



Comparison of Parent-Child Conflicts in Chinese and American Families

LI Haiyan^{[a],*}; WANG Piaodi^[b]

^[a]Associate Professor, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

^[b]Graduate Student, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

In modern society, the conflicts between parents and children are eminently shown through the different outlooks on the world, on lives, and the different values of views. It is an important aspect of the family education. If we can solve the conflicts of both sides properly, it will benefit the normal emotional communication between the two generations. Therefore, this thesis will make comparative studies on parent-child conflict in Chinese and American families, analyzing similarities and differences and summarizing the reference on the solutions in dealing with family conflicts. We should take its essence to its dregs and apply them reasonably to the family education of our country to help children grow up more healthily.

Key words: Parent-child conflict; Chinese and American families; Family education

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INTRODUCTION

With the rapid development of economic globalization and several years of efforts, China has made to join the

WTO to integrate China's economy into the world's economy. Profound changes have taken place at every level of society in China. These political and economic changes have penetrated into people's thinking fields, so the Chinese people have been exposed to more and more new concepts, new thoughts, and different values and lifestyles. Besides, the government attaches great significance to promoting cross-cultural communication among governments, schools, businesses, scholars and so on. Many foreigners, for example Americans, in turn, are also influenced by Chinese culture. As a result, a fierce collision between cultures appears in many aspects of society, as well as in family education. It is of great importance to deal with the conflicts in families properly and take in the advanced teaching methods from the foreign countries.

For hundreds of years, various thinkers and scholars in various fields from various countries have devoted themselves in the studies about what conflict is, what brings about conflict, how conflict positively or negatively shape one's thoughts and behavior, and why conflict can strengthen or weaken the related harmony. Though most people, consider family members as their most close relatives, and would wish their home to be a non conflict place. Family, as the basic constituent part of a society, still cannot be immune from being disturbed by conflict. As one important section of the conflicts, family conflict is not only a reflection of the status of parent-child's relationship, but also an epitome of family education, which is of great significance in promoting the healthy development of children both physically and mentally.

1. THE MANAGEMENT OF PARENT-CHILD CONFLICT

For many of us, the time we spent with our parents is much longer than that of anyone else. And what's more, the longer time we spent, the more conflicts will we

meet. With the conflict settled, both your parents and you would share a peaceful and harmonious environment, which will be of great advantages in your work, study, and life. Parents should refrain from dotage, protection or undertaking everything for their children, they have to build up a democratic, harmonious and sweet family atmosphere, only by doing this, can the children really feel the warmth of the family, the understanding and tolerance from the parents. Besides, a sensible parent would tend to treat the children in a mental way, instead of a physical way. Parents should develop healthy and positive views of life and optimistic, generous characters to make their personalities subliming under the right direction.

1.1 An Outline of Conflict Management Theories

1.1.1 Definition of Conflict

Conflict refers to a situation in which people, groups or countries are involved in a serious disagreement or argument. Conflict is an element that cannot be avoided in interaction; it happens from person to person, place to place, it happens among people, like friends, classmates, family members and so on, within and between groups and institutions. It occurs “when two or more social entities (i.e. individuals, groups, organizations, and nations) come in contact with one another in attaining their objectives” (Rahim, 1992, p.549) and when some kind of inharmonious things appears between them. However, there are no clear meanings or definitions for the term “conflict”, according to the scholars’ definitions from home and abroad, it can be classified into two major levels. At the first level, conflict is a personal thing; it takes place among the individuals, and is in the form of people’s inner imbalance. Conflict is about an individual’s behavior, reply, or personality characteristics. After the 1970s, there was an important period, because the researches on conflict studies has sped up, which was in the in the communication part, what’s more, many theories have come into form since then. In this level, incompatibility is regarded as the main reason of conflict.

Conflicts usually occur on the basis among people, namely interpersonal basis, which is also the focus of interest in this thesis. So, conflict here is a common relation between persons, with communication between people through the dualistic course. Other levels of definitions are very simplified. In this level, conflict does not exist only in someone’s mind; instead, it appears and develops in a relationship among people. Obviously, parent-child conflict belongs to the interpersonal level. Conflict is a widespread phenomenon in all aspects of social life, and may take different forms in different relationships. In this thesis, we mainly talk about the conflicts among parents and children in the families of Chinese and American counties, that is, the opposite ideas, opinions, feelings or wishes that are difficult to choose occurring among children and parents in different families.

