

Summary Report on Conflict in Phayao Research

In general, anthropologists label Thai culture as a "conflict avoidant" culture. Our research with people in Phayao confirms this label, yet, based on the descriptions from our interviewees, this report attempts to state more clearly what conflict avoidance looks like in lives of Phayao people.

We divided our data into two major categories to organize the ways Phayao people approach conflict. Interviewee descriptions focused on these two stages: the "pre-conflict" stage, before an actual conflict is present, and the "dealing with conflict" stage, once a conflict had occurred. A third group of data sits between these two stages, called "causes of conflict" and marks the shift between the "pre-conflict" and "dealing with conflict" stages.

Preventing Conflict

Our data demonstrate that Phayao people find ways to prevent conflict in their relationships as a method of conflict avoidance in the "pre-conflict" stage. Our interviewees expressed two main motivations behind their desire to prevent conflict in their relationships. One of these motivations was that conflict produced negative emotions in the lives of those involved in the conflict. Expressions such as *จิตใจเราก็ห่อเหี่ยว* and *ไม่สบายใจ* were two examples of emotions that made conflict something to be avoided. On the positive side, interviewees wanted to *อยู่เย็นเป็นสุข* and they see conflict as a barrier to feelings of happiness. Another motivation frequently mentioned was the fear of ruined relationships that might result from conflict. Some people mentioned directly that conflict is to be avoided because it results in broken relationships. This fear might lead people to avoid making too many friendships and getting close to others for fear that conflict might arise. Also, conflict with others is to be prevented because "we may need those people to help us when we are in trouble." Thus, sometimes fear of losing the benefits of a relationship, not just the relationships themselves, is enough motivation to prevent conflict in the first place. One person mentioned that even when the possibility of conflict arising in a relationship is apparent, the relationship might be cut off. While one person did mention that conflict was just a natural part of relationships, most of the data seems to reflect that Thais mostly try to prevent conflict because, as one interviewee said, "absolutely nothing good can come from conflict."

The primary way by which Thais prevent conflict is by employing positively viewed behaviors that help create and maintain "smooth" relationships with other people. Things such as generosity and kindness towards others were the most frequent behaviors mentioned and seem to play a significant role in building relationships that have little to no conflict for Thai people. Also, one must keep anger under control, smile and maintain a good temper to show that relationships are smooth. Interviewees mentioned that keeping opinions to oneself is important for smooth relationships. Yet, some people also mentioned how clear communication was important. The phrase สามัคคี, a key phrase in our "kwaam bpen Thai" research, was also mentioned by an interviewee and captures the essence of these "smooth relationships" that are characterized by reciprocal generosity, kindness and a lack of friction based on expressing or holding on to one's desires more than is necessary.

Causes of Conflict

While the interviewees mentioned a broad range of causes of conflict, it was significant how often the causes of conflict reflected antithetical behavior to what builds and maintains smooth relationships. People described how selfish, greedy behavior could lead to conflict with others. Other money issues, such as borrowing money without paying it back or stealing money from others could lead to serious conflict. Situations at work where people with authority abuse their power and use it for selfish gain instead of helping others also sparked conflict between co-workers. Similarly, times when people express their opinions or lack self-control over their anger in public were seen as causes of conflict for Thai people. This might express itself in being stubborn with one's opinions to the point that one's pride prevents one from sympathizing with another's view. Also, meddling in other people's personal affairs by offering unwanted advice or opinions can lead to conflict in the minds of Thai people. Not only does maintaining smooth relationships help prevent conflict for people in Thailand, but a lack of these types of positive behaviors or acting in an opposite manner can instead cause conflict.

Interviewees mentioned other causes of conflict, but no other significant patterns or themes emerged that warranted analysis. We can say that the presence of multiple causes of conflict may mean that even for conflict avoidant cultures, conflict inevitably still occurs and for a variety of reasons.

Dealing with Conflict

The second major stage of our data on conflict is the "Dealing with Conflict" stage. In this stage, we grouped the data into two sub-categories reflecting two different methods of dealing with conflict once it is already present in a relationship. We named these two different groups of methods as Avoid and Confront.

Data in the Avoid category is divided into three types of avoidance responses: Passively Compete, Pretend and Withdraw. Passively compete involves responses to conflict where people chose to deal with the issue at hand but ignore or neglect the relationship with the person with whom they have conflict. This manifested itself in several examples given by our interviewees. In the workplace, an employee who had a conflict with his boss took revenge on the boss by gossiping and slandering him behind his back. Likewise, a boss used his authority to fire an employee with whom he had conflict, though he did not give the employee any reason for the firing. In a family situation, a mother told her children not to trust another family member with whom she had a conflict. Interviewees also mentioned that using other forms of indirect communication, such as a 3rd party intermediary, were common methods of dealing with conflict. This response to conflict is a type of avoidance in that the relationship with the other person is avoided while the issue itself might be dealt with in other ways. This response might be prevalent among Thai people because of the "face" factor involved. A person who uses this method can deal with the conflict without necessarily losing face through direct contact with the other person.

