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## **Conflict Management Styles in the Classroom**

**Stephen A. Furlich, Texas A&M University-Commerce, TX**  
**Derek C. Clapp, McLennan Community College, TX**

*Stephen A. Furlich, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor Department of Mass Media, Communication, Theatre, and Derek C. Clapp, M.A. is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies.*

### **Abstract**

The present study deviates from previous research by investigating personality and immediacy interactions with conflict management styles within small groups inside the classroom. Categories of personality were used. Results showed robust and statistically significant correlations for some of the conflict management styles with immediacy and personality. Implications from the results are discussed in the paper as to the usefulness of predicting small group member's conflict style within the classroom.

### **Introduction**

Conflict is inevitable and it often becomes a vital component of group projects (Alino & Schneider, 2012). In order for conflict to be a positive force within a small group, a better understanding of conflict must be sought. Therefore, this paper will investigate individual's conflict management styles inside small groups within the classroom through the variables of immediacy and personality.

Johnson and Johnson (2012) define conflict as communication interactions between two or more interdependent people who have separate goals. Blake and Mouton's (1964) conflict managerial grid identifies specific conflict styles one may exhibit. The five styles of conflict management are accommodating, avoiding, competing, collaborating, and compromising. Blake and Mouton (1964) offer a human relations perspective on managing conflict by emphasizing interpersonal and small group behaviors (Sharma, 2012). Consequently the researchers believe that studying the variables immediacy and personality within small groups inside the classroom for this study are germane to further understanding conflict issues.

### **Rationale and Research Question**

Employees are finding themselves spending time in small groups within organizations more than ever before. These small groups can be assembled for various reasons such as decision-making and problem-solving (Bonebright, 2010). Therefore, with small groups playing a larger role

within organizations, educators within higher education need to better understand dynamics within classroom small groups that prepare students for work life.

Small group conflict inside the classroom must be studied in order to further understand the constructive and destructive potential of intragroup conflict. Conflict management styles have been found to influence the outcome of conflict resolutions (Gelfand, Keller, Leslie, & de Dreu, 2012). However, its impact has not been adequately addressed when involved with immediacy and personality.

Immediacy has not been addressed in the area of small group conflict within the classroom. However, immediacy has been shown to have an impact on behaviors and communication outcomes in the instructional context (Sidelinger, 2010; Witt & Kerksen-Griep, 2011). Immediacy has been previously defined from an instructor's perspective as "use of pro-social as opposed to antisocial messages to alter student behavior" (Gorham, 1988, p. 41). Immediacy is defined in this study as a student who displays pro-social as opposed to antisocial messages in a small group within the classroom.

Finally, personality has been shown to influence behaviors such as conflict resolution (Ward, Atkins, Lepper, & Ross, 2011). However, personality has not been addressed in relation to immediacy with conflict resolution styles. Personality is defined in this paper as a consistent set of behaviors that an individual exhibits.

The interactions between conflict management styles, immediacy, and personality can further understanding small group conflict within the classroom. Therefore, the following research question is proposed:

**RQ1:** Do relationships exist between conflict management styles, personality styles, and immediacy in small groups within the classroom?

### **Conflict Styles**

Conflict appropriateness and effectiveness are often constant issues found within conflict. They play an important role when studying conflict. However, the structure of conflict can make these two constructs a difficult challenge to balance (Romer, Rispen, Giebels, & Euwema, 2012).

One way to understand differing conflict management styles is through Blake and Mouton's (1964) conflict managerial grid, which encompasses five key conflict management styles. These include accommodating, avoiding, competing, collaborating and compromising. Conflict styles within classroom small groups can impact the interactions within the groups, as well as the group outcomes. Conflict styles can become predictive of the individual's communication strategies (Vecchi, 2009). Therefore, it would be beneficial for one to be able to project an individual's likely conflict management style in order to place the right person in a given situation.

