Can absent leadership be positive in team conflicts?

An examination of leaders' avoidance behavior in China

Abstract

Purpose – Although conflict avoidance is one of the most commonly used conflict resolution styles in China, there has surprisingly been no explicit investigation of the effects of leaders' avoidance. This paper therefore examines how leaders' avoidance influences followers' attitudes and well-being in China.

Design/methodology/approach – Data was collected from 245 subordinates in three large companies in the People's Republic of China through an online survey. Multiple regression analysis was adopted to test three sets of competing hypotheses.

Findings – Leaders' avoidance behavior is positively related to followers' perception of justice, supervisory trust and emotional well-being in Chinese organizations.

Originality/value - Our paper joins growing attempts to consider conflict management in the context of leadership. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to examine empirically the relationships between a team leader's avoidance behavior and his or her subordinates' perceptions of justice, supervisory trust, and emotional well-being in a single study. The findings are provoking by illustrating positive effect of leader's conflict avoidance behavior in China. Our paper supports that conflict avoidance could be a sustainable rather than one-off strategy by a leader, and that identifying conditions (e.g. culture) that affect the outcomes of conflict avoidance is important.

Keywords: Leadership, Avoidance, Justice, Trust, Well-being, China

Article Type: Research paper

Introduction

Conflict is one of the most common phenomena in team interactions (Rahim, Magner, & Shapiro, 2000; Zhang, Cao, & Tjosvold, 2011). Given the information asymmetry between supervisors and subordinates (Restubog, Hornsey, Bordia & Esposo, 2008), team members expect the team leader or manager to take charge of a conflict situation. Managers spend substantial amounts of their time (around 25%) dealing with conflicts (Bass & Bass, 2008), which indicates the important role played by team leaders in team conflict situations. Since conflict management is useful for helping employees to develop high quality leader relationships with their foreign managers, studies have suggested that a leader's avoidance or non-involvement could be detrimental in a wide range of situations, including team conflicts (Chen, Tjosvold, & Fang, 2005; Tjosvold, 2008).

However, it is worth noting that most leadership and conflict research cautioning against conflict avoidance by leaders has been based in Western contexts. Different cultures lead individuals to prioritize different sets of values and behaviors; therefore, the globalization of management prompts the question of whether particular leadership styles and behaviors remain positive or negative across cultures. For example, it is still unclear whether a leader's avoidance has a negative impact on subordinates' attitudes in Eastern cultures such as China in the same way as it does in Western cultures. Despite the common understanding about conflict avoidance in China (Ohbuchi & Atsumi, 2010; Tjosvold & Sun, 2002), there has surprisingly been no explicit investigation of the effects of leaders' avoidance. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to explore how leaders' avoidance influences followers' attitudes in China.

The reason for focusing on leaders' avoidance behavior in China is twofold. First, while most leadership and conflict literature points to the detrimental effects of leadership avoidance in team affairs, including in conflict situations, this paper addresses the question "Does leaders' avoidance in China negatively influence followers?". Second, by considering a

leader's avoidance in conflict situations, where his or her involvement seems to be required, this paper's research question is extended to the broader inquiry of whether laissez-faire leadership is one of the least effective leadership styles across different cultures. Connecting with leadership theory, to explore the effects of leaders' avoidance behavior on followers' attitudes, is justifiable given the importance of the leader's role in team conflicts as well as the conceptual and behavioral link between leadership avoidance and laissez-faire leadership (Saeed, Almas, Anis-ul-Haq, & Niazi, 2014).

During this investigation, competing hypotheses are presented that match the different approaches to leadership found across different cultures (e.g. the global appreciation of certain leadership styles as opposed to culturally-specific implicit leadership). There is evidence for both generalizability and culture-specificity in leaders' behavior and/or leadership (Gelfand, Erez, & Aycan, 2007). The Global Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness (GLOBE) project, for example, has found that followers in all of the cultures studied appreciate transformational (charismatic/inspirational) leadership (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). At the same time, some styles of leadership that are perceived as negative or detrimental to performance in a North American context are perceived as neutral or even positive in other cultures (Dorfman, Hanges, & Brodbeck, 2004). On the other hand, extant leadership and conflict research in China is also unclear in its conclusions about the possible effects of a leader's avoidance behavior on followers' attitudes. The cultural expectation of paternalistic leadership, where the leader is strongly involved in the follower's affairs, may lead to disapproval of the leader's avoidance; however, studies show that avoidance is one of the most commonly used conflict resolution styles in China (Ohbuchi & Atsumi, 2010; Tjosvold & Sun, 2002).

This paper aims to contribute to the literature on conflict management, leadership, and cross-cultural management. Firstly, it contributes to the leadership literature as it joins the

growing attempts to consider conflict management in the context of leadership. In doing this, the paper also challenges the traditionally one-dimensional view of laissez-faire leadership, which has mostly been negative. Secondly, this paper aims to contribute to the conflict management literature, especially in relation to avoidance. The findings in this paper indicate whether or not avoidance could be a sustainable choice by a leader rather than a one-off strategy, and show that identifying conditions that affect the outcomes of conflict avoidance, such as culture, may be important. Finally, this paper contributes to the cross-cultural management literature. The investigation of leaders' conflict avoidance in this paper illustrates that a high power distance culture may offer important insights in terms of a leader's level of (non)involvement in his or her team.

