

# Forty years of conflict: the effects of gender and generation on conflict-management strategies

Forty years of  
conflict

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Previous studies examining the relationship between gender and conflict-management strategies have generally reported weak or inconsistent results. This paper aims to study extends past research by examining the main and interactive effects of gender on conflict-management strategies over time. The authors propose that conflict-management strategies commonly employed in the workplace are impacted by worker gender as predicted by face negotiation theory and vary over time based on the “generation” of the worker.

**Design/methodology/approach** – To test the study hypotheses, a field study was conducted to assess main and interactive effects of gender and generation on the five strategies for conflict management: Integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising. Questionnaire data were collected over four decades (1980s-2010s) from employed students (N = 6,613). Data analysis was performed using a multivariate analysis of covariance.

**Findings** – The results suggest female employees consistently use more noncompeting strategies (integrating, obliging, avoiding and compromising) than male employees and male employees consistently use more competing strategy (dominating) than female employees. All the main and interaction effects were significant.

**Research limitations/implications** – While this study involved primarily students in the USA studying management at two major public universities, there may be implications for a more global population of workers. However, the results support the notion advanced by face negotiation theory that men will generally seek to save face while women will generally avoid conflict in consideration of others.

**Practical implications** – This study demonstrates that workers employ different conflict-management strategies over time and the use of certain strategies varies by gender. An implication of this study is the need to regularly reassess selection, training and evaluation processes for managers. In addition, supervisors should encourage employees to enhance the effective use of cooperative (integrating, obliging and compromising) strategies and focus on specific situations when uncooperative strategies (dominating and avoiding) may be needed.

**Originality/value** – By using face negotiation theory as the organizing framework to examine changes in conflict-management strategies over time, this study contributes in a substantial way to the understanding of how gender and generation interact to influence the selection and use of conflict-management strategies in the workplace.

**Keywords** Conflict intensity, Conflict-management strategies, Face negotiation theory, Gender, Generation

**Paper type** Research paper

For more than 50 years, researchers and practitioners have been examining the role of conflict in organizations. The most common premise has been that conflict is a natural occurrence between individuals (and groups) and understanding conflict management strategies will lead to positive organizational outcomes (Jehn and Mannix, 2001; Pelled *et al.*, 1999; Somech, 2008). The assertion has been made and validated that organizations should not eliminate conflict but, rather, manage it to enhance individual, group and organizational effectiveness (Rahim, 1985, 2011).



More recently, however, researchers have been examining the roles that gender and societal perspectives have on conflict-management strategies by documenting systematic differences between how women and men approach the management of conflict in the workplace (Brewer *et al.*, 2002). There are numerous field studies examining gender differences and the strategies for handling interpersonal conflict (Baron, 1989; Cole, 1996; Kilmann and Thomas, 1975; Neff, 1986; Rahim, 1983a; Renwick, 1975; Shockley-Zalabak, 1981). These studies have generally reported weak or inconsistent relationships between gender and the strategies for handling interpersonal conflict.

A similar conclusion was reached by Wall and Blum (1991). Their literature review suggests there are marginal and inconsistent relationships between gender and negotiation outcomes. After reviewing the literature on gender differences in conflict-handling strategies, Nicotera and Dorsey (2006) concluded the following:

There is no *there* there. Conflict style is not driven by biological sex, regardless of how many studies try to find the effect; it simply is not there [...] the search for gender differences in organizational communication and in conflict communication particularly, has little promise to produce any meaningful findings (p. 312).

In her summary of the literature, Putnam (2007) concluded that research on organizational conflict management has mushroomed in the past decade but calls for additional research on organizational conflict from the perspectives offered by other disciplines, such as management and communications. Finally, in their 10-year assessment of conflict management studies, Ma *et al.* (2008) modeled the structure of conflict management and concluded the need to map new relationships will potentially shed additional knowledge on the factors impacting conflict-management strategies in the workplace.

One factor increasingly being investigated with respect to work values is the generation of workers (Twenge *et al.*, 2010). Anecdotes regarding how various generations have changed social and workplace interactions have long inferred that time changes certain traits, including interpersonal interactions. Specifically, in structured research contexts, over the past decade or so researchers have attempted to assess the impact of generational differences on certain workplace behaviors, including conflict-management strategies, resulting in inconclusive outcomes and calling for additional research to investigate the relationship between generational differences and conflict management strategies (Jennings, 2016).

Through workplace observations, discussions with managers and interactions with early career professionals, we believe the use of conflict-management strategies has changed over time and has occurred differentially by gender. If such changes in perceived behaviors have indeed occurred, the implications for worker selection, training, and promotion in work contexts that are currently experiencing flatter organizational structures and focusing on team effectiveness are significant.

