PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES AS PREDICTORS OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT HANDLING STRATEGIES[#]

Uma Bhowan
University of Mauritius
Reduit, Mauritius

The study examined the relationship of personal attributes (predictors) with interpersonal conflict handling strategies. Data were gathered from 225 middle and lower level managers through a questionnaire. Five conflict handling styles were extracted through varimax rotated factor analysis. Integrating and dominating were the most and least preferred styles for handling conflict with both superiors and subordinates. Need for power, achievement, and independence predicted the use of dominating, integrating, and obliging styles in both contexts. Power and achievement predicted use of obliging and dominating with subordinates. Achievement determined the avoiding and compromising styles with superiors; and independence predicted the use of integrating with subordinates and dominating with superiors.

The pervasiveness of conflict is perhaps nowhere more evident than it is in organizations. The complex influences and experiences that contribute to conflict behavior in organizations have become a topic of lively debate leading to increased understanding of theory and practice of conflict management. What is still lacking is an understanding of the factors which facilitate or hinder the synergic use of conflict.

Conflict is now viewed as a necessary and positive indicator of organizational effectiveness. Emphasis has now shifted from the "resolution" of conflict to the "management" of conflict. The notion of management implies not only maintaining an optimal level of conflict but also handling of the same through appropriate strategies.

Attempts have been made to identify effective strategies (styles) of managing conflict (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Hall, 1969; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Thomas, 1976). Blacke and Mouton (1964) first presented a conceptual framework for classifying the styles of handling interpersonal conflict. Proposed by them, the "conflict grid" identifies

---

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Uma Bhowon, Faculty of Social Studies and Humanities, University of Mauritius, Reduit, Mauritius. E-mail: ubhowon@dove.uom.ac.mu

five conflict behaviours based on two cognitive/affective dimensions. The scheme originally proposed by Blake and Mouton (1964) was reinterpreted by Hall (1969), and Thomas (1976, 1992). Based on these attempts and using two basic dimensions. Rahim and Bonoma (1979) delineated five styles of handling interpersonal conflict. The first dimension, concern for self, refers to degree (high/low) to which a person attempts to satisfy one's own concerns. The second dimension, concern for others, refers to the degree (high/low) to which a person wants to satisfy the concerns of others. The styles thus generated are integrating, obliging, compromising, dominating, and avoiding. The advantage of using one style over the other remains debatable. Although some researchers suggest that integrating or problem-solving is the most appropriate style (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Burke, 1969; Likert & Likert, 1976), others suggest that the appropriateness of a particular style varies from situation to situation (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979; Thomas, 1977).

Research on conflict handling styles has emphasized the importance of individual differences (Jones & Melcher, 1982; Terhune, 1970). While these differences cannot be overlooked, it is likely that in organizational setting a number of organizational variables may also have an impact on the form of conflict behavior. Among variables identified are the sources of conflict (Renwick, 1975), the size of the issue (Thomas, 1976), the relative power of the parties (Kabanoff, 1986).

The present study attempts to investigate the relationship between personal attributes and conflict handling strategies. The main objectives of the study were: (i) to identify the styles of handling interpersonal conflict of Indian managers, and (ii) to examine the effects of personal attributes (need for achievement, independence, relationship, and power) on the subjects use of conflict handling strategies with their immediate superior and subordinates.

Kilmann and Thomas (1975) studied the styles of handling conflict in relation to four dimensions of Jungian personality. Results revealed that extroverts were likely to strive more for a collaborative style. Using the same scale, Chanin and Schneer (1984) found that "feelers" tended to handle conflict through compromise and accommodation, while "thinkers" tended to compete or collaborate. Other studies have found low correlations between personality and conflict handling styles (Bell & Blakeney, 1977; Jones & Melcher, 1982). This may be due to the inability to control the hierarchical relationship between the parties involved and the situation or issue of conflict. Kabonoff (1987) found

the need to control to be positively related to the competing mode and inclusion to be negatively related to competing. Neither machiavellianism nor locus of control was found to be associated with any of the conflict measures.

Unfortunately, the implications of personality disposition have not received adequate attention in the literature. This is due to the contingency approach taken by researchers (Filley, 1976; Thomas, 1976), which undermines the importance of personality factors.

In the present analysis, it is expected that personal attributes will contribute significantly to the variance in the styles of handling conflict. It is expected that need for achievement will be correlated with the integrating style, need for power and independence with the dominating style, and need for relationship with obliging and compromising styles.