Theoretical background and hypotheses

The notion of conflict is quite broad, since there is an extensive list of possible causes including, but not limited to, incongruent goals, attitudes, values, or beliefs (Jehn & Mannix, 2001) or incompatible activities (Deutsch, 1973). The words for conflict in Chinese (*maodun*: 矛盾; *Chongtu*:冲突) also have very subtle meanings and this is even more the case in

organizational contexts. Chinese people often relate conflict to relationship (*guanxi*:关系).

Conflict may mean a difference or disagreement over interests or loyalty; an argument, dispute, or fight; or a clash or contrast. Given such broadness and subtlety, the fact that conflict is common in the interpersonal context of teams (Rahim et al., 2000), and the various team affairs that a team leader is expected to manage, it would be challenging to constrain or limit the scope of conflicts that a leader should deal with (or avoid). Conflicts perceived by followers in a team could be caused by the leader directly (in one-to-one tensions with the leader or by negligence or lack of concern for the follower's affairs) and/or by other team

members indirectly (as a result of competition over the limited resources for career progression, or differences based on dissimilar professional and personal points of view) (e.g. Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2006).

As one of most popular conflict resolution theories, the Dual Concern Model suggests that people's choice between the different types of resolution (e.g. collaboration, compromise, accommodation, domination, or avoidance) depends on the combination of their concern for themselves and their concern for others (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Rahim, 1983). Of the different types of resolution, avoidance is said to be a particularly passive style, with low concern for both oneself and others. Consequently, avoidance as a means of dealing with conflict is seen as counterproductive – it communicates mistrust, resulting in closed-mindedness (cf. Folger & Skarlicki, 1998) and sub-optimal and ineffective decisions (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2007; Tjosvold & Sun, 2002). This view is in line with the axiom "some solution is better than no solution" of certain cultures (e.g. in North America) that show a tendency to close a deal in negotiations (Cohen, 1991).

However, much of the conflict research from China argues that avoidance is a commonly used style for handling conflict in Chinese organizations. The collectivism culture in China, which emphasizes interpersonal harmony and long-term relationships, is suggested as the main reason why people engage in avoidance (Ohbuchi & Atsumi, 2010; Tjosvold & Sun, 2002). Given such cultural differences towards conflict avoidance, a natural question would be what the outcome of leaders' avoidance behavior is in China. To answer this question, this paper examines the relationship between a leader's avoidance, two attitudes of followers (supervisory trust and justice) and followers' emotional well-being, because studies show that trust and justice are important followers' attitudes that are influenced by the leader's behavior (cf. Tremblay, Vandenberghe, & Doucet, 2013) and that leaders also influence followers' emotions (De Cremer, 2006).

Leader avoidance as ineffective leadership behavior

Bass and Avolio (1997) identify three general forms of leadership: transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership. It is suggested that the presence, rather than absence, of leadership is important in conflict situations. For example, a transformational leader encourages subordinates to move beyond individual interests in conflict situations and to build a cooperative approach to conflict resolution (Dionne, Yammarino, Atwater, & Spangler, 2004). Transactional leaders resolve conflict situations and their accompanying ambiguity and uncertainty (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002; Tremblay et al., 2013). In a similar vein, the functional approach to leadership emphasizes the leader's instructional and regulatory nature (Kozan, 1997; Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006), and a team leader is expected to "manage" rather than "avoid" the affairs of the team, including team conflicts.

Laissez-faire leadership implies an absence of feedback and involvement, and hence a lack of supportive leadership, and this may lead to a lack of conflict management (Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007) or to leader avoidance. Put differently, if a leader fails to respond to team conflicts, by using avoidance tactics, the leader may be perceived as being absent and failing in his or her responsibility. Conflict research also shows that subordinates generally prefer problem-solving conflict management styles (e.g., De Dreu, 1997) and that they are even willing to comply with dominant behavior by a formal leader or manager (cf. Tost, Gino, & Larrick, 2013). Overall, studies on conflict management styles illustrate that avoidance has a negative impact on followers' perceptions (e.g. Desivilya & Yagil, 2005; Roloff & Ifert, 2000).

Looking at the case of China, paternalistic leadership has been considered as the indigenous, pervasive, and effective leadership style in Chinese organizations (Cheng, Chou, Huang, Wu, & Farh, 2004; Farh & Cheng, 2000) affected by Confucian values. Paternalistic

leadership, based on the prevalent notion of the "work family", (Farh & Cheng, 2000; Farh, Liang, Chou, & Cheng, 2008; Wong, 2012; Wu, Huang, Li, & Liu, 2012), blurs personal and work domains for most of the Chinese workforce, and leads to a natural deference to authority. This would mean that it is natural for the leader in China to be strongly involved in a wide range of affairs, including handling conflicts. Therefore it would not be considered effective in China for a leader to show an avoidance approach to conflicts.

