

# *A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis of Gender Differences within the African Business Environment*

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The objective of this exploratory study was to determine whether there are any differences in the use of conflict-handling (management) styles between men and women among entrepreneurs of small businesses in South Africa, and to compare the results against the conflict-handling styles used by male and female executives in organisations in Nigeria. The empirical research was done by applying the Rahim Organizational Inventory (ROCI) model. The results revealed that, although slight, a variance in conflict-handling styles exists between males and females, respectively. In South Africa, females tend to make use of the integrating style on a more frequent basis than males do to manage conflict with subordinates. Males registered a strong negative correlation between integrating, dominating and compromising styles. The study also compared results of a similar study done on executives in Nigeria. The results of the Nigerian sample are similar to that of the South African sample, in that both males and females tend to use the integrating style more frequently. Also, there is a slight indication that Nigerians have marginally lower concern for self than South Africans do.

*Key Words:* organisation; conflict management styles; relationships

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## Introduction

In developing countries, small business has evolved to become the panacea to socio-economic challenges and plights (Klapper and Parker, 2011; Sherifat 2013). Considered as a panegyric surge to larger industries, unemployment and the broader community, the significance of the small business is internationally recognised as a prolific contributor to development. However, despite acclaim received, the rate of failure for small businesses escalates comparatively higher in developing than in developed countries (Sherifat 2013). In specific, the micro-environment of the business has (among other factors) attracted attention as a source of organisational demise. Ndubisi (2013) proffers that a cognitive structure based on gender and relational demographics can impact processes of an interpersonal and organisational nature, including efficiency goals evident in communication, cooperation, satisfaction and performance.

Being the most populous African country and the eighth largest exporter of petroleum in the world, Nigeria is considered a force to be reckoned with. Besides South Africa, it is one of few African countries with a mature business environment and a stable government. Despite the geographical distance between the two countries, global players view both countries as access points into Africa. Invariably, international renown is bestowed as a result of a coalescence of human rights based on an increased awareness of equalitarian rights and discrimination practices. With due regard to the competitive environment in which businesses have to profitably operate, researchers have furthered investigation into the influences of gender and cultural differences on organisational performance and competence (Francis 2004; Davis, Capobianco, and Kraus 2010; Kark, Wiasmel-Manor, and Shamir 2012; Ramadoss and Rajadhyaksha 2012). Subsequently, the ascertaining of gender dynamics in workplace conflict bears plausible apperception, especially when taking into account the ostensible consequence response behaviour, role expectations and decision-making implications present with concerned role-players and the organisation (Davis, Capobianco, and Kraus 2010).

This article takes a look at the influence of gender on conflict management styles in the business environment in South Africa and reports the differences with which genders handle conflict situations in the workplace. Furthermore, the conflict management styles of the South African and Nigerian workforce are compared to establish whether there are similarities in conflict management styles of the labour force in the two most

prominent African countries within the business scenario. The purpose of this article is to uncover similarities (if any) between the two nations.

### **A Theoretical Analysis**

A tangible inter-related relationship between the 'macro-' (industry and societal) and 'micro-' (organisational) levels is observed and perceived precarious when threatened by intra-organisational conflict (Ndubisi 2013). Therefore, conflict management has innately been applauded as an indispensable managerial skill that simultaneously facilitates prevention on the one hand, while enhancing efficiency and customer service on the other (Manyak and Kantono 2010; Ndubisi 2013).

Over the years, interest has grown in the determination of the influence of workplace conflict on the organisation. A variety of studies have been conducted on conflict and justice (Ohbuchi, Suzuki and Hayashi 2001), conflict of interests and objectives (Vilaseca 2002), and managing constructive (functional) and destructive (dysfunctional) conflict (Jehn 1995; Pelled, Eisenhardt, and Xin 1999), styles of handling interpersonal conflict (Jehn, Northcraft, and Neale 1999), resolution strategies in conflict situations (Van De Vliert and Euwema 1994), as well as theories of conflict management (Rahim 2002). It appears from previous literature that conflict management (strategies and techniques) has been studied at length (Havenga 2005).