METHOD

Sample

Two hundred twenty-five men executives representing six different organizations voluntarily participated in the study. They were randomly drawn from the middle and lower levels of management. Of the sampled executives, 53.8% were from the lower and 46.2% from the middle levels of management. Significant differences were found between lower and middle level managers in terms of education, promotions, income, etc.

Instruments

Conflict Handling Styles

The study used Rahim's (1983) measure of the styles of handling interpersonal conflict. The respondents rated each item on a 7-point scale (1= never; 7= always) as to how frequently they involved in these behaviors to resolve differences with their immediate superior/ subordinates. Factor analysis constrained to five interpretable factors, accounting for a total of 83.4% of the variance. Separate analysis for superiors and subordinates revealed a similar pattern with slight variations in the number of items for each factor. The factors that emerged were integrating, avoiding, compromising, obliging, and dominating. This structuring of factors was similar to the original measure. All the five scales exhibited well over .50 reliability.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics, alphas, and intercorrelations of conflict handling styles (for immediate superior and immediate subordinates)

Styles	I	II	III	IV	V	M	SD	Alpha
I. Integrating	-	07	27^b	30^b	08	37.8	5.9	.66
II. Avoiding	05	-	30^b	25^b	10	26.4	6.6	.82
III. Compromising	29^b	33^b	-	34^b	18^b	16.5	4.6	.78
IV. Obliging	26^b	46^b	43^b	-	16^b	15.9	4.0	.66
V. Dominating	-05	14^a	30^b	14	-	26.9	6.8	.74
M	37.4	27.6	17.1	17.8	25.7			
SD	5.6	7.2	4.5	4.0	6.4			
Alpha	.80	.69	.77	.73	.73			

Note: The matrix above the diagonal indicates conflict handling styles with immediate subordinates; the matrix below the diagonal indicates conflict handling styles with immediate superior. Decimal points in correlation matrix are omitted. $N = 225$; a: $p < .05$; b: $p < .01$

Personal Attributes Scale

The Personal Attribute Scale was drawn from Steers and Braunstein's (1976) questionnaire of Behaviorally Based Measure of Manifest Needs in Work Setting (MNR). The scale has been found to exhibit reasonable levels of convergent, discriminant, and predictive validities and high test-retest and internal consistency reliabilities. Results on this questionnaire have showed consistency with the theory as they related to job attitudes, performance, leadership attributes, etc. The MNR measures four needs: achievement, autonomy, affiliation, and dominance. Five out of the twenty items had a reverse scoring. The same instrument was used by Schneer and Chanin (1987) to study manifest needs as personality predispositions to conflict handling behaviour. The internal consistency reliability coefficients for their sample were .65, .21, .78, and .55, respectively for achievement, affiliation, dominance and autonomy. Clearly, the need for affiliation exhibited a weak alpha coefficient.

Table 2

Factor Loadings Obtained: Personal Attributes

Items	Factors		
	Achievement	Independence	Power
I try very hard to improve on my past performance.	.60	.01	.05
I try to avoid any added responsibilities on my job.	.39	-.28	.02
I do my best work when job assignments are fairly difficult.	.53	.13	.02
I try to perform better than my co-workers.	.59	.10	.19
I strive to gain more control over the events around me.	.46	.07	.41
I go my own way regardless of the opinion of others.	.06	.44	.13
In my work assignments, I try to be my own boss.	.16	.33	.34
I disregard rules and regulations that hamper my personal freedom.	-.06	.46	.05
I try my best to work alone on job.	.12	.67	.06
I strive to be in command when I am working in a group.	.04	.17	.75
I seek an active role in the leadership of a group.	.21	.04	.46
Engen value	3.05	.61	.99
% of Variance	42.2	22.3	13.9

Factor analysis results for this study revealed three interpretable factors: achievement, independence, and power. The three factors accounted for a total of 78.4% of the variance. Relationship did not emerge as an independent factor. It is possible that the need for relationship is a very complex construct that when tapped with only five items will not exhibit unidimensionality. Reliability coefficients for the three factors were well above .50. These values were .63, .54, and .64, respectively for achievement, independence, and power. Intercorrelations ranged between .17 and .52.

RESULTS

Results concerning direct relationship between conflict handling styles and personal attributes are primarily based on stepwise multiple regression analysis. Table 3 depicts results of conflict handling styles with both superiors and subordinates. In the case of subordinates, need for achievement appeared to be the best predictor for the use of integrating style. Need for independence also contributed significantly but negatively to the use of this style. Taken together, the two factors accounted for a total of 18% of the variance. The obliging style was significantly predicted by all the three need factors... achievement, independence, and power (with the third factor showing a negative impact)... explaining 7% of the variance. Power emerged as the best predictor for the use of dominating style (10% variance). Achievement also contributed significantly but negatively to this style. The avoiding and comprising styles were unrelated to any of the personal attributes.

