Managerial and Employee Conflict Communication in Papua New Guinea: Application of the Culture-Based Social Ecological Conflict Model

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Abstract

Framed by the culture-based social ecological conflict model (CBSECM), this study examines individuals' accounts of conflict communication in Papua New Guinea (PNG) between Chinese managers and PNG employees. In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 14 participants: six Chinese managers and eight PNG employees. The findings show that primary orientation elements of face and power distance and situational features of labor laws and family obligations shape reported conflict communication strategies. PNG employees tended to submit to managers even when they felt wrongly accused given their cultural orientations and situational constraints. To express dissent, these employees often used indirect, passive resistance strategies. Chinese managers reported using competition to resolve conflicts. The resulting conflict outcomes are distrust and dissatisfaction and have potential negative implications for intercultural relations and organizational success. The study contributes to the CBSECM by illuminating some of the multilevel effects proposed in the model.

Research on culture and conflict communication is prolific leading to significant understanding of the ways that people manage conflict across cultures. Much of this research is based on cross-cultural comparisons (i.e., comparing how two or more cultures or countries interact with members of their own cultures) using individualism and collectivism as an explanatory mechanism. Such research has found that individualism tends to lead to self-face needs, competitive conflict communication, and direct consultation about face and conflict needs; in contrast, collectivism tends to lead to other-face needs, indirect management of face and conflict needs, and collaborative, avoiding, and compromising conflict communication (e.g., Boros, Meslec, Curseu, & Emons, 2010; Komarraju, Dollinger, & Lovell, 2008; Merkin, 2015; Nguyen, Le, & Boles, 2010; Oetzel et al., 2001). These findings are reflective of conflict models or theories that include concerns or preferences and value or norms such as dual-concern models (Putnam, 2013) and face-negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998).

While these models are illustrative of within-culture conflict communication and some intercultural conflict communication, research also demonstrates that some collectivistic people will engage in competitive conflict during conflict negotiations with members of different cultures as explained by the ingroup–outgroup distinction (Lui, 2011; Lui & Wilson, 2010; Triandis, 1995); similarly, some individualistic people also use different conflict communication with outgroup members (Adler & Graham, 1989). The culture-based situational conflict model (Ting-Toomey, Oetzel, & Yee-Jung, 2001) was

developed to address multiple explanatory factors of dual concerns, value–norm differences, and situational appraisals for explaining individuals' conflict behavior.

This model has been useful for explaining the interplay of values and situational appraisals to understand conflict dynamics and outcomes. However, this model also has limitations in that it fails to recognize multilevel socio-historical factors, political factors, and situational appraisals which shape conflict communication (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2013) provided an in-depth explanation of the advantages of examining multilevel effects including the following: (a) integrating worldviews and globalization to the understanding of value differences; (b) providing a rich understanding of the conflict context to illustrate institutional and political influences that affect situational appraisals and individual communication (top-down effects); and (c) illustrating how individual communication shapes conflict context and institutions (bottom-up effects).

Thus, this study is framed by the culture-based social ecological conflict model (CBSECM; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013) which considers multilevel effects. The CBSECM explores the way that primary cultural orientations (e.g., individualism–collectivism, power distance, and face concerns), situational appraisals, conflict communication, and conflict outcomes develop along multiple levels. The model provides a sophisticated framework for understanding intercultural conflict consistent with a culture-in-context approach that examines multiple layers and factors (Janosik, 1987). However, the CBSECM is much more elaborate and explicit on the relevant conflict components. The purpose of this study is to examine the usefulness of the model to explain conflict communication of managers and employees in a specific cultural context. This examination includes how the four major constructs, as well as how multilevel effects, are reflected in conflict accounts. Conflict accounts are useful approaches to understanding conflict communication as they show how individuals perceive and construct their social reality (Buttny, 2012; Gelfand et al., 2001). More specifically, they show how participants explain, justify, and evaluate their own and the other party's communication; they provide insights into participants' sense-making of a conflict and its context (Buttny, 2012; Gelfand et al., 2001).

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is like most other nation-states that are increasingly global and multicultural; there are frequent intercultural interactions and potentially frequent conflict as a result of this diversity (Oetzel, McDermott, Torres, & Christina, 2012). While the study of intercultural conflict in organizations is common in many nations, it is understudied in the Pacific Islands in general and PNG in particular. This study also examines interpersonal conflict accounts from two cultures that are generally classified as collectivistic. The current study provides an examination of the model as applied to interpersonal conflict between Chinese managers and indigenous PNG employees. The study includes qualitative interviews with six managers and eight employees from six small- and medium-size wholesale and retail shops owned and/or managed by Chinese with indigenous PNG employees.

We first begin with a review of the CBSECM with particular focus on PNG and Chinese cultural perspectives around conflict. We also integrate a brief background of the PNG context within the model. We then introduce the interview procedures and discuss the results in the context of the CBSECM.

Culture-Based Social Ecological Conflict Model in the Papua New Guinea Context

The CBSECM was originally developed in 2001 (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001) and later expanded (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013) to explore the multiple levels of intercultural conflict developed through the social ecological framework (Brofenbrenner, 1979; Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, & Rinderle, 2006; Stokols, 1996). The social ecological framework explores how individuals are related to their environments. This framework includes four distinct and nested levels: macro, exo, meso, and micro (Brofenbrenner, 1979). The macro-level refers to larger sociocultural elements such as worldviews, histories, and ideologies. The exo-level includes formal institutions such as government and judicial systems. The meso-level consists of the immediate levels of influence such as the neighborhood, workplace, and local churches. The

micro-level is the intrapersonal and interpersonal features that are close to people as they live their daily lives. These levels shape and influence each other through top-down (macro to micro) and bottom-up effects (micro to macro). Multilevel effects occur when two or more levels combine to shape conflict communication of individuals (top-down) or larger societal approaches to conflict (bottom-up). These effects might include the following: (a) One level exacerbates a second level; (b) one level contradicts a second level; (c) one level is perceived by one party as shaping behavior and a second level is perceived by the other party for the same behavior; and (d) the levels complement or reinforce each other (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013).