Recent research linking gender and conflict-management strategies using face negotiation theory suggests that “face” is an important framework for considering differences in conflict approaches in the workplace (Zhang *et al.*, 2014). The underlying assumption is that, “face is an explanatory mechanism for conflict styles.” And that, “Face is an individual’s claimed sense of favorable image in the context of social and relational networks [...]” (p. 373).

Face negotiation theory identifies two primary “face concerns” that include self-face and other-face. The theory suggests these “faces” are relatively stable traits related to gender. Thus, relevant studies have suggested that men typically have higher levels of self-face, and therefore seek to save face in their organization, while women will be more focused on the face of others (Oetzel and Ting-Toomey, 2003). In addition, Gwartney-Gibbs and Lach (1994) reported that women display higher levels of sensitivity to workplace problems associated

with interpersonal relations than men. Research studies examining those interpersonal relations that systematically control for national culture (Chatjoulis and Siniki, 2006; Kim *et al.*, 2004) and industry (Truslow, 2004) support the contention that predictable differences may exist between conflict-management strategies based on gender yet potentially evolve over time (Jehn and Mannix, 2001).

In the present study, we seek to address these calls for new information in the rapidly-expanding conflict management field by including the role of generational differences in the gender-related conflict management relationship within the context of face negotiation theory. We do so by examining three specific questions and related hypotheses through the use of a unique longitudinal survey administered over four decades. Those questions are:

- (1) Do conflict-management strategies differ by gender?
- (2) Do conflict-management strategies vary over time reflecting generational differences of workers?
- (3) Do the effects of gender and generation systematically interact to effect specific conflict-management strategies?

We believe that the inclusion of gender and generation in the same model using a consistent method for assessing the use of conflict management-strategies will advance our understanding of this important area of human resource management practice.

### Conflict management strategies

There are several strategies for managing interpersonal conflict and one strategy is typically more appropriate than another for effective outcomes. Follett (1940) found three main ways of dealing with conflict – domination, compromise and integration, and two other ways of handling conflict in organizations – avoidance and suppression. Blake and Mouton (1964) created a framework for classifying the approaches, or strategies, for handling interpersonal conflicts into five activities:

- (1) forcing;
- (2) withdrawing;
- (3) smoothing;
- (4) compromising; and
- (5) problem-solving.

They described these five activities for handling conflict based on the two primary concerns of managers: concern for production and concern for people. Thomas (1976) reinterpreted their scheme. He considered the intentions of a party (cooperativeness, that is, attempting to satisfy the other party's concerns; and assertiveness, such as attempting to satisfy one's own concerns) in classifying the modes of handling conflict into five types. Pruitt's (1983) dual-concern model (concern for self and concern for others) suggests that there are four strategies for handling conflict:

- (1) yielding;
- (2) problem solving;
- (3) inaction; and
- (4) contending.

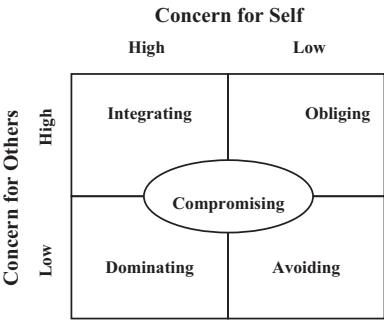
Interestingly, he did not recognize compromising as a distinct style.

**Figure 1.**  
The dual concern  
model of the styles for  
handling  
interpersonal conflict

**Table I.**  
Confirmatory factor  
analyses of the  
strategies for  
handling  
interpersonal conflict  
for the four decades

*Rahim's dual concern model*  
Rahim and Bonoma (1979) differentiated the strategies for handling conflict on two basic dimensions: concern for self and concern for others. The first dimension explains the degree (high vs. low) to which a person attempts to satisfy his or her own concern. The second dimension explains the degree (high vs. low) to which a person attempts to satisfy the concern of others. It should be pointed out that these dimensions portray the motivational orientations of a given individual during conflict. Studies by Ruble and Thomas (1976) and Van de Vliert and Kabanoff (1990) provide additional evidence in support of these dimensions. The combination of the two dimensions (concern for self and others) results in five specific strategies for handling interpersonal conflict, as shown in Figure 1 (Rahim and Bonoma, 1979, p. 1327). Thus, how an organizational member handles his or her conflict, depends on the relevant situation or state in which they find themselves. Specifcillay, Rahim (2011) created a list of situations (states) where each style is appropriate (pp. 51-54; Tables I-IV).