Key to conflict management is the realisation that the managers spend approximately 20% of their time resolving conflict (Applebaum, Abdallah, and Shapiro 1999). This contributes to the ascertaining of positive correlations between the two dimensions, which in turn explains that when substantive conflict inflicts an impediment, increased affective conflict can also be noticed (Rahim 2002). It is of utmost importance to determine, not only the type of conflict, but also the dimensions of workplace conflict. Value can extend from the determination of the type of conflict to the various organisational levels in order to execute different types of conflict handling styles (Rahim 1986). In apposition, Brenner, Tomkiewics, and Shein (1989) suggest that the possibility of gender differences be duly considered when deliberating the ability to manage conflict. Management must determine whether conflict has a negative or positive effect, not only on the organisational performance, but also on the individuals (Rahim 2002). Dimensions of conflict that are useful for conflict management include, among others: task and emotional conflict (Ross and Ross 1989), cognitive and affective conflict (Amason 1996),

and task and relationship conflicts (Jehn 1997). Affective and substantive conflict accounts for differential effects in organisations and also affects the management of interpersonal conflict within the work environment (Jehn 1995; Pearson, Ensley, and Amason 2002).

Challenged by accelerating levels of unemployment, poverty and low skill levels, policymakers in developing countries have noted the benefit of encouraging women to participate in the growth and development of an economy (Nwoye 2007; Klapper and Parker 2011). Carrieri et al. (2013) assert that once women have entered the labour market, upward immobility denigrates impartial empowerment of women, thereby rendering gender studies a prerogative. The pursuant significance of noting gender differences in the workplace is therefore nestled in the yielded inferences displayed in specific conflict behaviour, and whether such inferences are gender specific. Brewer, Mitchell, and Weber's (2002) research extends to topics such as gender role conflict, organisational status, and conflict handling styles. They highlight two theoretical perspectives to explain conflict handling within different genders. These perspectives focus on the influence of gender role orientation on the one hand, while the other emphasises organisational status. Notably, Sherifati (2013) contend that empirical data on factors influencing gender differences as experienced in small businesses has escaped the focus and attention of social researchers. Similarly, studies on gender differences in conflict resolution strategies in Africa appear to be non-existent (Manyak and Kantono 2010). As such, Ehigie and Umoren (2003) have collated research from various Nigerian cultures, such as the Yoruba, Ibo, Hausa and Bini, where women have had to engage in a 'non-career occupations' like that of the small business entrepreneur. Invariably, the skill of managing a business effectively and efficiently is crucial to attain entrepreneurial success. Although an entrepreneur is said to possess specific traits, women are generally regarded as incompetent on account of irrational, emotional and even temperamental behaviour.

The inherent differences between men and women and the different conflict handling styles should not be lightly dismissed. Different expectations conveyed elicit diverse reactions from key role-players in the workplace. This seemingly has contributed to the perpetuation of gender stereotyping in an already deemed masculine work environment. Subsequently, women are described as being sensitive and empathetic towards subordinates and peers thereby promoting collective inter-personal relationships. They are said to favour collaborating and compromising conflict styles, while mediating with transformative and process-focused in-

