

The Relationship Between Culture and the Conflict Resolution Styles: A Survey Method and a Statistical Analysis

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Abstract: This study attempts to study the relationship between the high-context (collectivistic) and the low-context (individualistic) cultures and the five interpersonal conflict resolution styles. Hofstede's two-dimensional culture taxonomy was applied to differentiate the culture types. The main data collection was the application of the 35-item Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II) on graduate students of the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR). This study may show that there is a relationship between cultural variables and conflict resolution styles. It is concluded that there is a sub-culture in the ICAR community that can be characterized as collaboration/ integrating style.

Key words: High-context culture • Low context-culture • Conflict resolution styles • Questionnaire
• Statistical analysis

INTRODUCTION

Hofstede defines culture as “collective programming of the mind” [1]. As Avruch and Black put it, culture involves the social structuring of both the world outside of the self and the internal world. The concept refers to widely shared practices and too commonly held “assumptions and presuppositions that individuals and groups hold about the world” [2]. As Ross [3] has argued, conflict is interpretive behavior and cultural process (p.12). Psychocultural dispositions, deep-seated, socially constructed, internal representations of self and others, shape a culture's style of interaction with others and interpretations of behavior (p.24).

The influence of national culture on conflict resolution and management has received increased attention in the recent literature. A number of studies have shown how styles of conflict resolution are affected by culture [4-6]. Similarly, culture has been shown to influence the preference for third party intervention [7]. These studies compare countries known to differ along certain cultural dimensions, most notably the individualism-collectivism dimension. The unit of analysis is the nation state; differences that exist within the country are usually overlooked.

This study aims to offer a unique opportunity to test the relationship between the cultural variables and conflict resolution styles. Descriptions of national conflict resolution styles are often closely linked to national cultural characteristics. The survey method is chosen because most of the evidence for how cultural differences influence conflict management come from case studies and survey. There is a tendency that collectivistic cultures prefer accommodation and avoiding and individualistic cultures are more inclined to competing and collaboration styles. Apart from the describing the low-context (Western) and high-context (non-Western) conflict resolution styles, this study will address whether there is a universal conflict resolution culture among CR practitioners and researchers or collectivistic/individualistic continuum of cultural difference still affects CR styles.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Cross-cultural research introduces many taxonomies of culture in terms of a multi-dimensional culture. The dimensional treatment of culture is best exemplified in the empirical works of Hofstede [8,9] and Schwartz [10] that are based on values. Hofstede represents culture in

four derived dimensions: power distance, individualism, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity. In this study, I will employ Hofstede's framework of the cultural dimension in which he differentiates the two types of culture: the high-context culture and the low-context culture. Also, I believe that culture is not the cause of the conflict. It basically affects the conflict dynamics. I use the culture as a lens where conflict may follow the constructive or destructive path. If we differ the culture into the two categories like Hofstede, they may have an effect on how the conflict proceeds and what kinds of the conflict management styles are employed.

The high-context culture basically defines the collectivist cultures and the low-context culture refers the individualist cultures. It may be argued that this distinction is too simple and underlooks sub- and supra-cultures within the society. However, it is useful for our analysis to articulate the relations between the types of culture and conflict management styles. Culture is not only one factor that affects preference for different styles. There are a number of other variables such as personality, the topic of conflict and structural and situational factors.

In individualistic cultures, people give priority to their personal goals, even these goals conflict with those of their family, friends and country. In contrast, people in collectivistic cultures give priority to group goals. In individualistic cultures, the unit of analysis is the individual where self is autonomous and separate from the other (group). An individual can be member of many groups (democrat, Yankee fan, etc.), yet no one defines the individual identity its entirety. On the other hand, in collectivistic cultures, the self is not autonomous and often defined in connection with the group (Marxist, Zionist, Turkish, etc.). Individuals are attached to fewer groups, but attachment is very strong and highly defining of one's identity.

Basically, individualism (low-context culture) is a cultural pattern found in the western world such as in North America, Canada and Western Europe, whereas collectivism (high-context culture) is the dominant pattern in the Middle East, Central Asia, Far East, Africa, South America and to an extent in Eastern and Central Europe. However, in both individualistic and collectivistic cultures one can find individuals who are allocentric (pay primary attention to the needs of a group) or idiocentric (pay more attention to their own needs than the needs of others).