1.1.2 Conflict Management Theories

Accordingly, “conflict management styles vary from culture to culture in a variety of ways. A number of studies have been conducted to explore the differences in conflict management across cultures” (Jehn & Weldon, 1992, p.25). Hammer also uses a cultural view to explain the conflict management styles. According to him, “an individual from some cultural or ethnic community will learn the attitudes, knowledge structures, behaviors and strategies for defining and responding to conflict situations” (Hammer, 2005, p.677). Conflict is a very common phenomenon and it cannot be avoided in any person-to-person relationship, and it might bring about different effects to every relationship according to how the two parties in the conflict take up the conflict, or, the different conflict management. If you manage the conflict successfully, then the conflict would turn out to be a positive one, leading to a satisfying result. On the contrary, if you manage the conflict unsuccessfully, the conflict would turn out to be an unpleasant result which might also affect the relationship to progress well. Because conflict is a dynamic interaction between both sides, the management that each side shows or resorts to in coping with and responding to the conflict is pivotal to the on-going conflict. That is to say, it will be of great concern in deciding whether the conflict will deteriorate or mitigate.

In order to find out and choose the best way to deal with conflict, scholars from home and abroad devoted themselves in the progress of studying conflict management. What’s more, their intellectual properties are impressive. Conflict management styles have been classified into various groups by many scholars. Different conflicts in different situations need to be settled in different ways, that is to say, no matter what culture or race the group is in, people have a tendency to use the ways which they are accustomed to deal with the conflicts in their progress of socialization.

The research progress of conflict management can be classified into two parts. The first part is about a single-dimensional pattern of the management, but there are a lot of imperfections and limitations of this pattern. For instance, this kind of pattern neglect other styles which refer to different kinds of consideration for self and others, the patterns only take the two extreme conflict styles into account. The improvement of the two-dimensional patterns in the research of conflict management styles is the next part. The two-dimensional patterns were firstly introduced into the study of conflict management styles by Blake and Mouton. They developed a notional system to classify the styles of coping with interpersonal conflicts.

1.2 Parent-Child Relationship and Conflict

1.2.1 Definition of Parent-Child Conflict

According to Willgerodt, for example, conflict in the familial context was defined as “an issue perceived by

a family member to cause disagreements between two or more members in the family” (Willgerodt, 2003, p.802). Just like the definition clearly shows that, it is nonetheless not as directive as for the connate nature of conflict. Because of my own particular research focus, conflict is considered as specific as an issue. From the comprehensive definitions of conflict mentioned in the former parts, conflict, however, can be better regarded as a dyadic concept. Therefore, parent-child conflict can be defined as the reciprocity of parent and children who detect inharmony and the probability of disturbance from each other as a result of inharmony. It is of vital significance to know the kernel concept of inharmony in order to make clear sense of parent-child conflict.

Inharmony may get on opposite opinions in interests, aims or appetency and so on. On the other hand, conflict, for parents and children who share the natural bond of blood and live for years under the same roof, often appears out of love and concern for the other one, which just could not find its way to reach out of the latter one at a particular time. “Conflict that occurs between parents and adolescents does have its characteristic features that distinguish it from all other kinds of interpersonal conflict. With the latter two, conflicts may arise out of incompatible interests between two or more people” (Simons & Miller, 1974, p.8). As a result, parent-child conflict and conflict resolution usually represent a special form by comparing to the situation with other relationships. Since the birth of the child, perennial aims and nether interests are most often harmonious. But there does exist inharmony, according to provisionally detected disagreements or oppositions.

1.2.2 Features of Parent-Child Conflict

Child is an expression describing the life beginning in biology and ends up in society. Actually, child may be defined as the stage within the life spacing when most of a person’s biological, cognizant, mental and social characteristics are changing from what is representatively regarded naive to what is regarded mature. For those children, this stage is a theatric challenge, which requires modulation to changes in the self and in the family. The stage of child is one of consistent changes and interim between persons and their contexts. For most children, there is a persistence of snug and accepting relations with their parents, although lesser parent-child conflicts are standard.