*Integrating*  
(high concern for self and others) style is associated with problem-solving, that is, the diagnosis of and intervention in the right problems. The use of this style involves openness, exchanging information, looking for alternatives, and examining differences to reach an



Strategy	Generation			
	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s
1. RMSEA	0.04	0.03	0.05	0.04
2. $\chi^2/df$	3.21	3.78	3.96	2.04
3. RMSR	0.02	0.01	0.02	0.02
4. Normed fit index	0.97	0.98	0.99	0.98
5. Comparative fit index	0.98	0.99	0.99	0.99
6. Incremental fit index	0.98	0.99	0.99	0.99
7. Goodness-of-fit index	0.99	0.99	0.98	0.98

**Notes:** RMSEA (Root mean square error of approximation) and RMSR (Root mean square residual) should be < less than 0.07 and for this study they ranged between 0.03 and 0.05.  $\chi^2/df$  should be  $\leq 4$  and they are satisfactory for the four factor analyses. The rest of the indexes 5-7 should be  $\geq 0.90$ . Therefore, these indexes are all satisfactory

effective solution acceptable to both parties. This is often described as a win-win style of handling interpersonal conflict that satisfies the concern of both parties.

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### *Obliging*

(Low concern for self and high concern for others) Style is associated with attempting to minimize the differences while emphasizing common issues in an effort to satisfy the concerns of the other party. An obliging person overlooks their concern to satisfy the concern of others. This style is often described as a lose-win style of handling interpersonal conflict that satisfies the concern of the other party. The self-sacrifice common to this style that may include generosity, charity, or obedience to others.

Strategies	Overall means/SD	Male	Female	F
1. Integrating	3.95/0.55	3.92/0.55	4.00/0.55	38.84***
2. Obliging	3.62/0.57	3.63/0.56	3.67/0.59	6.40*
3. Dominating	3.29/0.68	3.36/0.65	3.22/0.70	65.53***
4. Avoiding	3.19/0.70	3.16/0.69	3.25/0.70	30.14***
5. Compromising	3.69/0.56	3.63/0.57	3.73/0.55	43.38***

**Notes:**  $N = 6,613$  (Male = 3,225, Female = 3,388); \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.0005$

**Table II.**  
Strategies for  
handling  
interpersonal  
conflict: estimated  
marginal means  
classified by gender

Strategy	Generation				<i>F</i>
	1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	
1. Integrating	4.02	4.02	3.82	3.99	59.18***
2. Obliging	3.58	3.59	3.62	3.81	45.48***
3. Dominating	3.30	3.28	3.25	3.33	4.31**
4. Avoiding	3.10	3.20	3.14	3.38	40.81***
5. Compromising	3.69	3.78	3.61	3.64	41.44***

**Notes:**  $N = 6,613$  [Gen 1 (1980-1989) = 1,216, Gen 2 (1990-1999) = 2,226, Gen 3 (2000-2010) = 2,038, Gen 4 (2010-2019) = 1,133]; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.0005$

**Table III.**  
Strategies for  
handling  
interpersonal conflict  
estimated marginal  
means classified by  
generation

Gender	Strategy	Generation				<i>F</i>
		1980s	1990s	2000s	2010s	
Male	Integrating	4.01	3.96	3.76	3.95	3.37*
Female	Integrating	4.02	4.07	3.89	4.02	
Male	Obliging	3.59	3.55	3.61	3.77	2.95*
Female	Obliging	3.56	3.64	3.64	3.84	
Male	Dominating	3.33	3.38	3.32	3.42	3.79*
Female	Dominating	3.27	3.19	3.19	3.25	
Male	Avoiding	3.07	3.11	3.11	3.33	3.50*
Female	Avoiding	3.13	3.29	3.17	3.42	
Male	Compromising	3.62	3.71	3.55	3.62	2.82*
Female	Compromising	3.65	3.85	3.67	3.65	

**Note:** \* $p < 0.05$

**Table IV.**  
Interaction effects of  
gender and  
generation on  
estimated marginal  
means for conflict-  
management  
strategies

*Compromising*

(Moderate concern for self and others) Style involves the middle ground where both parties relinquish something of personal value to reach a mutually acceptable decision. It may mean averaging their differences, making mutual concessions, or deciding on a reasonable middle position.

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*Dominating*

(High concern for self and low concern for others) Style has been identified with win-lose orientation or with forcing behavior to win one's position. A dominating person seeks to obtain their objective while oftentimes ignoring the needs and expectations of others.

*Avoiding*

(Low concern for self and others) Style has been associated with withdrawal, buck-passing, or sidestepping situations. An avoiding person satisfies neither their concern nor the concern of others. This style is often described as a lose-lose style of handling interpersonal conflict that does not satisfy the concern of either party.