Pruitt and Rubin's [11] proposed the four styles of handling conflict (problem solving, yielding, contending and inaction) in which no distinction is made between problem-solving (integrating) and compromising styles.

Conflict occurs in several forms, including intra-personal, interpersonal, intergroup and international conflict. This study was confined to interpersonal conflicts. A model of interpersonal conflict management styles that was developed by Blake and Mouton [12] and refined by Thomas [13] is used here too. This model has been represented in a space defined by two axes: assertiveness and cooperativeness [4-6,14]. It identifies five different styles of managing conflicts: avoiding, accommodation, forcing, compromise and collaboration or problem solving. These styles can be interpreted in terms of orientation toward conflict situations along two dimensions. The first dimension represents the degree (high or low) to which a person attempts to satisfy personal concerns. The second dimension represents the degree (high or low) to which that person attempts to satisfy others' concerns [4]. Competing/Forcing (high in assertiveness) involves the use of power in order to win one's own concerns at the other's expense. Accommodation/Obliging (high in cooperativeness) represents trying to satisfy the other party's wishes at the expense of one's own. Collaboration/Integrating (high in both) involves bringing all pertinent issues and concerns out into the open and reaching a solution that integrates the different point of view. Avoiding (low in both) side-steps the issue and shies away from its open discussion. Compromise/Problem-solving (mid-point) involves splitting the difference, with both parties giving up something to find a middle ground [6] Figure 2.

Independent Variable: Culture- High context (Collectivistic) and low-context (individualistic) cultures.

Dependent Variable: Conflict resolution styles-integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising.

Hypothesis I-: There is a universal professional/intellectual subculture of interpersonal conflict management styles among conflict resolution theorists, practitioners and researchers.

Hypothesis Ia-: CR practitioners and researchers may more inclined to compromising and problem-solving approach.

Hypothesis II-: Degree of conflict styles is affected or related to the high-context and low-context cultural differences of CR theorists, practitioners and researchers.

Hypothesis Iia-: The collectivistic (high-context) cultures give more emphasis on the avoidance and accommodation/obliging of conflicts because they placed high value on tradition, security and conformity.

Hypothesis Iib-: The individualist (low-context) cultures emphasize the competing/dominating or collaboration/integrating styles of conflict management because they placed high value achievement, stimulation and self-direction.

RESEARCH METHOD

The pilot study will investigate, by means of survey, whether there is a sub-culture within ICAR community in terms of conflict management styles. Also, the survey method helps us to reveal whether there is a relationship between high-context and low-context culture versus conflict management styles.

The survey will be conducted in the Washington Metropolitan area between Western and non-Western subjects. According to Hofstede's [1] measures, Western countries are the most individualistic culture in the world. On the other hand, non-Western countries placed under the collectivistic cultures. The Western and non-Western samples will compose of students in five universities in D.C. Area. From a pool of students, the researcher will send the questionnaire by mail and e-mail. Also, the questionnaire will be distributed in the courses of the peace and conflict studies. Therefore, the main sampling method will be a convenience sampling among the peace and conflict studies programs in the Metropolitan Area.

Sample: Survey data will be collected from a convenience sample of five universities and colleges of the Capital Area of Peace Studies Association. In Metropolitan Area, there are five universities that have peace and conflict studies departments or programs in undergraduate and graduate levels. Although the whole population of this study consists of the conflict and peace studies programs in the United States, it is easy to collect the data by using the students of peace and conflict studies in the Washington area. The programs and departments have different approaches and sub-cultures about the managing and resolving the conflicts, this study takes them as one cultural entity in order to measure conflict styles of the students. In order to test Hypothesis I, Ia, II, Iia and Iib, we need to compare the non-conflict resolution students from different departments, basically social sciences. These students will also be selected by

the convenience sampling and will be exposed to same kind of procedure and method.

