

## WHAT GOES AROUND COMES AROUND: THE IMPACT OF PERSONAL CONFLICT STYLE ON WORK CONFLICT AND STRESS

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*Conflict styles are typically seen as a response to particular situations. By contrast, we argue that individual conflict styles may shape an employee's social environment, affecting the level of ongoing conflict and thus his or her experience of stress. Using data from a hospital-affiliated clinical department, we find that those who use a more integrative style experience lower levels of task conflict, reducing relationship conflict, which reduces stress. Those who use a more dominating or avoiding style experience higher levels of task conflict, increasing relationship conflict and stress. We conclude that an employee's work environment is) in part, of his or her own making.*

Conflict management styles have been related to the quality of agreement reached during negotiations (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993) and other conflict management episodes (Van de Vuert, Euwema, & Huismans, 1995), but the impact of conflict styles may be much broader than that. We argue that conflict management styles can have a pervasive effect on work life in organizations, by impacting the degree to which an employee experiences ongoing conflict. Conflict levels, in turn, affect the amount of stress felt by individual employees. Previous research has shown that people with different dispositions tend to create different social environments for themselves. Thus, a person's "situation" depends not only on external conditions, but also on his or her own approach to people and problems. Similarly, experience of conflict is not just a function of external conditions, but also of the conflict management styles that people bring to bear on problems at work.

## Conflict Styles

### Dual Concerns Model

A number of scholars have developed typologies of conflict styles using the conceptual foundation provided by Blake and Mouton's (1964) managerial grid. The two dimensions have been variously labeled "desire to satisfy one's own concern" and "desire to satisfy other's concern" (Thomas, 1976), or "concern for self" and "concern for other" (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979). A person's conflict style is said to incorporate both dimensions in varying degrees. High concern for both self and other defines a "collaborating" or "integrating" style, while low concern for both self and other defines an "avoiding" style. High concern for self, but low concern for other describes a "competing" or "dominating" style. And, low concern for self, but high concern for other describes an "accommodating" or "obliging" style.<sup>1</sup> This basic scheme has dominated the field of dispute resolution for several decades, and has led to the development of several scales that have been extensively studied (Putnam, 1988; Rahim & Magner, 1995; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974).<sup>2</sup>

### Style as an Individual Disposition

There has been ongoing debate, however, about whether there really is such a thing as a conflict management "style." Blake and Mouton (1964), Thomas (1976), and Rahim (1992) hoped to measure the ways in which individuals typically deal with the conflicts they face. This approach treated conflict styles as individual dispositions, stable over time and across situations. Others have argued that approaches to conflict are strategies (Knapp, Putnam, & Davis, 1988; Pruitt, 1983) or intentions (Thomas, 1979) chosen to match the circumstances or the relationship, and therefore should not be treated as stable traits. For example, a person who is dominating when facing conflicts with subordinates is not likely to take the same approach when facing conflicts with a boss.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Some schemes also include "compromising" as a style, which describes moderate concern for self and other. Conceptually, Pruitt (1983) has argued that compromising is not really a distinct style, but rather constitutes "half-hearted" integrating; for this reason, we omit compromising in our analysis.

<sup>2</sup>Others have taken a more inductive approach to conflict styles, resulting in lists of styles ranging from three (Nicotera, 1993) to seven (Sternberg & Soriano, 1984) or more (Volkema & Bergmann, 1989), but in none of these cases has the list of approaches been reproduced by others or developed into scales used in research.

<sup>3</sup>Indeed, this problem has led Rahim (1992) to develop three versions of his scale, one of which refers to conflict with subordinates, another to conflict with peers, and the third to conflict with bosses. The assumption is that people will exhibit different styles when facing those with less power, equal power, or more power. At the same time, the presumption remains that, for a given situation (e.g., conflicts with one's boss), a person's style will be stable.

To accept the view that the situation influences how people approach conflict does not, however, require one to reject the presence of dispositional tendencies. Sternberg and Soriano (1984), for example, found that type of conflict (interpersonal, interorganizational, international) affected which conflict style subjects thought was most appropriate, while also finding significant consistency in subjects' conflict management choices across types of conflict. Similarly, Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, and Hair (1996) found that choice of conflict style was affected by who the conflict was with (e.g., roommate, sibling, romantic partner), while also finding that conflict style was predicted by agreeableness~ an established personality trait. Further supporting our claim that conflict management behaviors are at least partly dispositional, recent research has shown that negotiation tactics and outcomes are associated with dispositional characteristics such as social value orientation (De Dreu & Van Lange, 1995; Olekalns & Smith, 1999) and Big Five personality traits (Barry & Friedman, 1998). Thus, there is evidence both for situational determinants of conflict management behavior (e.g., Drory & Ritov, 1997) and dispositional determinants (e.g., Sternberg & Dobson, 1987). The latter should be visible over the long run, while the former should dominate in specific, extreme situations (Kenrick & Funder, 1991).

