EFFECTS OF INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS AND ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT ON SUPERIORS' USE OF CONFLICT STYLES AND SUBORDINATES' SATISFACTION WITH SUPERVISION

Lee Kim Lian[1] and Low Guan Tui[2]

[1]University College Sedaya International, No. 1, Jalan Menara Gading,
UCSI Heights, 56000 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
[2]Vesseltech Engineering Sdn. Bhd., Jalan KPB4, Bukit Belimbing, Balakong,
43300 Seri Kembangan, Selangor, Malaysia
e-mail: [1]kllee@ucsi.edu.my, [2]drgtlow@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Data from 139 respondents from major industries showed that subordinates were more satisfied with their superiors' supervision through the exercise of integrating, compromising and obliging styles. On the contrary, subordinates who perceived their superiors as primarily using dominating and avoiding styles viewed them as incompetent in supervision and thus lowering their level of satisfaction with supervision. Among the conflict handling styles, integrating was most correlated with organic structure. The organic structure was found to be positively correlated with subordinates' satisfaction. These results implied that organic structure can be a potent force in maintaining organizational stability. The exercise of dominating style was found to be only marginally correlated with superior's age. Superior rank in lower hierarchy level was found to have a negative impact, albeit marginally on the exercise of dominating style. The present results also seemed to suggest that subordinates tend to be less satisfied with superiors with wider span of control.

Keywords: organization behavior, organization structure, span of control, managerial supervision, conflict handling styles, satisfaction with supervision

INTRODUCTION

Conflict is inevitable in organizational setting. Managers should be aware of various approaches in handling the conflict to mitigate its negative effect on subordinates' performance or job satisfaction as dissatisfaction itself could lead to many organizational dysfunctions (Churchill, Ford, & Walker, 1976; Fisher & Gittelson, 1983; Van Sell, Brief, & Schuler, 1981; Rahim & Buntzman, 1989). It is believed that positive interpersonal relationship at workplace is able to increase subordinates' satisfaction and subordinates with higher level of satisfaction are more likely to be committed to the organization (Brown & Peterson, 1993).

On the other hand, little attention has been given in linking the types of conflict handling styles with span of control and structure, superior's individual characteristics such as hierarchy level, age, length of service, race and gender, and subordinates' satisfaction. Knowing how conflict handling styles are related to these will enable the superior to change or maintain his/her conflict styles to achieve desirable outcomes. Hence, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- Are there any significant differences in subordinates' satisfaction with supervision when subjected to different conflict management styles?

- Are there any predictable relationships between organizational variables and conflict handling styles and subordinates' satisfaction with supervision?

- Can superiors' characteristics be predictors of their exercise of conflict handling styles and subordinates' satisfaction with supervision?

The theoretical framework of this study rests upon the interaction among major variables as depicted in Figure 1.
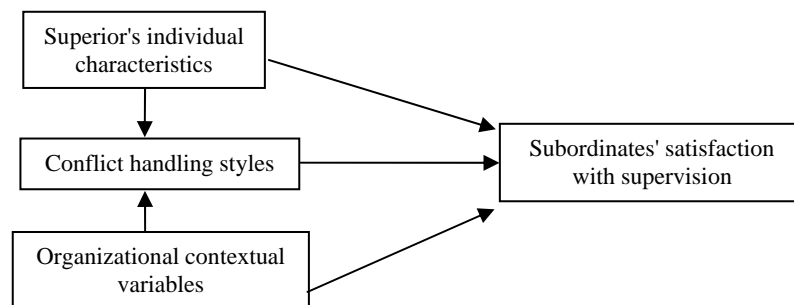

Figure 1. Model of conflict handling style and interactions

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews the relevant constructs and variables as well as their interactions involving:

1. Typologies of conflict handling styles
2. Organizational contextual variables
3. Superior's individual characteristics
4. Satisfaction with supervision

Typologies of Conflict Handling Styles

The first conceptual scheme for categorizing conflict revolved around a simple cooperation-competition dichotomy following the intuitive notion that styles can be arrayed on a single dimension ranging from competition or selfishness (Deutsch, 1949, 1973). However, the limitation of single-dimension model is that it fails to encompass styles that involve high concern for both self and others, and styles that involve neither high concern for neither self nor others (Ruble & Thomas, 1976; Smith, 1987; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986).

Subsequent theorists then drawn on a new two-dimensional grid for classifying the styles as suggested by Blake and Mouton (1964, 1970) which is a self-oriented and others-oriented concern. Other authors have labeled the two dimensions differently (e.g. Thomas & Kilmann, 1974; Rahim, 1983a, 1986c; Thomas, 1976; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986; Van de Vliert & Hordijk, 1989), but the basic assumptions have remained similar. Although it has also been debated that individuals select among three or four conflict styles (Pruitt, 1983; Putnam & Wilson, 1982), but evidence from confirmatory factor analyzes concluded that the five factor model has a better fit with data than models of two, three and four styles orientations (Rahim & Magner, 1994, 1995).

For the purpose of this study, the researchers have chosen Rahim and Bonoma (1979), and Rahim (1983a, 1983b, 1983c, 1983d, 1983e, 1985, 1986a, 2001) styles of handling interpersonal conflict on two basic dimensions: concern for self and concern for others. It is among the most popular styles of handling conflict used in research. In fact, Rahim and Bonoma's (1979) model was based on Blake and Mouton's (1964) grid of managerial styles as well as the Thomas and Kilmann's (1974) Management of Differences Exercise (MODE) instrument. This work leads them to identify five specific conflict styles as shown in Figure 2.
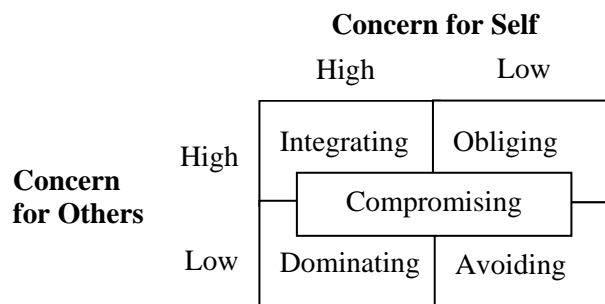

Figure 2. The styles of handling interpersonal conflict

Source: Adapted from Rahim and Bonoma (1979)

Rahim (1983a, 1986a, 2001) defines styles of handling conflict as integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising. It was Rahim's idea that "organizational participants must learn the five styles of handling conflict to deal with different conflict situations effectively" (Rahim, 1986a, p. 30). The five conflict styles that emerge from various combinations of these two dimensions are described below:

Integrating style

High concern for self and others reflects openness, exchange of information, and examination of differences to reach an effective solution acceptable to both parties. This style concentrates on problem solving in a collaborative manner. Thus, the integrating style is believe to be both effective and appropriate in managing conflicts and, therefore, is perceived as highly competent (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Tutzauer & Roloff, 1988).