In the case of superiors, achievement was the single best predictor for the use of integrating style, accounting for 24% of the variance. The avoiding and compromising styles were predicted only by achievement (9% variance).. Need for independence emerged as the best predictor for obliging style (4% variance) and dominating style was predicted by need for power and independence explaining 20% of the variance.

Table 3

Stepwise multiple regression analysis results - Personal attributes (Predictors) and conflict handling styles (Criterion) with immediate subordinates/superiors

Style	Personal Attributes					
	Achievement		Independence		Power	
Integrating						
R	.40	(.49)	.42	(.49)	*	(.49)
R^2 Change	.16	(.24)	.02	(.00)	*	(.00)
Beta	.40[6]	(.46[b])	-.13[a]	(-.05)	*	(.06)
Order	1	(1)	2	(3)	*	(2)
Avoiding						
R	.06	(.22)	.09	(.25)	.08	*
R^2 Change	.00	(.05)	.00	(.01)	.00	*
Beta	.10	(.22[b])	.06	(.11)	-.09	*
Order	1	(1)	3	(2)	2	*
Compromising						
R	.06	(.20)	.06	(.21)	.05	(.20)
R^2 Change	.00	(.04)	.00	(.00)	.00	(.00)
Beta	.01	(.24[b])	-.03	-.03	-.03	(-.08)
Order	3	(1)	2	1	1	(2)
Obliging						
R	.27	(.25)	.21	(.19)	.24	(.25)
R^2 Change	.02	(.02)	.04	(.04)	.01	(.00)
Beta	.16[9]	(.13)	.30[b]	(.18[9])	-.22[b]	(.01)
Order	3	(2)	1	(1)	2	(3)
Dominating						
R	.37	(.45)	(.39)	(.45)	.32	(.39)
R^2 Change	.04	(.00)	.01	(.05)	.10	(.15)
Beta	-.20[b]	(-.06)	.11	(.22[b])	.37[b]	(.33[b])
Order	2	(3)	3	(2)	1	(1)

Note: $N = 225$; a: $p < .05$; b: $p < .01$; *Tolerance level insufficient for further computation; Figures in parentheses show results for Immediate Superiors.

DISCUSSION

Proportional mean analysis results indicate that Indian managers have a well defined value hierarchy of what strategies of conflict resolution were most or least desirable, in which integrating was most and dominating the least desirable style. Studies conducted in other cultures have come up with similar findings (Rahim, 1983). Compromising and dominating are the least preferred styles with both superiors and subordinates. The absence of any difference between the styles employed with reference to subordinates versus superiors is surprising. There is sufficient evidence to assume that Indians have a strong orientation to respect hierarchy (Tayeb, 1987). If it is so, styles should reflect this orientation. If integrating is discounted, avoiding is the style for dealing with subordinates and obliging for the superiors. The absence of compromising emerging as a preferred mode of conflict resolution is also surprising. In the collectivist culture of India, maintaining relationship is more crucial. Hence egocentric conflicts are more likely to be salient. Avoidance and compromises are more common than confrontation which is a more typical Western mode of conflict resolution. On the other hand, making allowance for the element of social desirability heightened by the setting in which information was elicited, integrating could well be an indication of the thrust towards the professionalization of the Indian managers. Similar findings were obtained by Kumar and Srivastava (1978). In this respect, Indian managers are not different from American managers who also view confrontation and forcing as the most and least preferred style.

Personal attributes were found to be a significant predictor of the use of conflict handling styles These style also varied as a function of the status of the target person. Achievement significantly influenced the use of integrating, avoiding, and compromising styles with superiors and it influenced the integrating and obliging styles positively and dominating style negatively with subordinates. Independence influenced the obliging style in both contexts. It positively influenced the dominating style with subordinates. Power positively influenced dominating style in both contexts and negatively influenced obliging style with subordinates.

Some conclusions drawn from the data are the following: achievement oriented respondents are concerned with accomplishing difficult tasks and would address the underlying issue in order to co-ordinate with others who are perceived to have the resources required to achieve the goals. Additionally such persons may see confrontation

of conflict and problem-solving as accomplishment of themselves and would thus strive for them. The use of avoiding and compromising with superiors is expected since the status of the target person may induce compliance from those who have a high desire to succeed. Their emphasis on task success may explain the negative relationship of dominating style in the subordinate context. The use of obliging with both superiors and subordinates by independence oriented respondents may be but one way to avoid responsibility to others. The use of dominating style with superiors by high independence oriented executives may reflect their desire to overcome opposition and do what one likes. This also explains the negative relationship with integrating style since the use of this style would require some amount of commitment from them. Power related to dominating style in both contexts. Individuals high on this need are concerned mainly with controlling and commanding others and hence they would force others to accede to their wishes.

