	-.04	<b>.56</b>	.10	.39
I searched for a solution that satisfied both parties (CCM)	-.25	.34	<b>.63</b>	-.29
I emphasized finding a middle road (CCM)	-.22	-.02	<b>.86</b>	-.08
I insisted that we both had to give in a little (CCM)	.11	-.19	<b>.84</b>	.03
I tried to find a compromise (CCM)	-.27	.26	<b>.68</b>	.06
I avoided a confrontation about our differences (A)	-.26	.31	.00	<b>.76</b>
I avoided our different opinions as much as possible (A)	.05	.03	-.12	<b>.86</b>
I tried to avoid a confrontation (A)	.02	.49	-.04	<b>.63</b>

Note. Factor loadings >.50 are in boldface.

## Results

Means and correlations of the main dependent variables can be found in Table 3.

### Feeling Offended

The extent to which participants felt the other person had offended them was analyzed by ANOVA with insult (yes vs. no) and culture (honor vs. dignity) as between-subject factors. Results showed a reliable main effect of insult, indicating that our manipulation was successful: Participants reported more offense in the insult condition ( $M = 3.31, SD = 1.55$ ) than in the no-insult condition ( $M = 1.69, SD = 1.46, F [1,78] = 23.71, p < .001, \eta^2 = .23$ ). Additionally, we observed a main effect of culture, suggesting that honor culture participants were more offended overall ( $M = 3.09, SD = 1.76$ ) than dignity culture participants ( $M = 2.00, SD = 1.49, F [1,78] = 9.35, p < .01, \eta^2 = .11$ ). Because we predicted that the effects of culture should be more evident in the insult condition than in the no-insult condition, we examined whether the main effect of culture was reliable in each of the insult conditions, even though there was no significant interaction. Results were consistent with our reasoning, in that people from an honor culture felt significantly more offended than those from a dignity culture in the insult condition,  $F(1,79) = 5.97, p < .02$ , while the difference between them was less strong in the no-insult condition,  $F(1,79) = 3.37, p < .07$ . This effect is in line with our reasoning and consistent with Hypothesis 1b, namely that people

Table 3

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations of Dependent Variables ( $N = 82$ )

	M (SD)	1	2	3
1. Honor scale	3.84 (0.84)	–		
2. Feeling offended	2.55 (1.71)	.34**	–	
3. Perceived conflict	3.27 (1.25)	.17	.40**	–
4. Cooperative conflict behavior	3.64 (0.77)	.13	-.20 <sup>+</sup>	-.06

Note. <sup>+</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

from honor cultures have a stronger affective reaction to conflict than people from dignity cultures, and this effect seems more pronounced when they are insulted.

**Perceived Conflict**

The conflict interpretation was analyzed by ANOVA with insult (yes vs. no) and culture (honor vs. dignity) as between-subject factors. Results showed a main effect of insult,  $F(1,78) = 8.61, p < .01$ , and  $\eta^2 = .10$ , qualified by an interaction of Insult  $\times$  Culture,  $F(1,78) = 8.67, p < .01$ , and  $\eta^2 = .10$  (see Figure 1). In line with Hypothesis 1a, simple main effects showed that honor culture participants interpreted the situation as less conflictual than dignity culture participants in the absence of insult,  $F(1,78) = 4.44, p = .038$ . Additionally, and in line with Hypothesis 1b, honor culture participants tended to interpret the situation as more conflictual than dignity culture participants after an insult,  $F(1,78) = 3.38, p = .070$ .

**Conflict Behavior**

The four subscales of conflict behavior—forcing, yielding, avoiding, and cooperative conflict behavior—were analyzed in four separate ANOVAs with insult (yes vs. no) and culture (honor vs. dignity) as between-subject factors. Only the cooperative conflict behavior scale showed a significant effect—an interaction of Insult  $\times$  Culture,  $F(1,77) = 4.11, p = .046, \eta^2 = .05$  (see Figure 2). In line with Hypothesis 1a, simple main effects showed that honor culture participants were more willing to show cooperative conflict behavior than dignity culture participants when they were not insulted,  $F(1,78) = 5.21, p = .025$ . Honor culture and dignity culture participants were equally willing to engage in cooperative conflict behavior after an insult,  $F(1,78) = .30, ns$ , offering no support for Hypothesis 1b on this measure.