Leader avoidance as an effective form of leadership behavior in China

On the other hand, the collectivism culture, which emphasizes interpersonal harmony and long-term relationships, is suggested as the main reason why people engage in avoidance behaviors in China (Ohbuchi & Atsumi, 2010; Tjosvold & Sun, 2002). Despite being common in China, empirical studies show that avoidance is sub-optimal for an individual's co-workers because the individual chooses to avoid conflict represses his or her true feelings and ignores hidden problems between them (e.g. Tjosvold, 2008; Tjosvold & Sun, 2002). Therefore, while collectivism may explain why avoidance behavior is chosen when amongst colleagues, it does not seem to suggest that avoidance is effective in Chinese organizations. This paper thus considers whether another cultural value prevalent in China, high power distance, may explain how leader avoidance influences followers' attitudes. Power distance is the degree of power that authorities have over subordinates, and it is closely related to the followers' attitudes towards authority and leadership (Hofstede, 1991; Kirkman, Chen, Farh, Chen, & Lowe, 2009; Schaubroeck, Lam, & Cha, 2007). When someone holds a high-status position, the position itself affects expectations about that individual's behavior in group contexts (Ridgeway & Berger, 1986), and this would be even more evident in high power distance cultures like China (Farh & Cheng, 2000; House et al., 2004).

Implicit leadership theories suggest that contextual/cultural influences determine leadership dynamics (e.g., Dvir & Shamir, 2003; Howell & Shamir, 2005). A revisiting of the

notion of paternalistic leadership may help to illustrate the delicate issue of the effects of power on subordinates. Farh and colleagues argue that paternalistic leadership (Farh et al., 2008; Farh & Cheng, 2000) combines strong discipline and authority (authoritarianism) as well as fatherly benevolence and moral integrity (morality), which could be quite paradoxical. Authoritarian leadership refers to a style of behavior in which the leader asserts absolute authority and control over subordinates and demands unquestioning obedience from them. In benevolent leadership, the leader's behavior demonstrates individualized, holistic concern for subordinates' personal or familial well-being. Moral leadership can be broadly depicted as a leadership style that demonstrates superior personal virtues, self-discipline, and unselfishness (Farh & Cheng, 2000).

Of these different leadership behaviors, the moral features of paternalistic leadership could have important implications for perceptions of a leader's conflict avoidance. In contrast to the view of leaders in the West, who are expected to be exceptional individuals or heroes who lead the way, make key decisions, and energize subordinates (Kuttner, 2011), moral paternalistic leadership places a leader in a more humble position that is centered on others. Moral leadership behavior in the Chinese context is even more important for employees, because of the long history of autocratic rule and substantial power asymmetry between supervisors and subordinates (Yang, Mossholder, & Peng, 2009). The *junzi* (moral) leader wins others over by his or her virtue (Ip, 2009), and being *junzi* means demonstrating self-discipline by treating subordinates politely and by not abusing one's power (Wu et al., 2012).

"Face" (or self-image) is another cultural notion that should be considered in connection with the perception of a leader's conflict avoidance. Face represents the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself or herself (Goffman, 1959) and it becomes a particularly salient concern in conflict (Peng & Tjosvold, 2011). Contrary to conventional claims that avoidance behaviors are caused by a low concern for others, high concern for the other's face

and for mutual face could result in the "facework" that is avoidance in China (Ohbuchi & Atsumi, 2010; Tjosvold & Sun, 2002). Similarly, Peng and Tjosvold (2011) conceptualize conflict avoidance: obliging and accommodating are viewed as sub-strategies of avoidance, highlighting their commonality with other concerns. Hence leaders' conflict avoidance behaviors in China are considered to be effective.

The parallel arguments illustrated so far are in favor of both negative and positive connotations of leaders' avoidance behavior in China. Since individuals attribute the causes underlying another person's behavior by observing that behavior (Kelley, 1972), the effects of a leader's avoidance behavior may be determined by how it is observed and perceived by his or her subordinates (cf. Gardner, Avolio, & Walumbwa, 2005). Depending on the follower's causal attributions, leader avoidance may be viewed as the result of negligence/ignorance or as the result of concern/respect; we therefore now present competing hypotheses associating leaders' avoidance behaviors with followers' attitudes and well-being, without making any assumption about which attribution a follower might make.

Leader avoidance behavior and subordinates' attitudes in China

Conflict management relates to justice, which is a central concern in China (Fields, Pang & Chiu, 2000; Greenberg, 1990). The negative consequences of a manager's avoidance may be due to the accompanying uncertainty and ambiguity (cf. Desivilya & Yagil, 2005; Roloff & Ifert, 2000). This state of uncertainty prompts an increased desire on the part of the employee to seek justice-related information (Strom, Sears, & Kelly, 2014; Yang, 2015a). For example, when employees experience high levels of role ambiguity (e.g. a high level of conflict), they are highly attuned to cues from their supervisors (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). A leader's avoidance may amplify, rather than decrease, the initial ambiguity caused

by the conflict, and the subsequent increased uncertainty induces anxiety and leads the follower to question the fairness and trustworthiness of the authority figure (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002). Similarly, perceptions of fairness are significantly related to whether the decision maker gives consideration to others' input or voice, regardless of the degree of control those individuals have over the decision outcome (Bobocel & Zdaniuk, 2005). Subordinates' voices are most likely to be heard via accommodation and compromise in conflict-handling, whereas leader avoidance may not allow followers the opportunity to react and express their voices.

