

A STUDY ON CONFLICT HANDLING STYLES OF PURCHASING PROFESSIONALS

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ABSTRACT

During the progress of purchasing activities, the ways purchasing professionals handle conflicts will influence buyer-supplier relationships. Moreover, ethical purchasing is often considered essential in maintaining the relationships with suppliers. It is necessary to analyze the impact of purchasing professionals' moral development on conflict handling. Because of the growing numbers of global suppliers, purchasing professionals, who are often exposed to multicultural occasions, are expected to be capable to negotiate with their suppliers to prevent possible conflicts. Since conflict handling is essential for purchasing professionals and moral development and multicultural experiences are likely to be two important factors affecting conflict handling, it is therefore imperative to study the impact of moral development and multicultural experiences on conflict handling styles of purchasing professionals. But there is no research analyzing the impact of multicultural experiences and moral development on conflict handling styles for purchasing professionals. Accordingly, this study takes purchasing professionals in Taiwan as research subjects, uses Rahim's Organizational Conflict Inventory-II to investigate the conflict handling styles of purchasing professionals, uses the Multicultural

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Experiences Questionnaire to measure multicultural experiences, and uses the Defining Issues Test to measure the purchasing professionals' moral development. The findings reveal that purchasing professionals' conflict handling styles are associated with their moral development and multicultural experiences. This study can contribute to the research on conflict handling of purchasing professionals, and also promote further understanding of conflict handling styles of purchasing professionals.

Keywords: conflict handling styles, multicultural experiences, moral development, purchasing professionals.

INTRODUCTION

Purchasing professionals play an important role since they have to manage purchasing function effectively. During the progress of purchasing activities, conflicts are usually inevitable. The conflicts may exist between buyers and sellers, or between departments within the firm. Empirical evidence on the impact of conflict management on inter-firm relationships and job performance suggests that how purchasing professionals handle conflicts influences buyer-supplier relationships and organizational purchasing performance. Therefore, it is important to study purchasing professionals' conflict handling styles.

Conflict handling styles are the "patterned responses or clusters of behavior that people use in a conflict" (Hocker & Wilmot, 1985). Conflict handling styles reveal an individual's cultural traits, personality, and the situation in which the conflict occurs. The choice of conflict handling styles is associated with several individual characteristics, such as gender, moral development, culture, experiences, and social value orientation (Ogilvie & Kidder, 2008). However, little attention

(Day, Michaels & Perdue, 1988; Hagen, Kedia & Oubre, 2003) was paid on purchasing professionals' conflict handling styles. None analyzes the influences of moral development and multicultural experiences on conflict handling styles for purchasing professionals. Moral development and multicultural experiences are two important individual characteristics in current business environment confronted by purchasing professionals.

While moral development and reasoning might be affected by contextual factors such as individuals' professions, disciplines, and professional rules, purchasing professionals might behave differently from business students when encountering ethical dilemmas. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct research on the associations between moral development and conflict handling styles for purchasing professionals. Furthermore, while embracing sufficient multicultural experiences is beneficial for purchasing professionals, it is therefore imperative to study the impact of multicultural experiences on conflict handling styles. Nevertheless, a review of literature reveals that there is no research investigating the association between multicultural experiences and conflict handling styles.

To fill the research gap, this paper takes purchasing professionals as research subjects, and attempts to explore the impact of moral development and multicultural experiences on purchasing professionals' conflict handling styles. More specifically, the purposes of this study are (1) to determine the most dominant conflict handling style among purchasing professionals, (2) to explore the relationships between purchasing professionals' styles of handling conflict and their moral development levels and multicultural experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conflict Handling

There seems to be no completed definition of conflict as it concludes a variety of disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, anthropology, and communication (Saphiro & Kulik, 2004). The only consensus about the nature of conflict is that it appears when people with different needs or goals, or perceive that they are being impeded by others in satisfying and achieving these needs or goals. To a preferred or balanced outcome, conflict handling and negotiating is therefore the necessary process to resolve conflict among interest groups (Rahim, 1983).