### **Effects of Style on Personal Environment**

In most studies of conflict style (e.g., Van de Vliert et al., 1995; Brett, Shapiro, & Lytle, 1998) the primary focus has been on specific dispute resolution episodes. We suggest, however, that the impact of conflict styles may be more long-lasting and pervasive. Recent research in psychology has supported the long-held view (Weick, 1969) that the social environment people experience is, at least in part, a result of their own tendencies. For example, Furr and Funder (1998) examined the effects of "personal negativity" (as measured by a battery of inventories) on social interactions among college students. Those higher in personal negativity tended to keep their distance from others during social interactions, act irritated, blame others, and avoid eye contact. In response, their interaction partners tended to exhibit condescending behavior, act irritated, remain detached, and dominate the interaction. Moreover, if "personal negativity" is indeed a dispositional trait, this pattern will be repeated over time, so that the person high in personal negativity will live in an environment that is more filled with irritated, detached people than occurs for those lower in personal negativity. The social environment that these students faced was not some external presence, but rather was shaped by their own dispositions, and the "cognitive-affective process dynamics characteristic of them" (Mischel & Shoda, 1998, p.251).

Similar findings have been reported for the effects of personality on the experience of conflict. Graziano et al. (1996) examined interactions between subjects asked to resolve several social conflict problems. Low-Agreeable subjects perceived provocative behaviors by their interaction partner as a "conflict," resulting in higher levels of negative affect and higher levels of aggression by those low-agreeable subjects. In response to this aggression, the partner in the interaction was also more likely to experience the interaction as "conflict." Given the seeds of a conflict (the social conflict problem presented by the researchers), some people created interactions with others that were experienced as "conflict," while others did not. How much conflict existed in this environment was not just an external reality, but a result of how each person approached existing problems.

Returning to conflict management styles, we expect that the style which is used can affect the degree to which a person's environment is filled with conflict. If a person approaches conflicts at Time 1 in such a way that those conflicts are more likely to be resolved, then there will be less conflict in that person's environment at Time 2. If such an approach is used repeatedly (i.e., is dispositional), then this person's environment will be filled with relatively few conflicts. By contrast, conflicts are likely to accumulate for those who are less able to resolve them, producing an environment that is more highly conflict-laden.<sup>4</sup>

This process is significant in organizations since conflict is pervasive. Negotiation and dispute resolution are among the core tasks of management (Lax & Sebenius, 1986), and dispute generation and dispute resolution are central to strategic decision-making (Eisenhardt, 1997; Amason, 1996) and the operation of ongoing work teams (Jehn, 1995). Every day, managers are called upon to resolve differences in priorities and preferences, and use conflict in a way that benefits the organization. The key question is how people respond to those conflicts. The degree of conflict experienced is not just a result of latent conflicts (Pondy, 1967), group norms (Jehn, 1997), or corporate culture (Dennison, 1990), but also individual variations in approaches to managing conflicts. Depending on how people approach conflict, they can amplify or dampen naturally-emerging disputes, and make the environment one that is supportive or alienating for themselves.

### **Integrating**

An integrating approach to conflicts can be expected to produce a less conflict-laden environment. From a theoretical perspective, supporters of integrative bargaining argue that only through effortful exploration of both sides' interests can the outcome of a dispute be one that is wise (durable) and efficient (pareto-optimal) (Fisher & Ury, 1991). In experimental research, where concern for self and concern for other were manipulated, the highest levels of joint gain were achieved when negotiators had both a high concern for self and a high concern for other (Pruitt, Carnevale, Ben-Yoav, Nochajski, & Slyck, 1983; Ben-Yoav & Pruitt, 1984a, 1984b), and field studies have shown that supervisors who use an integrating style achieved more behavioral compliance with their requests (Rahim & Buntzman, 1990), which should reduce conflict levels for these supervisors. At the extreme, there may be cases where no deal is even possible

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<sup>4</sup>We are not suggesting that conflict management style determines who is the instigator of conflict. Rather, given ongoing tensions and conflicts which occur naturally in organizations, some people may act in ways that resolve these conflicts and stimulate cooperative behavior, while others may act in ways that leave conflicts unresolved and stimulate antagonistic behavior. If these styles are stable over time, they can shape the environment that each person experiences. Given two employees in the same job with the same peers and bosses and the same number initial disputes, the degree of conflict in their environments may still be quite different.

without the discovery of new alternatives that come from integrative bargaining. The most

famous case of this type may be the Israeli-Egyptian agreement concerning the Sinai desert, where no deal was possible as long as each side focused only on its desire to have control of this territory (Fisher & Ury, 1991, pp.41-42). Once Egypt realized that Israel's interest was in security, and Israel realized that Egypt's interest was in sovereignty, a deal was possible—where Egypt took back the Sinai, but it was made into a demilitarized zone.