Trust can also be affected by conflict (Porter & Lilly, 1996), as it involves perceptions of risk and issues of dependency (Kramer & Tyler, 1996). Trust in a supervisor reflects subordinates' evaluations of their manager's trustworthiness on the basis of their interactions with the manager (Hempel, Zhang, & Tjosvold, 2009). Treating conflict as a mutual problem that needs to be solved can promote leadership trust (Hempel et al., 2009), whereas feelings of anxiety and uncertainty are associated with low levels of trust (Kenworthy & Jones, 2009). In addition, despite it being common in China, avoidance behavior has been found to be ineffectual in strengthening interpersonal relationships (Tjosvold, 2008). Following these lines of argument, we present our first set of hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: Leaders' avoidance is negatively associated with justice perception in Chinese organizations.

Hypothesis 2a: Leaders' avoidance is negatively associated with supervisory trust in Chinese organizations.

By contrast, if we rely on the earlier culture-based arguments about the morality of leadership in China, the power distance dimension is the most relevant in considering justice given the role of justice in authorities and organizations in China (Lee, Pillutla, & Law, 2000). A negative correlation has been found between authoritarianism and justice (Aryee, Budhwar,

& Chen, 2002), since authoritarian leaders are less likely to show respect for subordinates (Wu et al., 2012). Power dependence (Emerson, 1972) restrains people from expressing themselves freely to the party with more power (cf. Huo, Lam, & Chen, 2012). In this vein, even a low degree of assertiveness by a leader, including accommodation or integration, could be considered by the subordinates to be the leader imposing his or her views, which is not fair or just for Chinese subordinates. In comparison, avoidance by a leader could be seen as deference towards subordinates and as a gesture triggered by face concerns for them. This could be perceived as a sign of the leader's integrity and self-discipline, because the leader restrains himself or herself from imposing on his or her subordinates (as an authoritarian leader would do), and consequently as justice.

Leaders' moral behavior is a critical determinant of their trustworthiness and thus also of subordinates' trust in their leaders (cf. Cheng et al., 2004; Farh & Cheng, 2000; Wu et al., 2012). There are three antecedents of trustworthiness in the organizational setting: integrity (adherence to a set of acceptable principles), benevolence (empathy), and ability (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). Integrity and unselfishness (benevolence) are key characteristics of moral and ethical leaders (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005). By contrast, absolute authority and control over subordinates may make subordinates feel uneasy and oppressed (cf. Wu et al., 2012), and this has been shown to be associated with low levels of trust (Farh & Cheng, 2000; Farh, Cheng, Chou, & Chu, 2006). The challenge of balancing pervasive authoritarian leadership with trust in China is also supported by various surveys illustrating a low level of trust (lower than 10%) in supervisors who typically engage in authoritarian styles (Li, 2005; Wu & Xiao, 2011). A leader's avoidance or an unimposing style by a leader on the other hand, could be perceived as a sign of respect and of sensitivity to the subordinate's face. Such perceived sensitivity and integrity can build faith, and subsequently trust, in subordinates. Our second set of hypotheses is:

Hypothesis 1b: Leaders' avoidance is positively associated with perceptions of justice in Chinese organizations.

Hypothesis 2b: Leaders' avoidance is positively associated with trust in supervisors in Chinese organizations.

Leader avoidance and subordinates' emotional well-being in China

Emotion occurs from judgment about how the environment affects an individual (Lazarus, 1991). A situation where there is a potential for conflict could be emotionally laden with negative emotions of frustration, fear, and anxiety (Bodtker & Jameson, 2001). There are significant correlations between (interpersonal) conflicts and frustration, depression, and job dissatisfaction in both China and the US (Liu, Spector, & Shi, 2007), and prolonged conflicts for which the leader exhibits avoidance behavior may not resolve these negative feelings. Research also indirectly shows the challenges of containing negative emotions when the leader adopts avoidance or laissez-faire leadership in situations of team conflict. For example, a self-managed group and/or a group where the leader shows hands-off leader behavior may not be well equipped for containing conflict once a relationship conflict is sparked (e.g. Langfred, 2007). In fact, laissez-faire leadership itself could be a root cause of specific workplace stressors including frustration, psychological distress, and burnout within the workgroup (Kelloway, Francis, & Montgomery, 2005; Skogstad et al., 2007).

Emotional leadership as a component of the transformational leadership style also encourages a leader to become involved in conflict management and the management of emotions in team processes (Ayoko & Callan, 2010). Effective team leaders are good at managing negative events, including conflicts (Pirola-Merlo, Hartel, Mann, & Hirst, 2002). In a similar vein, many studies have illustrated the challenges of unresolved conflicts, which lead to reduced interaction and to behavioral disintegration (Jehn, 1994; Li & Hambrick, 2005). If

avoidance means that bad news is unexplained, it may lead employees to withdraw and engage in retaliatory behavior (e.g. Aquino, Tripp, & Bies, 2001). This may be the result of negative emotions not only from the unresolved conflict itself but also from the leader's avoidance behavior. As emotional status is an important reflection of emotional well-being, the first of our final set of hypotheses is:

Hypothesis 3a: Leaders' avoidance is negatively associated with the emotional well-being of subordinates in Chinese organizations.

