

# ***FNT: A Research about the Relationships Among Conflict Styles, Face Concerns and Four Individual-level Elements: Gender, Age, Occupation and Degree of Education***

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**Abstract:** This study intends to examine the relationships among the four individual-level elements(i.e. age, gender, occupation and degree of education), face concerns and conflict styles in interpersonal conflicts in a certain culture. 205 participants from China were investigated by filling in a questionnaire survey. Significant results were discovered that gender mediates conflict styles while age and degree of education have respective links with face concerns among these Chinese participants: 1) In an interpersonal conflict, females relatively have a higher tendency to choose the avoiding style and comprising style while males relatively show a higher tendency to use the dominating style; 2) People from 30-50 years old have relatively highest concern for other faces, next are people above 50, and the last, people from 20-30 have relatively lowest concern for other faces; 3) Highly educated people in China show more concern for other faces than people with a low education background. Although more research is needed to examine how the four elements influence face concerns and conflict styles in other countries and cultures, and to identify the underlying factors that why age, gender and degree of education produce respective effects on face concerns or conflict styles, the current results can provide more detailed and recognizable predictors for Chinese people to foresee target person' s face concern and choice of conflict styles in an interpersonal conflict.

**Keywords:** FNT, Face Concerns, Conflict Styles, Self-Construals.

## **1. Introduction**

Conflict Face Negotiation Theory (FNT) is a major subject in the sphere of intercultural communication research. To date, the field of FNT achieved remarkable results. The majority of the research results were produced by Western researchers, and among them, Stella Ting-Toomey and Kurogi, who published an important essay about face-negotiation theory in 1998, had a great impact on later related studies. The underlying assumption of FNT is: conflict styles can be predicted by face concerns. And Ting-Toomey also gave much more detailed assumptions about the relations among cultural and individual factors, face concerns and conflict styles. Later on, many empirical studies (e.g. John & Stella, 2003; John et al., 2009; Neuliep & Johnson, 2015) certified that face is an explanatory mechanism for culture' s influence on conflict management styles. There also occurred some studies to examine the relation between emotion and conflict styles, and the relations among relational factors, face concerns and conflict styles. However, there has been little empirical research

to test these assumptions related to individual-level factors, face concerns and conflict styles. So, this study aims to fill this research gap. And this research, to a certain extent, can provide more indicators for people to deal with conflicts.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Conflict FNT**

Conflict Face-negotiation Theory (FNT), as developed by Stella Ting-Toomey (1985, 1988, 2005a, 2015a, 2017) explains the culture-based, individual-based, and situational factors that shape communicators' tendencies in approaching and managing conflicts in diverse situations. Choice of facework management will influence our choice of conflict communication styles. Her major contribution is to provide two dimensions for face concerns: cultural dimension and individual dimension. The Conflict FNT admitted the individual-level factors on facework. Ting-Toomey introduced one important individual factor "self-construals", which was divided into two sides: independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal by Markus and Kitayama (1991). However, Ting-Toomey's studies mainly are theoretically cultural, individual, emotional and relational assumptions without enough empirical analysis and quantitative studies to prove these propositions. Although later related studies examined that face is a predictor for conflict styles; Emotion mediated the effects of self-construals and face concerns on conflict styles (Zhang et al., 2014); Conflict styles were chosen depending on relational features as well as face concerns (Moriizumi & Jirotaikai, 2013), these former studies mainly focused on cross-country quantitative comparisons in cultural, emotional or relational dimension. But, this research, from the individual dimension, setting in a particular country (China), aims to study more individual factors' effects on the choice of conflict management styles and on the degree of face concerns under quantitative analysis.

### **2.2. Conflict Styles**

Many researchers have conceptualized conflict styles along two dimensions: concern for self and concern for others. Rahim (1983, 1992) based his classification on the two dimensions, and resulted in five conflict styles of handling interpersonal conflict: dominating, integrating, avoiding, obliging and compromising. Later Ting-Toomey et al. (2000) added three more conflict styles: emotional expression, third-party help, and neglect. According to the previous research, there are some common factors like individual-collective culture associated with face concerns and choice of conflict styles during a conflict episode. In a face-based conflict condition, when someone's own face is threatened, he would react to save, maintain or give up his own face. And the concern variations for self-face and other-face have mediated effects on conflict styles. One study examined the role of culture and relational context in interpersonal conflict, and its analysis proved that cultural value and gender accounted for some of the variances in interpersonal conflict (Banu Cingöz-Ulu et al., 2007). This research will try to take four individual-based elements into account: age, gender, occupation and educational background, and attempt to analyze whether the four factors have effects on face concerns and conflict styles.