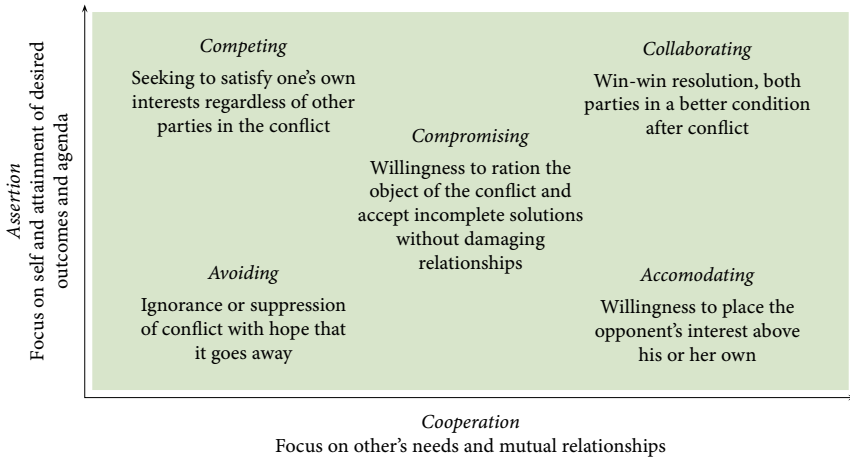


FIGURE 1 Conflict-management styles (adapted from Thomas and Kilmann 1974)

terventions. In comparison, men are regarded as self-centred and career orientated, thereby portraying themselves as agentic and destructive. An expression of anger by men denotes competence, while in women it symbolises emotional instability. Men endorse conflict-managing styles of avoidance and competition, and apply a more rights-based mediation approach.

However, substantial evidence does acknowledge men and women entrepreneurs to be psychologically on par with one another, in some instances even elevating the female counterpart as effectively superior in managerial skills and competence (Ehigie and Umoren 2003). Notwithstanding, previous research has recorded that the survival, growth and profit of women-owned small business are handicapped by external limitations, for instance female subordinates significantly challenge and exhibit behaviour of displeasure towards female managers (Nwoye 2007; Davis, Capobianco, and Kraus 2010; Klapper and Parker 2011; Ramadoss and Rajadhyaksha 2012). Comparatively, researchers such as Braidford, Stone, and Tesfaye (2013) and Booysen and Nkomo (2010) confirm that the ‘think manager-think male’ mantra continues to serve as a means by which women have adapted themselves to managerial strategies of ‘transformational leadership’ or ‘participatory management.’

Kark, Wiasmel-Manor, and Shamir (2012) juxtapose the above-mentioned with contemporary perceptions that preferably attach feminine and masculine characteristics rather than biological traits to a position. Androgyny describes the degree to which a focal role perceives him- or herself as an entity with blended instrumental (independent, assertive,

logical, competitive and task-driven) and expressive (emotional, sensitive and caring) traits. This is clearly evident within the upper levels of the organisational hierarchy where a convergence of male and female conflict styles is to be noted (Davis, Capobianco, and Kraus 2010). A causal nexus is accordingly detected between the transformational leadership style and leadership effectiveness (Kark, Wiasmel-Manor, and Shamir 2012). Nevertheless, Davis, Capobianco, and Kraus (2010) maintain that in the long run gender roles impact behaviour, even small gender differences as sensed by peers, subordinates and senior colleagues are considered to have extensive effects.

Invariably, conflict has the potential to negatively affect productivity, work performance and job satisfaction. Conflict can be an obstacle to upholding interpersonal relationships and job satisfaction. These negative effects show the importance of empirical studies on conflict. Studies need to focus on different facets of conflict, including appearance, causes, emotional effects, cognitive motivation and behavioural aspects (Nauta and Kluwer 2004).

The objective of this study was to firstly, through a thorough theoretical analysis, do a literature review on the current research and viewpoints on the underlying variables of the study in order to provide sufficient background and knowledge of the fundamentals of the topic. In the second phase in order to meet the primary objective a cross-comparison was done using secondary data obtained by one of the authors in a study done on gender differences within an small business in South Africa (Havenga 2005) and data obtained from a study done by Osisioma in Nigeria one year later, using the same instrument and methodology to obtain the data on which the this study's comparison was done. The research method of the study done by Havenga has been re-visited in the section below as well as Osisioma's study on the partial re-visit of methodology.

A sub-objective would be to compliment or reject previous studies' results that concluded that within the work-environment females are more inclined to use the cooperative, obliging and avoiding styles, while males are dominating.