The CBSECM includes four key components each with specific elements: primary orientations, situational appraisals, conflict communication, and conflict outcomes (see Figure 1). While multilevel elements are included in both primary orientations and situational appraisals, the current version of the model does not explicitly link the specific elements of these components together. Hence, this review is organized around the four components and the multilevel effects are integrated within the primary orientations and situational appraisals components.

Primary Orientations

Primary orientations are the elements that explain general interactive patterns of individuals involved in intercultural conflicts. Primary orientations involve each of the four levels. At the macro-level, cultural values such as individualism–collectivism (individual goals and rights or group-oriented goals and rights) and power distance (degree to which people believe power should be distributed unequally) have been found to influence conflict communication (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). At the exo-level, religiosity and spirituality have been found to influence conflict communication (Croucher, 2013). At the meso-level, family socialization patterns have been identified as creating communication norms for conflict (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). At the micro-level, individual attributes such as independent and interdependent self-construals and self- and other-face concerns have been shown to shape conflict communication (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003).

In regard to the specific context of this study, PNGeans "identify more strongly with their clan links and their origins" and those that they live with (Burke, McKinnon, Barkhordarian, Dorney, & Flannery, 2005, p. 24). They have closer relationships and stronger social identity with their community or ethnic
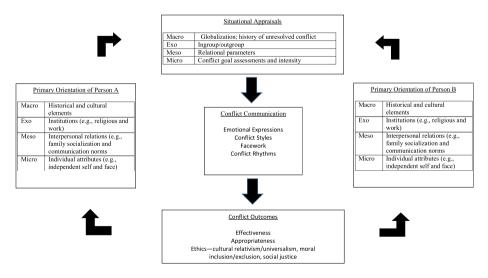

Figure 1. Culture-based social ecological conflict model (adapted from Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013).

groups than their attitudes toward national identity (Feeny, Leach, & Scambary, 2012). In other words, PNGeans are socially bound; everyone in the community is related through kinship, speaking the same language, historical ties through marriage or tribal war alliance, or sharing similar ethic cultures. All of these form the basis of integration (Brown, 1982; Tivinarlik & Wanat, 2006). People are interconnected by this web of social ties and networks (Brown, 1982) and claim loyalty to one another either as a group or in person (Reilly, 2008). Observing and applying moral order to maintain social order is paramount in the decision-making process in PNG societies (Barker, 2007). The morality and legality of the issues always go hand in hand in upholding and maintaining the social contract or norms that have been implicated in interactions.

In regard to Chinese cultural values and worldviews, research demonstrates that Chinese embrace and maintain social harmony with one another based on Confucian values and cultural connections (Adams & Vernon, 2007; Chin & Liu, 2015; Nguyen & Yang, 2012). Confucianism is a significant philosophy, and it is a well-acknowledged socially ideal tradition predominant in Chinese culture and observed in various social groups such as the family, community, and the organization. The Confucian philosophy entails loyalty and a strong sense of family, group, and national identity; reciprocal relationships with ingroup members; respect for and loyalty to leaders and those of higher social structures, and acceptance of control by them; desire for harmony and stability at all levels; and value of long-term relationships and a strong tradition of self-realization (Adams & Vernon, 2007; Leung, Koch, & Lu, 2002). These values are observed at all levels of social organizations and manifest in different styles, facets, and perceptions, to uphold and promote peace and harmony in social relationships.

Situational Appraisals

The perceptions and attitudes toward conflict are also influenced by one's assessment of a given conflict situation, or situational appraisals. These appraisals are influenced by primary orientation and also occur at the four levels. Macro-level situations include history of unresolved conflict between members of the conflict parties, economic disparities between the haves and have-nots, and the systematic deprivation of minority groups particularly resulting from globalization (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). The exo-level involves ingroup–outgroup boundaries observed between conflicting parties (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). The meso-level contains the perceptions of relational parameters such as trust–distrust and competition–affiliation (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001). The micro-level includes conflict goals assessments and conflict intensity (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013).

Papua New Guinea became an independent nation-state in 1975 after colonial rule originally by Britain (Papua) and Germany (New Guinea through World War I), although administered by Australia prior to independence. The presence of Chinese in Papua New Guinea started with migrants as tradesmen and laborers on German coconut and tobacco plantations in the East New Britain Province of PNG in the late 1800s (Wu, 1982). The Chinese worked for Germans, while bringing in more Chinese to look after their own businesses. The major turning point for Chinese businesses in PNG was after World War II when over two million British pounds was paid to the natives of Gazelle Peninsula (East New Britain Province) for war damages. The European merchants could not accommodate rising demands for modern commodities and luxuries by natives, but the Chinese were able and willing to fill this gap.

Currently, China has significant investments in the merchandising and manufacturing industries (The PNG Investor's Manual, 2011, 2013). The Chinese interests in PNG, and ties with the PNG government, strengthened in 2002 when the PNG government introduced its export-driven strategy: "Look North and Work the Pacific" (Papua New Guinea Trade Policy Framework, 2006). As a result, more Chinese immigrated to PNG to operate small businesses. Recent reports show that most wholesale and retail shops in PNG are owned and managed by Chinese (The PNG Investor's Manual, 2013). Over half of the semi-skilled and unskilled staff employed by these wholesalers and merchants are PNGeans (December 2010 Quarterly Economic Bulletin, 2010).

Conflict Communication

Micro-conflict processes are the specific communicative styles and strategies that parties enact during intercultural conflict. These communication processes include emotional expressions, conflict styles, and facework (communication used to support, uphold, and threaten image of self or other) (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). These processes are shaped by primary orientations and situational appraisals. Briefly, research demonstrates that people with individualistic values, self-face orientation, and independent self-construals tend to prefer cooperating and competing facework and conflict styles. In contrast, people with collectivistic values, other-face orientation, and interdependent self-construals tend to prefer cooperating and avoiding facework and conflict styles (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Peng & Tjosvold, 2011).