## **3. Research Methods**

This research takes methods of contrastive analysis and quantitative analysis.

### 3.1. Participants

There are total 205 people from different ages, occupations and education background participating in this experiment. All of them are randomly selected through a Chinese online platform Credamo. Every participant needs to fill in a questionnaire survey about their own views on face concerns and conflict styles.

### 3.2. Experiment Design

This research designs a questionnaire survey to collect answers from participants. The questionnaire has three parts: individual information, answers to conflict situations, and face concern spectrum.

The first part is individual information collection, the contents including gender, age, current education background and personal occupation. The four dimensions are the independent variables that we plan to take into consideration. As to the age, we divide all participants into four age groups: 20-30, 30-40, 40-50, 50 above; As regards the occupation, 205 people are divided into five fields of occupation: student, service personnel, company employee, institution staff and professional staff; And for the degree of education, participants are categorized into four groups: low (middle and primary school), middle (high school), high (college and university) and higher (graduate school and above).

In the second part, there are three designed conflict situations. The three conflicts are set in different situations, but the common point is that the involved two sides do not have a close relationship. Participants should describe how they would do if they face such conflicts. And according to their textual descriptions, especially the key words, like “I will compromise him”, “I will try to discuss with him to reach a win-win cooperation”, or “I will stop the arguments and find another car” to conclude what exact conflict style each of participants choose. And then, count all the frequency in all the three conflict situations, and to analyze the data with the four individual-level elements through Pearson chi-square test. In this way, we can see whether in a certain culture, the four individual-based elements have respective or common effects on conflict styles.

In the third part, beneath each conflict situation, there are two face concern spectra from 0 to 100. Participants should update the two spectra to show their self face concern degree and other face concern degree in their mind for each of the three situations. And through multiple linear regression test, we can analyze whether the four individual-based elements are linked to face concerns in a conflict episode. With the final results, we try to know whether the results could be explained by Ting-Toomey’s theoretical propositions of conflict NFT on individual dimension.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Conflict Styles and the Individual-level Elements

Table 1: Frequency of Conflict Style Choice for Male and Female.

		Conflict Styles				
		avoiding	obliging	compromising	dominating	integrating
		count	count	count	count	count
gender	male(88)	14	36	40	39	28
	Female(117)	34	41	68	39	39
Percentage	male	.16	.41	.45	.44	.32
Percentage	female	.29	.35	.58	.33	.33

Table 2: Pearson Chi-Square Test for Gender.

Pearson Chi-Square Tests		
		\$pin
gender	Chi-square	11.843
	df	5
	Sig.	.037*

The first test is a Pearson chi-square analysis that used gender, age, occupation and degree of education as the independent variables and the frequency of five conflict management styles as the dependent variable. The results of this analysis (see Table 1 and Table 2) show that gender has a strong link with the choice of conflict styles ( $P=.037$ ), while the other three independent variables (age, occupation and degree of education) have no significant connection with the choice of conflict styles. From the percentage of choice frequency, we can find that females' percentage of avoiding style frequency and compromising style frequency are significantly higher than that of males ( $P=.29 > P=.16$ ,  $P=.58 > P=.45$ ); Males' percentage of dominating style frequency is notably higher than that of females ( $P=.44 > P=.33$ ).

Table 3: Average Face Concern Degree for Male and Female.

Gender	Male	Female
Average self face concern degree	56.1818	58.5470
Average other face concern degree	50.2386	50.4530

From Table 3, we can see that male's average self face concern is a little lower than that of female; While male and female's average other face concerns are almost the same.

#### 4.2. Face Concerns and the Individual-level Elements

Table 4: Anova Test of Face Concern for the Four Individual-based Elements.

ANOVA <sup>a</sup>						
Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
1	Regression	1817.135	4	454.284	2.089	.084b
	Residual	43483.470	200	217.417		
	Total	45300.605	204			

Table 5: Multi Regression Coefficient of Face Concern for the Four Individual-based Elements.