Obliging style

Low concern for self and high concern for others style is associated with attempting to play down the differences and emphasizing commonalities to satisfy the concern of the other party. Obliging is associated with accommodating behaviors. It can be used as a strategy when a party is willing to give up something with the hope of getting something in exchange from the other party when needed (Blake & Mouton, 1964).

Dominating style

High concern for self and low concern for others style has been identified with win-lose orientation. Within interpersonal context, the dominating (competing/ distributive) style has been found to be associated with low levels of effectiveness and appropriateness (Blake & Mouton, 1964).

Avoiding style

Low concern for self and others style has been associated with withdrawal when a person fails to satisfy his/her own concern as well as the concern of the other party. This style is useful when the issues are trivial or when the potential dysfunctional effect of confronting the other party outweighs the benefits of the resolution of conflict.

Compromising style

Intermediate in concern for self and others style involves give and take whereby both parties give up something to make a mutually acceptable decision. It may be appropriate when the goals of the conflicting parties are mutually exclusive or when both parties who are equally powerful (e.g. labor and management). This style may be of some use in dealing with strategic issues, but heavy reliance on this style may be dysfunctional.

Organizational Contextual Variables

Span of control

Span of control is the number of subordinates reporting to a superior. Narrow span will provide closer supervision and tighter "boss-oriented" controls and therefore provide greater chances for building shared goals as well as coaching and feedback (Likert & Likert, 1976; Tannenbaum, 1968; Porter & Lawler, 1964). On the contrary, wide span of control provides managers with larger number of subordinates reporting to them. Managers with larger spans were more likely to handle problems with subordinates in a more formalized, impersonal manner, using warnings and punishments instead of coaching and feedback (Kipnis & Cosentino, 1969; Kipnis & Lane, 1962; Goodstadt & Kipnis, 1970; Ford 1981; Heller & Yukl, 1969).

Organizational structure

The study of organizational structure is influenced by Weber's (1946) work on bureaucracy, which depicted precise and impersonal structures of tasks, rules, and authority relations as central to rationalizing the real world (Hall, 1969; Meyer, 1972; Pugh, Hickson, Hinings, & Turner, 1968). In this study, structure is conceptualized on a mechanistic-organic continuum. In mechanistic/bureaucratic organizations, employee alienation and strict adherence to roles often mean avoiding conflict by resorting to intransigence. Burns and Stalker (1961) called the opposite type "organic". This strategy tends to emphasize horizontal specialization and coordination and there are comparatively few rules enforced in the organization. The benefit of the organic structure is its flexibility, adaptability and early recognition of external change (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Webb & Dawson, 1991).

Satisfaction with supervision

Numerous research findings suggest that conflict management style is related to various aspects of employee satisfaction are of interest and represent an important

41

extension to the job satisfaction literature (Johnson, 1993; Locke, 1976). Smith, Kendall, and Hulin (1969), in their Cornell Job Descriptive Index (Cornell JDI) described five areas of satisfaction: the work itself, the supervision, the co-workers, the pay and the opportunities for promotion on the job. Since the theme of the present study is on the superior-subordinate relationships, the job-facet satisfaction is most relevant to satisfaction with supervision.

The conflict handling styles which superior uses in supervising their subordinates can have a broad impact on the subordinates' attitude towards work. Many studies recorded that supervision to the extent that the superior exercises dominating and avoiding is found to have a negative impact on the subordinates' satisfaction (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoeck, & Rosenthal, 1964; Likert, 1961).

Superior's Individual Characteristics: Hierarchy Level, Age, Length of Service, Gender and Race

Hierarchy level

Hierarchy level indicates the ranking position of superior in terms of reporting structure. Bellis-Junes and Hand's (1989) study suggest that execution of certain task at the appropriate hierarchy level will increase motivation and boost the moral of the employee. This implies that personnel at different hierarchy level would execute the managerial style differently and possibly with different result. According to Aquino (2000), superiors in higher hierarchy status usually interact with subordinates using both integrating and obliging styles.

Age and length of service

Age and length of service were evaluated to enhance understanding of the manner in which the physiological and psychological changing of aging influence human behavior and perception.

Gender

There is evidence that male are more dominating and less compromising than female in conflict situations (Imler, 1980; Kilmann & Thomas, 1977). While few researchers have investigated the relationship between gender role and conflict management style, those who have done so found that:

(a) Feminine individuals disapproved of conflict more than masculine (Baxter & Shepherd, 1978),

(b) Androgynous individuals reported more frequent use of integrating or compromising styles than feminine or undifferentiated individuals (Yelsma & Brown, 1985), and

(c) Masculine individuals were more likely to report a dominating style, while androgynous individuals were more likely to report an integrating style (Portello & Long, 1994).

Thus, since it is clear that gender roles do not conform to the principal of biopsychological equivalence (Korabik, 1990), many previous studies of the relationships between biological sex and conflict style in organizational are open to reinterpretation.

Race

In a multi-racial society like Malaysia, employees bring into the organization different system of values. Differences in the perception of conflict handling style and satisfaction with supervision along the racial line will be investigated in the present study.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The hypotheses were grouped into:

1. Those dealing with consequences of conflict handling styles upon subordinates' satisfaction with supervision (H_{1a} and H_{1b}).

2. Those dealing with association of organizational context upon conflict handling styles (H_{2a} and H_{2b}).

3. Those addressing the correlation of superior's characteristics upon conflict handling styles (H_{3a} and H_{3b}).

4. Those dealing with the association of superiors' characteristics and satisfaction with supervision (H_{4a} and H_{4b}).