2. COMPARATIVE ANALYSES ON THE CULTURAL VALUES OF CHINESE-AMERICAN FAMILIES

The cultural context includes cultural values, which date back to the larger philosophical problems. According to Chen et al., “cultural value is a concept implicit or

explicit, concerning individual or group. It influences people’s choice on behaving styles, approach and purpose” (Chen & Starosta, 1997, p.21). What’s more, cultural values can point out both the way of consciousness and communication. For those reasons, no matter why a conflict is brought about or how different people manage it, cultural values must be the reason and in fact, it is the main reason. In order to have a deep understanding of this theme, scholars have done many studies. For example, some Chinese scholars like Huang Guangguo conclude that there are six factors that might affect conflict management “face, interrelation, seniority, power, credibility, and severity of the conflict” (Huang, 1997, p.42). “Facerefers to the projected image of a person’s self in a relationship network” (Ting-Toomey, 1988, p.213). In the Chinese society one has to utilize every kind of method to “earn face”.

2.1 Context of the Traditional Chinese Families

Throughout the Chinese human history, there are three main contexts for the traditional Chinese families: Confucianism, collective values, and harmony. Separate analysis of these three contexts is as follows.

2.1.1 Confucianism

Traditionally, the Chinese people have a fairly complex set of standards connected with parent-child relationships. Confucianism, developed by Confucius, has been a ruling philosophy of China for hundreds of years, and it plays a very important role in the shaping of Chinese values, and family values. Confucianism has a rather forceful effect in guiding people towards being a good man: A father, a mother, or a descendant, and is diffusely regarded as the most important element of the traditional Chinese culture, some even say that the traditional Chinese culture is built upon the Confucianism. Filial piety is one of the most impressive conceptions in the kernel values of parent-child relationship. An old Chinese proverb goes: Filial piety comes first in all virtues. Because of the significance attached to the filial piety, most of the ethical principles considering parent-child relationship come from the part of the child. Confucianism is also connected with satisfying social duties, building up mutual relationships with others, consistent to standards, esteeming parents and the old and achieving family prestige through personal achievement. So, if you do something that goes against the hierarchical relationship, then there will be conflicts between two different generations.

Family is the epitome of all of the organizations of different levels of society, and the fundamental unit of society is the family, too. And in a family, everyone should be a good family member, not only in a family scope, but also in a society scope. There are also two essential relationships outside the family scope: between the governor and the governed and among friends. The relationship between the governor and the governed is

a hierarchical one, in this relationship, the governed has to listen to and obey the governor, and the governor has to take care of the governed, it is just the same situation as the relationship of parent and child. This relationship stretches to the ranking and underling and many other relationships like this. Generally, the underlings are demanded to show obedience to their rankings, and rankings should take care of the underlings. Rankings may get into some fields which are a kind of invasion of private affairs in the eyes of Americans.

2.1.2 Collective Values

According to Triandis, "in a collectivistic society like China, social relationships and group harmony are important concerns" (Triandis, 1995, p.83). According to Hofstede, China is one of the collectivistic countries, in a collectivistic country, the people attach importance to the points, needs, and goals of the in-group instead of oneself, and they have great willing to cooperate with in-group members. In other words, people in China attach more attention on "we" rather than "I". By summarizing, there is harmony, face-saving, filial piety, humility and so on; all these are the top collectivist's values.

Chen and Starosta summarized five cultural values that guide and regulate Chinese conflict management and resolution: "harmony, relationship, face, seniority and authority" (Chen & Starosta, 1997, p.8). Of these five cultural values, the latter two: seniority and authority have a strong influence on the relationship between parents and children in traditional Chinese society. Seniority stipulates the order of the elder and the young, so it exerts strong control upon communication and decision making in the process of conflict. Authority means those positions such as the ranking, father, husband and older brother. These two conceptions dedicate in stipulating the socially recognized standards of parent-child relationships without any doubts.

2.1.3 Harmony

Hofstede thinks that "harmony often takes precedence over task accomplishment and personal desires; individual effort and achievement are expected to contribute to the collective good" (Hofstede, 1984, p.31). Family harmony belongs to one essence of the Confucianism cores. It is believed that only when we achieve the family harmony, could the society be harmonized. Family harmony depends on obeying people in authority in the family. The family members in China are highly united, they seldom express what they like or do not like. They always pay attention to the interest of the whole family.