COEFFICIENT <sup>a</sup>						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	29.428	7.729		3.807	.000
	gender	1.410	2.097	.047	.672	.502
	age	2.776	1.191	.200	2.331	.021
	occupation	1.068	.866	.087	1.233	.219
	Degree of education	3.404	1.672	.176	2.036	.043

From table 4 and table 5, we can see that age and degree of education have strong links with the average other face concern ( $P=.021$ ,  $p=.043$ ) by means of a multi regression analysis that set gender, age, occupation, and degree of education as the independent variables and the average other face concern in all the three conflict situations as the dependent variable.

Table 6: Average Other Face Concern for Age Groups

Age	20-30	30-40	40-50	>50
Average other face concern	47.8701	52.2903	53.9143	49.9677

Table 6 shows that the average other face concern of aging groups from 30 to 40 and from 40-50 are higher than 50. The rank of aging groups about other face concern degree from high to low as: 40-50 aging group, 30-40 aging group, 50 above aging group, and 20-30 aging group.

Table 7: Average Other Face Concern for educational Groups

Education background	Low	Middle	High	Higher
Average other face concern	47.4167	48.5741	52.0275	50.0333

A further finding is that the average other face concern of people with high and higher education background are higher than 50 ( $A=52.0275$ ,  $A=50.0333$ ). The rank of degree of education about other face concern degree from high to low as: high education, higher education, middle education, and low education.

## 5. Discussion

The current study examined the relationships among four individual-level factors (age, gender, occupation and degree of education), face concerns and conflict styles by setting in three conflict situations. The result was: First, the Chinese participants' gender influenced conflict styles, but had no effect on face concerns. Second, concerning of age and degree of education on face concerns were partly significant. None of the four elements could influence both conflict styles and face concerns, and the four elements all showed no significant relation with self face concern.

### 5.1. Hypothetical Explanations

The study results showed that among the four age groups, Chinese people from 30-50 concern other face most, then are people above 50, followed by the 20-30 group concerning other face lowest. A possible explanation of this result is: the people from 30-50 have a higher degree of interdependent self construal than the 20-30 group and above-50 group. Ting-Toomey asserted that members of collectivistic cultures rely predominately on their interdependent self construals. That meant, with a collectivistic culture, socially interdependent self construal, rather than independent self construal, plays a more vital role on Chinese people. But, even in China, the interdependent self construal still shows individual differences, and a certain micro group (e.g. age, degree of education) may have a "collective degree of self construal". Markus and Kitayama (1991) pointed out that being interdependent "entails seeing oneself as part of an encompassing social relationship and recognizing that one's behavior is determined, contingent on, and, to a large extent organized by what the actor perceives to be the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the relationship." The current domestic situation is: Chinese people between 30 and 50, are in a highly active and complex social relationship. Most of them are in working stage, and their behaviors for job, social resources

are to a large extent contingent on others' feelings, thoughts and actions. So they have to consider more about the social relationship and express a higher concern for other face to maintain and save others' face in a conflict (the ultimate goal is to let the target person save their face in one future conflict). Most Chinese people who are above 50 already retire and withdraw from the active and complex social relation circle. Their relation circle are simpler, and they do not have to worry about their job and social resources, so accordingly, their degree of interdependent self construal declines. As the aging old, the independent self construal of old Chinese people is very likely to increase because of the power distance in traditional Chinese culture. Many old people think even in a conflict, others should give them face out of respect. The decrease in interdependent self construal and the increase of independent self construal are two possible reasons for the drop of other face concern. And to the people between 20 and 30, their relatively low other face concern shows their relatively low degree of interdependent self construal. The decreased degree of interdependent self construal may result from two factors. One is the simpler social relationship mentioned above, because many people during this age period are just starting their career in work place or at school. The other factor is the young age itself. Many of them have not much insight and experience of the society, and their immature mind to a large degree leads to their focus on themselves. Their more focus on self and ignorance of social relationship tend to cause their declining of interdependent self construal, and further influence their concern for other face showing relatively low.

In term of degree of education, the study result reflected that in China, highly educated people tend to show a higher concern for other face than people with low education background. The self-construals theory could not explain this result in here because highly educated people and people at low educational level in China have no significant social relationship differences. In other words, highly educated people do not necessarily show a higher dependence on others' face. The possible new explanation is: education brings more inclusiveness. The potential for conflict exists where opposing interests, values, or needs tinge our relationships (Ho-Won, 2008). Highly educated people generally have a higher inclusiveness of opposing interests, values and needs because they learned various values and thoughts, and have seen many lessons of interests conflict from books or other people in reality. So, they are more likely to show a more inclusive attitude towards opposing thoughts or interests than people at a low educational level when themselves in conflicts.