On the other hand, uncertainty management theory (Lind & Van den Bos, 2002) suggests two different sources of uncertainty: informational (cognitive) uncertainty, and personal (self) uncertainty (See, 2009). While both types of uncertainty may cause negative emotions, personal uncertainty exerts a stronger influence on subordinates as it stems from self-doubt (cf. See, 2009). Studies illustrate that authoritarian leadership is likely to induce fear and anxiety (Farh & Cheng, 2000; Farh et al., 2006), even though an authoritarian leader may reduce subordinates' cognitive uncertainty because of his or her clear direction and orders (Wu et al., 2012). The fear and anxiety may arise because the authoritarian leader adversely triggers subordinates' self-uncertainty and threatens their sense of self-determination and personal control. Conversely, the fact that Chinese workers tend to be at ease with ambiguity (Westwood, Sparrow, & Leung, 2001) could suggest that a leader's avoidance may reduce self-uncertainty and may be in line with subordinates' desire for autonomy (cf. Deci & Ryan, 1985). Free from control or a sense of external pressure by the leader's non-involvement, subordinates are free to exercise some control and to enhance their efficacy and self-belief when handling challenges (cf. Gagné & Deci, 2005). Therefore, the leader's avoidance may reduce the negative emotions associated with self-uncertainty. The second of this final set of hypotheses is:

Hypothesis 3b: Leaders' avoidance is positively associated with the emotional well-being of subordinates in Chinese organizations.

Method

Samples and data collection

To test these hypotheses, we gathered data from employees in three large companies in the People's Republic of China. We sent surveys through the companies' human resources departments, and the final sample included 245 subordinates. The average age was 30.8, and they had worked in their respective companies for an average of 5.6 years.

We adopted a web-based survey utilizing www.surveymonkey.com. A survey link was created and an invitation e-mail with the survey link was sent to the human resources departments of these multinational companies. Respondents were guaranteed confidentiality in the invitation email. The survey was designed in English, and then translated into Chinese by two English-Chinese bilingual professionals. They discussed and revised the translation until they reached agreement. Then the second author, who is a Chinese national, checked and revised the final Chinese version of the survey. A pre-test was run with a small sub-sample of 20 respondents to detect potential problems in the online survey design. After the pre-test, the online survey was revised and tested again by two respondents to make sure that there were no problems with completing it online.

Measurements

Conflict Avoidance. We used the 5-item measurement from Rahim Organizational Co nflict Inventory II[1] to measure conflict avoidance. Each item was noted on a 7-point Likert sca

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[1] Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II, Form A: Used with permission from the Center for Advanced Studies in Management. Further use or reproduction of the instrument without written permission is prohibited.

le from "1=strongly disagree" to "7=strongly agree". Sample items included "My supervisor a

ttempts to avoid being 'put on the spot' and tries to keep the conflict to himself/herself". The s

cale showed an internal consistency value of .62.

Trust. We used the 3-item measurement from Schoorman and Ballinger (2006) to

measure trust. Each item was scored on a 7-point Likert scale from "1=strongly disagree" to

"7=strongly agree". Sample items included "My supervisor keeps my interests in mind when

making decisions". The scale showed an internal consistency value of .65.

Justice. We employed the 6-item measurement developed by Niehoff and Mooreman

(Niehoff & Moorman, 1993) to measure procedural justice. Each item was noted on a 7-point

Likert scale from "1=strongly disagree" to "7=strongly agree. Sample items included "Job

decisions are made by my supervisor in an unbiased manner". The scale showed an internal

consistency value of .83.

Emotional well-being. Emotional well-being can be measured by evaluating the absence

of negative emotions including anxiety and depression. The 6-item measurement for anxiety

and 6-item measurement for depression from Spell and Arnold (2007) were used to measure

anxiety and depression respectively. Respondents were asked to rate each item in terms of

how their jobs had made them feel in the past few weeks based on a 5-point Likert scale:

1=Never, 2=Some of the time, 3=Much of the time, 4=Most of the time, and 5=All of the

time. Sample items for anxiety included "relaxed", "anxious" and "worried", and the scale

showed an internal consistency value of .83. Sample items for depression included

"enthusiastic", "depressed" and "miserable", and the scale showed an internal consistency

value of .84.

Control variables. Older people may tend not to avoid conflict. Women are more

sensitive to perceptions of procedural justice than men (Sweeney & McFarlin, 1997). On the

other hand, the results of Farh and colleagues (Farh, Earley, & Lin, 1997) showed that the

relationship between procedural justice and citizenship behaviors was weaker for women than for men. People who work in the same company for longer may become less conflict-avoiding. Team size may also influence conflict avoidance behavior, trust, and justice. Hence age, gender (1=male, 0=female), length of service in the company, and team size were included as control variables in the analysis. To check whether different functions and industries influence the results, function and industry were also included in the control variable. Job function is measured by assigning a code for each job function (1 – general management, 2 – public relations, 3 – finance/accounting, 4 – human resources, 5 – information management, 6 – legal , 7 – manufacturing/operations, 8 - marketing, 9 – research and development , 10 - sales, 11 – supply chain, 12 - other). Industry is measured by assigning a code for each industry (1 - manufacturing, 2 – service, 3 - retail, 4 - other).