Due to the blood tie shared by the parents and children, conflict has always been considered as a harmful factor in the family. To the Chinese people, building up a harmonious relationship is the finality of communication, especially in the familial context. As a well-known Chinese old saying goes, a harmonious family leads to an all-round prosperity.

2.2 Context of the Traditional American Families

2.2.1 American Parent-Child Relationship

Because the individualism has enjoyed immense popular support, the public of America thinks that independence is very valuable. The relationship of parent-child is also of the same situation. However, the concept of independence does not mean that the family is not united. The status of family love and kindred in Americans' mind is the same as that in the Chinese ones. What differs is that the Americans know how to express their emotions and feelings to their families, which is very different from the Chinese people. As for the way of showing love to family members, the Americans attach much more importance to the action instead of words. So, in an American family, it is very frequent to hear the members say "I love you". What's more, it is obvious to see a short distance between American parents and their children. The parents also play a role as friends to their children. Without any doubts, this will help the parents and children to communicate and share their feelings.

2.2.2 American Husband-Wife Relationship

So far, a research by Gottman and Kurdek on family members' conflict resolution generally has focused on married couples' strategies. There are mainly three patterns of marriage in American's couples: The first pattern is based on belief, just like the traditional Christian family; the second pattern is marriage based on romance, namely love itself; and in the modern American society, the third pattern which is based on reasonable nature is the reasonable marriage pattern. And in the last pattern, the person himself is the center instead of God or romance. What's more, on one hand, communication is very important and necessary for couples; on the other hand, individual privacy is also required to be respected, but in the Chinese family value, there are almost no secrets between husbands and wives, which is regarded as loyal to each other.

2.3 Main American Cultural Values' Influence on Family Conflict

2.3.1 Individualism

Individualism is one of the leading cultural patterns in America, dating back to the doctrine of the English philosopher John Locke in the seventeenth century that each individual is special, unique and the fundamental form of nature. Individualism can be accepted specifically in individual initiative, independence, personal privacy and personal expression. And in America, the leading individualistic culture accepts competition instead of cooperation; it is more important to achieve personal goals instead of group goals; every single person has the right to deal with his or her own property, emotions, and opinions. And making decisions is more important in the individualistic culture.

2.3.2 Equality

Equality is so appreciated by the American people that it is proved from the government to the social relationship.

Of people's rights and interests to people's daily lives such as communication and making friends. No matter in primary or secondary social relationship, the equality's value has the equal position. In the primary social relationships, equality is much more important than rank in an American family. Manners are not that important in American families, which can be easily found. Children are often treated as adults. After discussing parent-child conflict, parent-child relationship should also be taken into consideration. Most Americans have already realized that. According to the American law, after the children are 18. Parents are not amenable to raise them anymore. As soon as the children are 18, they can be treated as adults by their parents, which mean that their parents no longer give them financial help; they should think of ways to make money to feed themselves.

With the development of society and improvement of people's mind, husband is no longer the only pillar at home. Wife's main task is not only in the kitchen any more, they also go out to find jobs. This change gives women liberation and the position between husbands and wives are more equal.

2.3.3 Materialism

Materialism is rooted in most of the American people. They are born with it. It is considered almost as a right by the Americans to pursue abundant materials and comfortable lives. If anyone does not seek for materials or wealth, then he may not be understood or even laughed at. Reality in America is always a material one. What's more, this value even brings about a different consumptive value from other cultures. It is not difficult to be non-materialistic when you have everything. Can you notice that the most materialistic countries are developing countries? When you are poorer, you are more prone to long for wealth. And being materialistic is more behavior than some economic phenomenon, I don't think it can be relevant or be precisely defined and studied for a large country.

2.4 Differences and Similarities

These are the dominant traditional cultural values of the two countries reflected in the family life. However, since China is going through quick social development and economic globalization, some different and new behavioral patterns and thinking modes can be found in the drama as well. One main reason is that many families have only one child, and making the young generation to express their demands or disapproval more directly and immoderately than their parents do. Second, in order to keep the family harmony, the young children prefer to take no matter what action, sometimes they even tell lies, however, cheating always produce new conflicts in the families. Third, when the children are unconsciously influenced by the considerable Western ideology and cultural values, the parents are also influenced. The parents are trying to use an equal view

and position to understand their children, ignoring their authority.