The relevant literature clearly suggests that more cooperative conflict management strategies, such as integrating and obliging (in which a meaningful amount of concern is shown for the other party) are likely to produce positive individual and organizational outcomes, while less cooperative strategies like dominating and avoiding (in which little concern is shown for the other party) frequently result in escalation of conflict and negative outcomes ([Rahim, 2011](#)).

**Generational differences**

For this study, data on gender, generation, and conflict-management strategies were collected during four decades. The contribution of this study is attempting to answer our three research questions focusing on gender and longitudinal factors impacting workplace behaviors. [Howe and Strauss \(2000\)](#) used historical data to classify workers according to their birth years into four generations:

- (1) traditionalists;
- (2) baby boomers;
- (3) Generation X; and
- (4) Generation Y.

There are many anecdotes regarding generational differences. However, the majority of empirical studies addressing those differences are considered inadequate to fully answer our research questions.

The present study collected data during 1980-2019 and is designed to explore if the conflict-handling strategies of male and female employees changed over the past four decades. That is, we sought to explore whether state-related behaviors change over time in relation to more stable traits such as gender and generation ([Aspinwall and Taylor, 1992](#); [Erickson and Ritter, 2001](#); [George, 1991](#); [Wright, 2007](#)). Based on the suggestion by [Kluemper et al. \(2009\)](#), we expected to find interactions among the conflict-management strategies while holding gender, age and generation constant.

It is possible to reclassify the data to Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) and Generation Y (born between 1981 and 2000), but it was decided to not do so. The reasoning behind this decision was that some of the richness in the data would be lost as there would be only two groups rather than four groups in the analysis. The objective of the study was to

investigate how men and women employees changed their conflict-management strategies during the four decades (1980-2018). The first two decades (1980-1990) approximately represent Generation X and the other two decades (2000-2018) approximately represent Generation Y.

Therefore, our specific research hypotheses are:

- H1a.* Female employees will use higher levels of the integrating strategy than male employees.
- H1b.* Female employees will use higher levels of the obliging strategy than male employees.
- H1c.* Female employees will use higher levels of the compromising strategy than male employees.
- H1d.* Female employees will use higher levels of the avoiding strategy than male employees.
- H1e.* Male employees will use higher levels of the dominating strategy than female employees.

Another issue that has not been properly investigated is the stability of conflict-management strategies over time. That is, are there generational difference in conflict-management strategies among employees? Did employees change their conflict-handling strategies during four decades (1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s)? In other words, is there any main effect of generation on conflict-management strategies? We are not aware of any previous studies examining this issue:

- H2.* Employees will differ in their use of the strategies for handling interpersonal conflict during the last four decades.

The final issue that has not been examined by existing studies is the possible interaction effects of gender and generation on the five strategies for handling conflict. That is, is it possible that the conflict handling strategies of male and female employees changed differently during the four decades?

- H3.* There will be significant interaction effects of gender and generation for each of the five conflict-management strategies.

## Method

### *Samples and procedure*

Data for this study were collected using a questionnaire from the first author's undergraduate and MBA students who were employed outside the university during the span of 1980 to 2019 (i.e. 40 years) on the five strategies for handling interpersonal conflict in organizations. The unique benefit of collecting data in this way assured that age and experience levels of respondents were fairly similar thus allowing for consistent comparisons of reported conflict management strategies for each cohort over time.

### *Measurement of strategies*

The five strategies for handling interpersonal conflict with a supervisor (integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising) were measured with the 28 items of the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II), Form A (Rahim, 1983b)[1].



The items of the ROCI-II, Form A use a 5-point Likert scale (5 = Strongly Agree [. . .] 1 = Strongly Disagree) to measure the conflict-handling behavior of subordinates. A higher score indicates greater use of a style for handling interpersonal conflict with a supervisor.

The data collected included information on gender was categorized according to the decades of collection (1980s, 1990s, 2000s, 2010s). In total, 6,613 respondents completed the survey instrument as a requirement for their participation in conflict management, organizational behavior, and other related courses. After the instrument was completed, the instructor explained the scores on the five strategies, that is, how students handled conflict with their supervisors and its implications to avoid any potential for priming the survey subjects.

Rahim and Magner's (1995) study using five different samples ( $N = 2,076$ ) provided empirical support for the convergent and discriminant validities of the ROCI-II and the invariance of the five-factor model across referent roles (i.e. superiors, subordinates, and peers), organizational levels, and four of the five samples. Our study confirms the five-factor solution of conflict-management strategies with LISREL has a better fit than two-, three- and four-factor solutions.