Conflict handling styles reveal an individual's cultural traits, personality, and the situation in which the conflict occurs. A number of styles of conflict handling have been proposed to explain the communication behavior during conflict. Black and Mouton (1964) are perhaps the first researchers proposing the dual dimension typology about the negotiators' concerns: concern for production, and concern for people. They classified five types of handling interpersonal conflicts, including compromising, smoothing, forcing, withdrawal, and confrontation. Since then, this dual concern model, with opposing notions of concern for self and others, has become the prototype of the successive research on conflict handling styles.

A person who is both low on concerning self and others is an avoider, meaning unassertiveness and uncooperativeness in dealing with conflict. He or she may use withdrawal tactics or put off conflict issues, or even does not recognize that there is any dispute. In the contrast, an integrating (or collaborating) person is both high on concerning self and others when dealing with conflict. Integrating is traditionally considered the most beneficial way to resolve conflict (Browaeys & Price, 2008). This type of people is more likely to work together actively to get a win-win

solution to satisfy the needs of both sides. For those who are both in the middle of concerning self and others are likely to compromise between the needs of both sides. This type of people may make a mutually acceptable solution so that the conflict can be solved. Someone who is high on concerning self and low on concerning others is dominating (or competing), pursuing more on self interest rather than others' interest. Contrast to the competing style, if a person is high on concerning others and low on concerning self is accommodating (or obliging), meaning the propensity to satisfy the needs of others. Rahim, Garrett and Buntzman (1992) argue that each style of handling conflict is appropriate if it is used to achieve an organization's proper end. No single conflict handling style is more suitable than others. Therefore, several studies suggest situational approach that the selection of better conflict handling styles depends on the conflict situation (Delerue, 2005; Rahim, 2002).

Based on the dual-dimension model, some instruments have been developed to assess individual conflict handling styles; for example, the Conflict Measurement Survey developed by Kilmann and Thomas (1977), the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory (ROCI-II) developed by Rahim (1983), and the Dutch Test for Conflict Handling (DUTCH) developed by Van de Vliert (1997). Each instrument has its advantages and disadvantages. Among these instruments, the ROCI-II is the most widely used in the conflict literature (De Deru, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer & Nauta, 2001; Ogilvie & Kidder, 2008). Several studies have used the ROCI-II to measure individual conflict handling styles. This study will also use the ROCI-II instrument to measure the conflict handling styles of purchasing professionals.

While facing a conflict situation, the choice of conflict handling styles is associated with individual characteristics. In addition to the characteristics of the conflict situation, an

individual's gender, culture, moral development, working experiences, education, emotional intelligence, and social value orientation may influence her or his choice of conflict handling styles (Ogilvie & Kidder, 2008). Several researchers have explored the relationships between individual characteristics and conflict handling styles. However, little attention was paid on purchasing professionals' conflict handling styles. Only Day et al. (1988) and Hagen et al. (2003) explored the relationships between purchasing managers' conflict handling styles and respondent demographic variables. But, these two studies only focused on the associations between purchasing professionals' demographic variables and conflict handling styles. They did not analyze the influences of moral development and multicultural experiences on conflict handling styles for purchasing professionals.

Moral Development

The theory of cognitive moral development proposed by Kohlberg (1969) has been widely used in understanding the reasons that people use in making moral judgments. Kohlberg (1969) defines moral reasoning as the judgment about right and wrong; moral development is the level of maturity of moral reasoning. He also defines a subject's level of moral reasoning as the reasoning used to defend one's position when faced with an ethical dilemma. Kohlberg (1969) argues that as individuals mature, so too does their ethical judgment. As people mature and acquire more education and experience, their moral reasoning develops along with a well-defined sequence of stages. Kohlberg divides moral development into three major levels and six stages: The pre-conventional level focuses on the consequences of decisions for the self; the conventional level deal with the in-group of family, friends, and peers; and the post-conventional level focuses on principles for humanity in general. Each successive stage requires more complex thinking and involves the individual's consideration of an increasingly

wide range of persons and institutions. Kohlberg argues that individuals respond differently to ethical issues in accordance with their stage of moral development (Jones, Massey, & Thorne, 2002).