Data for the pilot study were collected from the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution (ICAR) students. There are approximately 150 students enrolled to ICAR right now. A total of 26 respondents completed the data collection instrument. The distribution of the respondents in terms of gender was as follows: Male-11 (% 42.3) and Female-15 (% 57.6). The percentage of the respondents between high-context and low-context culture in terms of international and domestic students was as follows: international students-9 (% 34.6) and domestic students-17 (% 65.3). The gender distribution within the international students consists of 5 (% 55.5) male and (%44.4) female. And it is 6 (%35.2) male and 11 (%64.7) female for the domestic students.

Data Collection and Measure: Data will be collected by means of questionnaire which contained mostly closed-ended questions. The respondents will be asked to think of a recent interpersonal conflict episode to which they were a party. This could be an open conflict or more of a covert disagreement. They will be asked to briefly describe this conflict and then to answer the questions that followed with regard to this episode. Respondents will be asked who the other party was for example, friend, family member, classmate, workmate, etc. They will be also asked the topic of the conflict. The response categories for this question are: a work-related matter, family matter, friend-related, etc.

Statements adopted from the 35-item Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II) will measure conflict management styles used by the respondent during this episode [15]. The instrument has been reported to have satisfactory test-retest and internal consistency reliabilities (Ibid). The five-style model has been shown to have factorial validity in non-Western cultures [6]. Each statement was worded so as to represent, as much as possible within a sentence, the behaviors depicted for a style in the multi-item ROCI-II. These statements representing (1) Integrating (Collaboration), (2) Obliging (Accommodation), (3) Forcing (Competing), (4) Avoiding and (5) Compromising (Problem-solving), are as follows:

- (1) I try to investigate an issue with my _____ to find solution acceptable to us. (very likely, likely, depends, unlikely, very unlikely).
- (2) I usually accommodate the wishes of my _____. (very likely, likely, depends, unlikely, very unlikely).

- (3) I am generally firm in pursuing my side of the issue. (very likely, likely, depends, unlikely, very unlikely).
- (4) I usually avoid open discussion of my differences with my _____. (very likely, likely, depends, unlikely, very unlikely).
- (5) I usually propose a middle ground for breaking deadlocks. (very likely, likely, depends, unlikely, very unlikely).

The scale of these statements consists of following numbers: very likely-5, likely-4, depends-3, unlikely-2, very unlikely-1).

These statements were used to test hypothesis I, Ia, II, IIa and IIb.

RESULTS

Initial analyses were carried out on the two multi-dimensional measures of conflict management styles and values. The means and standard deviations of the five conflict management styles of all ICAR students are given in Table 1. These data will be examined for the descriptive analysis and for the test of hypotheses I and Ia. In general, respondents preferred some styles over others. The respondents reported that collaboration/integrating is significantly the first preference of all students with the conflicting party. Also, it is reported that using compromise/problem-solving more often than accommodation/obliging or avoiding and avoiding more

Table 1: Means (bolds) and Standard Deviations (in parantheses) of the Five Conflict Management Styles (N=26-Total, N=9-H/C, N=17, L/C)

Conflict Management Style	Total	Low-Context	High-Context
1- Accommodation/ Obliging	22.69 (4.50)	22.94 (3.61)	22.63 (3.25)
2- Avoiding	20.92 (6.58)	21.06 (6.81)	21.63 (6.28)
3- Collaboration/Integrating	27.12 (5.11)	25.59 (4.86)	30.25 (4.71)
4- Competing/Forcing	20.73 (3.41)	21.12 (3.84)	19.50 (2.07)
5- Compromise/Problem-Solving	23.50 (3.86)	22.94 (3.61)	25.63 (3.07)

often than competing/dominating. Overall, an integrating approach is the most preferred style (Figure 1 and 2). Other researchers have also found the same kinds of evidence in their study [16,6].

If we look at the conflict management styles of high-context and low-context culture students, the five styles follow almost same pattern of the overall results. Integrating is also the most popular style with both international and domestic students. Therefore, the high-context culture respondents preferred the integrating style more than any other styles. Similarly, the low-context culture respondents involved the more often high levels of both assertiveness and cooperation towards the other party in conflict situation (Figure 1a, 1b and 2).