### **Immediacy**

Much of the previous immediacy research has been conducted in the instructional context. Inferences can be drawn from this research in the instructional context to predict conflict management styles in groups based upon personality. An individual student's consistent

immediacy behaviors within a small group are aligned with our definition of personality as a consistent set of behaviors. This study hopes to increase understanding the conflict management style an individual is likely to use with immediacy and personality.

Scholars have addressed the influential effects of immediacy over the past three decades (Pogue, & Ahyun, 2007). Mehrabian (1966) is often credited with initially addressing immediacy as an influential component in forming attitudes from communication interactions. Mehrabian (1966) found that less immediate communication was associated with more negative communication assessments. Immediacy has been found to be influential with students inside the classroom (Sidelinger, 2010; Witt & Kerksen-Griep, 2011). This is important to understand because people do have some control over the impact that their immediacy behaviors have with others they interact with (Harrison, 2011; Lapka, 2012; Sidelinger, 2010; Zeng & Zhang, 2012).

Gorham (1988) identified some of the verbal immediacy behaviors found to be important to students' learning, including the use of humor, praising students, engaging in conversations with students before, after, or outside of class, teachers' self-disclosure, encouraging students to talk, and asking for students' input. Instructors tend to continually display the same immediacy behaviors and have the same consistent impact on their students (Darjan, 2011), therefore students within small groups are likely to display the same conflict management style behaviors because it is part of their personality as is immediacy.

## **Personality Styles**

Another variable that may impact the conflict situation is personality. A common means by which researchers study personality and conflict is the five-factor structure. The Big Five factors of personality are extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and openness to experience (Gurven, Von Rueden, Massenkoff, Kaplan, & Lero Vie, 2013). Tupes and Christal (1961) initially generated the Big Five model and was later built upon by Goldberg (1990). Smaller sets of variables (40) can serve as markers of the Big Five (Noftle & Robins, 2007). These factors can be measured with reliability (Thalmayer, Saucier, & Eigenhuis, 2011).

## **Methods**

### *Participants and Procedures*

This study examined small groups within the classroom and the relationships between an individual's self-perceived level of immediacy and personality style with the five recognized conflict management styles by Blake and Mouton (1964). The sample consisted of 209 college students consisting of both upper and lower level classifications from a medium sized southwest university who completed a three-part survey during the Spring 2000 semester. The students were already part of a classroom small group when they participated in the study. To minimize the possibility of obtaining biased responses, the participants were instructed that they would remain anonymous and all answers were confidential.

## **Measurement**

### *Verbal Immediacy*

The first part of the survey was taken from Gorham's (Gorham, 1988) verbal immediacy instrument that uses a Likert scale (0-4) to answer 16 questions about perceived levels of immediacy communication behaviors inside the classroom. For this study, the context of the

survey was changed from the classroom in general to working in groups inside the classroom. Gorham's original measure has been modified in the past with positive results (Baker, 2010). The results revealed reliability with a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .82.

### *Personality Styles*

The second survey was taken from Goldberg's (1992) Big Five inventory that lists 40-personality traits divided equally among the five personality realms. Each area consisted of 8 items and was assessed using a 9 point Likert scale. Evidence that the 40 items are as robust as the initial 100 item survey was provided by (Nofle & Robins, 2007). The reliability results ranged from .76-.84 for the five personality areas.

### *Conflict Management Styles*

The final aspect of the survey was taken from Rahim's (1983) ROCI-II conflict management style instrument. The 35 statements of the ROCI-II were randomized so that the 7 items for measuring each conflict management style was assessed. Of the three separate ROCI-II forms-A, B, and C where the difference is in reference to boss, subordinate, or peer, the word "peer" was the only form used because of its relevance to group work with college students. Support for the ROCI-II is evident in Bowles' (2009) study claiming that the ROCI-II is theoretically grounded and reliable. The results indicated reliability ranging from .60-.86.

