Gender and age differences in conflict management within small businesses

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this exploratory study was to establish, through the application of the Rahim Organisational Inventory (ROC II) instrument, how the gender and age status of owners/managers of small businesses relate to the application of different conflict-handling styles. The sample of 68 participants was taken using a convenience sampling technique to ensure representation from the strata of the 102 small businesses. Analysis of variances was used to determine if differences exist in conflict-handling styles within the gender and age status groups. The results of the statistical analysis done revealed that slight to significant variances were found, which are discussed accordingly.

Keywords: Conflict-handling styles, interpersonal conflict, age, gender, small business

There is no shortage of definitions for the term conflict. Ting-Toomey (1985, p.72) defines conflict as a form of intense interpersonal and/or intrapersonal dissonance between two or more interdependent parties based on incompatible goals, needs, desires, values, beliefs, and/or attitudes. Rahim and Magner (1995, p.722) regard conflict as an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement or dissonance within or between social entities.

Through the years different schools of thought on conflict have been developed and applied. According to Rahim (1992, p.4) the *traditional approach* follows the belief that all conflict is considered to be negative and destructive, and as such should be avoided. The avoidance of conflict thus leads to the focus being shifted from managing it to trying to prevent it from occurring. The studies of Elton Mayo during the 1920s gave rise to the *human relations approach*, which states that conflict is considered to be a natural phenomenon and can thus not be eliminated, but should be viewed as making a contribution to increasing the performance within a group or organisation (Robbins, 1998, p.434-435). The *inter-actionist approach* developed the philosophy among modern theorists that "healthy" organisations seek to increase intra-organisational conflict, thus actively encouraging conflict in the workplace. The rationale behind this is that groups that are too harmonious and peacefully static, are non-responsive and inadaptable, and that moderate levels of conflict optimise productivity (Rahim, 1992, p.5).

In order to counteract the negative or positive effects of conflict, appropriate conflict-handling styles have to be implemented. Conflict management is what people who experience conflict intend to do, as well as what they actually do (Van de Vliert, 1997). It refers to the strategies implemented by members aimed at reducing or solving conflict.

It is contended that conflict is an important theme to study in both business organisations and in close working relationships. Conflict, if perceived negatively as with the *traditional approach*, may impact on productivity, work performance and on job satisfaction. In close working relationships it can also be a threat to satisfaction and the endurance of interpersonal relationships. Such negative outcomes necessitate that conflict be studied empirically by gathering data on its appearance, causes, and on its emotional, cognitive motivational and behavioural aspects (Nauta & Kluwer, 2004)

During the past few decades researchers have taken a keen interest in conflict in the workplace and its impact on organisations. Amongst others, studies were conducted on *interpersonal conflict-handling styles* (Jehn 1997; Fillbeck & Smith, 1997; Neale & Northcraft, 1999), *conflict resolution strategies* (Van De Vliert & Euwema, 1994), *conflict and justice* (Ohbuchi, Suzuki & Hayashi, 2001), *theories of managing conflict* (Rahim, 2002), *conflict of interests and objectives* (Vilaseca, 2002) and *managing constructive (functional) and destructive (dysfunctional) conflict* (Jehn, 1995; Pelled, Eisenhardt & Xin, 1999). It seems from literature that conflict management strategies or techniques have been studied systematically (Havenga, 2005).

Rahim (2002) suggested that conflict management strategies should involve recognition of the different types of conflict which may have a positive or negative impact on individual and group performance. Dimensions of conflict which are useful for conflict management include: task and emotional conflict (Ross & Ross, 1989); cognitive and affective conflict (Amason, 1996) and task and relationship conflicts (John, 1997). *Affective* and *substantive* conflict account for differential effects in organisations and also affect the management of interpersonal conflict within the work environment (Jehn, 1995; Pearson, Ensley & Amason, 2002) According to Rahim (2002) the two dimensions of conflict, *substantive* and *affective*, are positively correlated which means that in the process of enchaining *substantive* conflicts, *affective* conflict may also be increased.