Conflict communication is influenced by numerous situational features in indigenous PNG. One feature is internal or domestic immigration: people moving from rural areas to urban centers (Laura, 1997; Reilly, 2008). In terms of the globalization process, PNG has experienced an influx of people in recent years including investors, diplomats, employees working for multicultural businesses (Faal, 2007; Manning, 2005), and refugees from war-torn and fragmented countries, such as Indonesia's province of West Papua. This transition has led to competition among immigrants and between immigrants and host citizens for scarce resources and job opportunities. In most cases, citizens blame external immigrants for benefiting from resources that citizens claim as their rights (Reilly, 2008).

Furthermore, PNG is also known for ethnic fighting in cities and towns, resulting from historical unresolved conflict between tribal enemies or immigrants' disrespect for the host culture (Reilly, 2008). For example, unresolved tribal or ethnic conflict can lead to individual members of these tribes attacking each other in towns and cities and even full-scale ethnic clashes (Reilly, 2008). These approaches reflect an honor culture where it is important for ingroup members to protect the face and honor of its members (Aslani et al., 2016; Shafa, Harinck, Ellemers, & Beersma, 2014).

Overall, PNG people solve conflicts collectively because everyone is a member of a bigger social network or group of people even though the real issue may be between two people (Banks, 2008; Burke et al., 2005). For example, if a man harasses a woman and he is assaulted by the woman's ethnic group members in return, the ethnic members of the man's group will mobilize and attack the woman's group, which will then lead to a full interethnic clash. However, such approach to conflict management varies across ethnic groups (Banks, 2008; Brown, 1982). Traditional nonviolent forms of conflict management used in PNG include avoidance of enemies, social shaming of trouble makers, use of vague and flexible language to save-face, or migration to other places (Young, 1997).

Chinese maintain social harmony and loyalty to higher authorities (Adams & Vernon, 2007; Nguyen & Yang, 2012). They prefer noncompeting, nonaggressive styles compared to the Western cultural approaches to conflict because of the perceived strong relational ties and loyalty to authorities (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Onishi & Bliss, 2006; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; Triandis, 2001). Their approach to conflict management is grounded in long-term interpersonal relationships (Adams & Venon, 2007). According to Leung and Tjosvold (1998), a specific feature that differentiates Chinese from other Asian countries is their strong emphasis on and approach to power differences. The Chinese acknowledge, uphold, and respect authorities, and are loyal to them.

Further, the Chinese conflict management styles involve high consideration for face (self, other, and mutual) and perceived power differences between parties involved. The associated conflict management styles of integrating, compromising, obliging, and avoiding describe the Chinese way of managing interpersonal conflicts (Ma, 2007; Nguyen & Yang, 2012; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Wong, Wei, & Tjosvold, 2015; Yuan, 2010). However, Leung et al. (2002) described such approaches to conflict management between and within the members of organizations as secondary and nothing more than to secure group cohesiveness and proper functioning of the organization, not driven by other social and family ties. In addition, Leung and Tjosvold (1998) argued that Chinese can confront issues directly; they

can be competitive if self-face is threatened (Brew & Cairns, 2004), and they can be aggressive to those who they consider outsiders or outgroups (Leung & Tjosvold, 1998; Lui & Wilson, 2010).

Conflict Outcomes

Conflict competence is the evaluative criterion for the conflict outcomes. It includes such elements as appropriateness, effectiveness, productivity, satisfaction, and ethicality (Canary, Lakey, & Sillars, 2013; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). Research demonstrates that most people rate cooperative conflict and facework as appropriate, effective, productive, satisfying, and ethical, while competing and avoiding are rated lower (Canary & Lakey, 2013; Cupach, Canary, & Spitzberg, 2010). These are general assessments that are moderated by the situational appraisals (e.g., judging a situation as distrustful may result in perceived competition to be high on the criteria).

There is limited research about conflict outcomes within the current context. As previously noted, increased immigration has increased perceived competition and negative intergroup relations between PNGeans and immigrant groups (Reilly, 2008). For example, an anti-Chinese riot took place in 2009 as they were accused of taking away jobs and business opportunities from PNG nationals (Chin, 2010).

Summary and Research Questions

The CBSECM provides a multilevel framework to explain intercultural conflict communication in a specific context. It focuses on the primary orientations, situational appraisals, conflict communication, and conflict outcomes in these contexts and is well suited to explore intercultural conflict among Chinese managers and PNG employees.

The extant literature demonstrates some similarities among indigenous PNGeans and Chinese in terms of collectivism, high power distance, and face concerns. These values result in similarities in conflict management preferences. The conflict management approaches and communicative strategies employed underscore relational ties the members of the group or the individual parties acknowledge and honor. They are loyal to members with higher status; thus, they avoid conflict to maintain harmonious relationships. Despite these similarities, there are also differences in the approaches employed. One difference is that in PNG, these values can sometimes result in a violent approach to managing conflict to maintain long-term peace.

Another key factor is the context of study. While most research explores conflict management within culture, this study explores intercultural conflict within the PNG context. Both cultures emphasize the ingroup–outgroup distinction, and collectivistic people can be more competitive with outgroup members (Leung & Tjosvold, 1998; Lui, 2011; Lui & Wilson, 2010; Peng & Tjosvold, 2011). Further, the PNG context has a history of mistrust and conflict with outside groups, so this may exacerbate the level of conflict (Reilly, 2008).

Given this summary and literature review, this study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do Chinese managers and PNG employees perceive, negotiate, and account for their intercultural conflicts?

RQ2: How are multilevel effects reflected in the accounts of conflict communication by Chinese managers and PNG employees?

Methods

A qualitative, interpretive interview study guided by framework analysis was used to address the research questions (Gale, Heath, Cameron, Rashid, & Redwood, 2013). Development of certain knowledge about the human social world starts from understanding and interpreting people's actions and reactions on the

issue being investigated (Symon & Cassell, 2012). Framework analysis is used when a specific theoretical or empirical framework guides the analysis and yet specific content or themes within the framework are not clear. This approach is appropriate for this study given the desire to apply the major components of the CBSECM to the data. This guided qualitative approach is also appropriate as it allows for exploration of a multitude of elements associated with the CBSECM.