A review of the moral cognition/action empirical literature conducted by Blasi (1980) concludes that individuals at a higher moral stage are more likely to resist the pressure of conforming to the judgments of others. The review also concludes that while there is a statistical relationship between moral development and moral action, moral development can not totally explain ethical/unethical behavior. For example, individuals at a higher stage are not always more honest and altruistic, and post-conventional level individuals are not always more likely to resist social pressure to conform in moral action. Accordingly, a “higher stage of moral development is a necessary but not sufficient condition for moral behavior such as honesty, altruism, and resistance to temptation” (Trevino, 1986).

To measure an individual’s cognitive moral development, Moral Judgment Interview (MJI) developed by Kohlberg (Colby & Kohlberg, 1987) and the Defining Issues Test (DIT) developed by Rest (1979) are two different approaches that have traditionally been employed by researchers in moral development research. The DIT, a short, objective instrument that is practical for large-scale research, is used more frequently than the MJI to assess the moral development stages of people (Narváez & Bock, 2002). The DIT measures the ethical understanding of subjects, and does not necessarily require that they possess strong verbal and oral skills; it measures recognition knowledge, a type of tacit knowledge rather than explicit verbal knowledge. Therefore, for practical consideration, the DIT is used for measuring moral development in the study.

Rahim et al. (1992) suggest that selecting specific conflict handling styles may include ethical component in nature. As a person's moral development is a critical component of his/her ethical action (Rest, 1986), it is believed that ethical issues are usually accompanied with conflict interests. Making ethical decisions often implies handling conflict of each interest group. Individuals may develop a more complex and mature ethical reasoning only through conflict.

Therefore, it is speculated that there is an association between moral development and conflict handling styles. However, up to now, only Rahim, Buntzman and White (1999) and Chow and Ding (2002) study the association between moral development and conflict handling styles, and both indicate the relationship between high-level moral development and the adoption of integrating handling style for business students. But these two studies only choose business students as research subjects. Ethics issues and conflict situations in business profession might be more complicated than what students face on campus. No evidence can generalize their research results to purchasing contexts. There is still no research analyzing the association between moral development and conflict handling styles of purchasing professionals.

Multicultural Experiences

Due to the increasing global business, enriching multicultural experiences is crucial for business professionals because these people have more occasions to interact with others from different cultures at present or in the future. Multicultural experience has multi-faced nature that varies along several dimensions. Accordingly, various categorizations of multicultural experiences have been proposed in the literature. For instance, Selmer (2002) takes participants' past multicultural experiences to investigate the relationship between multicultural experiences and the adjustment. Townsend and Wan (2007) define multicultural experience as "the combination of time of study and quality of interaction with people from different cultures"; time of study refers to the length

of time spent in a multicultural environment, and quality refers to the depth of interactions.

In general, there is no major instrument measuring an individual's multicultural experiences in the literature. Endicott, Bock, & Narvaez (2003) evaluate students' multicultural experiences in the areas of multicultural attitudes, breadth of multicultural activities, and depth of multicultural activities. The instrument they used is then revised to a shorter version, contains two main

subscales: the multicultural experience subscale and the multicultural desire subscale. This updated version is called the Multicultural Experience Questionnaire (MEQ), which is developed for measuring multicultural experience and attitudes (Narvaez, Endicott & Hill, 2009). According to Narvaez et al. (2009), individual with higher MEQ scores are more open-minded, less being jingoism, and more likely to perceive discrimination and sexism as common issues. The MEQ instrument seems to be more comprehensive than the others. Therefore, the multicultural experiences of purchasing professionals in the present study will be measured based on the two domains of the MEQ: the multicultural experience and the multicultural desire.