Results

Means, standard deviations and correlations are reported in Table 1. Multiple regression analysis was used to test the hypotheses using SPSS software. Table 2 presents our multiple regression analysis results. As shown in Table 2, subordinates' perceptions of their managers' conflict avoidance were positively related to justice (b=0.331, p< .001) providing support for Hypothesis 1b but not for Hypothesis 1a. Subordinates' perceptions of their managers' conflict avoidance were positively related to trust (b=0.198, p< .001) providing support for Hypothesis 2b but not for Hypothesis 2a. Subordinates' perceptions of their managers' conflict avoidance were negatively related to anxiety (b=-0.158, p< .05) and depression (b=-0.221, p< .001) providing support for Hypothesis 3b but not for Hypothesis 3a.

Insert Table 1 and 2 about here

In addition, we found that one of the control variables – team size – is positively related

to both trust (b = 0.322, p< .001) and justice (b = 0.256, p< .001). In other words, the larger the team, the higher the level of justice and trust for subordinates. The positive association between larger team size and subordinates' attitudes is in line with our finding suggesting the positive effects of leader avoidance or laissez-faire leadership: when the team is larger, it is harder for the leader to be involved and control each member of the team. Length of service in the company is negatively related to justice (b= -0.226, p< .05) and positively related to depression (b = 0.311, p< .01). These findings suggest that as employees' length of service with their company grows, they tend to develop cynical attitudes about organizational justice. This could be because the more the employee knows about the system, the more critical he or she becomes. Despite years of research on the effects of gender on reactions to injustice, there is no agreement on the direction of these effects (cf. Lee et al., 2000). In our study, gender is not found to relate to justice or trust, but is negatively related to depression (b = -0.260, p< .05), indicating that male respondents tend to have lower levels of depression compared to their female counterparts.

Discussion

The main purpose of this research is to examine the effects of leaders' conflict avoidance on followers' attitudes and followers' emotional well-being in Chinese organizations. Competing hypotheses are presented as a result of the (implicit) inconsistent positions concerning leaders' avoidance behavior in China. The findings in this paper are intriguing, in that they suggest there are positive relationships between leaders' avoidance and followers' attitudes and emotional well-being, which are different from the conventional negative view about leadership avoidance in a Western context. The findings suggest that, in China, a team leader's avoidance or lack of intervention in a conflict situation can be effective in achieving positive attitudes and emotions among subordinates.

Among the different cultural values in China, the value that is the most pertinent in relation to leadership and leader behavior is high power distance since the clear hierarchical distinctions between a manager and his or her subordinates in China influence the attribution process of the subordinates and consequently shape their attitudes toward certain leadership behaviors. Because leaders in China have more power, they could use their power in their own favor in conflict situations. By contrast, a team leader's avoidance behavior in a conflict situation may suggest that the leader is neutral (there is positive procedural justice), and that s/he is demonstrating integrity and morality, restraining himself or herself from the possible abuse of power (there is positive supervisory trust), and there is therefore a low level of negative emotions associated with the leader's avoidance. The findings from our study suggest that leaders' avoidance is effective in China, a culture where the power distance is high.

To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to examine empirically, in a single study, the relationships between a team leader's avoidance behavior and his or her subordinates' perceptions of justice, supervisory trust, and emotional well-being. This is rather surprising given the widespread of avoidance behavior in China (Ohbuchi & Atsumi, 2010; Tjosvold & Sun, 2002). The positive effects of a leader's avoidance found in this paper are intriguing, as it has been suggested that avoidance behavior amongst team members has negative consequences at work (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2007) despite being a culturally accepted behavior in China (Ohbuchi & Atsumi, 2010; Tjosvold & Sun, 2002).

Theoretical implications

This paper contributes to the literature on conflict management, leadership, and cross-cultural management. First of all, it joins the growing attempts to consider conflict management in the context of leadership. About four decades ago, Burns (1978) stated that conflicts offer managers the opportunity to display leadership, as managers can exploit

conflicts to improve both relationships and efficiency at work. The "conflict-specialist-as-leader" theory has a prominent role in shaping leadership dynamics (Kuttner, 2011), and therefore conflict management research could inform our understanding of effective leadership (Chen et al., 2005; Tjosvold, 2008). However, until now the relevance of leaders' conflict avoidance to leadership remains uncharted territory. Our paper sails into this territory and sheds some light on the understanding of leadership avoidance in team conflict situations.

Our findings challenge the one-dimensional view of laissez-faire leadership. Although very few studies have addressed this leadership style, they have mostly found its effect to be negative (Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). The positive relationship found in this study between a leader's avoidance behavior and the attitudes of his or her followers suggest the possible effectiveness of laissez-faire leadership and the need for a context-dependent application of theories on leadership and leadership behaviors (Yang, 2015b). Our findings reveal the possible benefits of a "non-involved" leader, while most leadership research has emphasized the importance of the leader's involvement, especially in team conflict situations (Bass, 1990).