Numerous studies have supported the criterion validity of the instrument (Hammock and Richardson, 1991; Kim *et al.*, 2004; Landaela and Grün, 2011; Ting-Toomey *et al.*, 1991). Rahim (2011) reports the subscales are not associated with social desirability response bias.

#### *Analysis and results*

The data were analyzed using SPSS 24. The main and interaction effects of gender and generation on conflict-management strategies were tested through the use of Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA). The covariate for the study was age. The  $\alpha$  level of significance for the overall analysis was set at 0.0001.

To confirm the existence of the five strategies for handling interpersonal conflict, and in particular the stability of these factors over the four decades of the study, Confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were conducted. Table I reports the results.

The results indicate the fit indexes, such as root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and root mean square residual (RMSR) values, ranged between 0.01 and 0.05 and the  $\chi^2/df$  values were consistently less than 4. Finally, the remaining fit indexes (numbers 4-7) were greater than 0.90, indicating satisfactory factor structures. In other words, the data on conflict strategies for each decade adequately fit the model presented in Figure 1. In addition, the results show the convergent and discriminant validities of the five-factor structure of the conflict management strategies.

With respect to the analyses of covariance, results indicate the effects of covariate age on the five strategies were significant (Wilks' Lambda = 0.98,  $F = 34.53$ ,  $p < 0.0005$ ). The five criterion variables were significantly different between male employees and female employees (Wilks' Lambda = 0.98,  $F = 34.53$ ,  $p < 0.0005$ ) and among the four decades (Wilks' Lambda = 0.93,  $F = 32.48$ ,  $p < 0.0005$ ). The interaction effects of gender  $\times$  generation were also significant (Wilks' Lambda = 0.99,  $F = 2.95$ ,  $p < 0.0005$ ). The observed power of all the tests ranged between 0.79 and 1.00. The Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices (Box' M = 1155.93,  $F = 10.98$ ,  $p < 0.0005$ ) was significant which indicates the observed covariance matrices of the dependent variables are not equal across gender and generation. Also  $F$ -ratios of Leven's Test of Equality of Error Variances ranged between 5.33 and 36.52, which were significant at the 0.0005 level, indicates that the error variances of the dependent variables are not equal across gender and generation.

Table II reports the estimated marginal means and related standard deviations of the five strategies for handling conflict classified by gender.



With respect to *HH1a-e*, our results indicate there are gender differences based on the strategies for handling conflict in the workplace. That is, consistent with face negotiation theory, female employees make greater use of integrating, obliging, avoiding, and compromising than the male employees in an organizational setting. Interestingly, our data also support the common notion that male employees make greater use of dominating strategies than female employees to resolve workplace conflict consistent with face-saving behavior posited by face negotiation theory.

[Table III](#) reports the estimated marginal means of the five strategies for handling conflict classified by generation, that is, grouped by four decades.

Consistent with *H2*, the results indicate there are significant differences in conflict-management strategies across the four decades. Specifically, strategies involving the use of obliging and avoiding behaviors appear to increase during the four decades.

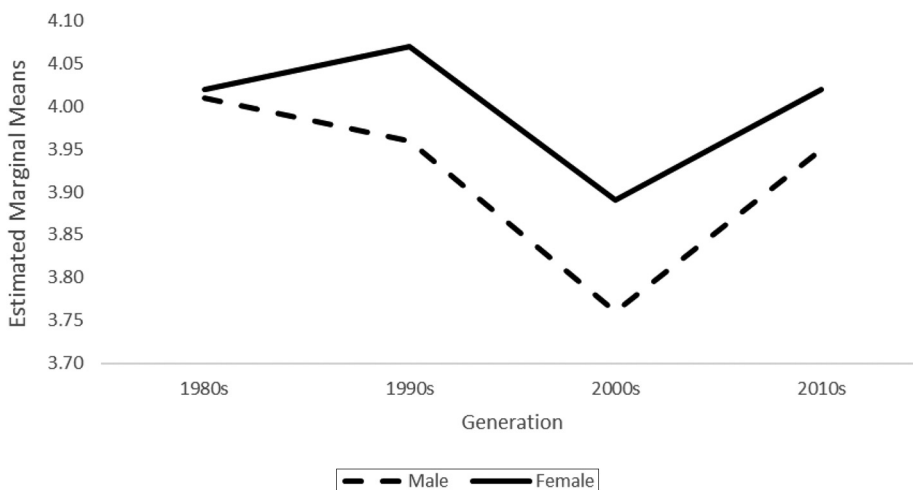
Finally, [Table IV](#) reports the estimated marginal means of the five strategies for handling conflict classified by gender and decade. Consistent with *H3*, the two-way interaction effects were significant for all the strategies. Overall, the results suggest that female employees relied on the use of integrating, avoiding, obliging, and compromising strategies during the four decades more so than male employees. Conversely, male employees appeared to rely on the use of dominating style for conflict management more than female employees did during all four decades.

