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Sheryl Brahnham

Southwest Missouri State University

Michael Hignite

Southwest Missouri State University

Thomas Margavio

Southwest Missouri State University

Tonya Barrier

Southwest Missouri State University

Jerry Chin

Southwest Missouri State University

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Are Women in IS Better at Managing Conflict?

Sheryl Brahnham

Southwest Missouri State University
shb757f@smsu.edu

Michele A. Hignite

Southwest Missouri State University
mah985f@smsu.edu

Thomas M. Margavio

Southwest Missouri State University
tmm224f@smsu.edu

B. Tonya Barrier

Southwest Missouri State University
tbb364f@smsu.edu

Jerry M. Chin

Southwest Missouri State University
jmc808f@smsu.edu

ABSTRACT

As the workforce becomes increasingly diversified, it becomes increasingly important to understand the conflict resolution attitudes brought to IS by both men and women. This research is designed to investigate (and possibly to challenge) assumptions that may exist regarding the relationship between gender and conflict resolution for both males and females. Using a large group of emerging IS professionals as subjects, the results of this study indicate that men and women show differences in their conflict resolution attitudes. When compared to their male counterparts, women entering the IS workforce are more likely to utilize a collaborative conflict resolution style and men are more likely to avoid conflict. As collaboration is generally considered more productive and avoidance more disruptive in the conflict resolution process, the study suggests that women entering the IS workforce may initially possess more effective and constructive conflict resolution attributes than their male counterparts.

Keywords

Gender, conflict resolution, IS professionals.

INTRODUCTION

It is becoming a truism that successful management depends heavily on an ability to handle conflict effectively. Mintzberg (1973) observed over thirty years ago that managers are increasingly being called upon to take up the role of “dispute handlers” and mediate conflicts between colleagues, subordinates, suppliers, customers, and even superiors. The degree to which managers are currently charged with the responsibility of resolving conflict is evident in a recent estimate that managers spend 18% of their time—up from 9% a decade earlier—managing employee conflict alone (McShulskis, 1996).

Concomitant with this change in managerial role is the convergence of three other trends that make conflict management a topic of keen interest. The first is associated with employee empowerment and the current emphasis on collaborative work. The popularity of teamwork is resulting in more potential for conflict (Pelled, 1996; Smith, Harrington and Neck, 2000). As a result, managers are no longer the only ones who need to hone their conflict resolution skills. Efficient conflict management is essential at all organizational levels.

The second trend is a change in attitude regarding conflict, and the acknowledgement that conflict, properly managed, is perhaps more beneficial to an organization than detrimental (Mckenzie, 2002). There is evidence that work group conflict, for example, improves the quality of team performance, enhances decision making, and results in more innovation (Cox, Lobel and McLeod, 1991; Jehn, 1995).

The third trend is the growing diversification of the workforce, with recent studies in conflict management reflecting an expanding multiculturalism and the increasing presence of women and minorities in the workplace (Brewer, Mitchell and Weber, 2002; Elsayed-Ekhouly and Buda, 1996). While studies have shown that multicultural teams are inclined to generate more conflict (Pelled, 1996), this may not be the case for mixed gender teams (Pelled, Eisenhardt and Xin, 1999). Rather, in terms of gender, research has centered on gender differences in conflict management style and the question of whether female

managers are capable of handling conflict as competently as male managers (Brenner, Tomkiewicz and Schein, 1989; Powell, 1988). Although the verdict is still out, there is evidence that women are willing to abandon gender role expectations and mold themselves to the prescriptions of the managerial role (Jago and Vroom, 1982; Korabik, 1990; Korabik, Baril and Watson, 1993; Watson and Hoffman, 1996). Female managers may even have an advantage when it comes to handling conflict, as studies have found that people who are more flexible in their gender role orientation are better at resolving conflict than people who are more rigid (Brewer et al., 2002; Heavey, Layne and Christensen, 1993; Portello and Long, 1994).