One of the problems of managing conflict, as suggested by Applebaum, Abadallah & Shapiro (1999) is that managers spend 20% of their time resolving conflict. Recognition of the different types, as well as the dimensions of conflict in the workplace is valuable in managing conflict. However, being aware of the extent of conflict at various levels of an organisation and of the various conflict-handling styles is crucial for understanding the management of organisational conflict (Rahim 1986). What became evident from the literature survey is that almost all studies concentrate on conflict, whether generic or in a work environment, in organisations and groups not linked to small businesses. Very few conflict studies have been conducted in small- and medium- sized enterprise environments. These environments, according to Havenga (2005) are closely knit and have an impact on the behaviour of individuals that may differ from that in larger organisations. Recent research has focused on conflict of interests and objectives (Vilaseca, 2002); team building and conflict management techniques (Filbeck & Smith, 1997); influences of work/family conflict on job satisfaction and quitting intentions among business owners (Boles, 1996); the phenomenon of *substantive* conflict in small family firms (Davis

& Harveston, 2001); and conflict management strategies in small family businesses (Sorenson, 1999).

Personality characteristics, interpersonal needs, individual behaviour (Lotriet, Crafford & Visser, 2001), organisational status (Brewer *et al.*, 2002), emotions (Bodtker & Jameson, 2001), power, rewards, beliefs and basic values (Weider-Hatfield & Hatfield, 1995; Slabbert 2002) also influence the choice of conflict-handling styles applied.

Apart from this Brenner, Tomkiewics and Schein (1989) also bring into the equation the possibility that the sexes differ in their ability to manage conflict. Gender role, organisational status and conflict-management styles are also addressed by Brewer, Mitchell & Weber (2002). They focused more broadly on the differences between sexes in dealing with conflict, and consider two theoretical perspectives which provide a more clear and effective way of explaining individual differences in conflict handling styles. The one perspective highlights the influence of gender role orientation and the other organisational status. Some older studies suggest that females have a more *cooperative* attitude to conflict handling than males (Rahim, 1983), whilst Beddell and Sistrunk (1973) suggested that females are more competitive. The gender role perspective, according to Brewer *et al.* (2002) conceptualises masculinity and femininity as independent dimensions. Following this role perspective the *competitive* or *dominating* behaviour appears to be consistent with the male role. *Obliging* and *avoiding* behaviour on the other hand is more consistent with females.

Gender differences in conflict-handling styles

It appears that while few researchers have studied the relationship between conflict- handling styles and gender roles, those who have reported masculine individuals adopting a *dominating style* (Portello & Long, 1994; Brewer *et al.*, 2002) and females an *avoiding conflict-handling style* (Brewer *et al.*, 2002). In a study conducted by Antonioni (1998) it was revealed that gender in general had little relationship with the variance of the conflict-management style. Gender was non-significant in all models after controlling for the personality variables. Korabik *et al* (1993) came to the same conclusion a few years earlier when they stated in their study that women managers do not differ from their male counterparts in preferred conflict-handling style. Other studies such as that of Dean (1992) verified that in small family businesses most of the owners made use of the *authority (dominating) style* to resolve disputes. The *compromising style* was used to a lesser extent. Sutschek (2001) in turn found in her study that females did not use the *integrating* and *obliging conflict-handling styles* more often than males when confronted with the same conflict scenario. Male managers did not use the *competitive conflict-handling style* more often than female managers. Males prefer to use the *dominating conflict-handling style* before utilising the avoiding strategy. Females, on the other hand, prefer the *avoiding* instead of the *dominating conflict-handling style*. Research done by Sorenson and Hawkin (1995) also found more similarities between preferred conflict-handling styles for managers of both sexes when dealing with the same conflict situation.

It is evident that studies done on conflict-handling styles between male and female participants in the business environment has provided inconsistent results when compared to other studies done in the same field. Therefore, it is firstly the purpose of this study to establish if and how gender influences the implicit or explicit choice of conflict-management styles of owners/managers of small businesses. In light of this the first hypothesis will be tested:

Hypothesis 1
There is a statistically significant gender difference in conflict-management styles used by owners (managers) when dealing with subordinates in small businesses.