Participants and Settings

The study was conducted in Mt. Hagen City, and two other nearby towns Banz and Kundiawa, among employees and managers of six retail or wholesale shops. Five of the shops were owned and managed by Chinese and one owned by a Malaysian family and yet managed by a Chinese. All of these shops have been operating for more than five years, and all have a workforce of over 20 people; the majority of employees are local PNGeans. Of the 14 participants, six were managers (all male) and eight were PNG employees (four male, four female).

An employee each was selected from each participating shop, except for two shops with two employees each. The reason for this choice was that the first participant was selected by the manager; therefore, to avoid selection bias of the manager, another employee was sought to participate. The responses were similar across the two employees in both cases. We did achieve theoretical saturation (i.e., no new themes found during final interviews) across the different stores (Morse, 2004); we just cannot be sure that we have saturation within the stores given that we did not have multiple employees in each location.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions were specifically adopted for this study. The main aim was to obtain information regarding participants' accounts about conflict management in the context of intercultural relations between managers or owners and employees. The interview guides were developed in an iterative manner between the first and second authors including three pilot interviews to refine the questions. The first question asked about the organization, while the second explored feelings about working in the organization. These were designed to be icebreaker questions and to provide some general context. The third question explored what it was like working with PNGeans or Chinese (respectively). The fourth and fifth explored how unhappy feelings and ways to work differently are discussed. The sixth question asked participants to tell about a specific difficult interaction with an employee or manager. The final question asked participants to share perceptions about how well employee–manager relations were handled by the organization and what could be improved. The Appendix displays the primary interview guides for the employees and managers. Probing questions were used for each of the main questions to solicit details.

The interviews were conducted by a PNG researcher on an individual basis at the venue and time of the participants' choice. The interviews were conducted in both English and Tok Pisin (Melanesian Pidgin) and averaged 40 min producing an average of 25 single-space transcribed pages per interview.

Data Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed and then translated to English prior to analysis. The first author completed the translation and is fluent in both languages, is knowledgeable about the social context, and was able to consult with participants during the translation process as is common in translation for qualitative analysis (Bashiruddin, 2013). The transcripts were then analyzed using framework analysis (Gale et al., 2013).

The analysis was completed by the first author given his familiarity with the culture and context. Several steps were followed in the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gale et al., 2013). The initial step involved

reading the transcripts to become familiar with the responses. The transcripts were then coded using the deductive framework of the four components of the model and the inductive codes of the researcher. These initial codes reflected open coding where the participant responses were interpreted and intuitively captured. The next stage was to reflect on these open codes and explore similarities and differences in the codes in an iterative process to create themes. Similar codes were combined and revised. Themes within the framework were identified based on three criteria: forcefulness (emotional intensity), repetition (specific words and phrases are repeated), and recurrence (key ideas or meanings reoccur) (Owen, 1984). Final themes were given labels that reflect research used to develop the CBSECM given the purpose of this study to examine its usefulness in this context. To offset potential bias in interpretations, the first author shared the findings and raw data with the second author to validate interpretations. Participant validation was not available as the analysis was completed in a different country and reliable email contact with the participants was not available.

Findings

The first research question focused on how Chinese managers and PNG employees in the wholesale and retail industry in PNG perceive, negotiate, and account for their intercultural conflicts. The themes are presented within the components of the CBSECM including primary orientations, situational appraisals, conflict communication, and conflict outcomes. The second question explores the multilevel effects for conflict communication, and those are summarized after the elements are discussed. While the literature review presented these multilevel elements within the four components of the CBSECM, the results section separates these findings given the second research question.

Primary Orientations

Two themes for primary orientation were identified: *face concerns* (micro-level) and *power differences* (macro-level). These themes are intertwined in how employees and managers account for their own and other's conflict communication, and hence, quotations connect to both themes. The employees often avoid arguing about their problems because they acknowledge and honor their relationship with their managers and the manager's face due to positional power. They assume that arguing or complaining directly to their managers may seem self-face threatening because of the observed power and status differences between managers and employees. For example, as one of the female employees noted, "When I discuss my problem with the manager and he does not respond to my problem positively, I don't say anything more because I have a good working relationship with him (E2)." She avoids arguing with the manager to show her commitment to maintaining relational ties and his status. Another employee noted high power distance and other-face orientation: "Most times we listen to our manager and do what he says (E4)." This quote implies that he is being observant of the manager as a person endowed with authority in the organization. Finally, a third male employee noted that his boss has a negative approach to employee problems. He claimed: "In here, when we have problems, we don't talk to our manager. He is strict and that stops us. Most times he wants things done his way (E5)." This response illustrates the employee's explanation of power differences as a reason for not being able to discuss problems directly.

On the contrary, the owners who are also managers tend to show self-face and limited other-face concern in relation to employees and use their positions to mitigate or manage conflicts. As one manager claimed, "Everyone listens to me properly. If they do not hear me, I get this lady, my daughter, to talk to them. And if she understands them, she tells me and this helps me (M6)." The phrase "*everyone listens to me*" suggests the manager expects compliance and respect for his status and goals. He revealed that the daughter does not really act independently, but as a messenger for him. This response reflects self-face

concern and the use of third party as a strategy to indirectly communicate to employees that he is not interested in discussing their problems. Further, most managers acknowledged that they get tough on their employees. The hired manager explained that he got tough initially when he was hired to set clear boundaries with employees. He explained: "When I first came here, someone stole from the shop. I asked him to resign voluntarily and he did. Later I formally terminated him. Everything is fine now (M4)." The manager had to get tough to show his power and the type of activities that he would tolerate in the organization.

Situational Appraisals

Two themes were identified within the situational appraisal component. *Legal conditions* (exo-level) and *family obligations* (meso-level) were found to be prevalent in the employees' and managers' accounts. The legal condition is about the organizational compliance to PNG labor laws. A couple of managers responded that they do not receive any complaints from their employees because they comply with PNG national labor laws. As one explained, "I never receive any complaints from the employees because I make sure the employees' pay and conditions meet the National Labour Law requirement (M7)." The above response was consistent with the response given by another owner or manager as he claimed: "Since I opened this shop, I have never received any complaints from my employees because I comply with the National Labour Laws regarding employees' pay and conditions (M3)." Both responses assumed use of the labor laws helped limit employee problems and other complaints which are an expression of conflict.