Organizational conflict researchers (e.g. Rahim & Buntzman, 1989; Burke, 1970; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Likert & Likert, 1976) generally assert that superior who exhibits integrating, compromising, and obliging styles are more prone to foster a cordial dyadic relationships among superiors and subordinates. Several studies on the integrating, compromising, and obliging styles of handling conflict show consistent results in satisfaction with supervision (Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993; Tutzauer & Roloff, 1988; Wall & Galanes, 1986; Vigil-King, 2000). Likewise, other studies recorded that superior who uses dominating and

avoiding is linked to negative effect on subordinates' satisfaction (Kahn et al., 1964; Likert, 1961). Thus, it can be hypothesized that:

H_{1a}: Superior's integrating, obliging, and compromising styles have direct and positive effect on the subordinates' satisfaction with supervision.

H_{1b}: Superior's dominating, and avoiding styles have negative effect on the subordinates' satisfaction with supervision.

Superiors who possess wider span of control are more likely to deal conflict with subordinates in a more formalized, impersonal manner, using warnings and punishments (Kipnis & Cosentino, 1969; Kipnis & Lane, 1962). In addition, as span of control increase, managers are found to be more autocratic (Heller & Yukl, 1969). Likewise, Burns and Stalker (1961) define organic structure as horizontal specialization and there are a few rules being emphasized in the organization. Work group employing organic structure is having less conflict and the superior tends to use more compromising or integrating style. As such, the following hypotheses are predicted:

H_{2a}: Wider span of control is positively associated with dominating, and avoiding style, but negatively associated with integrating, obliging and compromising style.

H_{2b}: Organic structure is negatively associated with dominating and avoiding style.

Organizational behavior researchers such as Churchill et al. (1976) noted that aging and length of service were related to conflict handling style. The results suggest that older and longer served superior utilizes more dominating style. On the other hand, it is also expected that superiors at lower hierarchy level tend to be less dominating in their relationship with their immediate subordinate considering that their authority and organizational knowledge would only enable them to wield lesser exercise of power to be effective. Taking this into consideration, the following relationships are hypothesized:

H_{3a}: Superior's age and length of service are positively associated with dominating style of handling conflict.

H_{3b}: Superior's lower hierarchy level is negatively associated with dominating style.

As age and length of service are connected to dominating style according to Churchill et al. (1976), this will imply that older and long tenured superior tends to cause greater dissatisfaction with supervision among the subordinates. In

relation to organizational context, research by Meadows (1980) concluded that organic structure is positively related to satisfaction of higher order needs, but mechanistic structure is associated with their frustration. This statement is also supported by Rahman and Zanzi (1995) in their study which confirms organic structure is associated with greater job satisfaction with supervision. Considering these past findings, the following hypotheses are suggested as follows:

H_{4a}: Superior's age and length of service are negatively correlated with the satisfaction with supervision.

H_{4b}: Organic structure has direct and positive effect on the satisfaction with supervision.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sampling Design

Sampling frame is generated from the Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers (FMM), Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB), and Malaysian Trade and Commerce Directory. Respondents chosen to answer the survey question-naires were executives, managers and professionals. Stratified random sampling procedure was used in selecting the samples from the large database.

Research Instruments

All data used in the study consist of responses to questionnaire items. Measures of the relevant constructs were taken from previous studies and are discussed here.

Conflict handling style

Conflict management styles were measured by using the Form C of Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II) (Rahim, 1983a). This multi-item instrument contains 28 items and uses a 5-point Likert scale to assess subordinates' perceptions on supervisor's style of handling conflict.

Organization structure

Structure is conceptualized on a mechanistic-organic continuum using Burns and Stalker scale (1961). Organization structure was represented by a 7-item scale which measures organicity, i.e. the extent to which organizations are structured as

organic versus mechanistic entities. This scale was also developed by Khandwalla (1977a, 1977b) and later used by Covin and Slevin (1989) and Low (2005).

Hierarchy level

Hierarchy level is defined as the number of layer of authority structure below the top manager in an organization. With the top manager or managing director assigned as level one in the organizational hierarchy, this means that the higher score for this scale reflects the lower hierarchy level.

Span of control

Span of control is a measure of the total number of person being supervised by a superior. For statistical analysis the span of control is measured as the natural logarithm of this number.

Satisfaction with supervision

The instrument used to measure satisfaction with supervision is the updated version of the original Job Descriptive Index (JDI) (Smith et al., 1969) which was later revised by Roznowski (1989).

Data Analysis Techniques

Reliability and factor analysis was used to check the consistency and dimensionality of the scale items. Multiple regression analysis is performed to check the criterion-related validity of the scale items (result not shown). Pearson Intercorrelation was used to measure the associations among the conflict styles and satisfaction with supervision. Additional analysis of variance (ANOVA) and t-test were performed to test the group difference in conflict styles and satisfaction with supervision across superior's characteristics variables.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Sample Characteristics

From the total of 145 responses received, data from 139 respondents were usable. By ethnic group, 42% of the respondents were Chinese, 38% were Malay, 17% were Indian, while other races made up the rest. By gender, 53% were male and 47% were female. In terms of age, the highest proportion of respondents fell into the 23–30 years age group. They accounted for 63% of the total number of respondents. On the whole, the education level of the respondents was high. This

was reflected in the position or the type of occupation held by the majority of the respondents. The average salary of the respondents was higher than the population's average. On average, the respondents had worked in the present company for four years.

The survey also revealed the information about the respondents' superiors. Seventy-six percent superiors reported in the survey were males. On average, the superiors had worked in the organization for 11 years – far longer than the subordinates' average. Most of the superiors were holding high positions in the company with 33% of them in the first hierarchical level. Their educational level was also strikingly high, with 90% of them having had tertiary education.

Validating the Scales

The standardized Cronbach Alpha for each subscale is provided in Table 1. The internal consistency reliability coefficients for all the scales were satisfactory (Nunnally, 1978). All the scales had coefficient Cronbach Alpha greater than 0.78.