This paper contributes to the understanding of the intricate influence of cultural values on conflict avoidance in the context of leadership by considering power distance and its relevance to leadership and leader behavior in China. To date, cross-cultural studies have argued that avoidance is a common conflict resolution style in China because of the country's collectivist values (e.g. Tjosvold & Sun, 2002). However, empirical evidence has shown the negative consequences of conflict avoidance, especially in team conflict situations (e.g. Tjosvold, 2008). Along with an understanding of the cross-cultural leadership literature discussing individualism and collectivism (e.g. Schaubroeck et al., 2007), the investigation of leader avoidance in this paper shows that high power distance value, which is closely related to the leadership process (e.g. as a moderator: Kirkman et al., 2009; Schaubroeck et al., 2007),

may offer interesting insights for a leader in terms of his or her level of (non)involvement in a team.

This paper also contributes to the growing body of research that takes a balanced approach to understanding the motivations for conflict avoidance (e.g. Roloff & Ifert, 2000; Tjosvold & Sun, 2002). This paper appreciates the complexity of avoidance as a conflict-handling style (cf. Peng & Tjosvold, 2011; Tjosvold & Sun, 2002; Wang, Fink, & Cai, 2012) by illustrating the positive outcomes of leader avoidance. We highlight the benefits of moving away from the conventional view of avoidance, which has mainly negative connotations. The findings in this paper also indicate that avoidance could be a sustainable choice for leaders rather than merely a one-off strategy for cooling-off and dealing with trivial issues. Extending the positive findings in this paper by identifying the conditions that affect the outcomes of conflict avoidance may have important practical as well as theoretical value (cf. Roloff & Ifert, 2000).

Practical implications

Various surveys continue to reveal that managers perceive dealing with conflict as one of their most difficult tasks (Skjorshammer, 2001), and the challenge of this task is multiplied when managers and employees have different cultures and values (cf. Geddes & Konrad, 2003). The findings from our study suggest possible ways for non-Chinese managers to handle conflicts in a way that establishes trust with their Chinese subordinates, fosters their positive attitudes and cultivates their emotional well-being.

First, they need to be sensitive about cultural values, particularly the value of high power distance. An understanding of the influence of this cultural value on the perception of Chinese people regarding conflict and justice, and consequently on their trust and emotional well-being, informs managers of the leadership behaviors that can be effective in China. Our results show that avoidance of conflict could be perceived to be effective by Chinese

subordinates because it could mean the leader not imposing his or her own position, show his or her concern for face, and could be a sign of respect. Managing conflict effectively in different cultures requires managers to have strong cultural agility (Caligiuri, 2013).

Second, managers need to be aware of how their style influences their approach to managing conflict. Knowledge of their leadership style helps leaders to be aware of their natural tendencies when faced with a conflict situation, and of how they can adapt their style to different situations. Similarly, our findings suggest the possibility that a laissez-faire leadership style and/or avoidance approach to conflict could be effective in China. Foreign managers could, therefore, skillfully use avoidance or non-intervention in their management to be effective in managing their Chinese subordinates. Conflict avoidance could be a sustainable rather than a one-off strategy by a leader.

Third, it is possible that conflict avoidance and laissez-faire leadership could also work in cultures other than China. Indeed, a very recent survey among the readers of *Harvard Business Review* revealed that 10% of them *never* ask colleagues to either stop or change behavior that bothers them; 24% of them said that when they were upset with someone at work, they *rarely* let the person know; 26% of them said that when they disagreed with someone, they *often hint* at it, rather than objecting outright. Only 28% of them said they *always spoke up* when they felt that they had been misunderstood (Goulston, 2015). The readers of *Harvard Business Review* come from all over the world. The fact that 34% of them never or rarely communicate about conflict is quite intriguing, as it suggests that avoidance is very common at work. In this regard, avoidance could be adopted by managers in many places outside China, especially in countries with a high power distance culture.

Lastly, a leader should understand how his or her behavior in general influences the trust, the perception of justice and the well-being of his or her subordinates. Organizations whose managers and leaders create an atmosphere of fairness and trust have reported positive

organizational outcomes such as reduced turnover and absenteeism, increased employee

motivation, and greater organizational commitment (e.g. Padgett & Morris, 2005).