To conclude, these findings are consistent with the hypotheses and with some of the previous research findings. As expected, a positive relationship existed between need for achievement and integrating style and need for power and dominating. Although not predicted, a positive relationship was found between independence and obliging style.

As with any other oganizational research, this study is not free from potential limitations. One major limitation is that of self-report measures employed in the study. Although the present findings are not very inconsistent with those of previous studies, more objective measures need to be developed to enhance convergent validity. Another problem of this study is the problem of method variance. The possibility of respondents maintaining consistency in their responses can not be denied. However, items were properly randomized in the two scales which were placed wide apart in the questionnaire.

The overall results of this survey suggest several directions for future research. One important are for exploration is the consequences of the use of conflict handling styles and the causes of their success and failure. There is also a need to develop styles having fixed targets and specified assumptions.

REFERENCES

Bell, E. C., & Blakeney, R. N. (1977). Personality correlates of conflict resolution modes. *Human Relations, 30,* 849-857.

Blake, R. R. S. &   Mouton, J. S. (1964). *The managerial grid.* Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing.

Burke, R. J. (1969). Methods of resolving interpersonal conflict. *Personal Administration, 32,* 48-55.

Chanin, M. N., & Schneer, J. A. (1984). A study of the relationship between Jungian personality dimensions and conflict handling behaviour. *Human Relation, 4*(37), 863-879.

Filley, A. C. (1976). *Interpersonal conflict resolution.* Glenview: Scott, Foresman.

Hall, J. (1969). *Conflict management survey: A survey of one's characteristic reaction to and handling of conflicts between himself and others.* Houston, TX: Teleometrics, Inc.

Jones, R. E., & Melcher, B. H. (1982). Personality and the preference for modes of conflict resolution. *Human Relations, 35,* 649-658.

Kabanoff, B. (1986). *Type of power, affect, and preferences for different conflict modes.* Working paper, University of New South Wales, Kannington, Australia.

Kabanoff, B. (1987). Predictive validity of the MODE conflict instrument. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 72,* 160-163.

Kilmann, R., & Thomas, K. (1975). Interpersonal conflict handling behaviour as reflections of Jungian personality dimensions. *Psychological Reports, 37,* 971-980.

Kumar, U., & Srivastava, B. N. (1978). *Desirable and actual modes of conflict resolution of Indian managers and their organizations.* Selected papers from the Fourth International Congress of the International Association for Cross-cultural Psychology, Munich, Federal Republic of Germany.

Lawrence, P. R., & Lorsch, J. W. (1967). Differentiation and integration in complex organization. *Administrative Science Quarterly 12,* 1-47.

Likert, R., & Likert, J. G. (1976). *New ways of managing conflict.* New York: McGraw Hill.

Rahim, M. A. (1983). Measurement of organizational conflict. *Journal of General Psychology, 109,* 189-199.

Rahim, M. A., & Bonoma, T. V. (1979). Managing organizational conflict: A model for diagnosis and intervention. *Psychological Reports, 44,* 1323-1344.

Renwick, P. A. (1975). The effects of sex differences on the perception and management of superior subordinate conflict: An explanatory study. *Organizational Behaviour and Human Performance, 19,* 403-415.

Schneer, J. A., & Chanin, M. N. (1987). Manifest needs as personality predispositions to conflict handling behaviour. *Human Relations, 40*(9), 575-590.

Steers, R., & Braunstein, D. (1976). A behaviorally based measure of manifest needs in work settings. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour, 9,* 251-266.

Tayeb, M. H. (1987). Contingency theory and culture: A study of matched English and Indian manufactering firms. *Organizational Studies, 8,* 241-262.

Terhune, K. W. (1970). The effects of personality in cooperation and conflict. In P. Swingle (Ed.), *The structure of conflict.* New York: Academic Press.

Thomas, K. W. (1976). Conflict and conflict management. In M. D. Dunnette (Ed.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology.* Chicago, IL: Rand McNally.

Thomas, K. W. (1977). Toward multi-dimensional values in teaching: The example of conflict behaviors. *Academy of Management Review, 2,* 484-490.

Thomas, K. W. (1992). Conflict and negotiation processes in organizations. In M. D. Dunnettes, & L. M. Hough (Eds.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology,* 2nd. ed., (pp. 651-717). Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologyst Press.