Age differences in conflict handling-styles

Within the unique environment of small businesses, which, in most cases, are small family firms, interpersonal conflict could be detrimental to the success of the business. Although many of these businesses find ways to manage such conflict in the workplace, very little is known about how it is managed or the impact of conflict-management strategies on the business (Lee & Rogoff, 1996). It is believed that shifting the focus from the elimination of conflict to the management of conflict requires a better understanding of the conflict phenomenon (Thomas, 1992). It could be assumed that age, as part of the interpersonal conflict phenomenon in the workplace, also influences the style of handling conflict. It became evident from the literature survey that in contrast to gender issues, almost no specific studies have been conducted on age and its effect on the application of different conflict-handling styles.

Antonioni (1998) came to the conclusion that age in general had little relationship to the variance of the conflict-management style. It was found that age was significantly associated with only the *integrating* and *avoiding conflict handling styles*.

Therefore it is secondly the purpose of the study to establish how age influences the implicit or explicit choice of conflict-handling styles of owners/managers of small businesses, and additionally whether age is significantly associated with only the *integrating* and *avoiding conflict management styles*, as claimed in the study of Antonioni (1998). With this in mind the second hypothesis will be tested:

Hypothesis 2
There is a statistically significant difference in the conflict-management style used by owners of different ages in small businesses.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research approach

A quantitative approach was followed in this exploratory study. The primary data was generated using a standardised instrument in a field survey design. Results were presented by means of descriptive group statistics and correlations.

Research method

Participants and sampling strategy

The participants used for the study consisted of 68 Caucasian owners/managers of small businesses. This sample was taken using a convenience sampling technique to ensure representation from the strata of the 102 small businesses owners/managers, which was identified in a demarcated geographical area in South Africa. The participants were solicited to complete the conflict survey questionnaire. The resultant response rate of useable questionnaires was 82.4%. This rate can be considered acceptable, taking into account that low response rates are common in small business research (Sorenson, 1999). Sorenson (1999) had a usable sample of 59 in his study.

Characteristics of the sample are detailed in Table 1. Biographical data indicate that 73.2% of the respondents were males. Participants who had been in business less than 11 years totalled 48.2% and those more than 11 years 51.8%. Respondents came from different age groups with 30.4% being younger than 36 years, those between 36 and 45 totalling 28.6% and 41.0% were older than 46 years. Data further revealed that 57.2% of the businesses employed 1–10 people and 42.8% employed more than 10. The industries with the largest representation in the sample were the retail (39.3%), automobile (19.6%) and restaurant industries (7.1%). As can be seen from the statistics the gender composition of the sample was strongly biased toward males. There is also a skewed trend towards older participants with 69.6% above 36 years. Vinger & Cilliers (2006) state in their

TABLE 1
Demographics of participants

	N	%		N	%
Gender			**Academic qualification**		
Male	41	73.2	Grade 12 or lower	14	25.0
Female	15	26.8	Certificate/diploma	17	30.4
			Graduate/Postgraduate	25	44.6
Ethnicity			**Home language**		
Caucasian (White)	56	100.0	English	12	27.3
			Afrikaans	44	72.7
Years in business			**Number of employees**		
1-4 years	11	19.6	1-5 employees	16	28.6
5-10 years	16	28.6	6-10 employees	16	28.6
11-15 years	11	19.6	11+ employees	24	42.8
15 +	18	32.2			
Industry			**Age group**		
Steel	3	5.4	Younger than 36	17	30.4
Furniture	2	3.5	36-45	16	28.6
Paint	2	3.5	Older than 45	23	41.0
Automobile	11	19.6			
Restaurant	4	7.1			
Retail	22	39.3			
Financial	1	1.8			
Hotel	1	1.8			
Tourism	0	-			
Agriculture	0	-			
Health	2	3.5			
Other	8	14.4			

study that the age group 31 to 65 years can be considered characteristic of leadership levels in organisations.