On the contrary, the employees blame officers from the National Labour Department for not talking to them and listening to their complaints, and getting them sorted with their respective managers. One of the employees offered, "When people from Labour Department come to visit us, they never talk to us and listen to our complaints. They only talk to the management and go back (E6)." Another employee stated that the National Labour Department employees avoid talking to them when they visit their organization. She noted, "The National Labour people do not talk to us when they come here so we feel hopeless to see them when we have problems with our employer (E7)." The employees report wanting a neutral third party to address their concerns which is consistent with their other-face orientation and perception of managers' self-face orientation and higher status.

A second key situational appraisal element is family obligations. Most employees reported that they do not complain or contribute ideas to improve organizational activities as they have family obligations to meet. One employee offered a story to illustrate:

> Other problems like stealing [from customers] do occur and when that happens, the boss blames us for it. The day before yesterday, the company security arranged with outsiders and they stole a pair of shoes from the shop. The boss accused me and deducted K220.0 ($75USD) from my pay. When I asked him to give me a chance to explain myself, he ignored me. I could not insist complaining since there are no other means which I could help myself look after my children if I am terminated for arguing with the boss. I have children going to school and this is the only way I get money to help them. (E7)

Another male employee who has been working for over three years asserted:

> When I am unhappy with my wages or other work conditions such as workers' savings, I have thought of leaving the company; but I can't. It is hard nowadays. I can't go out on the streets and sell things or steal to survive or support my family and relatives. (E4)

These employees noted the need for employment to support their families and that they avoid conflicts even when they are accused of wrongdoing that they have not done.

Conflict Communication

This subsection presents three themes of conflict communication—two for employees and one for managers. Employees noted two predominant conflict communication strategies with managers: *submit* and *passive resistance*. These choices are reported to be shaped by their primary orientations along with the situational constraints. Culturally, the employees feel that avoiding is respectful and honors power. Situationally, they feel like they do not have a voice for their concerns even though they sometimes experience poor working conditions or are falsely accused of wrongdoing. Sometimes, they use passive resistance which allows them to show an appearance of respect and honor and yet meet with their own self-face and individual interests.

Submission is the first conflict communication strategy. One male employee noted:

> In my work, when my boss does not treat me well, I don't talk or complain about it; I keep it to myself. This is a problem; when I don't talk I feel horrible, but I just do whatever my boss tells me to do. (E5)

A female employee offered, "Many times I complained to my boss to give me a pay rise, but he ignores me. I've been with the company for six years, but have not seen any increase in my pay (E7)." Unlike the first employee, this employee initially contended with the boss. However, both employees eventually submitted even though they are not happy. Most of the employees followed one of these two patterns—submit without contending or contend and then submit—when facing difficulties with their managers. Employees can complain initially and yet not persist because it is self-face threatening or hindered by situational elements such as family obligations.

Passive resistance is the second conflict communication strategy. This communication strategy might be called passive aggression by managers or even researchers and yet employees described their communication as displaying resistance in a manner that lets them express their feelings without being inappropriate or impolite and/or to protect their jobs (i.e., feeling if they were direct they might be terminated). One of the employees responded that when he is unhappy about anything in the organization or has conflict with his manager, he first argues his case. If the manager's response is not satisfactory, he avoids raising the same issue and resists passively by walking out of the shop. He goes around the city for an hour, or even takes a day off, without telling the manager that he is leaving because of the problem:

> One day there was an incident that when I got a direct verbal instruction from the accounts manager to invoice goods without costs because it won't result in zero prices. Upon realising what I had done, my immediate boss wasn't happy because he did not receive any memo about this new change….After discussing it in their language, my immediate boss slammed the paper on the desk and told me to do the invoice…I wasn't really happy about this; it was to do with my instruction to other employees…To show my disappointment and frustration, I went home early without telling my boss and came back the next day. I do this often when I am not happy. (E2)

One of the managers explained his unhappiness about his employees using what he considered to be passive aggressive strategies:

> The thing that I don't like about Papua New Guineans is excuses. For the first time, they will be punctual and come on time for work, but then they start to give up. In their first days, they will promise, "ok no problem we'll come on time." And then after two months they would say, "I need to go. I have kids and I have to look after my kids this day so I am not coming for work." Or "I cannot come this day or that day because of family problem or I am sick or other excuses." (M4)

The first two months are employees' probation period, and the manager perceives that once employees are confirmed as permanent workers, their behavior changes.

In contrast, managers tend to use *competing conflict communication strategies*, with some compromise. Many responded that they are strict with their employees for not complying with instructions and for breaches of daily operational codes. They usually do not compromise their positions or stances to allow

for employees' views. One of the managers explained: "One lady employee stole from the shop and I had to call the police and they came and arrested her. I felt better and warned others not to practice such behavior (M6)." The manager did not allow the employee to explain why she did or did not steal and in fact "wrongfully accused her" according to other employees.

A couple of managers indicated in their responses that they compete first and then listen to their employees if there are valid grounds. One manager explained how he handled an employee's argument about pay:

> One afternoon when most employees had left for home, a male employee approached me and complained to me that he had never received any pay increase since he joined the company. We argued and then I had to go to the office and go through all wage records, timesheets and his attendance records and found his complaint to be genuine. I talked to the accounts manager next day and increased his pay. (M5)

Although the manager argued with the employee at first, he was convinced to check the records and confirm the employee's queries. With the convincing evidence, the manager could go along with the employee to get his complaint rectified. However, this example was not the most common pattern of conflict communication for managers.

