Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.
THE PREVALENCE OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT IN THE WORK PLACE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO GENDER, FUNCTIONAL POSITION AND STYLE OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

SCOTT DARREN CLIFFORD DOOLAN

2000
THE PREVALENCE OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT IN THE WORK PLACE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO GENDER, FUNCTIONAL POSITION AND STYLE OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Degree of Masters of Arts in Psychology at Massey University.

SCOTT DOOLAN
2000
ABSTRACT

At present there is limited research on the prevalence of interpersonal conflict in the workplace. This study developed an escalation model on interpersonal conflict in the workplace and used it to research the prevalence of interpersonal conflict in the workplace and its interaction with conflict resolution styles. One hundred and twenty three employees from a public and a private organisation responded to a questionnaire, which included the Rahim Organisational Conflict Inventory. The results of this study identified that the prevalence of interpersonal conflict in the workplace is very high and that this prevalence decreased as the intensity of the conflict increased. Furthermore, the findings suggested that peoples' use of conflict resolution strategies vary as the intensity of the conflict increases. Lastly, the prevalence of conflict resolution styles in this study did not match previous research findings on cultural differences in dealing with interpersonal conflict. The implications of this study are that extensive research should be conducted on the escalation model of interpersonal conflict in the workplace. This would establish national norms so organisations could use these to determine whether their organisation has too little or too much interpersonal conflict.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract I
Table of Contents II
List of Tables IV
List of Figures V

1. INTRODUCTION 1
  1.1 Definition of Conflict 2
  1.2 Organisational Consequences of Workplace Conflict 3
  1.3 Levels of Conflict 4
  1.4 Prevalence of Interpersonal Conflict in the Workplace 5
  1.5 Interpersonal Conflict Resolution Styles 7
    1.5.1 Aggression as a Conflict Resolution Style 11
    1.5.2 Moderating Factors Influencing Chosen Conflict Resolution Styles 13
      1.5.2.1 Functional Relationship 13
      1.5.2.2 Gender Issues 15
      1.5.2.3 Culture Issues 17
      1.5.2.4 Intensity of Conflict 19
      1.5.2.5 Work Experience 22
  1.6 Summary of Literature 23
  1.7 Aims and Research Questions 24

2. METHOD 27
  2.1 Participants 27
  2.2 Measures 28
  2.3 Procedure 35
3. **Results**

3.1 Analysis of the prevalence of interpersonal conflict in the workplace

3.2 Analysis of conflict resolution styles

4. **Discussion**

4.1 Summary of findings

4.2 Discussion of findings

   4.2.1 Prevalence of interpersonal conflict in the workplace

   4.2.2 Interpersonal conflict escalation process

   4.2.3 Prevalence of conflict resolution styles

   4.2.4 Levels of interpersonal conflict and styles of conflict resolution

4.3 Limitations

4.4 Future research

4.5 Conclusions

5. **References**

6. **Appendix A:** Work Conflict Questionnaire

   **Appendix B:** Information Sheet

   **Appendix C:** Letter to Organisations

   **Appendix D:** Factor Structure Matrix for Varimax Rotated Factor Solution (Rahim, 1992)
List of Tables

Table 1: Prevalence of interpersonal conflict in the workplace (Appelberg et al, 1991) 6
Table 2: Thomas (1976) conflict handling modes 8
Table 3: Rahim's (1992) conflict resolutions styles 9
Table 4: Group norms of five styles of handling interpersonal conflict with supervisor, subordinates and peers (Rahim, 1992) 14
Table 5: Summary of sample demographic information 27
Table 6: Scales analysis of conflict resolution styles (Rahim, 1983) 32
Table 7: Percentage of interpersonal conflict experienced at each of the four levels of conflict 38
Table 8: Differences between each of the four levels of conflict 38
Table 9: Frequency of interpersonal conflict in the workplace 39
Table 10: Prevalence of interpersonal conflict for functional groups and gender effects 40
Table 11: Differences in the amount of conflict for each functional group with each level of conflict 41
Table 12: Prevalence of interpersonal conflict for males and females with their respective genders 42
Table 13: Mean scores for conflict resolution styles 45
Table 14: Reliability Analysis of aggression scale 54
Table 15: Prevalence of conflict resolution styles for Rahim (1992) study and for the present study 62
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Total prevalence of interpersonal conflict in the workplace and for males and females</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Prevalence of interpersonal conflict in the workplace for supervisors, peers and subordinates</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>Total mean scores for conflict resolution styles and for functional groups.</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>Mean scores by conflict level for obliging style of conflict resolution</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>Mean scores by conflict level for avoiding style of conflict resolution</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>Mean scores by conflict level for integrating style of conflict resolution</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7</td>
<td>Mean scores by conflict level for compromising style of conflict resolution</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8</td>
<td>Mean scores by conflict level for dominating style of conflict resolution</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9</td>
<td>Mean scores by conflict level for aggressive style of conflict resolution</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 10</td>
<td>Prevalence of females' conflict resolution styles against levels of conflict</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 11</td>
<td>Prevalence of females' conflict resolution styles against levels of conflict</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>