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JUDUL	THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES
IJAZAH	MASTER IN HUMAN CAPITAL MANAGEMENT
SESI PENGAJIAN	2011-2012

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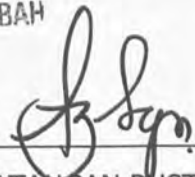
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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES

FARHANIS BINTI HAJI MOHAMMAD

THESIS SUBMITTED IN FULFILLMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER IN HUMAN CAPITAL MANAGEMENT

SCHOOL OF BUSINESS AND ECONOMICS

UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SABAH

2012

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I, Farhanis binti Haji Mohammad hereby declare that, the thesis is the result of my own study and investigation except for quotations, excerpts, equations, summaries and references, which have been duly acknowledged. All verbatim extracts have been distinguishes by quotation marks and sources for the statements have been specifically acknowledged.

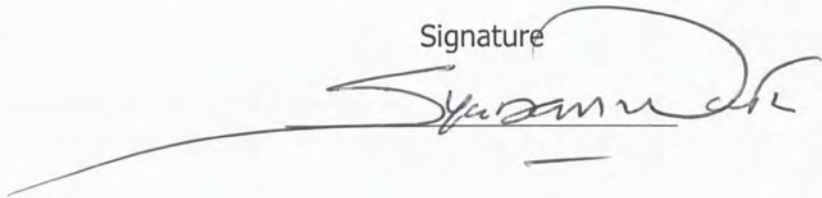23 July 2012

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Praise to Allah. I have managed to complete this research successfully. First and foremost, I wish to express my highest appreciation and thankfulness to my advisor, Prof. Dr. Syed Azizi Wafa for being supportive and given me invaluable advice and encouragement.

I would like to express my heartiest gratitude to Nor Azim Ahmad Radzi, that has been very helpful and sharing the knowledge during my research project.

My warmest appreciation and thanks go most to my parents, Haji Mohammad bin Mentek and Hajjah Hairani Mohd Tajudin; my brothers, Mohd Syakir and Mohd Syahrul Nizam and to my sister, Nur Syahirah Hanim for their continuous support, care and love.

Lastly, my warmness appreciation and thanks to my friends and everyone that involve directly or indirectly, which supported and encouraging me in finishing this research.

Farhanis Binti Haji Mohammad

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ABSTRACT

A STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES

This study examines the relationship between culture and conflict management styles. The main objective of this thesis is to explore and investigate the culture of Sabahan especially among the main ethnics; Kadazan/Dusun, Bajau, Murut and Malay. Even though there are many previous studies conducted regarding this topics, there is still limited and lack of research being done on Malaysia especially, Sabah. Through this study, people will be able to learn and understand more about the Sabahan culture and be able to know their styles of handling conflicts. The cultural dimensions being focused in this study are based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions (1991) which are power distance, uncertainty avoidance, collectivism and femininity. While for the conflict management styles, this study used Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II) that was developed by Rahim (1983). A sample size of 138 respondents from the government sectors located in Kota Kinabalu had participated in this study. Questionnaire was developed as based on Hofstede and Rahim. Multiple regression, hierarchical regression and one-way ANOVA were used to test the hypotheses developed in this study. Based on the analyses been conducted, it was found that not all of the cultural dimensions have relationship with conflict management styles. Besides that, the moderating variables used in this study are age, gender and position. However, it was found that only gender shows an indicator as a moderator between culture and conflict management styles. Thus, further study need to be conducted as to gain more information, and valuable and reliable findings regarding this subject.