Table 1
Summary of scale items and measure of scale reliabilities

Scales	Cronbach Alpha
Conflict handling styles	
Integrating	0.95
Obliging	0.85
Compromising	0.78
Dominating	0.90
Avoiding	0.78
Organizational contexts	
Structure	0.86
Span of control	n.a.
Superior's characteristics	
Hierarchy level	n.a.
Education orientation	n.a.
Age	n.a.
Length of service	n.a.
Gender	n.a.
Race	n.a.
Satisfaction with supervision	0.86

n.a. – indicates alpha is not applicable

Testing of Hypotheses

H_{1a}

The correlational analysis in Table 2 provided good support for H_{1a}. The integrating, compromising and obliging styles of handling conflict showed positive relationships and highly correlated with satisfaction with supervision. These three correlations were significant beyond 0.01 level. In the relationship of conflict handling styles to satisfaction with supervision, integrating style ranked highest among other style exercises ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$). This was followed by compromising style and obliging style which had coefficients of correlation of 0.33, $p < 0.01$ and 0.29, $p < 0.01$, respectively. The ranking of intercorrelation was somewhat similar to the study of Tamam, Hassan, and Yaid (1997) who studied the intracultural interpersonal conflict handling styles among Malay middle-level executives in government and private firms and Rahim and Buntzman (1989) who studied on respondents with post graduate working experience. It was expected that integrating, compromising and obliging style represents a high level of inner acceptance between superior and subordinate relationships.

Several studies on the integrating, compromising and obliging styles of handling conflict show consistent results (Burke, 1970; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Rahim & Buntzman, 1989; Likert & Likert, 1976). These styles result in greater satisfaction with supervision (Korabik et al., 1993; Tutzauer & Roloff, 1988; Wall & Galanes, 1986; Vigil-King, 2000; Gross & Guerrero, 2000). As the present results supported the general view, the integrating, compromising and obliging style has a positive effect on the superior-subordinate relationship. The high degree of intercorrelations among the integrating, compromising and obliging served to temper the previous discussions and tended to suggest that while integrating style emerged as the dominant explanatory of conflict handling style, its effective utilization might be tied to some extend, to the superior's exercise of a combination of other style such as compromising and obliging style.

H_{1b}

H_{1b} predicts that superior's dominating and avoiding styles have negative effect on subordinates' satisfaction with supervision. The present result seems to support H_{1b}. Both the dominating and avoiding styles showed relatively negative but significant correlation ($r = -0.50$, $p < 0.01$; $r = -0.24$, $p < 0.01$, respectively) with supervisory satisfaction. The study indicated that the dominating style perceived

held by a superior was negatively associated with supervisory satisfaction. Past researchers supported this correlation (e.g. Van de Vliert, Euwema, & Huismans, 1995; Van de Vliert, 1997; Rahim & Buntzman, 1989; Gross & Guerrero, 2000) and stated that dominating style which is derived from control over negative or punishing outcomes for others does not appear to be a suitable style for dealing with subordinates. Although it has been found in some studies that individuals can achieve substantive outcomes through forcing behavior (De Dreu & Van de Vliert, 1997; Rahim, 1992; Thomas, 1992) but people could not be forced into a deep-seated acceptance of organizational requirements.

H_{2a}

H_{2a} suggests that wider span of control is positively associated with dominating, and avoiding style but negatively associated with integrating, obliging and compromising style. The relationships as appeared in Table 2 between the perceptions of supervisory span of control and perceived conflict styles were not significant, although there were some marginal relationships, but logical with all the conflict styles. The interpretation of these results and their relevance to the hypothesis proposed in this study seems to vaguely suggest that wider span of control is positively associated with dominating ($r = 0.11$), follow by compromising ($r = 0.05$) style of handling conflict. The variable is negatively associated with integrating and ($r = -0.13$) and avoiding ($r = -0.07$) style of handling conflict. The results of the data analysis seemed to offer ideas on the direction of relationships, but yet failed to reach the desired statistical significance. Although H_{2a} was not supported in statistical terms, some explanation may be offered with regards to the present results. As span of control is related to the number of subordinates reporting to their superior, wider the span of control is positively associated with dominating and avoiding style as superiors need to exercise dominating style to control their subordinates.

The present result seems to imply that superiors who were perceived to have broader span of control tend to exercise greater dominating style. The reason for this was not conclusive. Many plausible explanations were possible, but it was believed that superiors with wider span were more likely to handle problems with subordinates in a more formalized manner instead of coaching (Kipnis & Cosentino, 1969; Kipnis & Lane, 1962). Hence, subordinates' attempts to exercise greater influence may be seen as a threat to the superior's control of their underlings. Furthermore, as the gap between superiors and subordinates will even likely to increase as a direct consequence of punitive procedures, the subordinates tend to avoid participation.

Weak relationship between integrating and broader span of control suggested that those who exercise integrating style over wider span of control accorded lesser

control over subordinates. Though the degree of control by exercising of integrating style has been questioned, at the very least, the integrating style can foster better relationship for the subordinates to perform better. This conclusion was drawn from the assumption that people generally prefer integrating than dominating style and integrating approach can provide greater satisfaction with supervision. No comparison was made as there was no past research done with regard to this correlation.

It was interesting to note that there is some evidence that a manager's satisfaction increases as the number of subordinates supervised increases (Cummings & Berger, 1976) but it might not indicate subordinates' satisfaction with supervision. This finding plays down the importance of span of control in contributing to the satisfaction with supervision and lead one to think that span of control may not be as important as the perception of conflict handling style in ensuring subordinates' satisfaction. Overall, the results agreed with H_{2a}. However, the present result should be used with caution as the measurement of both construct was not based on the objective measurement but on individual perceptions. Individual differences such as desire for position power and inner motivation, etc. might intervene in the relationship between span of control and conflict handling style.

H_{2b}

H_{2b} states that organic structure is negatively associated with dominating and avoiding style. The relationship between organic structure and conflict handling styles was significant as one would expect. The result agreed with H_{2b} that organic structure is negatively associated with avoiding (r = –0.23, p < 0.01) and dominating style (r = –0.30, p < 0.01). This was probably due to the reason that structure and conflict styles were very much a related concept. The former measures the organizational structural design while the latter measures one's style of handling conflict. Nonetheless, an important common element appeared to exist between them that explained their negative and statistically significant relationship between organic structure and both the dominating and avoiding style.