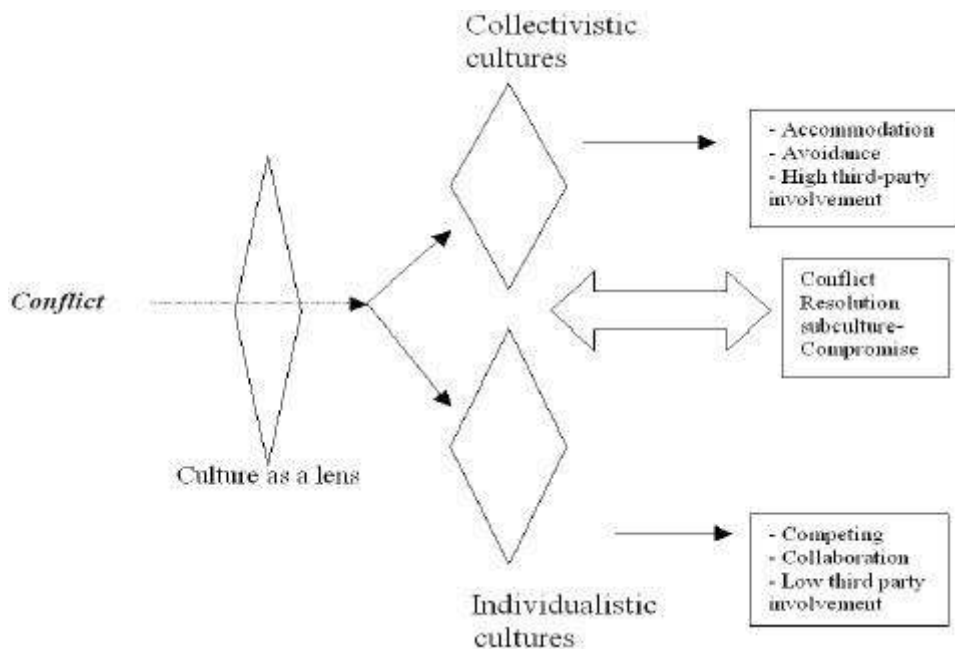


Fig. 1: Culture and Conflict Resolution Styles/Third Party Involvement



Fig. 2: A Two Dimensional Model of Five Interpersonal Conflict Management Styles

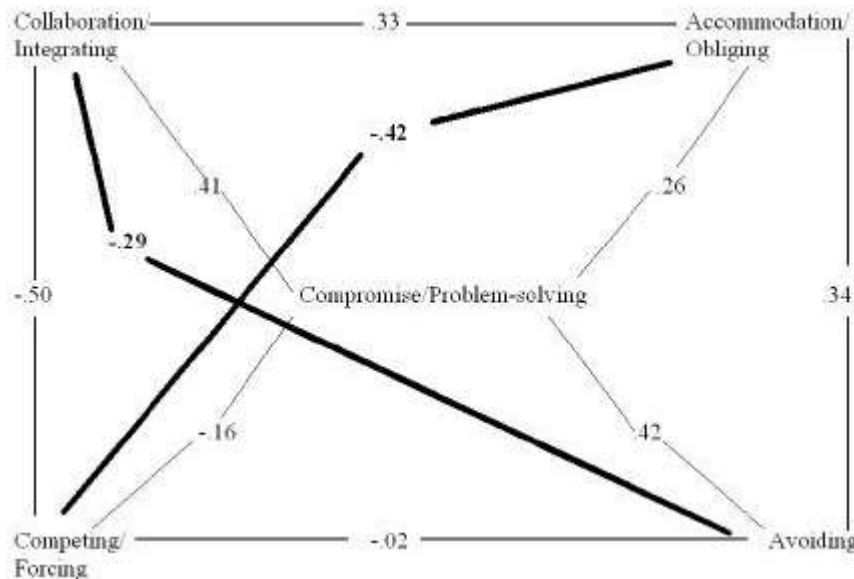


Fig. 3: Intercorrelations of Five Interpersonal Conflict Management Styles (N=26)

It is interesting that compromising is the second most preferred style after integrating for all the respondents. Similarly, the high-context culture respondents believe that compromising is the second most common style in conflict. In the case of the low-context culture, compromising tied for second place with obliging. In comparison to low-culture culture, face-saving, which is common in the Eastern culture, is a factor in the undesirability of obliging.