## **Research Design and Methodology**

### **RESEARCH PROPOSAL**

In a study done by one of the authors in 2008, in which quantitative approach was followed, the data generated was used to provide results on the gender differences in conflict-handling styles within a South African

small business. Participants were surveyed by means of a standardised instrument of which the results were presented using descriptive group statistics and correlations. The comparative analysis was done using the results of the Nigerian study conducted in 2009. The methodology utilised is explained in the sections below.

#### PARTICIPANTS

The population in the survey consisted of 56 Caucasian entrepreneurs. Randomly, from a total of 102 small businesses, a sample of 68 was taken from a geographical area of South Africa. The questionnaire was completed by 82.4% ( $n = 56$ ) of the respondents. Sorenson (1999) indicated that a response of this size is acceptable and the low response rate in small business is common to this sector. In his study, he only used 59 participants and indicated it as a usable response (Sorenson 1999). According to the biographical data, 73.2% of the respondents are males. Those respondents fewer than 11 years in the business were 48.2%, and those above total 51.8%. The participants fall into different age groups, namely 36 years (30.4%); 36 to 45 years (28,6%); and 41.0% are 46 years and older. From this data sample, it was deduced that 57.2% of the businesses employ 1 to 10 employees, while a remnant of 42.8% employ more than 10 persons.

Retail, namely 39.3%, was by far the largest represented industry in the survey, followed by 19.6% in the automobile and 7.15% in the restaurant industries. As indicated by the data gathered, the gender composition of the study group was strongly biased towards males. A skew trend was also noticeable with participants above 36 years of age (69.6%).

#### MEASURING INSTRUMENTS

A variety of measuring instruments were applied in the course of this study. It includes Blake and Mouton's (1964) two-dimensional grid, Hall's (1969) Conflict Management Survey Model, the Thomas-Kilmann (1974) conflict model, Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory – II (Rahim 1983), and the Dutch Test for conflict handling (Euwema and Van de Vliert 1990). Notably, Thomas and Kilmann (1978) aver that Hall's model proved to have some disappointing psychometric qualities. Similarly, Nauta and Kluver (2004) debunked the Dutch test for conflict handling, explaining that it was of dubious nature when measuring an all-circumferencing behavioural model. The Rahim's ROC II instrument has

also been questioned in the sense that it lacks optimal psychometric properties.

The Rahim instrument has a higher internal consistency coefficient than the Thomas-Kilmann instrument, according to Ben-Yoav and Bonai's (1992) studies. Meyer (2004), in recent studies, used four conflict-handling style, while Euwema, Van der Vliert and Bakker (2003) made use of seven conflict-handling styles.

It was decided, after consultation, that the high reliability coefficient of the ROC II instrument would be sufficient to reach the objectives of this study. Great success was achieved in the measuring of interpersonal conflict among supervisors, subordinates and peers within the working environment. A 28-item standardised questionnaire was used to measure the five styles of interpersonal conflict handling. Five-point Likert-type scales were used to do the measuring. Higher scores were noted with an increased use of conflict handling styles (Rahim 2002; Rahim and Magner 1995):

- *Integration*: Demonstrates a profound concern for self and others, reflecting a consent rate on problem-solving in a collaborative fashion.
- *Obliging*: Indicates a high concern for the other party and a low concern for self. Accommodation, non-conformation, lose-win style.
- *Domination*: Low concern for opposing party and a high concern for self. Zero-sum, control, competing and a lose-win style.
- *Avoiding*: Low concern for self and other party. Withdrawal or ignoring, inaction.
- *Compromising*: Moderate concern for self and other party. Sharing or give-and-take.

#### RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY

The SPSS program was used to analyse the information that was gathered. To determine the reliability of the instrument, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was used. Specialists in the field assisted with the face-value of the instrument to assure validity. Construct validity was calculated by applying factor analyses to the items in the questionnaire.