The benefits of an integrating style can also be seen in studies of social value orientation, since prosocial orientation has been equated to an integrative bargaining style, and pro-self orientation has been equated to a distributive bargaining style (Olekalns & Smith, 1999, p.658). Kelley and Staheiski (1970) found that those with a prosocial ("cooperative") orientation tend to adapt their dispute resolution approach to those of the other party; if the other party is antagonistic, they respond with similarly antagonistic behavior, but if the other party is cooperative, they respond with similarly cooperative behavior. Thus, in those situations where there is integrative potential, prosocials are able to capitalize on that opportunity. By contrast those with a proself ("competitive") orientation assume that everyone shares their proself perspective and thus acts distributively regardless of the orientation of others around them. Given some set of opportunities for integrative interactions—where the opponent has an integrative style—these opportunities are squandered. Thus, prosocial individuals are likely to resolve more conflicts than proself individuals, making their work environment less conflict-laden over time.

An integrative style, we should point out, may not always be needed; some negotiations may be purely distributive (Lax & Sebenius, 1986), and some decisions may be too trivial to justify the time and effort that are essential for integration (Rahim, 1997). Also, some dominating may serve as a useful complement to integrating (Brett et al., 1998; Van de Vliert et al., 1995). Nonetheless, for complex problems with the potential for joint gain (the type seen most often in intraorganizational conflicts) an integrative approach should produce greater understanding of each party's true interests, make it more likely that an acceptable solution is found, and ensure higher level of joint value. If an employee consistently applies an integrative approach to disputes and potential disputes within the organization, these disputes are more likely to be resolved, and the ensuing deals are more likely to preserve or create organizational resources, making future disputes less likely. As a result, those who tend to approach conflicts with a more integrative style are likely to experience less persistent conflict at work.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>This approach may seem counter to current arguments that conflict is productive (De Dreu & Van de Vliert, 1997), and ignore more structural perspectives on what it means to have a "conflict" (Wall & Callister, 1995), but that is not necessarily the case. We are not suggesting that it is better to eliminate all conflict, but rather that when there are disputes, integrating can affect whether those disputes are resolved, and thus the degree to which the parties who are involved feel that they continue to be in conflict with each other. Using as an example the Israeli-Egyptian negotiations over the Sinai, the creation of a demilitarized Sinai did not eliminate underlying disagreements between these countries, but it certainly did leave these countries feeling less overt conflict than had been the case. If an employee is able to resolve differences as they arise, his or her experience of the workplace will be one with fewer persistent conflicts.

**Task Versus Relationship Conflict.** The discussion so far has focused on the effects of conflict style on the presence of task conflict; that is, the effects of conflict style on a person's ability to resolve differences over work related issues and ideas. Recent empirical research has heightened awareness that there may be many types of conflicts-not just task conflict. Most importantly, some conflicts can be characterized as highly affective or interpersonal<sup>6</sup> (Pinkley, 1990, 1992; Amason & Schweiger, 1997; Jehn, 1995). While moderate levels of task conflict can be productive in some situations, "affective" or "relationship" conflict is usually very counterproductive, taking the focus away from the issues that need to be resolved and placing it instead on personal antagonism.

The problem is that task conflict usually produces relationship conflict. Correlations between task and relationship conflict ranged from .34 to .88 across 11 studies reported in Simons and Peterson (2000). Only Jehn (1995) reported a negative correlation between the two. As Simons and Peterson (2000) argue, differences of opinion between people may be taken personally, turning task conflict into relationship conflict. Amason and Schweiger (1997) describe the problem in this way:

The propensity to mistake cognitive [task] disagreement for personal animosity is especially high in instances where the issues are serious and there is the potential for great personal gain or loss. Often, rather than being seen as a cognitive exercise, disagreement or criticism will be interpreted as a sinisterly motivated effort to expand the influence of some at the expense of others. Such (mis)interpretation can trigger affective conflict. The offended team members respond to what they perceive to be personally motivated criticism with personal attacks of their own and, by so doing, trigger more affective conflict. This downward spiral produces animosity and an unwillingness to tolerate opposition or to continue working together. (p.107)

The key problem that managers face is how to create productive task (or cognitive) conflict without at the same time producing counterproductive relationship conflict.

Given this distinction between task conflict and relationship conflict, we need to distinguish between them in our predictions for an integrative style. We expect that the primary effect of an integrative style will be its impact on levels of task conflict.

*Hypothesis 1a: The stronger a person's tendency to resolve conflicts through integration, the lower will be his or her experience of task conflict at work.*

We expect that an integrative style will also affect relationship conflict, but only through its impact on task conflict. Given our assumption that task conflict often leads to relationship conflict, we predict:

*Hypothesis 1b: Through its effects on task conflict, the stronger a person's tendency to resolve conflicts through integration, the lower will be his or her experience of relationship conflict at work.*

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<sup>6</sup>Pinkley also identifies an emotional-intellectual and a compromise-win dimension.

### Obliging

While integrating is likely to help the parties resolve conflicts, and thus reduce the experience of conflict if it is used consistently over time, the effects of obliging are less clear-cut. Obliging, or focusing on the other party's interests but not your own, should provide an easy way to settle disputes. One party simply gives in to the other party, so that conflict is reduced. However, this result is achieved without recognizing the interests of the person who is obliging, and consequently his or her own issues are not resolved, and little energy has been invested into the dispute to find optimal or creative solutions. Obliging may resolve the dispute for the moment, but collective resources have not been expanded through creative problem-solving, and one side's problems may still remain. In one study, Fry, Firestone, and Williams (1983) showed that members of newly formed couples, who were hesitant to assert their own needs and wanted only to please their partner, tended to concede so rapidly that they missed opportunities for joint gains. Given these positive and negative influences on conflict resolution, we do not expect obliging to have a clear impact on experience of task conflict.