H_{3a}

H_{3a} predicts that superior's age and length of service are positively associated with dominating style of handling conflict. Table 2 indicates that superior's age was marginally correlated with dominating style of handling conflict (r = 0.14, p < 0.10), while the association of superior length of service with dominating style was not even significant. The correlations between all other conflict styles and superior's age and length of service were weak and insignificant statistically. Thus, the results provided only marginal support for H_{3a}.

The findings suggested that older superiors may need to adjust the conflict style when dealing with subordinates. Between superior's age and length of service, age had a greater impact on the nature of the superior-subordinate relationship. In general, the older the superior, the more dominant he/she is to the subordinate. This may be explained from enriched power, experience and knowledge as one matures with age which serves to increase the gap between subordinates and superiors. The fact that dominating style was insignificantly correlated ($r = -0.01$) with superior's length of service pointed to the conclusion that length of service is of little consequences to the nature of superior dominating relationship with the subordinate. As age and length of service are correlated ($r = 0.46$, $p < 0.01$), this latter finding seems to contradict with the result on the relationship between age and dominating style. This apparent contradiction can be traced to the fact that older age does not necessarily means longer service with the present organization as the superior may have many previous jobs.

Several other reasons could also attribute to the inconsistency in the results. The perception of dominating style could also be culture bound as in the eastern culture, the subordinates' respect for older superior tends to lend greater acceptance of their dominating styles thus negating its perception. Secondly, the relatively higher educational background of the present respondents tends to alter the perception of dominating style of superiors since perception of dominating style is confined to the job related activity. This is particularly true in the case when subordinate has professional background whereas the superior does not. Thirdly, as one moves upward in organizational hierarchy with length of service, the nature of the job changes towards administrative roles where less emphasis is placed on the performance. Furthermore, subordinates' perception of their superior's length of service would not differ a great deal on conflict style. This explanation lends support to the results that length of service has little relevance as far as perception of conflict style of superior is concerned.

It is also possible that results may differ in the case of a superior who is entirely new on the job since subordinates' tendency to view the superior to apply integrating style. It is also important to note from the simple correlational results in Table 2 that age of the superior alone does ensure the effectiveness of superior dominating style ($r = 0.14$, $p < 0.10$) as the age gap between the superior and subordinate helps to increase the dominating styles of conflict management. Although the relationship between dominating style and age was only marginally significant, this direction of relationship implies that the older superior tends to be more dominant.

It is also interesting to test the assumption of the differences in conflict handling style across racial line. To investigate this, analysis of variance of conflict handling style and race is performed and result is shown in Table 3. From the

52

ANOVA, it seems that there is little difference across the racial line in terms of conflict handling style of the superior. The only notable difference is in the obliging style where Indian superior is seemed to be more obliging than the rest, with $F = 3.11$ and $p < 0.05$.

Table 3
Analysis of variance of conflict handling style and race

	Conflict handling style				
	Integrating	Obliging	Compromising	Avoiding	Dominating
Malay	Mean = 3.46 N = 57	Mean = 3.08 N = 57	Mean = 3.25 N = 57	Mean = 3.06 N = 57	Mean = 3.14 N = 57
Chinese	Mean = 3.41 N = 65	Mean = 3.02 N = 65	Mean = 3.21 N = 65	Mean = 2.84 N = 65	Mean = 3.10 N = 65
Indian	Mean = 3.77 N = 11	Mean = 3.63 N = 11	Mean = 3.21 N = 11	Mean = 2.76 N = 11	Mean = 3.96 N = 11
Others	Mean = 3.22 N = 7	Mean = 2.96 N = 7	Mean = 2.85 N = 7	Mean = 2.98 N = 7	Mean = 4.0 N = 7

Conflict Handling Style

Sources of variation	Sum of squares	d.f.	Mean square	F	Significant F-test
Integrating					
Between groups	1.63	3	0.54	0.71	0.55
Within groups	102.79	136	0.76		
Total	**104.41**	**139**			
Obliging					
Between groups	3.69	3	1.23	3.11	0.03
Within groups	53.73	136	0.35		
Total	**57.42**	**139**			
Avoiding					
Between groups	1.77	3	0.59	1.74	0.16
Within groups	45.71	136	0.34		
Total	**47.48**	**139**			
Compromising					
Between groups	1.00	3	0.33	0.74	0.53
Within groups	60.83	136	0.45		
Total	**61.83**	**139**			
Dominating					
Between groups	5.59	3	1.86	2.07	0.11
Within groups	121.36	136	0.90		
Total	**126.95**	**139**			

The much debated gender differences in the behavioral and organizational study is further tested in this research. Independent sample *t*-test of conflict handling style and gender is performed. The result which is shown in Table 4 below indicated that there is no significant gender differences in the style of handling conflict. The difference between the conventional logic and this result could be attributed to equal gender status in Malaysian organization where male and female superior practices quite a similar conflict styles. This result is not consistent with other researchers who studied the relationship among biological sex and gender role, and concluded that masculine individuals were highest on the dominating conflict style whereas feminine individuals were highest on the avoiding style (Brewer, Mitchell, & Weber, 2002). In the past, considerable research examining individual sex found out inconsistent results where some studies suggest that women have a more cooperative orientation to conflict handling style than men (Rahim, 1983a; Rubin & Brown, 1975). Others suggest that women are more competitive (Bedell & Sistrunk, 1973; Rubin & Brown, 1975).

Table 4
Conflict handling style and gender (group statistic)

	Conflict handling style				
	Integrating	Obliging	Compromising	Avoiding	Dominating
Male (N = 105)	3.51	3.09	3.21	2.91	3.12
Female (N = 34)	3.26	3.07	3.21	3.00	3.21

Independent Sample Test

	t-test of equality of mean		
	t-value	d.f.	Sig. (2-tailed)
Integrating	1.49	137	0.14
Obliging	0.20	138	0.84
Avoiding	–0.81	137	0.42
Compromising	–0.04	138	0.97
Dominating	–0.46	137	0.64

H$_{3b}$

H$_{3b}$ posits that superior's lower hierarchy level is negatively associated with dominating style. The correlational result indicated that the lower the hierarchy level of the superior, the lesser the tendency he/she would exercise the dominating style (r = –0.14, p < 0.10). This result implies that superior in higher hierarchy status tends to interacts with subordinates using their authority rather

than other means of influence. Whether this mode of influence is more effective in affecting better work culture is questionable since there was also a study that suggests that higher hierarchy status superior tends to favor integrating and obliging style (Aquino, 2000).