## **Data Analysis and Results**

Immediacy was divided into low, moderate and high by using the mean score which was 42.49 and its standard deviation of 7.85. Scores within (+/-) 1 SD of the mean were considered moderate. Scores greater than 1 SD above the mean were considered highly immediate and those scores less than 1 SD below the mean were considered low. The level of personality was self-reported and then computed and tested in order to determine which of the Big-Five personality domains an individual attested to.

Multiple regression analysis was used in order to show the combined effects of a set of independent variables. The independent variables (level of immediacy and the Big-Five personality traits) and the dependent variable (5 conflict management styles) were normally distributed interval variables, which is where multiple regression most suitably applies (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013).

The multiple regression analysis found the competing conflict strategy variance of the regression coefficient equal to .129, therefore the p value was .01 and found to be significant at the level of immediacy with a p value of .005 with a positive relationship and beta equal to .196. This conflict style also was found to be significant with extroversion with a p value of .01 and a negative relationship of beta equal to -.309.

The avoiding strategy produced little variance with the regression coefficient equal to .076, therefore the p value was .01. However, it was found to be significant at the level of immediacy with a p value of .01 with an inverse relationship according to the standardized coefficients, where beta was equal to -.187 but positively significant at the personality level of extroversion with a p value of .01 with beta equal to .217. The preference for the compromising conflict management style yielded a regression coefficient equal to .076, therefore the p value was .01

and was found to be strongly significant at the level of immediacy with a p value of .001 with a positive relationship with beta equal to .289. It was not correlated with any personality type.

The fourth strategy, collaborating, accounted for part of the variance with a regression coefficient equal to .058, therefore the p value was .01 and generated significant findings at the level of immediacy with a p value of .001 with a strong relationship of beta equal to .496 and significantly inverse with a p value of .05 at the personality level of emotional stability with beta equal to -.136. The final conflict management strategy, accommodating, revealed regression coefficient equal to .056, therefore the p value was .01 and was also statistically significant at both the level of immediacy with a p value of .001 with beta equal to .196 and extroversion with a p value of .01 and beta equal to .192.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to determine conflict management styles from immediacy with the Big-Five personality factors in small groups within the classroom. Some relations among those variables were found. The competing style was positively related to immediacy and inversely to extroversion. Members who are less talkative but display immediacy behaviors are likely to use the competing conflict style. Avoiding conflict style was related to extroversion but indicated an inverse relationship with immediacy. Hence, group members who were talkative but displayed low levels of immediacy behaviors were likely to use the avoiding conflict style. The accommodating conflict style indicated an individual high in immediacy behaviors and extroversion. Therefore, those members who communicate more than others through displaying immediacy behaviors and talkativeness are likely to display accommodating conflict styles. Students most likely to use the collaborating method were found to have the strongest relationship with immediacy at extremely high and possess a negative relationship with emotional stability. Therefore, members displaying positive behaviors through immediacy but also having emotional swings are likely to use the collaborative conflict style.

These results can be beneficial for creating more dynamic groups within the classroom. Each different conflict management style has unique advantages and disadvantages in small groups (Lee, 2008). By knowing the conflict style a student is likely to display, classroom groups can be comprised of the most effective combination of conflict management styles regarding each group's goals.

Identifying a student's likely small group conflict style stemming from the results of this study can be done in several ways. One approach is to pass out the surveys of the variables used in this study to each class of students already using small groups. Then, identify their likely conflict management styles based upon the completed surveys and the variable relationship results of this study to reassemble the groups if needed. Another but less accurate approach is through observation. Extroversion and immediacy behaviors together were found to be strongly associated with several of the different conflict styles students were likely to display. Small groups can be assembled early in the semester for small daily activities. Observing the degree that each student displays of extroversion and immediacy behaviors in these early small groups can give some indication as to which conflict management style they are likely to display within classroom small groups. Students can then be placed into different small groups better suited for their conflict style for larger group projects if necessary.

The literature is void of immediacy as a viable construct in small group conflict management. Therefore, future research should investigate ways to identify student conflict management styles within small groups involving these variables. Researchers should investigate using observations to accurately identify students' small group conflict management styles.

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