**Discussion**

Extending previous findings, we argued and showed that people from honor cultures are more reluctant to perceive a situation as a conflict and are more willing to engage in cooperative conflict behaviors than people from dignity cultures when the situation involves no insult. Our reasoning is based on the assumption that an open confrontation with another person tends to be riskier for people from honor cultures than for people from dignity cultures. A person from an honor culture should be more con-

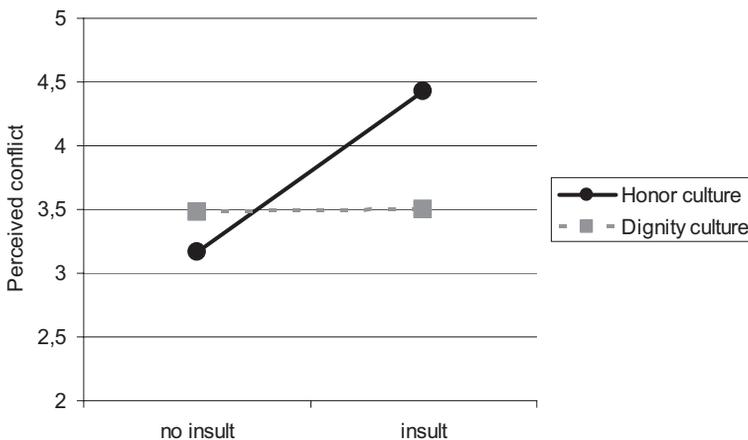


Figure 1. Perceived conflict by honor and dignity participants.

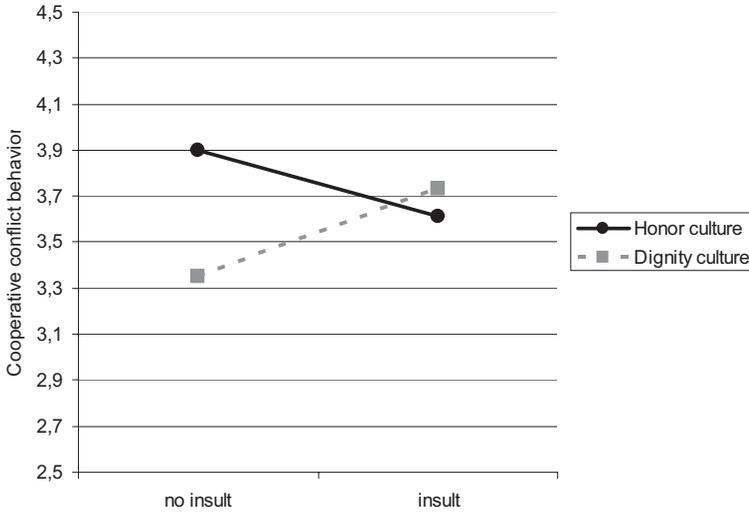


Figure 2. Cooperative conflict behavior by honor and dignity participants.

cerned about the possibility of losing face in a conflict by either being insulted or “losing” the conflict. If an honor person is insulted or loses the conflict, they may also lose the respect of their group and may need to restore their image of being a respectable person, for example by retaliating. This may explain why they prefer to handle potentially conflictual situations in a cooperative way—at least initially. When the other party displays forcing or aggressive behavior or insults the honor culture person, then the need to restore one’s reputation becomes paramount, eliciting more aggressive conflict behavior.

The added value of the current research is threefold. First, we focus on the processes that occur before people actually engage in conflict behavior—and before the situation has escalated into a full-blown conflict—by studying how people interpret a conflict situation and assessing the specific strategy they intend to follow. Examining these precursors of conflict enables us to predict why and when conflicts are more or less likely to escalate, providing scope for interventions addressing the early stages of conflict development in order to avoid conflict escalation and to promote peaceful conflict resolution.

Second, we show that even though participants from honor cultures generally felt more hurt and offended in this situation than participants from dignity cultures, they only interpreted the situation as conflictual when they were insulted. It seems as if interpretation of a situation as a conflict is forestalled until the confrontation is so obvious—due to the insult—that it can no longer be denied. At this point, honor culture participants clearly label the situation as a conflict and become less willing to engage in cooperative conflict resolution. This is in line with the idea that an open confrontation tends to be more threatening for people from honor cultures than for people from dignity cultures. Our findings concerning subjective interpretations and intended strategies in the early stages of conflict development also complement the behavioral observations made by Cohen et al. (1999), namely that honor culture participants reacted rather stoically to early annoyances but displayed angry and aggressive behavior when the annoyances persisted and could no longer be ignored.

Third, we extend prior findings by addressing a different cultural group than the honor culture representatives studied in previous research, such as southerners in the United States or Dutch migrants from the Mediterranean countries. Even though the group we examined (Hindustan Dutch) is well integrated in Dutch language and society and cannot be seen as a low status group in terms of educational level or SES, we were able to show that they endorse honor values more than native Dutch and display responses typical for members of an honor culture. This implies that the effects of honor culture versus dignity

culture can be demonstrated among people with equal societal status, who do not suffer from group-based stigmatization.