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ABSTRAK

Kajian ini mengkaji perhubungan di antara konflik dan gaya-gaya pengurusan konflik. Objektif utama tesis ini adalah untuk meninjau dan menyelidik budaya masyarakat Sabah, khasnya masyarakat Kadazan/Dusun, Bajau, Murut dan Melayu. Walaupun terdapat banyak kajian terdahulu yang telah dijalankan ke atas topik ini, namun demikian kajian yang dijalankan di Malaysia masih terhad dan tidak mencukupi. Menerusi kajian ini, ramai pihak akan dapat mempelajari dan memahami budaya serta gaya-gaya pengurusan konflik masyarakat Sabah dengan lebih mendalam. Dimensi kebudayaan yang diberi tumpuan di dalam kajian ini adalah berdasarkan Dimensi Kebudayaan yang telah dihuraikan oleh Hofstede (1991) iaitu; jarak kuasa, mengelakkan ketidakpastian, kolektivisme, dan feminism. Manakala, gaya pengurusan konflik adalah berdasarkan Inventori Konflik Organizasi Rahim-II (ROCI-II) yang telah di perkenalkan oleh Rahim (1983). Sebanyak 138 saiz sampel daripada sektor Kerajaan yang terletak di Kota Kinabalu telah turut serta di dalam kajian ini. Borang kaji selidik adalah berdasarkan Hofstede dan Rahim. Regresi berganda, regresi hierarki dan ANOVA satu-arah telah digunakan untuk menguji hipotesis yang telah dibina di dalam kajian ini. Berdasarkan analisis yang telah dijalankan, keputusan kajian menunjukkan bahawa tidak semua dimensi kebudayaan mempunyai hubungan dengan gaya-gaya pengurusan konflik. Selain daripada itu, pembolehubah sederhana yang digunakan di dalam kajian ini ialah umur, jantina dan jawatan. Walaubagaimanapun, kajiaan mendapati hanya pembolehubah jantina yang mampu memberi kesan ke atas perhubungan di antara budaya dan gaya-gaya pengurusan konflik. Justeru itu, lanjutan kajian perlu dijalankan bagi mendapat maklumat yang lebih tepat dan sesuai tentang perkara ini.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

World nowadays is facing challenges from uncertainties in global growth prospects as well as the pressures of globalization and liberalization. By the same token, such challenges occur has actually offers vast opportunities for growth. It is an advantage if people are able to seize those chances, as it depends on one's principal and fundamental. The global competition, bring changes in many things and so does people as not everyone will walk towards the same direction. Such phenomena proved that people cannot escape from having different point of views or looking at the same thing but from different perspective.

That is when problems that lead to misunderstanding or even disagreement can happen. Eventually, people cannot run and escape from having a conflict with others, as conflict is after all inevitable (Blake and Mouton, 1964). It is a fact that conflict exist whether people accept it or not as conflict is common and endemic. For instance, conflict happens even for a slightest reason like jealousy. It has been mentioned that researchers often considered conflict as an omnipresent and ubiquitous phenomenon penetrating myriad forms of human existence (Wilmot and Hocker, 2001; Putnam and Wilson, 1982; Rahim, 1986; Thomas, 1976).

In Human Capital Management, people are the asset of the organization. In an organization, it is crucial to employ the right people as it will broaden the chances of achieving success. Obviously, the main objective of the company is to have a strong, stable and having the right people as these people are the real asset of the organization as this will determine the path of the organization either

in the short run or in the long run. However, in every society it is common as to have different opinions in all important matters. A conflict scenario can simply occurs between both individuals or can happen towards more than two individuals within a unit or with other units that have no understanding or consideration towards each other's interests or in other word, such situation can be seen as incompatible. In the prospect of organization, situations involving conflict will be looked at as something positive, as they will recognized, acknowledge and even managed it   properly as it do benefits the organization.   With regard the organizational conflict, it is found that such conflict reduces personal and organizational effectiveness (Onishi and Bliss, 2006).

Eventually, such unpredictable scenario will also be considered as an opportunity to grow the people and also the organization. The increasing in benefits will make the organization to be more competitive as they matured. Therefore, according to Onishi and Bliss (2006), management of conflict is a vital component and role of managers regardless of the organization's goals. The differences can be due to person or collective reason. Organization or people themselves that does not know how to handle the conflict will eventually affect their performance and productivity that at the same time will also affecting the others and also the organization's performance and credibility.