The study results also show that gender has mediation function on conflict styles: females relatively tend to choose avoiding style and compromising styles in conflict, while males relatively tend to choose dominating styles in conflict, and both female and male have a similar degree of choice inclination of integrating style and obliging style. In Ting-Toomey's former study (2014), emotion mediated the effects of self-construal and face concerns on conflict styles. That means emotion is an indirect mediator. Whether gender, also like emotion, mediating the effects of self-construal and face concerns on conflict styles needs to be further explored. But the current statistics showed that females' self face concern is much higher than that of males, which did not match the certified rules that self face concern was associated positively with dominating style, while other-face concern was associated positively with integrating, obliging and compromising styles (Oetzel et al., 2003). So, here, it may deduce that gender is less likely to indirectly influence conflict styles. In other words, face concerns and self-construals may not be the mediums between gender and conflict styles. And other underlying factors like gender power comparison, gender social status are better taken into account.

## 5.2. Limitations

A study by Chen (2011) showed that in China, men tend to maintain self face and choose dominating style, while women tend to maintain other face and mutual face, and to choose obliging, integrating,

avoiding and compromising. Gender mediated the effect of face concerns on conflict styles, and the relation between face concerns and conflict styles followed the certified rule. In this current study, females indeed tend to choose compromising style and avoiding style while males tend to choose dominating style, but females' average self face concern is higher than that of males which does not match the certified rules of face concerns' influence on conflict styles. The first hypothesis for this inconsistency is what we point out above that face concern is only a predict mechanism for conflict styles. Except face concerns, there would occur some other factors that influence the exact choice of conflict styles. The second hypothesis is the limitation of data. The number of the participants is 205, which could not totally represent the true situation. And the form of data collection, by filling in questionnaires and designing textual description, existed certain inaccuracy.

This study only focused on Chinese people. So, whether the four individual-level elements have links with conflict styles and face concerns in other cultures, is now not clear. And it is worth to go further study by examining the assumption in other countries.

### **5.3. Theoretical and practical implications**

The current study has both theoretical and practical implications. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributed to extending FNT by examining and confirming the influence of more individual-based elements on face concerns and conflict styles. And it provide a micro-cultural definition that the cultural-based factors not just be divided into C-I cultures, beneath the two parts, many micro-cultural groups also should be taken into consideration. From a practical perspective, it is easier for people to foresee a stranger' s general face concerns and conflict styles by seeing his or her gender, age and degree of education. In cross-cultural situations, cultural-based factors help people to foresee target person' s choice of conflict styles and accordingly react with their own conflict styles to avoid unnecessary conflict. However, when it comes to a certain culture, different orientations of face concerns and conflict styles exist among people with a same culture. At this time, cultural-based factors could not obviously play its function. And self-construals, as one main individual factor examined before, could not give much practical help to people who are facing strangers in conflicts. When people do not sure about the target person' s self-construals and face concerns, gender, age and degree of education can become more recognizable indicators for them to predict target person' s conflict styles and face concerns in a conflict episode.

## **6. Conclusion**

This research aimed to examine whether other individual-level elements have influences to conflict styles and face concerns. Based on a questionnaire survey and quantitative analysis of the relations among the four individual-based elements, face concerns and conflict styles, it can be concluded that age, education background and gender all have some links with conflict styles or face concerns. The results indicate that gender has a strong link with conflict styles choice, while age and education background have positive links with other face concern. While there is an inconsistency between female and male' s self face concern and the choice of conflict styles, this approach provides a new insight into the FNT that not all cultural and individual factors influence conflict styles through face concerns. Despite some limitations, the current study may serve as a predictor to effectively predict one' s conflict choice and face concern in one certain culture. Results from this study provide three more detailed, more obvious individual elements to help people foresee the possible conflict styles and face concerns of target people. The remained question is why the two individual elements(age and degree of education) have links with face concerns but without further connection with conflict styles. And future research is needed to engender a deeper understanding of the underlying factors of

why the three individual elements (age, gender, and degree of education) mediate face concerns or conflict styles respectively. And there should be more studies to examine the three individual elements in different countries and even in cross-cultural situations.

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