Limitations and future research

Since the constructs that were examined in our study are individual perceptions, attitudes

and emotions, the data were collected using a self-report questionnaire. According to self-

perception theories, people are often active observers of their own attitudes, emotions, and

behaviors and can more accurately measure their own attitudes than those of other people

(Shrauger & Osberg, 1981). However, common method variance can be a concern when self-

report questionnaires are used to collect data from the same participants at one-point time

(Chang, Van Witteloostuijn, & Eden, 2010). To minimize common method variance, we

carefully designed our study in line with the suggestions made by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, and

Podsakoff (2012). For this study, conflict avoidance, trust, and procedural justice are very

different constructs, and their measurements also differ. To control common method variance,

the questions in the survey were randomly ordered (Murray, Kotabe, & Zhou, 2005), and

some items were negatively rated. The questionnaire was designed to be as short as possible,

by including only necessary questions, in order to avoid respondent fatigue. In addition,

respondents were assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of the study, that there was no

right or wrong answers, and that they should answer as honestly as possible. Finally, a post

hoc Harman one-factor analysis was used to check whether the variance in the data could be

largely attributed to a single factor, which was not the case. Some scholars believe that

properly developed multi-trait, self-report instruments are resistant to the method variance

problem (e.g., Spector, 1987), but others are less supportive of this view (e.g., Williams, Cote,

& Buckley, 1989). Nonetheless, future research could collect data from different sources to better manage common method variance.

This study has adapted scales of conflict avoidance, procedural justice, and supervisory trust that have been developed in Western settings. However, the internal consistency value for the conflict avoidance scale is only moderate (although it is within an acceptable range). This may be due to the use of non-indigenous scales, with the cultural and translation challenges of capturing the full meaning in a Chinese context. The survey also revised the wording to reflect the broad nature of conflicts at team level that were avoided by a leader (e.g. 'My supervisor tries to avoid unpleasant exchanges with our team'), which is different from the original measure at dyad level (e.g. 'I try to avoid unpleasant exchanges with my supervisor'), and this may be the cause of the moderate reliability. Even though we believe this approach allows us to explore leaders' avoidance in the context of leadership, a future study would benefit from a survey that gave more focused attention to particular types and levels of conflicts and subsequent conflict avoidance, as well as refining the concepts to suit a Chinese setting better (cf. Wong, 2012).

Moreover, since this paper has referred to laissez-faire leadership, a future study could be conducted with the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X) for the laissez-faire leadership scale (Bass & Avolio, 1997; Antonakis, Avolio & Sivasubramaniam, 2003). At the same time, adapting the MLQ scale should also be done with caution, given its current condition that places laissez-faire leadership at the opposite end of the spectrum from transformational and/or transactional leadership, in addition to describing it as the absence of leadership and as counterproductive leadership (Bass and Avolio, 1997; Hinkin & Schriesheim, 2008; Judge & Piccolo, 2004). On this basis, most studies on laissez-faire leadership have found it to have negative effects on followers, and there have been only a limited number studies exploring it (e.g. Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003;

Kelloway et al., 2005). Therefore, some urge the need for a more balanced and neutral approach as well as new instruments for measuring laissez-faire leadership, to gain a better understanding of it (Yang, 2015b). Nonetheless, measuring both a leader's conflict avoidance and laissez-faire leadership in a single study would offer initial insights.

Finally, it is worth noting that although our logic was built on paternalistic Chinese leadership, especially moral leadership, in relation to leaders' avoidance, the paper did not directly measure these relationships. Although this reasoning helps us to build the relationship between leaders' avoidance and subordinates' attitudes, future research should explore the association between the leader's avoidance and moral paternalistic leadership directly.

Conclusion

Our empirical findings show that, in China, leaders' conflict avoidance behavior is positively related to their subordinates' attitudes and emotional well-being. The possible explanation of these relationships is the high power distance culture in China. Our findings highlight the importance of cultural contingency when considering leaders' behavior, by illustrating the possible benefits of a leader's conflict avoidance, or laissez-faire leadership, in team conflicts, situations in which the leader's involvement is traditionally suggested to be important.

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Table 1 Mean, Standard Deviations and Intercorrelations (n=245)

		Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Team size	3.28	1.60										
2	Length in company	5.65	7.22	.181**									
3	Gender	.46	.50	.056	-.171**								
4	Age	30.75	7.91	.226**	.792**	-.064							
5	Function	4.56	3.10	-.162*	-.221**	.078	-.180**						
6	Industry	1.68	.62	-.245**	.216**	-.034	-.011	-.069					
7	Conflict avoidance	4.69	.85	.001	.031	-.008	.047	-.033	-.100				
8	Trust	4.91	.96	.353**	-.063	.078	-.035	-.103	-.269**	.212**			
9	Justice	4.98	.89	.267**	-.052	.008	.051	-.060	-.202**	.338**	.671**		
10	Anxiety	21.68	5.45	.068	-.025	-.076	-.073	.163*	-.011	-.165*	-.087	-.205**	
11	Depression	17.41	5.51	-.117	.051	-.037	-.063	.088	.072	-.222**	-.294**	-.429**	.583**

Note: Two-tailed tests.
**$p<.01$. *$p<.05$.

Table 2 Regression Analysis (n=245)

ariable	Trust		Justice		Anxiety		Depression	
Team size	.322	***	.256	***	.113		-.111	
Length in company	.014		-.226	*	.099		.311	**
Gender	.056		-.032		-.090		-.003	
Age	-.142		.148		-.143		-.260	*
Function	-.084		-.033		.178	**	.082	
Industry	-.179	**	-.059		-.012		-.041	
Conflict avoidance	0.198	***	0.331	***	-0.158	*	-0.221	***
R^2	.221		.213		.278		.315	

Note: Two-tailed tests.
***$p<.001$. **$p<.01$. *$p<.05$.