When competitive individuals or groups purposely try to annihilate, overthrow of subordinate each other as to achieve and gain certain objectives, this will create problems as it can be healthy or else. That is why how someone responds to and resolves conflict will limit or enable one's success. However, what can people do to overcome or tackle the problems occurred since conflict is frequently seen as a fight, a competition or the clashing of opposed involves conflict issue (what is the conflict about), feelings and cognitions (within-party experiences), and conflict management (between-party experiences) (Pondy, 1967; Schmidt and Kogan, 1972). Most academic work draws an explicit distinction between the emergence of the conflict, and the way it is managed. In organizations, people often avoid conflict, they remain inactive when conflict emerges, or they induce conflict without knowing it (Kolb and Bartunek, 1992;

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O'Conner, Gruenfeld and McGrath, 1993). These situations go unrecognized as long as we solely define conflict as a struggle or a fight. Fundamentally, De Dreu, Dierendonck and Dijkstra(2007) stated that "avoiding and ignoring conflict, or by assuming an inactive and passive stance, may be especially harmful for individual health and well-being, thus rendering it even more important to distinguish between the incident and management of conflict and also, for a good understanding of the possible influence of conflict on individual health and well-being, it is important to distinguish different types of conflict, that is, the conflict issues involved". This is because, each and every time war or fight happens, the reasons for it to happen be blurry.

Sometimes, people are not even realizing how they got into the problem. According to Wall and Callister (1995), despite being important by many scholars and practitioners, conflict and its antecedents and effects are still not yet fully understood for instance job stress is found to be both an important predictor and effect of conflict which indicates that an increase of job stress can be led by interpersonal conflict (see Wang, Jing, and Klossek, 2007). It is a norm that everyone will avoid such conflict that will be ensuing something that is harmful and later resulting such undesirable effects to them.

Researchers have suggested that an individual's "conflict style is a behavioral orientation of how to approach and handle conflict, with individual choosing a pattern of principles to guide them through the conflict process and these patterns evolve into actions and reactions that become known as their style" (Ruble and Thomas, 1976; Thomas, 1976; Thomas and Kilmann, 1978). According to Thomas (1976) and Folger et al., (1997), a conflict management style is a "general and consistent orientation toward the other party and the conflict issues, manifest in observable behaviors that form a pattern and share common characteristics over time" (Kuhn and Poole, 2000). It also been stated that, conflicts that are properly managed can actually increase one's productive and innovative as based on Kuhn and Poole (2000).

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Besides that, being able to manage conflict in a proper way will eventually offer "interpersonal relationship satisfaction, creative problem solving, the growth of the global workforce, and domestic workplace diversity" (Ting-Toomey and Oetzel, 2001) and leads to "improved efficiency, creativity and profitability" (Axelrod and Johnson, 2005). However, if such conflicts being mistreated and are not managed properly, it can cause "organizational inefficiency, reduced productivity, stymied innovation, and compromised profits" (Axelrod and Johnson, 2005). Brown (1983) stated that the influences of cultural differences on conflict management styles will actually help people to understand more towards one's culture.

1.2 Problem Statement

Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2001) stated that, cross-cultural conflict management styles are more challenging than intra-cultural conflict because cross-cultural conflict management involves people that have different perceptions and principles as on how to handle the conflict. According to Chen (1996), the need to study and exploration on cross-cultural conflict is very crucial as due to the world without boundaries nowadays. However, researches on cross-cultural conflict management styles especially involving Malaysia are still limited and understudied. Malaysia is a country that is very unique in term of culture diversity. This multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual nation, have similarity in many things but do differ in certain aspects.