The visual representations of the interaction effects with respect to integrating behaviors are portrayed in [Figure 2](#). The figure clearly displays that female employees used more integrating style of conflict management more consistently than male employees in each of the four decades.

Specifically, male employees reduced and female employees increased their use of integrating style during 1980s. Both male and female employees reduced their use of the integrating style during 1990s and 2000s. Their use of this style went up during 2010s.

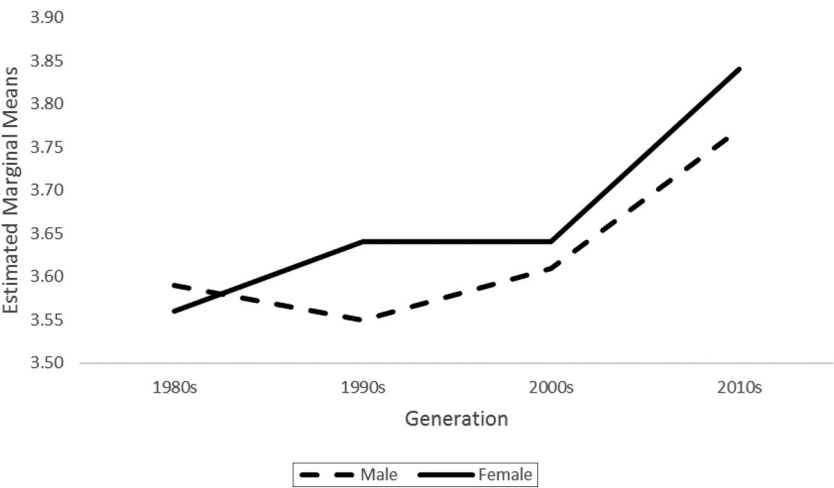
The interaction effect of gender and generation on the obliging style was significant at the 0.05 level. [Figure 3](#) graphically portrays this interaction effect over time for the consideration of future researchers.

Male employees tended to use slightly more obliging style than female employees at the beginning of 1980s, but reduced their use of this style for handling conflict until 1990s. They



**Figure 2.**  
Gender  $\times$  Generation  
interaction on  
integrating

**Figure 3.**  
Gender × Generation  
interaction on  
obliging

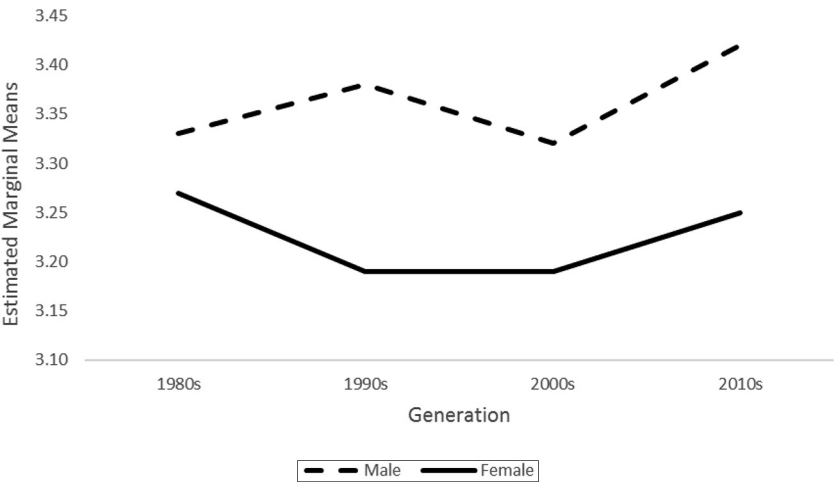


increased their use of this style during the remaining decades. Both male and female employees increased the use of this style during the 1990s to 2010s. During this period, female employees generally used more obliging style than male employees.

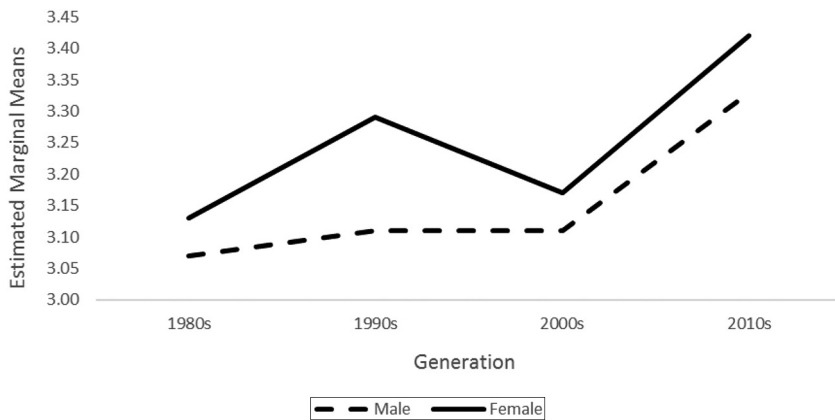
Figure 4 portrays the interaction effects of gender and generation on the dominating style of handling conflict.