Jassawalla, Truglia, and Garvey (2004) reported that interpersonal conflict is a key factor in the early termination or failure of international assignments for managers. Individuals who possess multicultural experiences, such as working or doing business with foreigners and studying abroad, are more likely to cope with international business conflicts (Leonidou, Katsikeas & Hadjimarcou, 2002). Mintu-Wimsatt and Gassenheimer (2004) suggest that salespeople's problem-solving approach is to some extent associated with their international sales experiences.

In the past, the impact of one's multicultural experiences has gain considerably attention. Multicultural experiences may influence individual decision-making and behavior (Mintu-Wimsatt & Gassenheimer, 2004; Ng, Linn & Asang, 2009). However, research on the association between multicultural experiences and conflict handling styles still cannot be found in the literature.

Summary

Based on a review of related literature, there is still a research gap on the study of the impact of moral development and multicultural experiences on conflict handling styles for purchasing professionals. This study accordingly proposed two major research hypotheses:

H1: *A purchasing professional's conflict handling style is associated with his/her moral development.*

H2: *A purchasing professional's conflict handling style is associated with his/her multicultural experiences.*

METHODOLOGY

This study modified Rahim's Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II) (Rahim, 1983) to gauge the conflict handling styles of purchasing professionals. The ROCI-II consists of 28-items for measuring five types of interpersonal conflict handling: Integrating, obliging, dominating, compromising, and avoiding. Each item will be answered on a 5-point Likert scale. The type with a higher score represents greater inclination when the conflict occurs. The ROCI-II were originally developed in three forms (Form A, B, and C) to measure the conflict handling styles when encountering one's supervisor, subordinates, and peers, respectively. Because the research subjects in the study are purchasing professionals, the researchers modified the instrument and focused on purchasing professionals' handling styles when confronting with the sellers.

Regarding the measurement of moral development of purchasing professionals, the Defining Issues Test (DIT) developed by Rest (1986) was used. The DIT uses well-constructed scenarios to examine purchasing professionals' ethical responses. Scenarios are commonly used in

business ethics research, which consists of a short description of an ethical problem, and is appropriate for the study of human behaviors because the stimulus presented in a scenario usually approximates closely a real-life decision-making situation. To measure multicultural experiences of purchasing professionals, the Multicultural Experiences Questionnaire (MEQ) developed by Narvaez et al. (2009) was used to investigate participants' multicultural experiences and attitudes. The term "culture" in the MEQ implies experience with a variety of groups, including ethnic minorities, immigrants, resident aliens, women, men, homosexuals, and political and religious orientations. This instrument contains 15 items with two subscales: the multicultural experience subscale and the multicultural desire subscale. The multicultural experience subscale consists of nine items which examines the number of multicultural experiences of the participants.

A questionnaire survey was used in this study. Survey methods are most useful for gathering information about the current status of some target variables within a particular collectivity, though they may not succeed in showing how the target variable uniquely fits into the pattern of the individual units within the collectivity. Questionnaires are documents that ask the same questions to all individuals in the sample and are commonly used in quantitative research. The strengths of a questionnaire survey are that the cost of sampling respondents over a wide geographic area is lower, less time is required, and a standardized, anonymous, and highly structured situation can be provided for the respondent to answer questions. Moreover, questionnaires are most commonly used in studies on related topics; this study therefore uses questionnaires to investigate purchasing professional' multicultural experiences, moral development and conflict handling styles. While developing the questionnaire, several professors and professionals with specialties on purchasing ethics were invited to examine the content of the

questionnaire; and ten purchasing professionals were invited to join the pre-test of the survey. Suggestions and feedback were provided by experts and pre-test participants, and hence some modifications of the questionnaire may possibly be made during the research.