Malaysia comprises of thirteen (13) states and three (3) Federal Territories which divided into two separate similar size regions, Peninsular Malaysia and Malaysia Borneo (Sabah and Sarawak). These two regions are separated by the South China Sea. Hofstede (1983) stated that Malaysia is among the countries that are high in terms the Power Distance dimensions. However, the question is, are the studies conducted by Hofstede in Malaysia were actually including the Sabah and Sarawak. It is because, Sabah itself has various ethnicities and each ethnic has different culture and values.

Basically, previous study has been focusing and examined cross-cultural dimensions and conflict management styles only involving certain countries. For example, there are study of cross-cultural conflict management styles between Americans and Arabs (Elsayed-Elkhouly and Buda, 1996), Americans and Japanese (Ohbuchi and Takahashi, 1994), Americans and Mexicans (Richard et al., 2006) and even between Jordanians and Turkish (Kozan and Ergin, 1999). Besides that, studies on cultures and conflict management styles between US and Asian cultures are basically focusing more on East Asian country such as Japan, Korea, China and Taiwan (Leung and Tjosvold, 1990; Ohbuchi and Takahashi, 1994; Ting-Toomey and Otzel, 2001).

Even though the studies conducted shows and provide an overview about the conflict management styles in Asia, the findings and the concept might be questioned since they only involved the several countries that might actually differ with other Asian culture and ways of managing conflicts. Therefore, there is still insufficient details and information regarding the culture and conflict management styles of other countries in Asian such as Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei and others. Thus, the questions are whether there is any differences among the Sabah main ethnics (Kadazan/Dusun, Bajau, Melayu and Murut) and towards what extend the degree of differences in terms of cultural dimensions and conflict management styles.

1.3 Research question

The following research questions are developed:

RQ1: Is there a relationship between culture and conflict management styles?

RQ2: Does demographic factor such as age, gender and position has any moderating effect on the relationship between culture and conflict management styles?

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RQ3: Does ethnicity differ in terms of their cultural dimension?

RQ4: Do different ethnicities differ in their conflict management styles?

All of these questions will be the primary interest of this study as this will help the researcher to examine and explore the relationship between culture and conflict management styles especially in Sabah.

1.4 Objectives of Study

The purpose of conducting this study was to examine the relationship between culture and conflict management styles in Sabah as there are many ethnics in this state. Thus the objectives of this study are:

a) To determine the relationship between culture and conflict management styles;

b) To determine the moderating effect of demographic factors such as age, gender and position on the relationship between culture and conflict management styles;

c) To determine the differences in the cultural dimensions of Sabahan from different ethnicities;

d) To determine the differences in conflict management styles of Sabahan from different ethnicities.

Eventually, through this study, not only managers but also other people will be able to learn and gain more knowledge about one's culture and types of styles that can be used to resolve conflict within a multi-cultural work setting peacefully.

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1.5 Limitations of the Study

Future research on this subject could be explore more as there is insufficient time for the researcher to conduct this study as perhaps longer time needed to gain more information and understandings. Besides that, this study could not obtain data from other places as due to time and monetary issues. Since the researcher is self-funding, the study therefore can be conducted based on the budget allocated by the researcher, as such as transportation fees, printing and many other direct or indirect expenses.

Besides that, for this study, questionnaire was used as one of the tools to gather the information required by the researcher. The information gathered from the questionnaire might not be accurate due to the lack of cooperation and honesty. Therefore, the limitation occur might actually affect the result of this study.

1.6 Significance of the Study

This study is conducted as to help people understand more about Sabah culture. This is due to the multi-ethnic in Sabah that perhaps offers much information and perhaps gives new idea about the people. Besides having to know about the Sabahan culture, this study will also investigate the conflict resolution styles that are used by the Sabahan. This perhaps will lead to the main objective of this study which is to seek relationship between culture and conflict management styles. Hence, by knowing one culture and styles of managing conflict, people especially those in the management level will be able to make a good decision making and also create a good relationship with others.

Therefore, this study wishes to explore more on the subject matter as it does benefits all. Moreover, this study involves those from middle management to top management especially among the main ethnics of Sabah which is the Kadazan/Dusun, Bajau, Murut and Malay. This is because; they are the one that always involved dealing with people and making decision.