Purpose of Study

The intent of this study is to investigate gender differences in conflict management styles among entering IS professionals, a subject that to date has received little attention. Towards this end we review the relevant literature on conflict management in terms of conflict style taxonomies and instruments, constructive and destructive conflict management styles, and gender role differences in conflict management. Our reading of the literature leads us to investigate two questions: 1) since female IS students exhibit gender role flexibility by their willingness to enter a field where the overwhelming majority of IS professionals are male and since people who are more flexible in their gender role orientation are better at resolving conflict than people who are more rigid (Brewer et al., 2002; Heavey et al., 1993; Portello and Long, 1994), are female IS students better at handling conflict, and 2) since IS does not conflict with the male gender role, do more men than women in IS handle conflict in ways that are considered less conducive to constructive outcomes but more in line with the expectations of their (male) gender roles?

CONFLICT STYLE TAXONOMIES

The first models of conflict management were developed in the early 1970s in the fields of social psychology and organizational psychology. These early models measured conflict mostly along a single dimension of concern for others represented by the bipolar anchors of cooperativeness and uncooperativeness (Deutsch, 1973). These models were soon rejected, however, on the grounds that they failed to account for strategies involving a concern for self interests (Thomas and Kilman, 1974). Subsequent models, following the work of Blake and Mouton (Blake and Mouton, 1964), have measured conflict using two orthogonal dimensions that include both a concern for others (cooperativeness and uncooperativeness) and a concern for the self (assertiveness and unassertiveness).

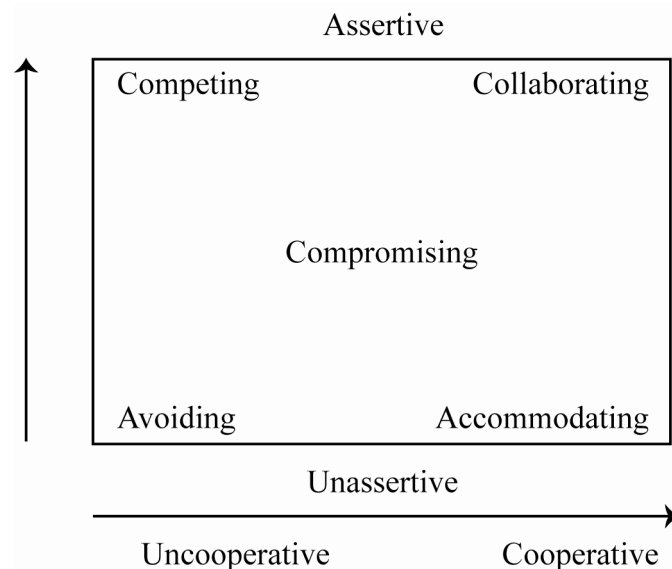


Figure 1. Two-Dimensional Conflict Handling Model (Thomas and Kilman, 1974)

Within this two-dimensional model, Thomas and Kilman (1974) have developed a framework (see Figure 1) that accounts for five styles of handling conflict: competing, collaborating, avoiding, accommodating, and compromising. High in concern for the self is the competing style, which is characterized by a drive to maximize individual gain, even at the expense of others. This is in contrast to the collaborating style, which is marked by a drive towards constructing solutions to conflict that meet the needs of all parties involved. Low in concern for the self is the avoiding style, which disengages from conflict, and the

accommodating style, which sacrifices self-interests to satisfy the needs of others. Finally, compromising, a strategy that theoretically straddles the midpoint between cooperativeness and assertiveness, involves making concessions to arrive at a resolution of conflict. Evidence that validates this taxonomy of conflict styles is inconsistent (Jehn and Weldon, 1997). Nevertheless, the Thomas and Kilman measurement has been found to be as valid and as reliable as all other measures of conflict (Kilman and Thomas, 1977; Rahim, 2001) and is widely used in academic research (Volkema and Bergmann, 1995).

CONSTRUCTIVE AND DESTRUCTIVE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES

Constructive conflict management styles are marked by cooperation, mutual respect, and a desire to learn from and to protect others (Hocker and Wilmot, 1995). Within personal relations, studies show that both men and women are most satisfied with themselves and their partners when using the collaborative style of managing conflict (Greeff and de Bruyne, 2000). Collaboration requires the establishment of trust and equality of power (Wilkinson, 1983). Compromising is also perceived as being satisfying to both men and women (Greeff and de Bruyne, 2000); in fact, there are a number of studies that demonstrate that compromising is actually cooperative, i.e., more related to collaborating and accommodating than to avoiding and competing (Ruble and Cosier, 1983; Van de Vliert and Hordijk, 1989).