We would, however, expect obliging to have a clear effect on relationship conflict. Obliging is a behavior that is similar to "ingratiation"—one of the social influence tactics identified by Yukl and Tracey (1992). Ingratiation tactics are meant to convince the recipient that you think favorably of them and their ideas. Doing whatever others want would be one way to show that you think favorably of their ideas. While this type of obsequious behavior is not productive, it is likely to produce positive affect in others (Yukl & Tracey, 1992; Ferris, Judge, Rowland, & Fitzgibbons, 1994; Wayne, Liden, Graf, & Ferris, 1997) by decreasing relationship conflict between the parties.

*Hypothesis 2: The stronger a person's tendency to resolve conflicts through obliging, the lower will be his or her experience of relationship conflict at work.*

### Dominating

Dominating occurs when a person considers his or her own interests, but not those of others. It is certainly possible that those who focus on their own interests will thereby act in a way that ensures that conflicts are resolved—they are at least presenting their concerns and making sure that they are addressed. However, there is also a high probability that employing a dominating style will lessen the chance of actually arriving at a solution to the dispute. In simulations where dominating was encouraged, potential joint gains were missed (Pruitt et al., 1983; Ben-Yoav & Pruitt, 1984a, 1984b). If this were to occur over time, available resources for resolving conflicts would effectively be reduced, making agreement harder to reach. In addition, high concern for self combined with low concern for other in these experiments resulted in "rigid, contentious behavior," another factor that led to "difficulty in reaching agreement" (Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993, p.111).

The difficulty created by a distributive bargaining style is exacerbated by the fact that opponents are likely to respond in a similar way. Returning to the social motivation literature, those who are "proself" (i.e., distributive) tend not to adopt an integrative style even if the opponent approaches them in this way. As a result, even bargainers predisposed to an integrative style are likely to respond with a less responsive, hard-bargaining stance (Kelley & Stahelski, 1970). In organizational settings, there is some evidence that a dominating style creates

behaviors in others that make problem resolution less likely. When a supervisor uses a more dominating style, subordinates are less likely to want to communicate with that supervisor (Richmond, Wagner, & McCroskey, 1983) or to comply with his or her directives (Rahim & Buntzman, 1990).

*Hypothesis 3a: The stronger a person's tendency to resolve conflicts through dominating, the higher will be his or her experience of task conflict at work.*

Since we expect dominating to affect task conflict, we should also expect it to affect—indirectly—relationship conflict.

*Hypothesis 3b: Through its effect on task conflict, the stronger a person's tendency to resolve conflicts through dominating, the higher will be his or her experience of relationship conflict at work.*

### **Avoiding**

Those who tend to use an avoiding style of conflict resolution are ill-equipped to deal with disputes that need some attention. With a low concern for their own interests, such people have a hard time representing themselves; at the same time, a low concern for others' interests makes them less able to understand and address other people's problems. Thus, they and other parties to disputes will lack the basic information needed to construct solutions to those conflicts. It will therefore be quite difficult to resolve disputes, and any solutions developed are likely to be sub-optimal, resulting in wasted resources. With fewer solutions developed for problems, and fewer resources available to apply to problems, those who attempt to avoid conflicts are likely to experience higher levels of ongoing conflict.

At a more fundamental level, to say that someone has low concern for self and for others implies that they have little desire to solve the problem at all. For these people, the stronger desire is to downplay or ignore disputes instead of resolving them. Ironically, those who use an avoiding style are likely to experience more task conflict, not less.

*Hypothesis 4a: The stronger a person's tendency to respond to conflicts by avoiding, the higher will be his or her experience of task conflict at work.*

Since we expect avoiding to affect task conflict, we should also expect it to affect-indirectly-relationship conflict.

*Hypothesis 4b: Through its effect on task conflict, the stronger a person's tendency to respond to conflicts by avoiding, the higher will be his or her experience of relationship conflict at work.*



### Effects on Stress

The next question we ask is: what consequences do these differences in the experience of conflict have for those who generate higher or lower levels of task and relationship conflict? At an intrapersonal level, we expect that differences in conflict style, and the resulting differences in experienced conflict, can affect the level of stress experienced at work. This is important because occupational stress has been related to worker dissatisfaction, depression, absenteeism, and a variety of physiological measures such as heart rate, blood pressure, and cholesterol level, which in turn have been related to disease and death rates (Fletcher, 1988).

Recent research suggests that personality can impact stress in two ways. First, personality may predispose an individual to use particular coping mechanisms in the face of stressors (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995). In Lazarus and Launier's (1978) terms, personality can affect the "adaptive resources" available to an individual for managing demands, and thus, the amount of stress he or she will feel. Expressed in terms of our research, a person who prefers the use of a particular conflict management style is expressing a preference for a certain coping mechanism in the face of a particular type of stressor. We should, therefore, expect different levels of stress to result from different styles of conflict management.