The Cronbach alpha coefficient for each of the ROC sub-scales reported ranged from 0.77 to 0.83 (integrating), 0.68 to 0.72 (obliging), 0.75 to 0.79 (dominating), 0.72 to 0.86 (avoiding); and 0.67 to 0.76 (compromising). The statistical analyses yielded a five-factor solution with all



items being between 0.65 and 0.83. From the analysis it was clearly indicated that the lowest reliability value was 0.65 (compromising) and the highest 0.84 (integrating) and could be considered as acceptable.

## **Results of Empirical Study and Comparative Analysis**

### **RESULTS OF EMPIRICAL STUDY**

A statistical analysis was done on the data gathered from the application of one or more conflict management styles as influenced by a prevalence of a specific gender type.

The analysis of the study related compilations whereby entrepreneurs in small and medium-sized businesses tend to be more integrating/collaborative ( $M = 1.87$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ) and less dominating/competitive ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ). In an analogous study by Sorenson (1999), small and medium-sized business owners (59 Caucasians) inferred means and standard deviations of 4.08 and 0.84 for integrating and 2.3 and 0.94 for dominating. Reasonable trends of descriptive statistical comparison regarding the other three conflict-handling styles were indicated in the study. A comparison of descriptive statistics regarding the other three conflict-handling styles showed a reasonably similar trend. Avoiding's  $M = 3.20$  and  $SD = 0.99$  compared to Sorenson's results of  $M = 3.030$  and  $SD = 0.89$ ; and Obliging's  $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 0.71$  compared to  $M = 3.85$  and  $SD = 0.81$  of Sorenson. In the case of the compromising style,  $M = 2.25$  and  $SD = 0.67$ ; with Sorenson recording  $M = 3.65$  and  $SD = 0.80$ , although not completely a baseline with which to compare the small business in general. No distinction was made between gender and age.

Tables 1 and 2 present the comparison of the various conflict handling styles within the small business context and against a backdrop of a 'gender' variable.

No significant statistical differences between the two genders were generated. The integrating dependant showed a minimal effect size of 0.118. None of the others were less than 0.1. Despite the fact that the integrating conflict-handling style had a statistically significant difference, it had a small effect size. The females make use of the integrating style on a more frequent basis than males do in order to manage conflict situations in the business. The mean for females was 1.724 and for males 1.900, considering that 1 has the highest and 5 the lowest meaning which is an indication that the integrating handling-style is used more frequently than their male counterparts in a conflict-situation.

TABLE 1 Descriptive group statistics among South African entrepreneurs

Factor	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Integrating	M	40	1.900	0.731	0.115
	F	14	1.724	0.377	0.100
Avoiding	M	39	3.166	1.054	0.168
	F	13	3.256	0.851	0.236
Dominating	M	41	2.917	0.896	0.140
	F	14	3.014	1.091	0.291
Obliging	M	41	2.707	0.689	0.107
	F	14	2.654	0.769	0.205
Compromising	M	39	2.179	0.633	0.101
	F	14	2.285	0.535	0.143

NOTES Column headings are as follows: (1) gender, (2) *n*, (3) median, (4) standard deviation, (5) standard error mean.

TABLE 2 Descriptive statistics among South African entrepreneurs

Factor	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Integrating	5.098	0.028	0.855	52	0.396	0.175	0.205	0.118
Avoiding	1.368	0.248	-0.278	50	0.782	-0.089	0.323	0.039
Dominating	1.266	0.266	-0.331	53	0.742	-0.097	0.293	0.045
Obliging	0.454	0.504	0.239	53	0.812	0.052	0.219	0.033
Compromising	0.625	0.433	-0.559	51	0.579	-0.106	0.190	0.078

NOTES Column headings are as follows: Levine's test for *E* of *V*: (1) *F*, (2) significance; *T*-test for quality of means: (3) *t*, (4) *df*, (5) sig. (2-tailed), (6) median difference, (7) standard error difference, (8) directional measures value.

When measured in terms of significant differences, the five conflict-handling styles, as used by both female and male respondents, showed an equitable yield.