Destructive conflict management styles, in contrast, are marked “by escalating spirals of manipulation, threat and coercion (overt expression of conflict), avoidance spirals (covert expression of the conflict), retaliation, inflexibility and rigidity, a competitive pattern of dominance and subordination, and demeaning and degrading verbal and nonverbal communication” (Greeff and de Bruyne, 2000, p. 322). Indeed, avoidance is one of the least adaptive (Cahn, 1990) and perhaps the most disruptive style of managing conflict in personal relationships (Heavey et al., 1993; Levenson, Cartensen and Gottman, 1993). In particular, both men and women show low satisfaction when males use avoidance (Greeff and de Bruyne, 2000). Competitiveness has also been shown to reduce satisfaction in personal relationships (Greeff and de Bruyne, 2000).

Within organizations, all five conflict management styles have their uses (Thomas and Kilmann, 1974); but the assertive modes are more highly valued (Rubin and Brown, 1975; Savage, Blair and Sorenson, 1989; Yukl, Falbe and Youn, 1993). Since there is typically less emphasis in modern business on competitive negotiation and more on interorganizational relationships (Watson and Hoffman, 1996), it is not surprising to find that the most valued conflict management strategy in business is collaboration, i.e., the win-win style of managing conflict (Blake and Mouton, 1964). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that upper organizational status is associated with the use of integrating as opposed to dominating conflict management styles (Brewer et al., 2002; Savage et al., 1989; Yukl et al., 1993). In general, the cooperative modes are considered to be more appropriate, efficient, and cost effective (Mckenzie, 2002).

GENDER ROLE DIFFERENCES IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

Early psychological studies in gender differences in conflict management style resonate with studies involving gender differentials in socialization. Traditionally, women are taught to define their sense of self within the context of relationships (Gilligan, 1982) and are socialized to abandon personal goals for the benefit of others. Men, in contrast, are taught to define themselves in terms of domination and control and are socialized to be more assertive, aggressive, and independent (Eagly and Karau, 1991).

Results from psychological studies, especially those prior to the 1980s, show that men and women tend to endorse conflict management strategies that complement gender role expectations (Wachter, 1999). In handling conflict, women, unlike men, favor accommodating strategies (Greeff and de Bruyne, 2000; Rubin and Brown, 1975), whereas men, unlike women, prefer to be more confrontational (Rosenthal and Hautaluoma, 1988), aggressive (Kilman and Thomas, 1977), and competitive (Rubin and Brown, 1975). There is also evidence that suggests that men are more avoiding in their style of conflict management than are women (Greeff and de Bruyne, 2000; Haferkamp, 1991; Mackey and O'Brien, 1998). Haferkamp (1991) believes that this later finding accords with gender role expectations, as men are considered less able to manage relationships and are expected to remain calm and in control. Furthermore, many men experience anxiety in social settings, and this may make men more likely than women to avoid conflict (Gottman and Levenson, 1986; Heavey et al., 1993; Levant, 1996).

In studies involving managers, conflict management styles do not converge as much with gender role expectations (Korabik et al., 1993). While it is true that many earlier studies in gender differences in handling negotiations showed that women were less competitive and more accommodating (Rosenthal and Hautaluoma, 1988; Rubin and Brown, 1975) and that men were less cooperative and more dominating (Vinacke, Mogy, Powers, Langan and Beck, 1974), recent studies report little or no difference between the way male and female managers handle conflict (Eagly and Johnson, 1990; Korabik et al., 1993; Watson and Hoffman, 1996). Not all contemporary findings are consistent, however. There are studies that still indicate gender-specific preferences (Brewer et al., 2002; Korabik et al., 1993) as well as studies that find men more accommodating

(Rahim, 2001) and women more avoiding (Brewer et al., 2002). Female avoidance of conflict, however, probably has more to do with power differentials than with gender differences (Korabik et al., 1993; Stockard and Johnson, 1992; Watson and Hoffman, 1996).

Some theorize that the reason there are fewer reported gender differences in the conflict resolution styles of managers than among other populations is that women managers are socialized within the organization to become more like men (Brewer et al., 2002; Korabik and Ayman, 1988). It is argued that advancement within an organization is associated with the possession of masculine traits and that women who want to advance are encouraged to adopt masculine characteristics (Brenner et al., 1989).