Second, in addition to shaping one's response to stress, personality may impact the stressors themselves (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995). In Lazarus and Launier's (1978) terms, personality can affect the "environmental or internal demands" placed on an individual, and thus, indirectly, the amount of stress he or she will feel (independent of that person's adaptive resources). In our terms, variations in conflict management style result in differential exposure to experiences of conflict at work, a known stressor (McGrath, 1976), thus increasing or decreasing the demands placed on an individual. In this way as well, we expect different conflict management styles to contribute to different levels of stress. To sum up, one's style of managing conflict affects stress both directly (as a resource for coping with the demands of conflict) and indirectly (through exposure to one stressor-conflict).

### Effects of Conflict Style on Stress via Conflict Level

We have already predicted that various conflict styles lead to varying levels of relationship conflict. Higher levels of relationship conflict should be a source of stress:

Research has demonstrated that affective, personal attacks decrease group performance. When group members are upset with one another, feel antagonistic towards one another and are experiencing affective conflict, their performance and productivity can suffer. Group members will tend to focus their efforts on resolving or ignoring the interpersonal conflicts, rather than concentrating on task completion (Jehn, 1997, p.92).

When conflicts become personal, they are more likely to escalate (Pruitt & Rubin, 1986); the more one side in a conflict "depersonalizes" the other, the more their actions are seen in the worst light, making more antagonistic responses seem appropriate, further increasing the original conflict. Relationship conflicts are unproductive, hard to manage, and likely to leave people with more pressures and less ability to manage them.

The potential effects of task conflict are more complicated. There is some evidence that

task conflict can lead to dissatisfaction and anxiety (Baron, 1990; Surra & Longstreth, 1990), but also evidence that it can also be productive (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1995) and that it need not have a negative impact on satisfaction (Jehn, 1991), depending on the circumstances. Thus, task conflict may place greater demands on people, but may also help stimulate creativity and solve problems, thus reducing demands on them. Whether task conflict is productive or not varies with the type of task, norms about conflict, and the degree of task interdependence (Jehn, 1995). Given a high degree of certainty that relationship conflict will be unproductive, combined with uncertainty about the effects of task conflict, we propose that the way in which conflict styles indirectly affect stress is through their effects on relationship conflict, not task conflict.

*Hypothesis 5: The effects of task conflict on stress are mediated by relationship conflict.*

### **Direct Effects of Conflict Style on Stress**

Conflict management styles are made up of two underlying dimensions—concern for self and concern for other. Concern for self, we argue, is the most important dimension directly affecting stress. Those with a high concern for self are able to represent their own interests, giving them a role in the management of the world around them and ultimately some sense of control. Those with a low concern for self fail to represent their own interests, making them passive recipients of the actions of the other parties and eliminating any semblance of control.

In terms of the stress literature, those high in concern for self have a "resource" for coping with potential stressors that is not possessed by those low in concern for self. Similar resources such as mastery, self-efficacy, locus of control, and Type-A personality which focus on the belief that one has the ability to manage life's demands, have been shown to decrease the impact of a variety of stressors (Jex & Bliese, 1999; Bluen, Barling, & Burns, 1990; Kahn & Byosiore, 1990; Hobfoll, London, & OIT, 1988). Those who exhibit low concern for self will not be able to define the problem for the other party (or themselves), are not engaged in choosing among alternatives, and are not the ones who are taking actions. They both lack a critical resource needed to solve problems and may perceive existing problems as more threatening, thus increasing their level of stress. While high concern for self may lead to a momentary engagement in stressful confrontation, a positive long-term outcome should be the likely result. Therefore, we hypothesize that those who use styles expressing high concern for self (i.e., integrating and dominating) will experience lower levels of stress, while those who use styles expressing low concern for self (i.e., obliging and avoiding) will experience higher levels of stress.

*Hypothesis 6: Those who use a more integrating or dominating style will experience lower levels of stress; those who use a more obliging or avoiding style will experience higher levels of stress.*

## Method

### Research Site

The sample for this study consisted of all members of a clinical medical department at a major southeastern university. This research was carried out as part of a larger investigation into the sources and consequences of conflict within a rapidly changing medical environment. In exchange for feedback concerning the dynamics of internal conflict, the department's administrators allowed the authors to conduct this research. All 85 members of the department participated in the data collection; however, because of missing data for some respondents, the effective sample size was reduced to 82. Sixty-eight percent of the sample was female, and ages ranged from the early 20s to the 70s. Doctors comprised 29% of the sample, with researchers (12%), nurses and clinicians (19%), and support staff (40%) filling out the rest. The data were collected through questionnaires administered one-on-one by the authors or other researchers associated with the project. Each subject was assured of the confidentiality of his or her responses and given the opportunity to decline participation if he or she wished.