In tables 3 and 4, the parametric (Pearson) and non-parametric (Spearman) inter-correlations with normal data distribution were carried out for both gender groups. 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  $p$  (sig) < 0.05.

It was determined that females varied between the integrating and avoiding style by registering a significant negative correlation (-0.699). The compromising and obliging styles showed a significant positive relationship of 0.584, with the integrating style (a high concern for oneself

TABLE 3 Inter-correlations of conflict-handling styles of South African male entrepreneurs

Variable		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(4)
(1) Integrating	<i>r</i>					
	<i>Srho</i>					
(2) Avoiding	<i>r</i>	-0.193				
	<i>Srho</i>	-0.171				
(3) Dominating	<i>r</i>	-0.630**	0.150			
	<i>Srho</i>	-0.652**	0.165			
(4) Obliging	<i>r</i>	0.480**	0.282	-0.167		
	<i>Srho</i>	0.473**	0.296	-0.196		
(5) Compromising	<i>r</i>	0.650**	-0.080	-0.345*	0.404*	-
	<i>Srho</i>	0.646**	-0.074	-0.330*	0.377*	-

NOTES *r* = Pearson Parametric correlation, *Srho* = Spearman non-parametric correlation, \*\* correlation is significant the 0.01 level (two-tailed), \* correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

TABLE 4 Inter-correlations of conflict-handling styles of South African female entrepreneurs

Variable		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(4)
(1) Integrating	<i>r</i>					
	<i>Srho</i>					
(2) Avoiding	<i>r</i>	-0.699**				
	<i>Srho</i>	-0.641**				
(3) Dominating	<i>r</i>	-0.320	0.085			
	<i>Srho</i>	-0.288	0.226			
(4) Obliging	<i>r</i>	0.303	0.283	-0.583*		
	<i>Srho</i>	0.441	0.031	-0.508		
(5) Compromising	<i>r</i>	0.242	0.025	-0.376	0.584*	-
	<i>Srho</i>	0.174	0.079	-0.388	0.594	-

NOTES *r* = Pearson Parametric correlation, *Srho* = Spearman non-parametric correlation, \*\* correlation is significant the 0.01 level (two-tailed), \* correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

and for others) pronouncedly more dominant. This could explain why a negative correlation exists.

A person using the avoiding conflict-handling style has a low concern for the individual he/she is in conflict with as well as with himself/herself. The obliging and compromising styles, on the other hand, are closely related to the extent that both have a low to moderate concern for self and

the other party. Both of these styles are to a certain extent accommodating having an ‘I give some and I take some’ attitude.

The dominating conflict-handling style on the other hand has a ‘high concern for myself’ and a ‘low concern for the other individual’ mind-set. In the study it is shown that a strong negative correlation of  $-0.630$  have been recorded among the male respondents.

The handling-styles integrating and obliging ( $0.480$ ), compromising ( $0.650$ ) at the  $p$  (sig)  $< 0.01$ , and compromising and obliging ( $0.404$ ) at the  $p$  (sig)  $< 0.05$  level yielded a significant positive correlation. The obliging style shows a form of behaviour that is similar to that of ‘ingratiation.’ According to Friedman, Curral, and Tsai (2000) ingratiation tactics sets out to try and convince the other party that you think favourably of them and their ideas which sets out to produce a positive effect in others and decreases conflict between parties.

#### RESULTS OF COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Data from the study on Nigerian executives was compared to the data of South African entrepreneurs regarding gender differences in interpersonal conflict-handling styles in the work-environment. Please note that the Likert scale was also used in this study. However, while a higher score indicated greater use of a conflict management style in the study done in South Africa, a lower score indicates greater use of a conflict management style in the study done in Nigeria.

Findings of the study revealed that Nigerian executives used the integrating/collaborating conflict-handling style to a greater extent ( $M = 4.40$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ) and to a lesser extent the competing/dominating ( $M = 2.96$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ). This is slightly different from the trends displayed by the South African entrepreneurs, where the least preferred conflict management style is avoiding/neglecting.