There are two problems with this theory. First, recent studies find that across all organizational levels the dominant culture adheres to both feminine (person-oriented) values and masculine (task-oriented) values (Jurma and Powell, 1994), with more emphasis currently being placed on feminine values (Powell, 1999). Second, these studies tend to conflate gender role orientation with biological sex, and this may explain some of the inconsistencies in the literature as well (Brewer et al., 2002; Korabik, 1990). Some individuals are gender typical whereas others are more androgynous. There is strong empirical evidence that male and female managers who are more androgynous are more willing to use the more constructive collaborative strategies (Brewer et al., 2002; Portello and Long, 1994). As would be expected, managers perceived by subordinates as being androgynous are likewise perceived as being more skilled in resolving conflict than managers who strongly adhere to gender role expectations (Jurma and Powell, 1994).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Despite gains in the workplace and in the managerial ranks within the last couple of decades, women are still underrepresented in the field of IS (Morgan, 1992). Among the myriad reasons given to explain this situation is the fact that IS is strongly associated with masculinity (Greenhill, Hellens, Nielsen and Pringle, 1996) and a rather negative image of masculinity at that. Individuals in IS are stereotypically characterized as *geeks* and *nerds* "who wear bow ties, glasses, pocket protectors, pants that are too short and lab coats and who are typically bald males who are passive geniuses and work alone with their computers" (Information Technology Association of America (ITAA), 1998, p. 2).

Several studies have shown that a woman's identification with the female gender role influences the occupation she chooses (Baker, 1987; Fassinger, 1990) and that females who strongly identify with the female role tend to avoid occupations not occupied by their gender (Chusmir and Koberg, 1989). Furthermore, it is theorized that women who go into occupations dominated by men are not gender typical nor are they afraid of being labeled unfeminine (Morgan, 1992). We hypothesize, therefore, that women in IS are not gender typical and will thus prefer the more constructive conflict management styles that are assumed by more androgynous individuals. Furthermore, given the gender role flexibility of women entering the field of IS, we do not expect women in IS to have gender specific preferences in conflict management style. Since the current culture in IS is very masculine and interpersonal skills are devalued (Melymuka, 2000), we do expect men to exhibit negative gender specific conflict management attitudes.

Hypotheses

Based on the evidence provided by these prior studies and in order to answer the study's two primary research questions, we investigated in this study five specific hypotheses (corresponding with the five conflict resolution constructs):

1. Women in IS will be more collaborative than men
2. Women in IS will be no more accommodating than men
3. Women in IS will be no less competing than men
4. Women in IS will be less avoiding than men.
5. Women in IS will be no more compromising than men.

METHODOLOGY

Using the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, 163 traditional-age (18-22) IS majors, enrolled in upper level undergraduate Information Systems courses at a large midwestern university, were assessed with regard to their particular styles of conflict resolution. Reliability data for the Thomas-Kilmann instrument have been reported as ranging from .61-.68 (test-retest) and .43-.71 (Cronbach alpha) (Rahim, 2001, p. 47-49) indicating that the instrument is a highly reliable device for such assessments.

IS faculty were asked to announce in their advanced IS classes that IS majors were needed for a research project. The volunteers were told that the purpose of the study was to learn more about the characteristics of IS majors. Advanced standing and an IS major were confirmed before a volunteer was included in the study.

The typical IS graduate from this university is normally placed in an entry-level programmer/analyst position. On rare occasion, some have gone to the technical support side; several have begun as pure analysts with no code writing responsibilities.

Once data were collected, they were subjected to a thorough statistical analysis using a variety of techniques including ANOVA and t-test assessment.

RESULTS

Scores for each of the 5 conflict resolution constructs measured by the Thomas-Kilmann instrument are contained in Table 1. These scores are accumulated by counting the responses to groups or clusters of questions contained in the survey. The minimum score for each category would be 0, with the maximum score being 12.

	Collaborating	Accommodating	Competing	Avoiding	Compromising
Mean	5.252	5.865	5.448	6.252	7.080
Median	5.000	6.000	5.000	6.000	7.000
Std Dev	2.318	2.466	2.957	2.448	2.105

Table 1. Group Means for Conflict Resolution Mode Categories (n=163)

From this table it can be seen that students scored highest on the construct of compromising, followed by scores for avoiding, accommodating, competing and collaborating, respectively. When compared to the norms established by the instrument's developers (Thomas and Kilmann, 1974)(representing scores from 400 mid and upper level managers in business and government), all of the means fall within the middle 50% of the norms reported for the instrument.