Avoiding and competing/forcing are the least preferred styles most of the time by both groups. An ongoing, constant state of conflict is seen as harmful to harmony in the most the high-context cultures. But the findings show that the participants from the high-context cultures reject the hypothesis IIa. The findings about the low-context cultures are more

hopeful for the hypothesis Iib. Although competing is the least preferred styles for them, they still overwhelmingly choice collaboration/integrating. Lastly, there is not enough evidence that there is a difference between high and low-context cultures and conflict management styles. We need larger sample and data for this.

The intercorrelations between different styles are shown in Figure 3. As can be seen from the figure, the most likely style to be used, collaboration/integrating is positively correlated with compromise, the second most likely style. Compromise is positively correlated with all other style except competing/forcing. Competing/forcing is not only the least preferred style, but also unrelated to any of the other four styles.

DISCUSSION AND SHORTCOMINGS

A consistent result obtained in the study across all high-context and low-context culture students is the preference for collaboration/integrating. The prerequisite for this style is the acknowledgement of a conflict and open discussion of all the relevant issues. If there is such open discussion of differences, the parties are expected to eventually reach novel solutions satisfying both of their concerns. Whether such discussions actually lead to integrated solutions is another matter. In short, there is a tendency for open discussion of differences. Although there is no comparison group in this research, I may conclude that there is a sub-culture in the ICAR community that can be characterized as collaboration/integrating style.

Also, the high positive correlation between the collaborative and compromising styles suggests that these involved discussions are conducted somehow in conjunction with the compromising style. One interpretation of this finding is that the collaborative and compromising styles are used in sequence. These findings are parallel to Blake and Mouton [12] findings about the use of "response hierarchies" in dealing with conflicts. The dominant response in the most conflict is collaboration, but if desired outcome is not obtained, the next response in the hierarchy is adopted, compromise. In other words, the initial response in a variety of conflict situations may be interpreted as a tendency to "discuss" the matter. If this initial method does not seem to work, a person may use the next most preferred style, which is compromise in our case. Another interpretation is that a person first uses the collaboration mode as an "opener" for what eventually created a compromising style.

Another finding in this study is the relative absence of competing/forcing in the conflict styles of both high-context and low-context culture students. It may be recalled from the Figure 3 that competing/forcing is also perceived in isolation from the other styles. But it is also possible that competing can be preferable style in specific situations such as the clear relations between superior and subordinates.

It is inevitable that the survey sampling methods have some biases that threatened the external validity. Because of the non-probability sampling, representation is low and subjectivity is high. Therefore, it is expected that there will be some reliability and validity problems during the pilot and actual stage of the survey research that will be conducted in Institute for Conflict Analysis

and Resolution, George Mason University and the other capital areas universities. Therefore, data may be affected by the characteristics of respondents.

Moreover, there are some other external and internal validity issues that should be addressed in here. First, the sampling of peace and conflict studies students may cause the construct effects that they answer the questionnaire in certain ways. In other words, what they say in a survey may differ from what they actually do in real life. Therefore, the generalizability of findings can be very limited to this setting. Also, it is hard to find when international students turn back their countries, they may expose some kind of "re-entry problem" that totally changes their perceptions about conflict resolution styles and third-party involvement.

Regarding internal validity, the testing and instruments used may be familiar to students that may result in little variability for variables. Also, the sampling variability and bias sampling may impose the limitations to our findings.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study is to test by survey means what various case studies and more casual observations had pointed out before: the differences between high-context (collectivistic) and low-context (individualistic) cultures about the conflict resolution styles. A theoretical foundation of the study is based on the collectivism-individualism distinction. One of the shortcomings of the study is the question of which cultural values account for the choice of conflict resolution styles and the use of third party. Situational and structural factors such as power distance, femininity/masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, personality differences, topic of conflict, time and place issues may have some effect on whether a significant relation will be found or not.

In order to overcome some shortcomings, we need to additional data from several cultures. Also, we need to focus on more internal cultural differences rather than cross-cultural and cross-national studies. The present survey is essentially a descriptive study and its data collection methods emphasize breadth rather than depth. Future in depth-studies on the different styles would be helpful to our present knowledge of this area.