Conflict Outcomes

In general, the reported conflict outcomes of both managers and employees are distrust and negative conflict outcomes and hence the overall theme of *dissatisfaction*. In particular, many employees and managers see cultural distance among themselves. One female employee offered:

> I've been working with Chinese for one month and I see nothing good in them. They are strict. If we make a loss, they will deduct from our pay and if we make any mistakes, we are most likely to be terminated. (E6)

Another employee was very emotional and seen to be frustrated when giving responses about her working relationship with her manager and the manager's responses to employee issues. She even called her manager a disrespectful name when responding. She offered:

> I've worked with Chinese for almost five years and I've found nothing good in them. They treat us like slaves. …We start work at 7:45am and finish at 4:30 pm. After that we do clean up and do stocktake until 6:00 pm; though some of us live far away and come for work. They don't consider that and arrange transport for us. Many of us female employees are also married and have kids and we are often bashed up by our husbands for going home late. We also do clean up during weekends from 3:00 pm to 4:00 pm. (E3)

Managers also have negative feelings toward their employees during conflict. One manager claimed:

> You know in PNG many things happen. They don't tell you straight – like my garden potato. Or they would ask, "why you deducted my pay?" So I will tell them you know what you did with customers or you snatch from the shop; made me take such action. (M5)

The "garden potato" is one of the many metaphors used by inland PNGeans for the organizations they work for to earn money to sustain their lives. This manager, along with others, feels that PNGeans take advantage of their employers and many are of suspect characters. They have a great concern for stealing and are suspicious of many of their employees.

Multilevel Effects

The second research question explored how multilevel effects are reflected in the accounts of conflict communication. At the macro-level, cultural values (primary orientation) and globalization (situational appraisal) are key elements. At the exo-level, Labour Department laws and ingroup–outgroup boundaries (situational appraisal) are present. At the meso-level, family obligations (situational appraisal) are

relevant elements. At the individual level, personality and personal approaches (e.g., facework; primary orientation) were reported.

Most of the multilevel effects relate to employees and managers reporting that employees tend not to complain about their working conditions or quickly submit to managers. Managers explained that following labor laws helps limit complaints, and yet employees report that primary orientation elements limit their complaining to show respect. Further, employees do not perceive the Labour Department representatives are interested in their perspectives. A final element that silences employees is family obligations, which limits complaining because employees do not want to lose their jobs. Some employees even see this confluence of elements limiting interaction with other during work hour. For example, one employee noted:

> I don't complain to my manager or any of my workmates because my manager is strict. During work hours, I don't even talk to customers or my family members. If I do, the manager would assume that I am trying to deal with them to steal from the shop. (E6)

In these accounts, macro-level elements are reported to shape individual employee behavior.

Another multilevel example relates to how macro- and meso-levels negatively impact employee relations. One employee reported:

> Sometimes I have problems with my workmates. The boss often gets me to do the stock control and this does not go down well with my other co-workers. Most times they get mad and argue with me when things go wrong. For example, one day there was a decrease in stock and the manager decided to deduct from our pay to recoup the lost stock. My workmates blamed me for that incident and were really mad with me, which consequently led into a heated argument between us. (E7)

The managers interpret and use labor laws to force compliance. They can recoup costs from employees if they believe they have stolen. Further, they expect strict adherence to managerial instructions. In this case, the employee reports being accused by peers of wrongdoing rather than viewing the manager and labor laws as creating this situation.

A second example illustrates further employee conflict:

> I got a direct order from the boss to distribute payslips at 4:45 pm, but the employees wanted this to be done immediately. They said they stay too far so they wanted their payslips quickly so they can get back home early. Because it was an instruction from the boss, I did exactly what he said. Then a fellow employee came forward and tore his payslip in front of me, telling me, "how much do you pay me?" I did not mention anything, I just let him tear the pay slip, swore at me and went away...I was angry so I had to report him to the general manager. (E8)

In both of these examples, within-group competition results from the multilevel elements and is counter to a predominant PNG primary orientation element, namely collaboration with peers.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the usefulness of the CBSECM in explaining accounts of conflict communication among Chinese managers and PNG employees. The findings show that primary orientation elements related to face (micro-level) and power distance (macro-level) along with situational appraisals of labor laws (exo-level) and family obligations (meso-level) shape conflict communication. PNG employees tended to submit to managers even when they felt wrongly accused. To express dissent, these employees used passive resistance. Chinese managers reported using competitive communication strategies to resolve conflicts. The resulting conflict outcomes are distrust and dissatisfaction and have potential negative implications for intercultural relations and organizational success. In addition, the study demonstrated reinforcing and contradictory multilevel effects of primary orientations and situational appraisals. These effects show that multilevel primary orientations sometime reinforce the

multilevel situational appraisals to shape conflict communication; in another case, the multilevel elements of primary orientations work differently than expected when coupled with certain multilevel elements of situational appraisals. Figure 2 displays the results organized by the CBSECM. The section discusses these findings in the context of the extant literature, organized around key aspects of CBSECM, and discusses theoretical and practical implications.

Discussion of Findings

Primary Orientations

The primary orientation findings are consistent with CBSECM as the macro-level cultural values (e.g., power) and micro-level face concerns shape conflict communication (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). Specifically, the findings about employees' accounts of other-face concern to show respect to observed power differences are consistent with collectivistic values of face concerns and high power distance in general (Leung & Tjosvold, 1998; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013) and PNG specifically (Young, 1997). Chinese managers' use of self-face orientation to reinforce their status and position is consistent with general cultural values of high power distance in China; the strong self-face orientation is less prominent in research where concern for harmony and others is an important part of managerial practice (Chin & Liu, 2015). Leung et al. (2002) discussed that approaches to normal conversations and conflict management applied by Chinese are to secure and maintain group cohesiveness and for the proper function of the organization.