Measuring instruments

Measuring instruments considered for this study include Blake and Mouton's (1964) *Two-dimensional grid*, Hall's (1969) *Conflict Management Survey model*, the Thomas-Kilmann (1974) *Conflict Mode*, the *Dutch Test for Conflict Handling* (Euwema & Van de Vliert, 1990), and the *Rahim Organisational Conflict Inventory – II* (Rahim, 1983). Hall's model proved to have disappointing psychometric qualities (Thomas-Kilmann, 1978). Nauta and Kluwer (2004) also questioned whether the *Dutch Test for Conflict Handling* model really measured behaviour under all circumstances. While *Rahim's ROC-II instrument* has also been criticised for the perception that the scale still lacks optimal psychometric properties.

Ben-Yoav & Bonai (1992) claimed that the Rahim instrument has a higher internal consistency coefficient than models such as the *Thomas-Kilmann instrument*. The five-factor ROC-II model also has a better fit with data than models of two, three and four conflict-handling style orientations. In recent studies, for instance, Meyer (2004) used four conflict-handling styles and Euwema, Van der Vliert & Bodtker (2003) seven.

After carefully considering the high reliability coefficients of the ROC-II Instrument it was decided that it would suffice for reaching the objectives of this study. This instrument measures how organisational members manage their interpersonal conflict with superiors, subordinates and peers in a work environment. Five styles of handling interpersonal conflict are measured with 28 items in a standardised questionnaire. This is done on a 5-point Likert-scale. Greater use of a conflict-handling style is presented by a higher score.

The five different areas of conflict-management which are incorporated into the ROC-II instrument include: **integrating** (high concern for self and high concern for others), **dominating** (high concern for self and low concern for others), **obliging** (low concern for self and high concern for others), **avoiding** (low concern for self and low concern for others), and **compromising**

(intermediate levels of concern for both self and others) (Rahim, 2002; Rahim & Magner, 1995).

Research procedure

With the assistance of an academic colleague in the strategic management field, the ROC-II questionnaires were personally distributed to the respondents. At the onset of distribution the owners/managers of the small businesses were briefed individually on the purpose, nature and expected duration for completing the questionnaire. Confidentiality and anonymity were also assured to participants. A period of two weeks was allowed for completion of the questionnaires. Collection of the questionnaires took place at the premises of the various businesses. Participants were then also given the opportunity to clarify any problems experienced with the questionnaire. A follow-up was done after an additional week to collect outstanding questionnaires not completed within the set time limit.

Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was carried out with the SPSS Programme (SPSS Inc., 2003). Firstly, factor analysis was done on the data regarding the influence of gender on the usage of one or more of the conflict-management styles. Secondly data was analysed statistically to determine how different age groups use one or more of the five conflict management styles in their interpersonal conflict situations in the workplace. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were computed to assess the validity and reliability of the constructs that were measured in this study. The construct validity was determined by applying factor analysis to the items in question. The face value of the instrument was assured through testing it with specialists in the field.

RESULTS

Validity of the ROC-II Instrument

In past studies (Gross & Guerrero, 2000), Cronbach's alpha coefficient for each of the ROC-II subscales has ranged from 0.77-0.83 (*integrating*); 0.68–0.72 (*obliging*); 0.75–0.79 (*dominating*); 0.72–0.86 (*avoiding*) and 0.67–0.76 (*compromising*). The analysis in this study yielded an acceptable five-factor solution with all items loading 0.65–0.83. The lowest reliability value was 0.65 (*compromising*) and the highest 0.84 (*integrating*). The lowest value can still be considered to be in the middle order of acceptability. Nunnally & Bernstein (1994) consider values that vary around 0.50 as being the lower limit of acceptability.

General findings from the study

Findings revealed that owners/managers in small businesses tend to be more *integrating/collaborative* (M = 1.87, SD = 0,87) and less *dominating/competitive* (M = 2.93, SD = 0,94). A study done by Sorenson (1999) with almost the same number of small business owner participants (59 Caucasians), recorded M's and SD's of 4.08 and 0.84 for *integrating* and 2.3 and 0.94 for *dominating*. Comparison of descriptive statistics regarding the other three conflict-handling styles showed a reasonably similar trend. *Avoiding* were M = 3.20, SD = 0.99 compared to Sorenson's results of M=3.030 and SD=0.89. *Obliging* were M = 2.71, SD = 0.71 compared to M = 3.85 and SD=0.81. In the case of the *compromising style* the M was = 2.25 and SD was = 0.67. Soreson recorded M = 3.65 and SD = 0.80. No distinction was made between gender or age.