This study may show that cultural variables, in fact, can predict some aspects of conflict resolution practices. One implication of this finding may be the benefit of including inter-cultural variables and measures into

conflict resolution practice and research. Current conflict resolution research either assumes homogeneity of each culture, or compares few variables. This research may enable researchers to search for subcultures within the conflict resolution field. Also, some statistical data may create a cultural profile of certain groups in society for effective conflict resolution practice. For example, a party with a collectivistic culture may expect superiors or even peers to interfere in a conflict situation more than his or her adversary from an individualist culture. Cross-cultural conflicts may be better managed if parties understand what the other party expects at each phase of the conflict process.

Similarly, third party interventions in highly culturally different parties may produce more compromising and problem-solving solutions. Future research would be worthwhile on the third-party roles and its relation to the conflict resolution styles, such as avoiding, compromise, etc. Also, the role of neutrality in third-party intervention that the Western literature invariably emphasizes is another important area for future research.

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APPENDIX: QUESTIONNAIRE

Hi, My name is I am currently a second year doctorate student at Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution at George Mason University, Fairfax, VA 22030 USA..

I would be grateful to you if you fill out this questionnaire. This is questionnaire distributed for the purpose of collecting anonymous information on the class project of 812: Advance Research Method. Your participation is strictly voluntary and all information is confidential.

Thank you for your cooperation. (Please put my mail folder)

A- Please answer following questions:

- I am first year master student second year master student first year doctorate student second year doctorate student third and more year doctorate student
- I am Male Female
- I am international student in-state student out-of-state student
- Place of birth (state or country):
- If you are an international student, how long have you been in the United States?

less than 6 months more than 6 months more than 1 year more than 2 years more than 3-4 years more than 5 years more than 10 years

B- In this section, please think about a recent interpersonal conflict in your life. It can be work-related, family-related, neighbor-related, roommate-related, etc. Briefly describe the content of the conflict (use back of the paper if necessary). Then, answer following statements that suit the best for you. For all statements, please just take one conflict.

I try to investigate an issue with my _____ to find solution acceptable to us.

very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely

I generally try to satisfy the needs of my _____

very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely

I attempt to avoid being “put on the spot” and try to keep my conflict with my _____ to myself.

very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely

I try to integrate my ideas with those of my _____ to come up with a decision jointly.

very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely

I give some to get some

very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely

I try to work with my _____ to find solutions to a problem which satisfy our expectations.

very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely

I usually avoid open discussion of my differences with my _____.

very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely

I usually hold on to my solution to a problem.

very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely

I try to find a middle course to resolve an impasse.

very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely

I use my influence to get my ideas accepted.

very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely

I use my authority to make a decision in my favor.

very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely

I give in to the wishes of my _____.

very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely

I give in to the wishes of my _____.

very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely

I win some and I lose some.

very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely

I exchange accurate information with my _____ solve a problem together.

very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely

I sometimes help my _____ to make a decision in his/her favor.

very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely

I usually allow concessions to my _____

very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely

- I argue my case with my ____ to show the merits of my position.
 very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely
- I try to play down our differences to reach a compromise.
 very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely
- I usually propose a middle ground for breaking deadlocks.
 very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely
- I negotiate with my ____ so that a compromise can be made.
 very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely
- I try to stay away from disagreement with my ____.
 very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely
- I avoid an encounter with my ____.
 very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely
- I use my expertise to make a decision in my favor.
 very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely
- I often go along with the suggestions of my ____.
 very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely
- I use "give and take" so that a compromise can be made.
 very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely
- I am generally firm in pursuing my side of the issue.
 very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely
- I try to bring all our concerns out in the open so that the issues can be resolved in the best possible way.
 very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely
- I collaborate with my ____ to come up with decisions acceptable to us.
 very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely
- I try to satisfy the expectations of my ____.
 very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely
- I sometimes use my power to win a competitive situation.
 very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely
- I try to keep my disagreement with my ____ to myself in order to avoid hard feelings.
 very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely
- I try to avoid unpleasant exchanges with my ____.
 very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely
- I generally avoid an argument with my ____.
 very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely
- I try to work with my ____ for a proper understanding of a problem.
 very likely likely depends unlikely very unlikely