Collaborating

Findings resulting from a statistical analysis of the data indicate that with regard to the conflict resolution mode of collaborating, a significant difference exists between the means for females and males (Table 2). The mean collaborating score for the female students was 6.023 while the male students' mean score was significantly lower at 4.975. Therefore, with regard to hypothesis one, the data support the hypothesis that women will be more collaborative than men.

Dependent Variable	Female (n=43)		Male (n=120)		1-tailed p-value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Collaborating	6.023	2.304	4.975	2.270	0.0055*
Accommodating	5.628	2.526	5.950	2.449	0.2320
Competing	5.279	3.026	5.508	2.942	0.3320
Avoiding	5.651	2.267	6.467	2.483	0.0305*
Compromising	7.326	2.135	6.992	2.096	0.1870

Significant at the .05 level

Table 2. Gender Differences for Conflict Resolution Mode Categories (n = 163)

Accommodating

With regard to research hypothesis two, no significant difference was identified for female and male subjects for the accommodating conflict resolution mode. The female mean score of 5.628 was comparable to the male mean score of 5.950.

Competing

With regard to hypothesis three, mean scores for both females and males were not significantly different. The mean score for the women in the group was 5.279, with the mean score for men being 5.508. The data, therefore, support the hypothesis that no significant difference exists between males and females with regard to the conflict resolution construct of competing. Women are no less competitive, then, than their male counterparts.

Avoiding

Regarding hypothesis four, mean avoiding scores for female students (5.651) were significantly lower than those for male students (6.467). Therefore, the results offer support for the hypothesis that women will be less avoiding than men in dealing with conflict.

Compromising

With regard to hypothesis five, women in IS will be no more compromising than men, the data did not reveal any significant difference between the scores for males and females on this construct.

DISCUSSION

These findings demonstrate the effects of gender as predicted on the conflict resolutions styles of avoiding and collaborating. Again, the two primary research questions addressed by the study were related to the conflict handling attributes possessed by men and women and the possible influence that gender might have on any possible resulting behaviors. The hypotheses researched and the conclusions reached support a positive response to the first research question of whether females in the study group are better at handling conflict. Clearly, the difference between the men and the women in the group with regard to the attributes of collaboration would indicate that the women are more likely to be collaborative. Regarding the second research question, females in the study showed no significant gender specific preferences. As noted above, women in the general population often exhibit a preference for accommodation and an aversion to the competitive style of resolving conflict. This was not the case with the women in our group. However, males in the study demonstrated a gender specific preference for avoidance. This raises the concern that some males in IS may possess less effective/constructive conflict resolution attributes than their female counterparts.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conflict is an unavoidable component of human activity. Organizations are confronted with both external and internal sources of conflict. Whether the source of conflict is external or internal, it is important for managers to understand the management styles of those they manage, as the application of ineffective conflict strategies can result in high stress, high turnover rates, and litigation that can ultimately undermine the overall health of the organization (Hirschman, 2001; Mckenzie, 2002). Effective conflict management, however, requires that styles of handling conflict be defined and measured and that those styles most conducive to positive outcomes be supported and encouraged.

This study focused on the first step of managing conflict by identifying the conflict handling styles of an emerging generation of IS professionals. The results of this study offer some support for the traditional view that differences in conflict handling behaviors may be based on the gender of the subjects involved and that emerging IS females may be in a better position to manage conflict than their male cohorts. This effort was design to provide some perspective on the possible change in assumptions that may have to be made by managers regarding the conflict handling attitudes of emerging IS professionals.

The results of this study also offer opportunities for future research. While replication of this study is certainly appropriate, we believe that several new research questions need to be pursued. For example, just as earlier studies in management focused on the need for females to adapt to a masculine organizational culture, our concern is that some men entering IS may need to adjust their conflict management style to accommodate an organizational environment that is rapidly changing and increasingly placing a premium on developing and maintaining positive interpersonal relationships. Therefore, research designed to focus on the adaptability of male IS subjects to changes in the organizational environment would seem highly appropriate.

Studies based on the further exploration of the factors determining male and female responses to organizational conflict (including factors influencing gender identity) would also be valuable.

Finally, the question of whether constructive responses to conflict can be taught effectively in order to alter predisposed responses to conflict could also yield significant results appropriate to this area of study.

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