### Measures

**Conflict styles.** The Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II)<sup>7</sup> (Rahim, 1983a) was used to assess the four personal conflict styles considered in this study: integrating, dominating, obliging, and avoiding. The ROCI-II relies upon five-point Likert-type scales (1 = Strongly Disagree... 5 = Strongly Agree) to assess the underlying dimensions of individual conflict style. In the ROCI-II, specific behaviors are described to subjects, who are asked to assess the degree to which that behavior reflects their own behavior in a conflict situation. Validation of the original instrument yielded reliabilities for the scales ranging from .67 to .77 (Rahim, 1983b). Similar results have been found in other studies (Welder-Hatfield, 1988). Based on an overview of ten studies using the ROCI-II scale, Welder-Hatfield (1988) finds support for construct, concurrent, and predictive validity of the measure. In a recent study, Rahim and Manger (1995) found support for the factor invariance of the ROCI-II across referent roles and organization levels, thus adding evidence of the dispositional validity of the measure.

**Task and Relationship Conflict.** Jehn's (1995) four item scale was used to assess task conflict. The scale asks the respondent to consider the amount of task-or work-based conflict he or she experiences with others in the work place. The five-point scale is anchored by 1 for "none" and 5 for "a lot." For this study, the subjects were asked to think specifically about interactions within the department, as opposed to the broader hospital or university setting. In her original study, Jehn found a reliability of .92 for the scale, similar to the value of .84 found in this study.

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<sup>7</sup>The ROCI-II has three forms (A, B, & C), with conflict with subordinates, peers, or supervisors as the referents. While Rahim (1983a) provides evidence suggesting that an individual's style varies with the status of the other party, the magnitude of these differences, although statistically significant, is small in absolute terms. Also, as a practical matter, is it very hard to get subjects to answer the same questions three times. Therefore, for the sake of parsimony, we used "people at work" as the referent for these items.

To measure relationship conflict we relied on Cox's (1998) Organizational Conflict Scale. Cox's scale focuses on the active hostility found in relationship conflict and is based on items such as "Much plotting takes place behind the scenes" and "One party frequently undermines the other." The scale is distinct from other recent measures of relationship conflict, such as Jehn's (1995), in that it deals more with perceptions of active conflict behavior rather than perceptions of an overall state of conflict. In this study we used 5 items from the original scale found to better represent the underlying construct (Cox, personal communication). The scale uses a six-point response format anchored by 1 for "strongly agree" and 6 for "strongly disagree." Cox found a reliability of .93 for the abbreviated scale, equal to the value found here.

Because of the relatively high correlation between task and relationship conflict, as well as the Ongoing concern about the empirical separability of these constructs (Simons & Peterson, 2000), we carried out a factor analysis (principal components analysis with varimax rotation) of the items in these scales. As Table 1 shows, a two-factor solution emerged with all items loading strongly and distinctly on their appropriate factor, strong evidence that the respondents distinguished between the two types of conflict.

**Table 1**  
**Results of Factor Analysis of Task and Relationship Conflict**

Items	Factor 1	Factor 2
<b>Task Conflict</b>		
How often do people you work with <i>disagree about</i> opinions regarding the work being done?	.23	.76
How much conflict <i>about the work</i> you do is there among the people you work with?	.39	.71
How frequently are there conflicts <i>about ideas</i> among people you work with?	.25	.84
To what extent are there <i>differences of opinion</i> among those you work with?	.37	.76
<b>Relationship Conflict</b>		
The atmosphere here is often charged with hostility.	.75	.29
Backbiting is a frequent occurrence.	.83	.32
One party frequently undermines another.	.89	.32
There are often feelings of hostility among parties.	.88	.31
Much "plotting" takes place "behind the scenes."	.80	.33

*Note:* The first and second factors accounted for 63% and 12% of the variance, respectively.

**Stress:** To measure work stress, we used a slightly modified version of Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein's (1983) Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). Recognizing that individuals may respond differently to stressful events or situations, Cohen et al. developed the PSS to measure

the experience of stress rather than purportedly stressful events. The original scale employed 14 items designed to assess stress-related thoughts and feelings experienced over the last month. Convergent validity for the scale has been demonstrated through significant correlations with scales measuring the self-assessed impact of life events and with standard measures of physical and depressive symptomology. The original scale was modified to focus on stress experienced at or as a consequence of work and the reference to the last month was dropped. A representative item asks the respondent to assess how often he or she "gets fidgety or nervous as a result of [his or her] job." A five-point response scale anchored by 1 for "never" and 5 for "often" was used. Two items that significantly overlapped with work characteristics, and thus may represent potential stressors rather than actual stress, were dropped. In this sample, we found a scale reliability of .90, slightly greater than the values of .84, .85, and .86 from Cohen et al.'s (1983) initial validation study.

Table 2 presents bivariate correlations between the variables used in the study as well as means, standard deviations, and scale  $\alpha$ s for the measures.