Gender differences in conflict-handling

By comparing the different conflict-handling styles against the background of variable *gender* in a small business, the findings were as presented in Table 2.

No significant difference could be found with regard to the different *genders*. A small effect size of 0.118 was experienced with the *integrating* variable. All the others, taking into account

TABLE 2
Descriptive group statistics and directional measures – gender (n=56)

FACTOR	GENDER	M	SD	t	DF	Sig (2-TAILED)	VALUE
Integrating	M	1.900	0.731				
	F	1.724	0.377	0.855	52	0.259	0.118
Avoiding	M	3.166	1.054				
	F	3.256	0.851	-0.278	50	0.782	0.039
Dominating	M	2.917	0.896				
	F	3.014	1.091	-0.331	53	0.742	0.045
Obliging	M	2.707	0.689				
	F	2.654	0.769	0.239	53	0.812	0.033
Compromising	M	2.179	0.633				
	F	2.285	0.535	-0.559	51	0.579	0.078

0 – 0.1 has no effect and 0.5 has a large effect size, were less than 0.1. Thus, although the variable *integrating conflict-handling style* proved not to have a significant difference, it did have a small effect-size. The females make use of the *integrating style* on a more frequent basis than males in order to manage conflict situations in business. The mean for females was 1.724 and for males 1.900 considering that 1 has the highest and 5 the lowest meaning. Both males and females, when measured in terms of significant difference, use all five of the conflict-handling styles to the same extent.

In Table 3 the parametric (Pearson) and non-parametric (Spearman) inter-correlations with normal data distribution were carried out for both gender groups. From this table it is evident that a consistency exists with regard to the inter-correlations, except for the *obliging conflict-handling style* where a significant negative correlation (-0.583) is registered with the Pearson correlation against the *dominating* factor at p < 0.05. No correlation is recorded in the Spearman case.

Through closer examination of the inter-correlations it was determined that females registered a significant negative correlation (-0.699) between the *avoiding conflict-handling style* and the *integrating style*. A significant positive relationship (0.584) is found between the *compromising* and *obliging conflict-handling styles*. The negative correlation is due to the fact that in the case of the integrating style a high concern for oneself and for others is dominant.

With the *avoiding style* a low concern for oneself as well as the other party in the interpersonal conflict situation exists. On the other hand the *obliging* and *compromising styles* are closely related in the sense that these styles both have a low to moderate concern for self and the other party. Both are also *accommodating* with a give-and-take attitude.

The males registered a strong negative correlation (-0.630) between the *dominating*, *integrating* and *compromising conflict-*

TABLE 4
Descriptive statistics – age status (n=56)

FACTOR	AGE	M	SD	STD. ERROR
Integrating	-36yr	1.932	0.567	0.137
	36-45	1.993	0.699	0.180
	45+	1.795	0.740	0.154
Avoiding	-36yr	3.274	0.805	0.195
	36-45	3.023	1.302	0.348
	45+	3.265	0.940	0.201
Dominating	-36yr	2.623	1.041	0.252
	36-45	2.662	0.775	0.193
	+45	3.330	0.847	0.176
Obliging	-36yr	2.775	0.768	0.186
	36-45	2.585	0.742	0.185
	45+	2.753	0.660	0.137
Compromising	-36yr	2.117	0.679	0.164
	36-45	2.183	0.820	0.211
	45+	2.397	0.559	0.119

handling styles. The *dominating style* projects a high concern for oneself and a low concern for others. It is compatible with autocratic authority and forces solutions. A significant positive correlation was found between *integrating* and *obliging* (0.480), and *compromising* (0.650) at the p < 0.01. The *compromising* and *obliging* (0.404) at the p < 0.05 level also reflected a significant positive correlation. By demonstrating supportiveness and acknowledging the concerns of others, the *obliging style* should contribute to good relationships and cohesiveness (Seymour, 1993).