H$_{4a}$

H$_{4a}$ predicts that superior's age and length of service are negatively correlated with the satisfaction with supervision. The data provided in Table 2 generally support the hypothesis of negative correlates between superior's age and length of service with subordinate satisfaction with supervision where $r = -0.10$ and $r = -0.07$, respectively. Furthermore, the present study failed to find any significant relationship between age and length of service with satisfaction with supervision.

In the case of differences in conflict handling style across racial line among superior, the result tabulated in Table 5 indicates that there is no difference in the level of satisfaction of supervision of the subordinates across different race of the superior. This indicates that racial distinction of the superior is not present in terms of subordinates' satisfaction with supervision. This seems to suggest that race is hardly a determinant of the outcome of the work environment.

Table 5
Analysis of variance of satisfaction with supervision

Race	Satisfaction with supervision
Malay	Mean = 12.77
	N = 57
Chinese	Mean = 13.31
	N = 65
Indian	Mean = 12.72
	N = 11
Others	Mean = 10.86
	N = 7

Satisfaction with Supervision

Sources of variation	Sum of squares	d.f.	Mean square	F	Significant F-test
Between groups	40.74	3	13.58	0.61	0.61
Within groups	2932.19	136	33.21		
Total	**2972.94**	**139**			

H_{4b}

H_{4b} suggests that organic structure has direct and positive effect on the satisfaction with supervision. Correlational result in Table 2 showed that organic structure was positively associated with the satisfaction with supervision ($r = 0.19$, $p < 0.05$). A study was conducted by Meadows (1980) on organic structure, satisfaction, and personality found out that organic structure in small work groups is positively associated with the satisfaction of higher order needs, but that mechanistic structure is associated with their frustration. It was observed that strong personality aspiring towards dominance, autonomy, and achievement respond more positively to organic structure and more negatively to mechanistic structure. This statement is also supported by Rahman et al. (1995) as reported in their study that more organic structure and greater job satisfaction with supervision.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the results of this study were quite consistent with the hypotheses based on other organizational studies involving qualified and professional people. The research instruments used in this study were tested and found to be reliable in our Malaysian work environment. The results provided some tentative, but hopefully useful guidance for organizational administration.

Inter correlations among the five styles of conflict handling showed that the results are closely similar to Rahim and Buntzman (1989). The results revealed that integrating, compromising and to some degree obliging are found to be in association with each other. On the other hand, dominating was the least correlated with all other styles and most often stands alone. Among all the conflict styles, dominating was most related to avoiding style. It indicates that dominating and avoiding style tend to be used interchangeably.

The conflict management styles were also found to be associated with an individual's perception of the source of conflict style. Superior who was perceived to exercise dominating style tends to exercise greater management control – giving little opportunity for the subordinate to be personally responsible for a meaningful portion of his/her works. In assessing the effectiveness of the various influence means, the results suggested that integrating, compromising and obliging should be emphasized to ensure subordinates' satisfaction with supervision. Dominating style should be minimized in any influence attempt except in situations that call for such approach, such as time of crisis or low performance. Comparative studies revealed an interesting difference in the ranking order of superior styles of handling conflict. A study by Tamam et al.

(1997), and Rahim and Buntzman (1989) ranked integrating, compromising and obliging as the most favorable, and dominating and avoiding as the lowest among conflict styles in eliciting subordinates' acceptance of supervision satisfaction.

The challenge of the contemporary organization is also to encourage the use of the integrating/problem solving style of handling conflict among superior and subordinates. Employees should also be trained not to engage in win-lose or bargaining style of handling conflict. This can be done by strengthening the integrating conflict-management style and discouraging the use of an avoiding style. To attain this goal, training in conflict management of subordinates and superiors, and appropriate changes in organization design and culture would be needed (Rahim, 2001).

Among the conflict handling styles, integrating was found to be the most associated with organic structure. The organic structure appeared to be positively correlated with the satisfaction with supervision. These results implied that organic structure can be a potent force in sustaining organizational stability.

The extent of span of control a superior has is dependent on how many subordinates he/she supervises. The results indicate that there was some marginal relationship between supervisory span of control and conflict styles although they were not so significant. Therefore, it was concluded that there was a weak but positive correlation between span of control and dominating style. This was due to the fact that superiors with wider spans of control tend to practice more formal way when dealing with their subordinates. On the other hand, superior who adopts integrating style over wider span of control would consequently exert lesser control over subordinates although integrating style is said to be able to foster closer relationship between superior and subordinates. The results also showed that subordinates tend to be less satisfied with superiors with wider span of control.

Between superior's age and length of service, the findings suggested that older superior seemed to be more dominant to their subordinate. The reason being is as superior gets older with age, he/she tends to have more enriched power, experience and knowledge. Even though age and length of service are correlated, the results seemed to play down the effect of superior's length of service on dominating approach with the subordinate. This contradiction can be explained that older age does not necessarily means longer service with the present firm as the superior may have many other previous jobs in the past career.

Managerial Implications

The following are several specific implications derived from the present study. First, the research findings suggest that when the superior has a choice in the style of handling conflict, he/she emphasizes to achieve greater satisfaction with his/her supervision. The superior attempts to use integrating, compromising or obliging style rather than relying too strongly on dominating style. Second, in the selection of superior to lead a division of work, especially when the work group is highly experienced and skilled, it is important that the superior must possess the ability to handle and manage such work group effectively. The conflict management has its limit as expressed in the earlier admonition that superior's dominating style tends to subdue the desire of subordinate's participation. The superior excessive dominating style results in the tendency to monopolize discussions and impede the creation of an occupational climate that promotes innovation, creativity and productivity. Third, the superior should recognize the dynamics of subordinates' perceptions of conflict style management as a function of knowledge, qualification, individual differences, etc. as the effectiveness of the conflict style influence may change in both magnitude and direction with the change of these modifying variables. Finally, one additional implication of the study must be emphasized on the outset of the discussions that present findings are to a certain extent, similar to those obtained in other organizational studies. This may serve to encourage further efforts in applying the findings of organizational research to industrial setting and it may indicate a common ground of organizational phenomena subject to general theories of administration.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future studies of conflict handling styles thus should focus on identifying other important respondent characteristics and more importantly, on understanding the processes by which such variables give impact on a person's perceptions. In future studies, attempts should be made to incorporate additional endogenous variables such as motivation, compliance and performance of subordinate which are more indicative of the organizational outcomes. In addition it may be useful to investigate whether the perception of superior conflict handling styles carry the same attitudinal and behavioral implication across the demographic variables such as gender, role status, race, etc.