Another inference made from this comparative analysis is that the preferences of conflict management styles of both genders in South Africa are similar and the same is also true for the Nigerian executives. Therefore, despite gender differences, both males and females within a specific country indicate the same conflict management style. This demonstrates that even though there are slight variations in conflict management styles between genders, when compared externally, the gender differences are not that drastic.

A comparison of descriptive statistics of the other three conflict-handling styles between South African entrepreneurs and Nigerian ex-

TABLE 5 Comparison of descriptive group statistics between South African entrepreneurs and Nigerian executives

Conflict-handling style		South African entrepren.			Nigerian executives		
		<i>n</i>	M	SD	<i>n</i>	M	SD
Integrating	M	40	1.900	0.731	277	4.40	0.781
	F	14	1.724	0.377	145	4.39	0.721
Avoiding	M	39	3.166	1.054	277	2.96	1.122
	F	13	3.256	0.851	142	3.13	1.040
Dominating	M	41	2.917	0.896	277	3.12	1.004
	F	14	3.014	1.091	143	2.99	0.911
Obliging	M	41	2.707	0.689	277	3.75	0.885
	F	14	2.654	0.769	142	3.61	0.761
Compromising	M	39	2.179	0.633	277	3.53	0.980
	F	14	2.285	0.535	142	3.45	1.022

ecutives showed a reasonably similar trend. A related inclination arose with the remaining three handling-styles. After integrating, Nigeria’s executives prefer obliging, compromising and avoiding ( $M = 3.75, 3.53, 3.12$  and  $2.96$ , respectively), in that order of conflict management styles. This is slightly different from the South African order of preference, which is compromising, obliging, dominating and avoiding ( $M = 2.179, 2.707, 2.917$  and  $3.166$ , respectively).

### Discussion

One of the objectives of this comparative study was to measure gender differences in conflict-handling styles in the work-environment. It became clear that entrepreneurs of small businesses, whether male or female, except for the ‘integrating style,’ use the remaining four different conflict-handling styles to the same extent. The results of this study confirm Rahim’s (1983) findings, which affirm that females have a more cooperative (integrating/collaborating) orientation to conflict-handling than males do. In contrast, Bedell and Sistrunk (1973) maintain that females are more competitive (dominating). However, Brewer, Mitchell, and Weber’s (2002) study found that obliging (accommodating) and avoiding styles are more consistent with females.

In this study as supported by other studies mentioned above it showed that the dominating (competing) conflict-handling style was applicable to the male respondents. Masculine individuals adopting a dominating style highlighted the content of Portello and Long’s gender studies

(1994). In the present study, the dominating behaviour appears consistent with a masculine gender role; while within the female gender role, the prevalence of obliging and avoiding conflict-handling styles is derived. 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 styles ( $r = -0.630, p < 0.01$ ) and compromising ( $r = -0.345, p < 0.05$ ).

Another objective of this paper was to compare the handling styles of male and female South African entrepreneurs against those of male and female Nigerian executives. Overlooking the gender and observing the two groups in general, although both groups mostly prefer the integrating conflict management style, the South African entrepreneurs prefer the conflict management styles in the following order: integrating, compromising, obliging, avoiding and dominating. Therefore, South African entrepreneurs exhibit a more cooperative approach with less assertion. Nigerian executives, on the other hand, prefer integrating, obliging, dominating, compromising and avoiding styles, in that order. This indicates that Nigerian executives demonstrate slightly higher levels of assertion.

When comparing female South African entrepreneurs and Nigerian executives, we found that both prefer using the integrating conflict management style. Both groups depict high levels of cooperation, although female Nigerian executives tend to be more dominating than female South African entrepreneurs. Male South African entrepreneurs used the compromising conflict management style more as compared to male Nigerian executives who prefer using the integrating conflict management style. Both groups show high levels of cooperation and moderate levels of assertion.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, this study paid attention to conflict handling styles as exercised by the various genders and by the owners/managers of small businesses. This study also compares the conflict management patterns of entrepreneurs in South Africa and executives in Nigerian organisations. When looking at the results of this study, it is evident that it is consistent with similar studies and in other cases differences were found.