Age differences in conflict handling

Comparison of the styles used to manage interpersonal conflict in the workplace against the age-status background variable recorded the statistical results as shown in Tables 4, 5 and 6. Age groupings used were 36 years and less, 36 to 45 years, and older than 45 years.

A significant statistical difference of p = 0.023 could be found for the factor *dominating* within the different age groups. A medium effect size of 0.364 was recorded with the *dominating* independent (Table 5). *Integrating, avoiding* and *obliging* had very small effect sizes ranging between 0.102 and 0.116, with the *compromising* dependent (0.187) lying between small and medium effect sizes. All the dependants excluding *dominating* had effect sizes smaller than < 0.2 but slightly bigger than > 0.1. Thus, although the variable *dominating conflict–handling style* proved to have a significant difference, it was contributed with only a medium effect size. It is also evident that the younger participants, 36 years or less, tend to make more use of the *dominating conflict-handling style* (M = 2.623) than the 36-45 years (M = 2.662) and the 45 years and older (M = 3.330) group.

TABLE 3
Parametric and non-parametric inter-correlations of chs's according to gender in small businesses (n=56)

MALES		Integrating	Avoiding	Dominating	Obliging	Compromising
				FEMALES		
Integrating	r		-0.699 **	-0.320	0.303	0.242
	Srho		-0.641**	-0.288	0.441	0.174
Avoiding	r	-0.193		0.085	0.283	0.025
	Srho	-0.171		0.226	0.031	0.079
Dominating	r	-0.630**	0.150		-0.583*	-0.376
	Srho	-0.652**	0.165		-0.508	-0.388
Obliging	r	0.480**	0.282	-0.167		0.584*
	Srho	0.473**	0.296	-0.196		0.594*
Compromising	r	0.650**	-0.080	-0.345*	0.404*	
	Srho	0.646**	-0.074	-0.330*	0.377*	

r = Pearson parametric correlation.
Srho = Spearman nonparametric correlation.
(**) Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)
(*) Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

TABLE 5
ANOVA – age status (n = 56)

FACTOR	GROUPS	SUM OF SQUARES	DF	MS	F	Sig
Integrating	Between	0.255	2	0.127	0.275	0.760
	Within	24.074	52	0.463		
Avoiding	Between	0.621	2	0.311	0.304	0.739
	Within	51.025	50	1.021		
Dominating	Between	6.428	2	3.214	4.039	0.023
	Within	42.177	53	0.796		
Obliging	Between	0.371	2	0.186	0.360	0.699
	Within	27.323	53	0.516		
Compromising	Between	0.845	2	0.422	0.920	0.405
	Within	23.405	51	0.459		

TABLE 6
Directional measures: age-status (n=56)

FACTOR	ETA VALUE
Integrating	0.102 *
Avoiding	0.110 *
Dominating	0.364
Obliging	0.116 *
Compromising	0.187 *

TABLE 7
Correlations of chs's according to age group in small businesses

	AGE GROUPS	INTEGRATING	AVOIDING	DOMINATING	OBLIGING	COMP.
r	-36	-				
Srho		-				
r	36-45	-				
Srho		-				
r	45+	-				
Srho		-				
r	-36	-0.253				
Srho		-0.073				
r	36-45	0.038				
Srho		-0.031				
r	45+	-0.341				
Srho		-0.268				
r	-36	-0.460	0.295			
Srho		-0.367	0.307			
r	36-45	0.740**	0.265			
Srho		-0.710**	0.167			
r	45+	-0.572**	-0.158			
srho		-0.382	-0.204			
r	-36	0.373	0.314	-0.167		
Srho		0.467	0.418	-0.268		
r	36-45	0.785**	0.161	-0.511*		
Srho		0.849**	0.171	-0.544*		
r	45+	0.328	0.397	-0.446*		
srho		0.201	0.379	-0.389		
r	-36	0.885**	-0.025	-0.340	0.563*	-
Srho		0.931**	0.087	-0.347	0.593*	-
r	36-45	0.731**	0.165	-0.606*	0.722**	-
Srho		0.846**	0.006	-0.740**	0.767**	-
r	45+	0.420	-0.191	-0.496*	0.146	-
Srho		0.256	-0.145	-0.463*	0.125	-

r = Pearson parametric correlation.
Srho = Spearman nonparametric correlation.
(**) Correlation is significant the 0.01 level (two- tailed).
(*) Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two- tailed).