Situational Appraisals

The key situational appraisals reported by employees and managers are labor laws and family obligations which are consistent with exo-level and meso-level elements in the CBSECM (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). Family obligations encourage PNG employees to have other-face orientation at work and not contend issues because they need their jobs to support their families and thus meet other social and cultural obligations as has been found in previous research (Barker, 2007; Feeny et al., 2012; Young, 1997). This result is also consistent with Rusbult, Farrell, Rogers, and Mainous (1988) model that argues that having alternatives discourages loyalty and passive approaches to conflict. Managers felt that following labor
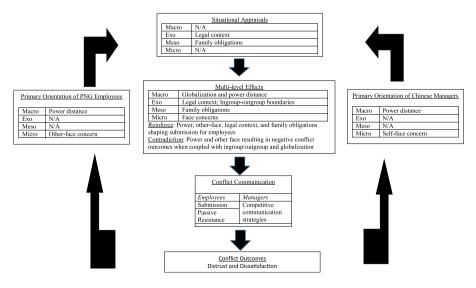

Figure 2. Culture-based social ecological conflict model in the current study.

laws allowed them to avoid conflict, while employees perceive that labor laws are used unfairly to silence complaints and to support managerial interests; this has not been directly reported in previous research. These situational elements and conflict communication should be interpreted with changing interpersonal relationships resulting from globalization. Laura (1997) argued that there is a shift in the focus of people now from the traditional leadership to foreigners who come with new forms of leadership based on money and modern wealth. Traditionally, the leaders, or the bigmen, of PNG are known for accumulating and distributing wealth and looking out for their villagers (Laura, 1997). PNG employees might perceive their managers as being like bigmen and expect their support and a reciprocal relationship (Banks, 2008; Brown & Ploeg, 1997; Laura, 1997; Osborne, 1995). In the absence of this relationship, PNG employees look to the Labour Department to support them and their rights. In contrast, Chinese managers operate from a business relationship and support organizational goals as well as reinforcing a Confucian perspective of a parent punishing a disobedient child (Adams & Vernon, 2007; Leung et al., 2002).

Conflict communication

The macro- and micro-level primary orientation and exo- and meso-level situational elements reinforce the proposed multilevel effects on the conflict communication of managers and employees consistent with the CBSECM (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). PNG employees' use of submission to avoid conflict is consistent with prior research about PNG cultural values of avoiding conflicting parties, and avoiding conflict with authorities (Young, 1997). The employees often prefer to avoid conflict because it will keep them out of harm and also allow them to convey respect. In several cases, employees demonstrate passive resistance to show their disagreement with managers' decisions. These findings are consistent with research about passive dissent strategies resulting from unresolved or poorly managed conflict (Kassing, 2011; Redmond, Katz Jameson, & Binder, 2016). Overall, the findings about conflict strategies are consistent with PNG cultural values observed in conflict management (Barker, 2007; Burke et al., 2005; Young, 1997), as well as individual situational appraisals (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). Chinese managers' use of competitive communication strategies is inconsistent with some literature on Chinese managerial approaches to conflict management where Confucian values about relationship and a focus on harmony are emphasized (Adams & Vernon, 2007; Chin & Liu, 2015; Wong et al., 2015). However, this prior research is focused on ingroup relationships. Additional research demonstrates Chinese can be aggressive with those they consider outgroups (Leung & Tjosvold, 1998).

Conflict outcomes

The conflict outcomes of these dynamics are negative and reinforce an ingroup–outgroup dynamic representing exo-level situational appraisals in the CBSECM (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013); more specifically, employees perceive lack of protection from the Labour Department and also perceive the manager as an outgroup member. Managers use the Labour Department laws to guide their behavior and reinforce their competitive approach, while also seeing employees as outgroup members. The employees expressed feelings of being overlooked and suppressed by their managers. They feel the managers' explicit attempts to suppress opinions from employees led employees to use discriminatory words which are culturally inappropriate in PNG (Laura, 1997). Both parties demonstrate a lack of trust in the other. Such outcomes are consistent with literature about avoid-compete dynamics during conflict (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2013; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). Further, they are also consistent with literature that demonstrates that lack of interpersonal trust results in poor negotiated outcomes (Gunia, Brett, Nandkeolyar, & Kamdar, 2011). We would be remiss to leave the conclusion that everything is negative in the managerial–employee relationship; the managers appreciate PNG culture in general as friendly and PNG people as hardworking, and they acknowledge it as an incentive for doing businesses in PNG.

Implications

Overall, the study provides support for the general principles of the CBSECM. As noted in the discussion of the findings, the four main components of the model are reinforced by the study findings and consistent with extant literature that is supportive of the model. The complexity of the model provides a more complete explanation of the conflict accounts than would be possible through single-level conflict approaches such as dual-concern models or face-negotiation theory by considering socio-historical and political factors (Putnam, 2013; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). Another significant contribution is the extension of the model through the multilevel effects in this study. One of the limitations of the CBSECM is that it does not specify relationships among the multilevel effects. The current study helps to illuminate several potential relationships and has implications for advancing the CBSECM.

First, this study illustrates that multilevel elements can have reinforcing effects on conflict communication. In this study, employees tended to use submission and feel silenced during the conflict. Such communication reflected primary orientations of respect for power and other-face concern as well as situational appraisals of lack of protection from the Labour Department and family obligations. All four elements contributed to submission and silence. This relationship reflects the predominant top-down effect expressed by the CBSECM (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013).

Second, this study illustrates that multilevel situational appraisals can contribute to negative conflict communication that may contradict the primary orientations. The findings demonstrate that two cultural groups with some similar cultural values (e.g., collectivism, power distance, and face concerns) can result in negative conflict communication, particularly when the situational features such as labor laws and family obligations are considered within a larger globalization context. For example, globalization is at a macro-level and appears to create a negative history where employees perceive a lack of power and agency. National labor laws are an important exo-level element that shapes conflict management and reinforces positional power. Further, ingroup–outgroup boundaries are reflective of exo-level situational appraisals that shape specific conflict communication. The managerial use of the labor laws occurs at the meso-level as parties enact specific communication strategies within the managerial–employee relationship. The specific employee appraisal of conflict strategies occurs at the micro-level. The result of these multilevel elements is negative communication and outcomes that appear inconsistent with primary orientations. This is an example of a multilevel effect where one level diminishes or contradicts the other (Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013).

Third, the conflict accounts reported by participants primarily focus only on two levels of primary orientation and emphasize two levels of situational appraisals. While the larger extant literature on PNG provides some insights into the larger socio-historical context, participants tended to reflect on elements that are more observable and closer to their individual situations. The implication of these findings is that research using CBSECM may need to supplement individual conflict accounts with other data such as historical accounts or Labour Department data that identify employee complaints to fully explicate the CBSECM. Similarly, studying multiple conflict contexts (e.g., other nations or different relationships within a given nation) can help identify a range of primary orientations and situational appraisals that will help elucidate the complex multilevel relationships among the components of the CBSECM.