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1.7 Scope of the Study

This study will cover the cultural dimensions that were developed by Hofstede (1991) and the conflict management styles by Rahim (1983). The cultural dimension consists of power distance, collectivism, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity. On the other hand, the conflict management styles model are based on Rahim's model that have five (5) different styles which is, integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising.

Each of this cultural dimensions and conflict management styles will be discussed in more details including the relationship between the two of it. The researcher distributed questionnaires to the main ethnics which are among the Kadazan/Dusun, Bajau, Murut and Malay. The data gathered from the questionnaire will help the researcher to construct the findings for this study.

1.8 Definition of terms

1.8.1 Culture

Hofstede (1991) defines culture as "collective programming of the mind" and developed cultural dimensions that comprises of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, collectivism and masculinity.

a) Power Distance

In this dimension, power distance indicates that the society that less powerful members are willingly accept and noticed about the unequally distributed in term of power. People or society that have high degree of power distance, accept hierarchical order within their organization which everybody know their place and do not require any explanation about it (Hofstede, 1991).

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b) Uncertainty Avoidance

People within the society that feels uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity are simply those that are scared to deals with something that cannot be predicted are those that are considered to be grouped in the uncertainty avoidance dimension but will differ in terms of having high or low uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1991).

c) Collectivism

Collectivism dimension refer to people that rely or depending on their relatives or members to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede, 1991)

d) Masculinity

Basically, this dimension symbolizes those that have preference in society for success, assertiveness, material reward for success and also heroism (Hofstede, 1991).

1.8.2 Conflict management styles

Thomas and Kilmann (1974) and Rahim (1983) have developed a model that can be used for handling conflict. This conflict management styles involves five styles, namely; integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising styles.

a) Integrating style

This style shows that problem can be solved in a collaboration manner. People that use this style are those that like to deal with conflict directly as they try to

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develop new and creative way out by not only for themselves but also for the needs of others (Rahim, 1983).

b) Obliging style

These indirect and cooperative styles are often being used by those that willing to let go something but they hoping to get something back in return. These types of people are one that willing to put down his needs as to please their partner (Rahim, 1983).

c) Dominating style

The dominating style indicates a win-lose situation or people that like to win over something by forcing people to follow him. This style might be effective and inappropriate as it might be effective in terms of achieving goals but it maximizes one's own need at the expense of others (Rahim, 1983).

d) Avoiding style

A person that uses this style is a person that likes to avoid from being involve with other problem. These people fail to satisfy their own needs as well as the concern of the other people (Rahim, 1983).

e) Compromising style

This compromising style involves those that would like to have a win-win situation. People involves with this style are those that are willing to give up

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something as to find a middle-ground solution that best for both parties (Rahim, 1983).

1.8.3 Demographic

It is a study on a population basically on the age, gender, ethnicity, level of education, income and others that are changing due to the economic, cultural and political issues (Investopedia, 2012).

1.9 Conclusion

There are still limited and understudied studies about Malaysia especially Sabah. This paper was conducted as to investigate more on Sabahan cultures focusing on the main ethnics which are the Kadazan/Dusun, Bajau, Murut and Malay. There are lots to be explored about the Sabahan as there are many other minor ethnic in Sabah. Hofstede stated that Malaysia is among the countries that are high in terms the Power Distance dimensions but are the studies conducted by Hofstede in Malaysia are actually including the Sabah and Sarawak.

This paper seeks to explore the relationship between culture and conflict management styles. There are four (4) dimensions in culture namely; power distance, uncertainty avoidance, collectivism and masculinity. While for conflict management styles, Rahim have developed five (5) styles which is integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising styles. Through this study, people will be able to learn more and understand one's culture and how to make a good decision and be able to handle problems or conflict within this multi-ethnic state as conflict is inevitable.

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