Directions for further research are needed to enhance our understanding of the interrelationships of power, conflict-management styles, and job performance. An important area of future research concerns carefully designing and evaluating the effects of intervention on supervisory power bases in enhancing positive conflict management styles and performance.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Aquino, K. (2000). Structural and individual determinants of workplace victimization: The effects of hierarchical status and conflict management style. *Journal of Management*, *26*(2), 171–193.

Baxter, L. A., & Shepherd, T. L. (1978). Sex-role identity, sex of other and affective relationship as determinants on interpersonal conflict management styles. *Sex Roles, 4,* 813–825.

Bedell, J., & Sistrunk, F. (1973). Power opportunity costs and sex in a mixed-motive game. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 25,* 219–226.

Bellis-Junes, R., & Hand, M. (1989). Improving management spans of control. *Management Accounting, 67*(9), 20–21.

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

————. (1970). The fifth achievement. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 6,* 413–426.

Brewer, N., Mitchell, P., & Weber, N. (2002). Gender Role, Organizational Status and Conflict Management Styles. *International Journal of Conflict Management, 13*(1), 78–94.

Brown, S. P., & Peterson, R. A. (1993). Antecedents and consequences of salesperson job satisfaction: Meta-analysis and assessment of causal effects. *Journal of Marketing Research, 30,* 63–77.

Burke, R. J. (1970). Method of resolving superior-subordinate conflict: The constructive use of subordinate differences and disagreements. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 5,* 393–411.

Burns, T., & Stalker, G. M. (1961). *The management of innovation.* London: Tavistock.

Churchill, G. A., Ford, N. M. Jr., & Walker, O. C., Jr. (1976). Organizational climate and job satisfaction in the sales force. *Journal of Marketing Research, 13,* 323–332.

Covin, J. G., & Slevin, D. P. (1989). Strategic management of small firms in hostile and benign environments. *Strategic Management Journal*, *10,* 75–87.

Cummings, L. L., & Berger, C. J. (1976). Organization structure: How does it influence attitudes and performance. *Organizational Dynamics*, *4*, 34–49.

De Dreu, C. K. W., & Van de Vliert, E. (1997). *Using conflict in organizations.* London: Sage.

Deutsch, M. (1949). A theory of cooperation and competition. *Human Relations, 2,* 129–151.

————. (1973). *The resolution of conflict: Constructive and destructive processes.* New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

Fisher, C. D., & Gittelson, R. (1983). A meta-analysis of the correlates of role conflict and ambiguity. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 68,* 320–333.

Ford, J. D. (1981). Department context and formal structure as constraints on leader behaviour. *Academic Management Journal*, *24,* 274–288.

Goodstadt, B. E. and Kipnis, D. (1970). Situational influences on the use of power. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *54,* 201–207.

Gross, M. A., & Guerrero, L. K. (2000). Managing conflict appropriately and effectively: An application of the competence model to Rahim's organizational conflict styles. *International Journal of Conflict Management, 11,* 200–226.

Hall, J. (1969). *Conflict management survey: A survey on one's characteristics reactions to and handling of conflicts between himself and others.* Conroe, TX: Teleometrics International.

Heller, F., & Yukl, G. (1969). Participation, managerial decision-making and situational variables. *Organization Behaviour and Human Performance, 4,* 27–241.

Imler, J. R. (1980). *The Effects of Occupational Category, Organizational Level, Organizational Size, Sex, and Conflict Opponent on the Conflict Handling Styles of Hospital Management Personnel.* Unpublished Master's Thesis, Youngstown State University, Ohio.

Johnson, D. W. (1993). *Reaching out: Interpersonal effectiveness and self actualization* (5th ed.). New York: Allyn and Bacon.

Kahn, R. L., Wolfe, D. M., Quinn, R. P., Snoek, J. D., & Rosenthal, R. A. (1964). *Organizational stress: Studies in role conflict and ambiguity*. New York: Wiley.

Khandwalla, P. N. (1977a). *The design of organizations.* New York: Harcourt-Brace-Jovanovich.

————. (1977b). Some top management styles, their context and performance. *Organization and Administrative Sciences, 7*(4), 21–51.

Kilmann, R. H., & Thomas, K. W. (1977). Developing a forced-choice measure of conflict-handling behavior: The "MODE" instrument. *Educational and Psychological Measurement, 37,* 309–325.

Kipnis, D., & Cosentino, J. (1969). Use of leadership powers in industry. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 53,* 460–466.

Kipnis, D., & Lane, W.P. (1962). Self-confidence and leadership. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 46,* 291–295.

Korabik, K. (1990). Androgyny and leadership style. *Journal of Business Ethics, 9,* 283–292.

Korabik, K., Baril, G. L., & Watson, C. (1993). Managers' conflict management style and leadership effectiveness: The moderating effects of gender. *Sex Roles, 29* 405–420.

Lawrence, P. R., & Lorsch, J. W. (1967). *Organization and environment.* Homewood, IL: Irwin-Dorsey.

Likert, R. (1961). *New patterns of management.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

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

Locke, E. A. (1976). The nature and causes of job satisfaction. In M. D. Dunnette (Ed.). *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* (pp. 1297–1350). Chicago, IL: Rand Mc Nally.

Low, G. T. (2005). *Strategic persistence and reorientation of the firms following an environmental shift: An empirical study of malaysian manufacturing companies.* Unpublished PhD Thesis, Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.

Meadows, D. H. (1980). The unavoidable a priori. In J. Randers (Ed.). *Elements of the system dynamics method* (pp. 23 – 57). Cambridge, MA: Productivity Press.