According to a data survey, in the Chinese families, almost 53% of the children use the traditional Confucian values as a basic principle in parent-child conflicts, for example, when they are complaint by their parents or the elder, they always sacrifice their own interest or avoiding the direct conflict with their family for the collective harmony. However, there are also negative influences which should also be noticed. In many cases, the children tend to comply with the traditional tenet. However, in order to guarantee family harmony, 75% of those 53% children will not tell their parents the truth, because they think that their parents would not accept it and even beat them. Unluckily, nearly every time when they tell lies, new conflicts would appear and do harm to the parent-child relationship. Only 40% children show or express their feelings or emotions directly, sometimes they even fight for their own interests.

According to this survey, there is also an opinion emerged that in a family relationship, cultural values have positive effects as well as negative ones. After the cultural values and people's behavior are mixed together, people's dealing with the relationship among family members is much easier. As for the negative effects, if we attach too much importance to a family in one culture, the Chinese traditional values such as hierarchy, would not be helpful to develop some space for family members. On the contrary, in the American culture, those dominant values such as individualism or materialism could be a blasting fuse of family conflict, because people would do anything to protect their own interests, which would lead to a result of making them self-serving.

We have spread the general knowledge of the differences of cultural values between two different countries. We can also find that people are adapting the cultural values very well, different cultural values make different people develop different lifestyles and manner, as a result, they have different attitudes and methods towards family conflicts.

CONCLUSION

Both the Chinese family and the American family use their own leading patterns to deal with family conflicts. For most of the time, the American family depends on the thoughtful patterns in dealing with their parent-child conflict. Fortunately, no matter in what families, guaranteeing family harmony is a common dream. There are different reasons of different parent-child conflicts, among the reasons, cultural values indeed play a role but not crucial. As for the transient style, according to the definition, this pattern concerns for themselves and others equally; there is no clear limit to distinguish this pattern. However, people often come to terms with each other among the family conflicts. Besides, some new changes

should also be noticed. Owing to the rapid development of China, Chinese families will touch and accept information from other countries. And people's minds have been changed and improved by those new foreign information. Some cultural values begin to show their influence on the Chinese families and the Chinese families are indeed affected by them.

These observations will be helpful for both the Chinese families and the American families. In addition, for many scholars, these observations are great materials because they can help to provide information, figures or examples for further studies on conflicts. What's more, they also give useful information to the governors; the governors use these to build a better harmonious society.

Family conflicts happen in different situations, for example, in different families and families in different societies. People in different cultures have different methods of dealing with family conflicts. On one hand, the management of family conflicts may have effects for a society to develop. Because of these, in order to accomplish the studies on this theme, we should form a team. At the same time, the governments should provide financial and technical assistance when doing the research. The research can help the managers to supervise the social orders. With more abundant data resources than before, there will be a long time before the research is brought into force. The results would be more practical when choosing more families and more representative of the research objectives.

Above all, this study provides a hypothetical step in understanding the Chinese cultural values as well as the American cultural values. From the comparisons, we can conclude that there are differences as well as similarities among parent-child conflicts in Chinese and American families. Although it is known to us all that there are many differences from culture to culture, people can find the similarities and learn to improve their own lives. To some extent, the observations in this research may serve for future studies.

In recent years, societal conditions have changed a lot. Two-child policy was put forward. It is extremely important to improve family education. As we all know, education includes family education, school education and social education. Therefore, some traditional family concepts are out of style. Things need to be done to change them. First, education in the family should not be only at home, it should also be in a social environment. That is to say, knowing how to survive in an accident is no longer enough, enhancing the responsibilities and ambition of children is necessary. Second, the children's

sense of independence, the ability of self-support, cooperation and the awareness of caring for others are badly needed in modern society. It is difficult to make a person qualified enough for this society. Parents have to adjust the wrong or inappropriate approaches to the changing society.

No matter what gives rise to the conflicts or how differently the measures have been taken to solve them, we have to admit that, only by figuring out the conflicts properly, can we provide a brighter future for the children, who are the hope of the families and the whole nation.

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