## Implications

The current results offer a more nuanced and hopeful perspective on the conflict management styles of people from honor cultures. Instead of viewing honor culture people as prone to respond aggressively and show hostility in conflicts, we propose that this type of behavior is probably restricted to conflict situations in which a person is insulted or a person's reputation is at stake. Our findings suggest that in other types of conflicts, in less severe conflicts, or in the initial phases of conflict, people from honor cultures will behave more constructively and cooperatively than people from dignity cultures. Moreover, the aggressive behavior may be restricted to situations that are seen as particularly insulting. For example, Cohen and Nisbett (1994) noted that people from the southern states of the U.S.A.—honor culture—only endorse aggressive behavior in issues of protection and honor.

There are several valid reasons why prior research might have overlooked or underestimated honor people's cooperative conflict management tendencies. One reason could be that they focused on salient but rather extreme conflict situations—such as those resulting in homicide (Cohen et al., 1996). Although it is very important to understand the conditions leading to such extreme outcomes, these results do not necessarily help understand more ordinary—but common—conflict situations that we face on a daily basis. At the same time, the potentially de-escalating effects of the honor culture style of conflict management might be underestimated because these effects are harder to assess than the escalating effects. It is difficult—or even impossible—to assess to what extent homicides, injuries, or other negative outcomes have been *prevented* due to cooperative conflict management. Thus, focusing on the occurrence of injuries or aggressive acts does not allow us to infer whether or how frequently such negative outcomes were avoided by constructive conflict management, as we can only count the injuries or aggressive acts that did take place.

In dignity cultures, it is common to talk about a conflict and to openly discuss the issue between the conflict parties in order to find a solution. People living in these cultures consider this approach as the standard way to solve a conflict and expect it from others as well. This approach, however, might be less obvious or less constructive for people from honor cultures. Although our results show that people from honor cultures have the intention to solve the conflict cooperatively, the open discussion on different views implies that the conflict is acknowledged, which might still be too threatening for them. They may prefer to politely ignore the conflict—as shown by ignoring the annoyances in the early stages of a conflict in the work by Cohen et al. (1999). Someone from a dignity culture who tries to resolve a conflict with someone from an honor culture may not pick up subtle cues intended to address the issue without explicit reference to the conflict. In fact, intercultural miscommunications are likely to emerge when people from a dignity culture fail to realize that the very behavior that is constructive in their own eyes might be considered offensive or threatening by honor culture people (Ting-Toomey et al., 2001).<sup>2</sup> Future research might aim to identify modes of conflict resolution that are acceptable for both types of cultures, for example the use of third parties.

## Limitations and Future Directions

We argued that the inclination of people from honor cultures to react less offensively to conflict situations as long as no insult is made can be explained by politeness norms or may result from their desire to avoid a potentially dangerous confrontation. Although there is ample evidence that these processes play

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<sup>2</sup>See also Brew and Cairns (2004) or Cai and Fink (2002) for different cultural perspectives on conflict management styles and negotiation.

a role in honor cultures (Cohen et al., 1996, 1999; Peristiany, 1965), we did not explicitly assess these concerns in the present research. Hence, our current findings do not allow us to directly examine whether these explanations indeed can account for the observed differences in conflict perceptions and conflict strategies. Now that we have established that people from honor cultures tend to respond cooperatively to conflict situations as long as no insult is made, future research may build on these findings to identify the specific concerns that drive these effects.

Future research might also further specify which kinds of situations or utterances are considered particularly insulting in honor cultures. This type of knowledge could help to avoid or de-escalate conflicts between people from honor and dignity cultures by helping to avoid unintended insults or by fostering peaceful settlement when conflicts accidentally arise.

## Conclusion

The current research modifies and complements earlier views on people from honor cultures, by showing that the common association of honor culture with aggressive conflict management highlights only one aspect of how these people respond to conflicts, namely when they are insulted. As long as they are not insulted, people from honor cultures are more constructive than people from dignity cultures—they interpret the situation less as a conflict, even if they feel more offended, and initially are more willing than dignity culture people to seek compromises or conflict solutions that satisfy both parties' concerns. This research not only gives a more complete view of conflict management in honor cultures, it also offers a window of opportunity for constructive conflict resolution between cultures. The good news is that we have shown that conflicts with or between people from honor cultures do not necessarily escalate into aggression and violence. Contrary to popular views, people from honor cultures are willing and able to solve a conflict in a peaceful and mutually satisfactory manner, as long as they are not insulted.

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