Evaluation of the descriptive statistics, application of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and the directional measures revealed that except for the *dominating conflict-handling style* the remaining styles of managing interpersonal conflict are used to the same extent by the different age groups.

Table 7 contains the parametric (Pearson) and non-parametric (Spearman) inter-correlations for the different age groups. Comparison of the Pearson and Spearman inter-correlations reveal that a consistency exists, except for the age group 45 years and older (*dominating*) with correlation differences of r = -0.572 at p <0.01 and Srho = -0.382 at p <0.05. The same is registered for obliging where r = -0.446 at p<0.01 and Srho = -0.389.

Analysing the Pearson correlation reveals that a significant negative correlation exists between the *dominating* and *integrating conflict-handling styles* (-0.740; 36-45 years and -0.572; 45+ years). Moderate negative relations are experienced between *obliging*, *compromising* and *dominating* variables with r = 0.511, r = 0.446 and r = 0.606, r = 0.496 at p < 0.01 respectively. Strong positive correlations exist between *integrating*, *obliging* and *compromising*. Closer scrutiny of the correlations and age groups reveals that in the age group 36 years and younger strong correlations are only recorded between *compromising* and *obliging*. It thus seems as if the younger owners/managers of small businesses are more inclined to focus on problem solving in a collaborative fashion, with a moderate to high concern for self and others. There can, however, also be a low concern for self as well as the other party where inaction, withdrawal or ignoring may occur with a correlation between *compromising* and *obliging* factors.

DISCUSSION

The combined objective of this exploratory study was to determine how gender and age variables affect the type of conflict-handling styles that are used during interpersonal conflict situations in the workplace.

The results did not support the first hypothesis which stated that males and females do not use the various conflict-handling styles to the same extent. It became clear that owners/managers of small businesses, whether male or female, use all the different conflict-handling styles to the same extent. However, the *integrating style* did have a small effect-size, which indicated that females tended to be more *integrating* than males, although no statistical significant difference could be proven. These findings support the results of Rahim (1983) that females have a more *cooperative* (*integrating/collaborating*) orientation to conflict handling than males. However, Bedell & Sistrunk (1973) concluded that females are more *competitive* (*dominating*). Brewer *et al*. (2002) found in their study that *obliging* (*accommodating*) and avoiding are more consistent with females.

With regard to males the use of the *dominant* (*competitive*) conflict-handling style was verified by this study and the others mentioned above. Portello & Long's study (1994) also reported masculine individuals adopting a *dominating style*. In the present study the *dominating* behaviour appears consistent with a masculine gender role, whilst use of the *obliging* and *avoiding conflict-handling* styles appears consistent with a female gender role. It should be noted again that it was found that a significant positive correlation exists between *compromising* and *obliging* (r = 0.584, p<0.05) for females. In the case of males a strong negative correlation exists between the *dominating* and *integrating style* (r = -0.630, p<0.01), and *compromising* (r = -0.345, p<0.05).

Considering the age groups and the types of conflict-handling styles they used in interpersonal conflict situations, the Pearson and Spearman inter-correlations were applied. Both methods were used to verify the ranked data. The results supported the second hypothesis which stated that conflict-handling styles were used to a different extent among various age groups. Evaluation of the statistics as portrayed in the different tables revealed that apart from the *dominating conflict-handling style* the

remaining styles are used to the same extent by the different groups. The older the participants are, the less dominating or competitive the style used.