Fourth, the accounts focused on top-down multilevel effects rather than bottom-up effects. Employees reported that their overall strategy was to submit with occasional expression of passive resistance. These choices are because they do not perceive any power to change the situation; in fact, they look for people in higher power (e.g., Labour Department) to address their situation. These findings show the value of the accounts to help illustrate how participants define their context and their agency (Buttny, 2012; Gelfand et al., 2001). They also illustrate how the CBSECM illuminates how multilevel situational appraisal elements of globalization (macro-level) and legal context (exo-level), along with the primary orientation element of cultural values (macro-level), result in submission and passive resistance. One implication for

the CBSECM is that positional power needs to be more strongly integrated into the situational appraisal of meso-level relational parameters. It appears that in relationships of unequal power under conditions of globalization, negative conflict history, and legal context, people in lower status positions do not perceive the ability to change their situations through conflict resolution or organizational dissent. The best they can do is express dissent in culturally appropriate ways (i.e., submission or passive resistance). In addition, the conflict dynamics from this lack of power and agency can potentially result in negative relations among employees; more specifically, some employees take frustrations out on their peers when they feel they are being mistreated by managers.

The study also has practical implications. Prior research demonstrates that intercultural conflict can be both beneficial and detrimental to businesses depending on how it is managed (Adair, Liang, & Hideg, 2017; Jayne & Dipboye, 2004; Oetzel, Dhar, & Kirschbaum, 2007; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2013). In this study, the conflict strategies result in negative conflict outcomes. Following the model, conflict management can be changed in several ways reflecting multiple levels. First, the managers can become more reflexive and understanding of the various challenges for their employees and employ dialectical thinking (Bai, Harms, Han, & Cheng, 2015). Dialectical thinking is the ability to tolerate ambiguities, tensions, and contradictions and has been found to be a positive predictor of employee performance in a study of Chinese leaders (Bai et al., 2015). Second, Labour Department members can work to meet the needs of employees as well as managers to ensure labor practices are followed and to give employees a chance to grieve without reprisal. It is probably too much to suggest that employees can effectively confront their managers without support or openness from a manager given constraints of primary orientations and family obligations. There simply is too much for them to risk in this situation, and thus, the adjustments probably will need to come at the higher levels of manager and the Labour Department.

Limitations and Conclusions

Despite its strength and uniqueness, there are some limitations of this study. First, this study focused on wholesale and retail shops in and around Mt. Hagen City in PNG; therefore, the results obtained do not necessarily represent PNG in general. Future research should look at other businesses to compare and contrast results. Second, we only interviewed one nonowner as a manager. This manager was "softer" in his conflict management approach than the owners, perhaps suggesting a difference between owner managers and hired managers that can be explored in future research. Third, all of the data are self-reported accounts and not actual conflict interactions. Relatedly, we chose to analyze the data in a comparative manner rather than the accounts of dynamics to protect the identity of the employees. Specifically, there is great fear by employees of getting fired for sharing their experiences. Linking employee and manager interaction together could potentially "out" an employee in the reporting of information. Future research should explore these complex dynamics in a more direct manner, provided ethical constraints can be overcome. Fourth, our inability to obtain participant validation of the framework analysis has implications for the accuracy of the interpretations. This is offset somewhat by having the first author being a cultural insider and yet our conclusions should be viewed with some caution. A final future direction is the need for additional research studies examining the multilevel effects associated with the CBSECM including levels not identified in the current study. The current study provides some interesting illustrations of these effects and yet further research is needed to better understand this complexity.

This study explored and investigated conflict communication between Chinese managers and PNG employees in the wholesale and retail industry, and it is informed by the CBSECM. The findings support the applicability of the model in the PNG context. Overall, the model provides a useful framework for understanding the myriad issues that explain conflict strategies and outcomes. Specifically, it identified face and power distance as key primary orientation issues and identified legal requirements and family obligations as two influential contributions to the model within a larger globalization framework. These

elements appear to result in generally negative conflict outcomes that should be addressed to improve working relationships, particularly for PNG employees. These findings also help to extend the CBSECM by illustrating various multilevel effects of primary orientations and situational appraisals on conflict communication and outcomes.

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Appendix: Interview Guides

Note: Main questions are numbered and probes listed below with letters.

Managers

1 Tell me about your organization?

   a How did it start?
   b How long has it been operating in Papua New Guinea?
   c What is the general motivation for doing business in Papua New Guinea?

2 How do you feel about working in multicultural organization such as this?

   a What are best parts?
   b What are worst parts?

3 What is it like working with Papua New Guineans?

   a What works well?
   b What types of difficulties, disagreements, or problems do you encounter?

4 When employees are unhappy about work and talk to you about it, how do you generally respond?

   a Does this approach help you?

5 When you have ideas for how work can be done differently, how do you talk to your employees about this?

6 Tell me a time that you had a difficult interaction with your employee (s)?

    a What happened?
    b How did you respond to the problem?
    c How did it end?
    d Do you wish you could have done it differently?
    e Is this a typical situation?

7 In your view, how well do you think your organization manages employees? What do you wish the organization did differently?

Employees

1 How do you feel about working in a multicultural organization such as this?

    a What are the best parts?
    b What are the worst parts?

2 What is it like working for a boss who comes from a different cultural background than you?

    a What works well?
    b What type of difficulties, disagreements, or problems have you had?

3 When you are unhappy with something about your work, how do you generally respond?

    a Does this approach help you get what you want?

4 When you have ideas for how work can be done differently, how do you talk with others about this?

5 Tell me about a time you had a difficult interaction with your boss?

    a What happened?
    b How did you respond to the problem?
    c How did it end?
    d Do you wish you could have done it differently?
    e Is this a typical situation?

6 Tell me about a time you had a difficult interaction with a co-worker?

    a What happened?
    b How did you respond to the problem?
    c How did it end?
    d Do you wish you could have done it differently?
    e Is this a typical situation?

7 In your view, how well do you think your organization and boss manage Papua New Guineans? What do you wish they did differently?