### Analysis

The AMOS (Arbuckle, 1997) structural equation modeling program was used to estimate a series of models designed to test our hypotheses. Because the modest sample size<sup>8</sup> precluded the estimation of multiple-indicator models, we averaged the individual items to develop composite scales. The factor loadings between the observed scales and latent variables were fixed at the square root of their reliability and the error variances were fixed at one minus the reliability multiplied by the variance of the composite scale (e.g., Hofmann & Morgeson, 1999; Scheck, Kinicki, & Davy, 1995). As recommended by Medsker, Williams, and Holahan (1994) and Maruyama (1998), we relied on several statistics to assess overall model fit: the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) (Bentler, 1990), the Incremental Fit Index (IFI) (Bollen, 1989), and the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) (Bentler & Bonett, 1980).

Figure 1 shows the results for our overall model. This model includes all relationships included in Hypotheses 1-6. The hypothesized model represented the data quite well, with fit statistics comfortably above the .90 level indicative of acceptable fit (CFI = .97; IFI = .98, TLI = .95).

### Effect of Style on Conflict

**Task Conflict.** As predicted, higher levels of integrating were associated with lower levels of experienced task conflict, while higher levels of dominating and avoiding were associated with higher levels of experienced task conflict, although the effect for avoiding was marginally significant. Thus, Hypotheses 1a & 3a received strong support while Hypothesis 4a received weak support. We also explicitly did not predict that obliging would have an effect on task conflict. To test whether obliging also has an effect on experience of task conflict, we respecified the hypothesized model, adding a path from obliging to task conflict. The path

<sup>8</sup>Bentler and Chou (1987) suggest that "although definitive recommendations are not available" a minimum ratio of sample size to free parameters of approximately 5:1 may be sufficient, a number slightly greater than our 4.8:1 ratio.

was not significant and, as the chi-square difference test shows, the addition of the path did not significantly improve overall model fit [ $\chi^2(1) = .37, p > .10$ ]. Thus, it appears that several conflict styles do affect the experience of task conflict at work: those who have an integrating style experience lower levels of task conflict, while those who have a dominating or avoiding style experience higher levels of task conflict. A person's work environment is, at least partly, of his or her own making.

**Relationship Conflict.** As can be seen in Figure 1, there is a strong relationship between task conflict and relationship conflict. We hypothesized that the effects of integrating, dominating, and avoiding on relationship conflict occur through their effects on task conflict (Hypotheses 1b, 3b, and 4b), while there would be a direct effect of obliging on relationship conflict (Hypothesis 2). To fully test Hypotheses 1b, 3b, and 4b, we needed not only to show that there is a relationship between task conflict and relationship conflict, but also to ensure that there is no direct effect of these conflict management styles on relationship conflict. To make this assessment, we re-estimated the model, adding direct paths from integrating, dominating, and avoiding to relationship conflict. None of the three paths was significant and their addition failed to significantly increase overall model fit [ $\chi^2(3) = 3.60, p > .10$ ]. Therefore, Hypotheses 1b, 3b, and 4b were supported. Turning to Hypothesis 2, as Figure 1 shows, higher levels of obliging are associated with lower levels of relationship conflict, thereby supporting this hypothesis.

### Effect of Style on Stress

We hypothesized that conflict styles would affect the experience of stress at work, both by affecting the level of relationship conflict experienced (indirect effects) and by providing people with resources for managing stress (direct effects). As Figure 1 shows, the path from relationship conflict to work stress was both strong and significant, suggesting that as conflict styles affect work conflict and relationship conflict, they will also affect the level of Stress experienced. To test Hypothesis 5, that the effects of conflict style on stress occur via their effects on relationship conflict (and not task conflict), we also need to show that there is no direct effect of task conflict on stress. To do this, we estimated a model that included a direct path from task conflict to work stress. This path was not significant and its addition did not significantly improve overall model fit ( $\chi^2(1) = .32, > .10$ ). Those who use an integrating or obliging style experience less stress, due to reductions in relationship conflict, while those who use dominating or avoiding styles experience more stress, due to increases in relationship conflict.

We also hypothesized direct effects of conflict style on work stress, expecting that those who are able to assert their own interests (i.e., those who use a dominating or integrating style) will experience less stress than those who tend not to assert their interests (i.e., those who use an obliging or avoiding style). These effects are shown in our hypothesized model. The paths for avoiding and obliging were both significant and positive as predicted, while the paths for integrating and dominating were not significant. These results are not exactly as stated in Hypothesis 6, but they do support the idea that people who tend not to assert their own interests are likely to experience higher levels of stress at work. These results point to an interesting contradiction faced by those who use an obliging style: obliging reduces work stress by reducing relationship conflict, but it also increases work stress by weakening a person's ability to assert his or her own interests.