The figure suggests that male employees clearly used more dominating style than female employees during all four decades. The use of this style by male employees increased during the 1980s, but reduced somewhat during 1990s. The figure may suggest that convergent use of the dominating style is a worthy area for future research investigation.

Figure 5 displays the interaction effects of gender and generation on the avoiding style of handling conflict.



**Figure 4.**  
Gender × Generation  
interaction on  
dominating



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**Figure 5.**  
Gender  $\times$  Generation  
interaction on  
avoiding

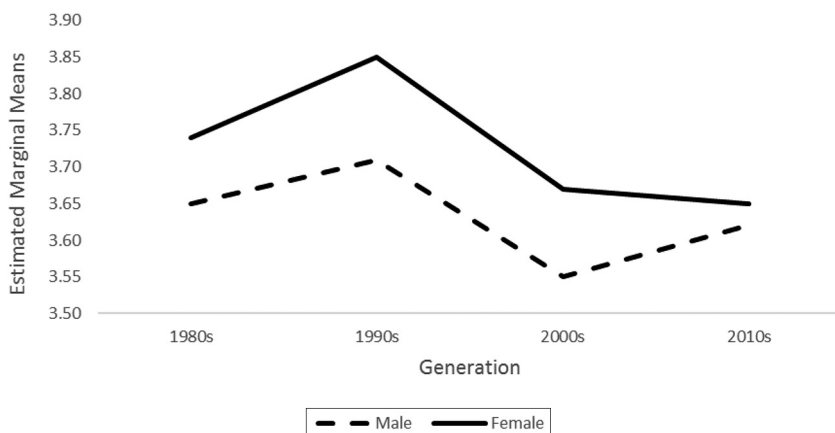
Clearly, female employees used the avoiding style more than male employees during all four decades. However, there appears to be a sharp decline in the use of this style by male employees during the 2000s. Both groups increased the use of the avoiding strategy during 2010s. Again, this suggests possible future investigation opportunities.

Finally, [Figure 6](#) displays the interaction effect of gender and generation on the compromising strategy for handling conflict.

Clearly, female employees used the compromising style more than male employees during all four decades. Both male and female employees increased the use of this style during 1980s and decreased the use during the 1990s. However, while women reduced the use of this style in the 2000s, men increased the use of compromising behaviors to manage workplace conflict during that period. The differential use of the compromising strategy by women and men over the study period is worthy of additional research inquiry.

## Discussion

By using face negotiation theory as our organizing framework to examine changes in conflict-management strategies over time, this study contributes in a substantial way to our



**Figure 6.**  
Gender  $\times$  Generation  
interaction on  
compromising

understanding of how gender and generation interact to effect the use of conflict-management strategies in the workplace. The most challenging part of our study was collecting four decades of data from a relatively homogeneous group of respondents according to age and work experience by surveying employed students. Conflict-management scholars generally agree that managing conflict is a behavioral state that will largely depend on the situation and contingent environment (Rahim, 2002). It is widely recognized that use of the cooperative strategies, such as integrating, obliging and compromising, which have meaningful concern for the other party involved in conflict, can lead to positive outcomes. And, the use of the dominating and avoiding strategies, which typically reflect a low level of concerns for others, generally lead to negative individual and group outcomes.

However, our study also touches on the discourse involving the relationship between state (situation) and the traits of organizational members. Through our longitudinal study, we have added to the call for research by Kluemper *et al.* (2009) and others to assess the changes in situation-dependent behaviors while relatively stable traits change over time as suggested by face negotiation theory (Jehn and Mannix, 2001; Ma *et al.*, 2008).

Results from our present study suggest, consistent with face negotiation theory, that female employees use more “non-forcing” strategies, such as integrating, obliging, compromising and avoiding strategies than male employees, while male employees will generally employ more forcing strategies, such as dominating, to achieve their objectives. Surprising, our findings are inconsistent with previous studies that reported no significant differences in conflict-management strategies based on gender. We believe the results of our study’s longitudinal design and large sample size along with the related MANCOVA analysis provides a unique contribution to our knowledge in this area because face negotiation theory can now be expanded to consider longitudinal changes in how workers interact with supervisors and peers. Of course, an ideal extension of our study would include workers from different national cultures and their perceived approaches to conflict management.