Meyer, M. W. (1972). Size and the structure of organizations: A causal analysis. *American Sociological Review, 3,* 434–441.

Nunnally, J. C. (1978). *Psychometric theory* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Portello, J. Y., & Long, B. C. (1994). Gender role orientation, ethical and interpersonal conflicts and conflict handling styles of female manager. *Sex Roles, 31,* 683–701.

Porter, L., & Lawler, E. (1964). The effects of "tall" versus "flat" organization structure on managerial job satisfaction. *Personnel Psychology, 17*(2), 135–148.

Pruitt, D. G. (1983). Strategic choice in negotiation. *American Behavioral Scientist, 27,* 167–194.

Pruitt, D. G., & Rubin, J. Z. (1986). *Social conflict: Escalation, stalemate, settlement.* New York: Random House.

Pugh, D. S., Hickson, D. J., Hinings, C. R., & Turner, C. (1968). Dimensions of organizational structure. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 13,* 65–105.

Putnam, L. L., & Wilson, C. E. (1982). Communicative strategies in organizational conflicts: reliability and validity of a measurement scale. In M. Burgoon (Ed.). *Communication Yearbook, 6,* 629–652.

Rahim, M. A. (1983a). A measure of styles of handling interpersonal conflict. *Academy of Management Journal, 26,* 368–376.

_____. (1983b). *Rahim organizational conflict inventory – II, Form A.* Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.

_____. (1983c). *Rahim organizational conflict inventory – I.* Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychology Press.

_____. (1983d). *Rahim organizational conflict inventory – II, Form A, B, & C.* Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychology Press.

_____. (1983e). *Rahim organizational conflict inventories: Professional manual.* Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychology Press.

_____. (1985). A strategy for managing conflict in complex organizations. *Human Relations, 38*(1), 81–89.

_____. (1986a). *Managing conflict in organization.* New York: Praeger.

_____. (1986b). Referent role and styles of handling conflict: a model for diagnosis and intervention. *Psychological Reports, 44,* 1323–1344.

_____. (1986c). Referent role and styles of handling interpersonal conflict. *Journal of Social Psychology, 126,* 79–86.

_____. (1992). *Managing conflict in organizations* (2nd ed.). New York: Praeger.

_____. (2001). Managing organizational conflict: Challenges for organization development and change. In R. T. Golembiewski (Ed.). *Handbook of organizational behavior* (2nd rev. ed., 365–387). New York: Marcel Dekker.

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

Rahim, M. A., & Buntzman, G. F. (1989). Supervisory Power bases, styles of handling conflict with subordinates, and subordinate compliance and satisfaction. *Journal of Psychology, 123,* 195–210.

Rahim, M. A., & Magner, N. R. (1994). Convergent and discriminant validity of the rahim organizational conflict inventory-II. *Psychological Reports, 74,* 35–38.

_____. (1995). Confirmatory factor analysis of the styles of handling interpersonal conflict: First-order factor model and its invariance across groups. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 80,* 122–132.

Rahman, M., & Zanzi, A. (1995). A comparison of organizational structure, job stress, and satisfaction in audit and management advisory services in CPA firms. *Journal of Managerial Issues, 7*(3), 290.

Roznowski, M. (1989). Examination of the measurement properties of the job descriptive index with experimental items. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 74*(5), 805–814.

61

Rubin, J. A., & Brown, R. (1975). *The social psychology of bargaining and negotiation*. New York: Wiley.

Ruble, T. L., & Thomas, K. W. (1976). Support for a two-dimensional model of conflict behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 16,* 143–155.

Smith, P. C., Kendall, L. M., & Hulin, C. L. (1969). *The measurement of satisfaction in work and retirement: A strategy for the study of attitudes*. Chicago: Rand McNally.

Smith, W. P. (1987). Conflict and negotiation: Trends and emerging issues. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 17,* 641–677.

Tamam, E., Hassan, M. S., & Yaid, Y. M. (1997). Intracultural interpersonal conflict-handling styles among Malay middle-level executives. *Malaysian Management Review, 32*(3), 5–61.

Tannenbaum, A. (1968). *Control in organizations*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Thomas, K. W. (1976). Conflict and conflict management. In M. D. Dunnette (Ed.). *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* (pp. 889–935). Chicago: Rand McNally.

————. (1992). Conflict and negotiation processes in organizations. In M. D. Dunnette & L. M. Hough (Eds.). *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology,* 2nd ed. (pp. 651–717). Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.

Thomas, K. W., & Kilmann, R. H. (1974). *The Thomas-Kilmann conflict MODE instrument*. Tuxedo, NY: Xicom.

Tutzauer, F., & Roloff, M. E. (1988). Communication processes leading to integrative agreements: There paths to joint benefits. *Communication Research, 15,* 360–380.

Van de Vliert, E. (1997). *Complex interpersonal conflict behavior: Theoretical frontiers.* Hove, UK: Psychology Press.

Van de Vliert, E., & Hordijk, J. W. (1989). A theoretical position of compromising among other styles of conflict management. *Journal of Social Psychology*, *129,* 681–690.

Van de Vliert, E., Euwema, M. C., & Huismans, S. E. (1995). Managing conflict with a subordinate and a supervisor: Effectiveness of conglomerated behavior. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 80,* 271–281.

Van Sell, M., Brief, A. P., & Schuler, R. S. (1981). Role conflict and role ambiguity: Integration of the literature and directions for future research. *Human Relations, 34,* 43–71.

Vigil-King, D. C. (2000). *Team conflict, integrative conflict-management strategies, and team effectiveness: A field study*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Wall, V. D. Jr., & Galanes, G. (1986). The SYMLOG dimensions and small group conflict. *Central States Speech Journal, 37,* 61–78.

Webb, J., & Dawson, P. (1991). Measure for measure: Strategic change in an electronics instruments corporation. *Journal of Management Studies, 28,* 191–206.

Weber, M. (1946). *From Max Weber: Essays in sociology* [Hans, H. Gerth, & C. Wright Mills (Eds. & Trans.)]. New York: Oxford University Press.

Yelsma, P., & Brown, C. T. (1985). Gender roles, biological sex and predisposition to conflict management. *Sex Roles, 12,* 731–747.