Data were collected through a mail survey of purchasing professionals across a broad spectrum of industries in Taiwan. Because of difficulty in getting a list of all purchasing professionals, we employed the snowball sampling concept to build the sample frame. Some professionals were invited to participate because of their purchasing responsibilities for their organizations. Starting with these participants, the snowball sampling method was used to identify other professionals who had purchasing responsibilities for their organizations. Respondents who agreed to participate were asked to suggest other individuals that were then contacted, either by e-mail or telephone. Care was taken to ensure that the individuals were actually involved in purchasing functions. Thus, we built a list of purchasing professionals. A sample of 1000 purchasing professionals was randomly selected from the lists of purchasing professionals. These purchasing professionals were contacted by researchers via e-mail or telephone to solicit their cooperation. A packet containing a cover letter with the promise of protecting the confidentiality of responses, a questionnaire, and a pre-addressed return envelope was mailed to each of the sampled purchasing professionals. Two weeks after the questionnaires were mailed, a follow-up to the 1000 purchasing professionals was conducted by e-mail or telephone to remind them of the importance of their responses and thank them for their assistance. A total of 372 respondents returned the questionnaires. Like any other conflict research, this study has the potential to suffer from responses that state what is socially desirable, not what is practiced. The fact that the survey was conducted voluntarily and anonymously may have minimized this problem to some extent.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Conflict handling is inevitable for purchasing professionals when facing purchasing issues. When a purchasing conflict happens, tension occurs between the purchasing professional's duty to both the employer and the supplier. Each purchasing professional may possibly handle the conflict in different ways, and therefore lead to different outcomes. Handling conflict and maintain good buyer-seller relationships has become essential for purchasing professionals. Understanding the way purchasing professionals handling the conflict will be helpful for those who want to build a close buyer-supplier relationship. The main purposes of the study is to determine the most dominant conflict handling style among purchasing professionals, and to explore the relationships between purchasing professionals' styles of handling conflict and their moral development levels and multicultural experiences.

Based on a survey of Taiwanese purchasing professionals, this study found that collaborating is the most dominant conflict handling style among purchasing professionals. Research results revealed that purchasing professionals' conflict handling styles are associated with their moral development and multicultural experiences. Purchasing professionals with higher moral development or more multicultural experiences will focus more on collaborating style while facing a conflict situation. Most purchasing professionals are predisposed to utilize collaborating and compromising behaviors across situations of conflict. This type of people is more likely to work together actively to get a win-win solution to satisfy the needs of both sides. This win-win strategy implies the consideration of mutual gains for both parties and thus is likely to be used in business contexts for mutual benefit. Nevertheless, each style of handling interpersonal conflict is appropriate if it is used to achieve an organization's proper end. No single conflict handling style is more suitable than others.

As there is increasing awareness of the needs to develop strong sense of business ethics and to handle conflict among interest parties. The findings of study contribute to the following aspects. First, this study contributes to a better understanding of moral development and conflict handling styles of purchasing professionals in Taiwan. While most related studies focus on purchasing ethics in the Western society, the current study can make significant contributions towards the ethics and conflict literature by providing valuable empirical insight into moral development and conflict handling styles in the context of purchasing in Taiwan. Secondly, this study can provide a thorough analysis of the impact of multicultural experiences on conflict handling styles of purchasing professionals. It is expected to make up for the lack of research on analyzing the relationship between multicultural experiences and conflict handling of purchasing professionals. Thirdly, profound implications for international enterprises are expected because this study can provide a basis for understanding multicultural experience, moral development, and conflict handling style of purchasing professionals when encountering questionable practices in purchasing situations. This study might help top executives to establish guidelines to help purchasers act ethically when facing ethical dilemmas and dealing with conflicts. So that it may prevent them from resorting to unethical practices.

This study has limited external validity as the sample frame is restricted to Taiwan. This might limit the generalization of the results of the study to the other countries. Making generalizations about the conflict handling of purchasing professionals in other countries based on the results of this study may not be appropriate without further research. With the increasing globalization in business environment, contemporary industrial marketers have increasing opportunities to communicate with purchasing professionals with different cultural backgrounds. Culture plays such a potentially important role in decision making. Therefore, understanding the possible

cross-cultural differences in conflict handling of purchasing professionals is a relevant work. Future research can put more attention on examining the conflict handling of purchasing professionals in multi-country settings.

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