Overall, the consistent use of integrating, obliging and compromising strategies by female employees as reported by our findings is commendable but not surprising. However, results suggesting the use of an avoiding style of conflict management may lead to suboptimal organizational outcomes and should be examined more carefully as recommended by Lax and Sebenius (1968) and Thompson (1960). Conversely, our results suggest that male employees typically lower levels of integrating, obliging, and compromising strategies than female employees which also may result in suboptimal organizational outcomes. And, our results suggest that men in the workplace tend to employ higher levels of the dominating style to deal with conflict which is oftentimes associated with negative consequences. Thus, it may be suggested that male employees should seek to minimize their exclusive use of the dominating strategy. In a related sense, the hypothesis that male employees use less avoiding style than female employees, which means they may be more willing to openly deal with conflict-laden issues and not avoiding them, should be empirically examined in future research. Finally, a unique and important contribution of our study is the confirmation of the factor structure relating to the five conflict management strategies over time.

#### *Implications for management practitioners*

There are several important implications of our study. First, we know that how managers employ different conflict-management strategies changes over time and the use of certain strategies varies by gender. That is, handling conflict is situational but traits of the organizational member do matter. Our study is the first step in responding to Wright (2007) by studying self-reported state-related behaviors while holding traits in common then assessing the relevant interactions over time.

Thus, the selection, training, and evaluation processes for managers should be reassessed on a regular basis. Conflict-management training should be culturally appropriate and include broad gender heterogeneity. When workers enter into a situation with possible conflict, understanding how employed strategies may be varied given the gender composition and generation of those involved will allow workers and managers to resolve conflict more effectively.

Thus, one practical implication of this study is that supervisors should encourage employees to enhance the effective use of cooperative (integrating, obliging, and compromising) strategies and focus on specific situations when uncooperative strategies (dominating and avoiding) may be needed. The challenge for a contemporary organization is to enhance the conflict-management skills of its members through appropriate training that will involve survey feedback, lecture, case studies, and exercises (Rahim, 2011). In particular, training should be made available to both male and female employees.

In an era of online skill development and webinars, organization members should be encouraged and rewarded to enhance their conflict-management skills through continuous self-learning. Organizations should provide appropriate reinforcements for learning and improving employees' conflict-management skills so that they can handle various situations effectively. Learning organizations are providing opportunities to managers for continuous learning that should help to improve their conflict-management skills. Functional conflict-management requires intervention at the macro level in an organization that will involve appropriate changes in organization design and culture would be needed (Rahim, 2002).

Finally, changes in organization design should consider the use of flatter, decentralized, and less complex structures. Also, there should be appropriate changes in organizational culture that provides rewards for learning new behaviors. These changes will encourage employees to acquire conflict-management competencies needed for improving their job satisfaction and performance and job-related attitudes.

### *Strengths and limitations*

One of the strengths of this study is the use of time-tested and valid measures of conflict-management strategies and the collection of data based on employee gender over four decades. The measures of this study were collected continuously over a span of 40 years. It appears that there is no study on conflict management that has covered a period of four decades during which time significant changes occurred in workplace culture and expectations of various "generations" of workers.

The limitations of this field study should also be acknowledged. First, this study involved primarily domestic students in the USA studying management at two major public universities. There may be implications for a more global population of workers.

Second, while there may be a problem of common method variance in the data on conflict-management strategies, it should be noted that a study by Spector (1987) concluded that properly developed instruments are resistant to the method variance problem. The present study used a well-developed and published measurement instrument which probably minimized the effect of common method variance. Data were collected from convenience samples that might limit generalizability of the results.

### *Directions for future investigation*

Further research is needed to enhance our understanding of the interrelationships of conflict-management strategies and effectiveness of employees of male and female employees, particularly in an global environment where national cultural factors may impact the use of certain conflict management strategies. An important area of future

research concerns carefully designing and evaluating the effects of intervention in enhancing positive conflict-management strategies on the effectiveness of employees. Field experiments are particularly useful in evaluating the effects of training to enhance positive conflict-management strategies on individual, group and organizational outcomes. There is also the significant need for scenario-based studies and laboratory studies that control some of the extraneous variables to facilitate our better understand of the effects of conflict-management strategies reported in the present study.

#### Note

1. Rahim Organizational Inventory–II, Form A: Used with permission from the © Center for Advanced Studies in Management. Further use or reproduction of the instrument without written permission is prohibited.

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