It appears as if the use of styles according to which conflict is handled based on gender does not differ much. It did, however, appear as though women more often than men made use of the integrating style. In both

South Africa and Nigeria, the use of other conflict handling styles with regard to gender did not differ significantly. The integrating and dominating styles appear to be the conflict handling styles that are used most often. Since the integrating style indicates medium levels of assertion and cooperation and the dominating style indicates high levels of assertion and low levels of cooperation, it can be stated that the general trend is towards higher levels of assertion and lower levels of cooperation. An emphasis is placed on the fact that the dominating style appears to be the least appropriate style to handle conflict; furthermore, individuals who make use of the conflict handling style are also less 'open for new experiences.' Rahim (1992) also indicates that the dominating style leads to an increase in frustration, thereby leading to more conflict.

Often, conflict management experts suggest 'avoidance' to be non-constructive, because this style benefits neither avoidance nor the other party involved in interpersonal conflict. They suggest coaching the person who uses the 'avoiding style' to become collaborative and in that way the individual will strive to be assertive with his/her own interests and cooperative in assisting the other party to achieve his/hers (Barsky and Wood 2005). It should be noted that the larger effects of avoidance include isolation, barriers to sharing important information and passive resistance (De Long and Seeman 2000).

When comparing the conflict management styles of South African entrepreneurs and Nigerian executives, both female South African entrepreneurs and female Nigerian executives prefer using the integrating conflict management style, depicting high levels of cooperation, although female Nigerian executives tend to be more dominating than female South African entrepreneurs. Male South African entrepreneurs tend to use the compromising conflict management style more compared to male Nigerian executives, who prefer using the integrating conflict management style. Both groups show high levels of cooperation and moderate levels of assertion. Therefore, in general, disregarding gender, South African entrepreneurs exhibit a more cooperative approach with less assertion, whereas Nigerian executives demonstrate higher levels of assertion. This could be due to cultural differences or the level of competitiveness in the market.

From the above, it can be construed that relatively few studies have themed an evaluation of the different aspects of conflict dynamics in small businesses. Although this study is explorative in nature, it displays a practical view of interpersonal conflict, specifically regarding gender and the application of conflict management styles.

The necessity of broadening this type of study on a more concentrated quantitative scale is a future prospect that requires development. The adaptable flexibility of such a study can be expediently linked to variables of cultural diversity and race, and may also divulge valuable information on conflict-handling styles used by employees of small businesses in interpersonal workplace conflict situations. The 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.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

Findings on the Havenga study were based on a purely Caucasian (White) group of participants. Among the group of 56 respondents, no Asians, black Africans or coloureds were to be found. There is no mention about the race of the participants in the study done by Osisioma (2009) either. Therefore, in the comparative study, no cultural influences could be accounted for. Booysen and Nkomo (2010) stress that gender and culture are an 'inter-related axis of social structure' or 'interlocking categories' that cannot be separated from embedded stereotyped perceptions attached to a role within the organisation. This might limit the consistency of this study. Furthermore, Davis, Capobianco, and Kraus (2010) submit that gender-related research has yet to pioneer the application of gender stereotypes attached to a specific target by fractionally deflecting from the actual behaviour of the target. As the purpose of the article was to identify whether there are similarities and differences in conflict-handling styles within and between the different population groups, the researchers did not investigate the reasons behind the similarities nor investigated explanations as to why each gender predominantly uses specific conflict-handling styles.

Further studies could include executives from 'western-' and 'eastern' countries as well as developed- and developing countries to do a comparative analysis of conflict dynamics between these two different cultures. It is the wish of the researcher that this specific study be taken further and more comparisons be done with other African countries.

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