In contrast to the Passively Compete method of avoidance, the Pretend method addresses the relationship between two conflicting parties but ignores the issue that caused the conflict. One common response in a relationship is to act indifferent in the relationship when a conflict is present. This can be expressed as both indifference to the issue at hand or indifference to the person with whom one has conflict. Interviewees expressed this kind of indifference with phrases such as "moving on," "forget about it," "never mind," or "letting fate takes its course." Indifference can both be a way to hide resentment at someone else because of a conflict or as a way to show confidence when one party "knows they are right", yet still maintain a relationship with someone. It can also be a way to hide feelings of remorse and a method to avoid asking for forgiveness when one party knows they are wrong in a conflict. Some people even equated this kind of indifference with forgiveness itself. In other situations, two

parties in conflict with one another may act as if nothing has changed at all. Some people will still act polite towards one another and maintain a pleasant temperament with one another yet not address the conflict at hand. One respondent said she would not talk about the issue but would still invite a person over for a meal as a way to solve the conflict. Yet, another person said that if a conflict is present, an invite to something could be regarded as a "waste of time." This method of conflict avoidance seems to also involve "face" issues by aiming to maintain a "smooth relationship" with others by ignoring the issue that caused the conflict. One "saves face" by pretending that everything is as normal as before the conflict was present. However, while things on the outside may appear normal, it seems that inner feelings may betray the sincerity of the relationship.

The Withdraw method of conflict avoidance differs from both the Pretend and Passively Compete methods in that this method ignores both the issue and the relationship in which conflict is present. This method is characterized by "running away" from both the problem and the person. Responses such as cutting off communication, avoiding contact, refusing invitations, and moving away from the person/situation of conflict were described by interviewees. In a workplace situation, when someone has a conflict with a superior, sometimes the only solution is to quit the job. Even teachers may resign from their position when a student has a conflict with them. Likewise, students may avoid approaching their teachers when a conflict is present. Some people mentioned that ignoring the issue and separating from each other could allow time for a relationship to heal and the conflict to be resolved on its own. However, most often the Withdraw response meant that the relationship has come to an end.

Not all methods Thai people use to deal with conflict involve avoidance. Our interviewees also described confrontational ways of dealing with conflict. We divided the data in the Confront category into Forgiveness, Open Communication and Destructive Responses.

It is important to note that in our interviews, forgiveness was something that we asked about directly because we were interested to know about it. It did not come up on its own in response to questions about conflict resolution, but people talked about forgiveness in positive ways. While it wasn't clear how often Thai people utilized forgiveness as a method of dealing with conflict, people still stressed the importance and benefit of forgiveness. One person said that not asking for forgiveness can "bring a heavy burden."

Another person said that we must be people who always forgive and, similarly, we must ask for forgiveness if we are wrong. In the context of marriages, respondents generalized that husbands would ask for forgiveness while wives would typically be quick to forgive them. In our respondents view, forgiveness was a way to make a bad relationship good and restore **สามัคคี** in a relationship. Also, sincerity in asking for forgiveness can make it more likely that a person will grant forgiveness. We would still like to know more about what forgiveness looks like in Thai relationships.

Surprisingly, Open Communication also came up as a common method of resolving conflict. This is surprising because most of our previous knowledge of Thai culture has stressed how Thais tend to use indirect communication, especially in situations of conflict. However, many of our interviewees stressed how open and direct communication was a positively viewed method of confrontation. Some said that open communication could help resolve a conflict quickly and that it is much better than using a third party to mediate a conflict. Others said that arguing can even help find a solution to a conflict, but avoiding communication will worsen it. Another interviewee stressed the need to communicate because it is important to understand the other party's point of view. In the course of the interviews, people mentioned several examples of how open communication is used in situations of conflict: teacher and students, children and parents and employees and employers. At least one person mentioned that using open communication with her employer did not lead to a resolution. Another mentioned that employees must approach their employers in humility if they are to speak directly to them about an issue. While it is not clear how often Thai people use direct communication in their relationships and how successful it is, we can say that people recognize some benefits of this method of conflict resolution.

Conclusion

Our interviewees also mentioned methods of confrontation that we labeled as Destructive Responses. While not mentioned frequently, some interviewees discussed how some people respond to conflict with violence and harsh words. In a marriage relationship, slapping and hitting were given as examples of how spouses might deal with certain kinds of conflict. Other examples of Destructive Responses include using harsh words and sarcasm with parents and co-workers with whom one has a conflict.

Out of these two groups of responses in the Dealing with Conflict stage, we

labeled 4 of the 6 types of responses as having potential to bring about a healthy resolution to a conflict. Withdraw, Pretend, Forgiveness and Open Communication can all lead to resolution of conflict, though in different ways. Based on the interviewees' descriptions, we felt that the Passively Compete and Destructive Responses did not offer a positive resolution to conflicts. What is interesting to us is that even "avoidance" methods of dealing with conflict can lead to a healthy resolution of conflict where relationships are reconciled. It is also interesting that even in a conflict-avoidant culture like Thailand, confrontational approaches are still utilized and recognized as having value. Still, our guess is that conflict avoidant methods are still preferred by Thai people. Finally, our model shows that in Thai culture, it can be just as important, and maybe more important, to use techniques that prevent getting into a conflict in the first place as a primary method of conflict avoidance.