Comparison of the inter-correlations of the gender and age groups' conflict-handling styles reveal that the *integrating* variable for males had a significant negative correlation with the *dominating* factor and significant positive correlation with the *obliging* and *compromising* factors. The correlations of the *compromising* factor for the male gender also had negative and positive correlations with *integrating*, *dominating* and *obliging*. This also corresponds with that of the age groups. Females only recorded a negative correlation between the *dominating* and *obliging* factors and a positive correlation between the *compromising* and *obliging* factors. This corresponds with the findings of the age groups. It thus seems that a relationship exists between conflict-handling styles and gender and age. A contradiction, however, does exist with regard to the fact that females have a more *integrating* or *collaborating* approach to conflict handling. When their age is taken into consideration, it appears that the younger they are, the more they tend to make use of the *dominating* conflict-handling style to manage conflict situations. A clear answer to this difference could not be found. A study conducted by Antonioni (1998) revealed that in general age and gender had little relationship with the variance in conflict-handling styles. His manager sample coefficients for both age and gender were non-significant as was the case for a student sample. Age was significantly associated with only two of the five styles, namely the use of *integrating* (Beta = 0.12 < 0.05) and *avoiding* (Beta = 0.15 < 0.01) styles. In the present study *integrating*, *avoiding* and *obliging* all had small effect sizes.

Limitations

The generalisability of the results is limited by the relative small sample size and the demarcation of the study to a restricted geographic area. Furthermore findings were based on a purely Caucasian (White) group of participants. Amongst the group of 56 respondents no Asians, Black Africans or Coloureds were to be found. As such no cultural influences could be included in the evaluation of the conflict-styles used by the participants. Other race groups may have had different outcomes with regard to age and gender. Another limitation is that a convenience sample was used. The absence of randomisation for control could affect the data. A further limitation could be the fact that only owners/managers' conflict-handling styles toward subordinates were studied. No attempt was made to explore and distinguish behavioural characteristics that may have been applicable to academic qualifications or industry groupings.

CONCLUSION

This study provides insights into conflict-handling styles and their application by owners/managers of small firms based on gender and age variables. In some instances the results are compelling and consistent with other studies and in other cases, as shown in this study, the findings differ.

What has become evident is that although the variance in styles in which conflict is managed by gender role and age respectively was not particularly large, it was established that females made use of the *integrating styles* on a more frequent basis than males. The other conflict-handling styles showed no significant difference in usage between the two genders. Negative and positive inter-correlations with regard to the conflict-handling styles were registered for both genders with more significant relations existing in the styles used by males.

With regard to age it was determined that except for the *dominating style* other conflict-handling styles were used to the same extent by different age groups. It has also become clear that with the younger age group a strong correlation exists between *compromising* and *obliging*.

The fact that the *integrating* and *dominating styles* have been prominent amongst the five conflict-handling styles calls for some further remarks. It should be noted that the *dominating style* of managing conflict is considered to be the worst style. It increases frustration and leaves residual frustration which is likely to cause further conflict (Rahim, 1992).

Superiors who use the dominating style are also, according to Van der Vliert, Euwema & Huismans (1995), less effective with their subordinates. Utley, Richardson & Pilkington (1989) have found that a relationship exists between the need for aggression and a *dominating* or *forcing style*. Individuals using the latter style may not be open to new experiences. With the *integrating style*, information needs and interests are shared openly, whilst the *dominating style* may be a demonstration of power. High levels of emotional stability may also be required when using the *dominating style* (Antonioni, 1998). It appears from discussions earlier in this study as well as the results given, that owners/managers of small businesses should preferably use a conflict strategy with low levels of dominance and even avoidance. The most frequently used conflict-management style should be collaboration. Sorenson's 1994 study suggests that businesses that produce the highest outcomes have developed a norm of collaborating.

In conclusion it can be stated that relatively few studies have been done to evaluate different aspects of conflict dynamics in small businesses. It is believed that this study, though exploratory in nature, has given a more usable picture of interpersonal conflict with regard to gender and age and the application of different conflict-handling styles. Future research on a much larger scale and with more participants is deemed necessary. Applying such a study to different cultures and races may also divulge valuable information if also applied to conflict-handling styles used by employees of small businesses in interpersonal workplace conflict situations. Integration of such knowledge into training programmes would not only enhance the quality of working relationships, but would also help to decrease conflict and enhance work performance and productivity.

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