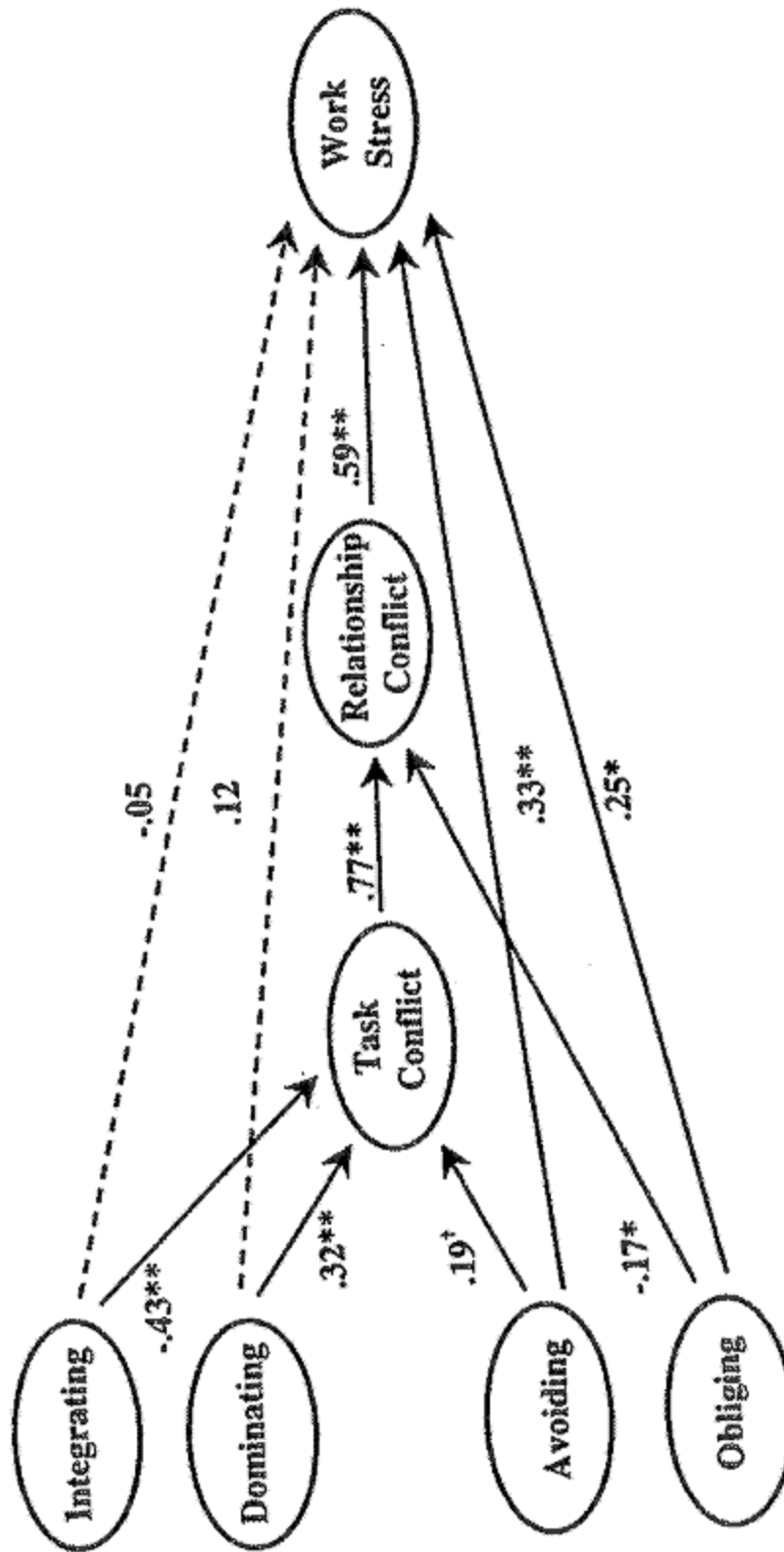
Table 2  
Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Integrating style	3.98	.68	(.86)						
2. Dominating style	2.42	.74	-.06	(.75)					
3. Avoiding style	3.50	.78	.15	-.16	(.76)				
4. Obliging style	3.30	.65	-.01	-.05	.25*	(.79)			
5. Task conflict	3.01	.90	-.38**	.22	.18	-.03	(.84)		
6. Relationship conflict	3.38	1.47	-.37*	.29**	.03	-.16	.67**	(.93)	
7. Stress	2.60	.75	-.25*	.18	.32**	.18	.39**	.48**	(.90)

Note: Scale alphas along diagonal.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . (two-tailed)

Figure 1  
Hypothesized Model



Note: Composite indicators and error terms have been omitted for clarity. Standardized coefficients are reported. Dashed lines indicate non-significant paths.  
<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . (one-tailed)



## Discussion

Typically, conflict management styles have been studied in the context of negotiation or dispute resolution, and the primary concern has been whether a given approach is effective in each specific instance. This is an important question, but the effects of conflict styles may be more sustained and pervasive than is suggested by this research. Conflicts occur regularly in organizations, as people present different opinions about problems and procedures and vie for their preferred approaches. As Lax and Sebenius (1986) put it, the very job of managing is one of constant negotiation. Thus, conflict styles represent a core dimension of managing interpersonal relations at work.

Given the centrality of conflict in work life, the way in which an employee manages disputes will have a pervasive impact on his or her work life. One's work environment is not just an external entity that is shared by all those who sit in the same office or are part of the same department or division. Rather, it is shaped by each employee as he or she engages with others in particular ways. As personality researchers have shown, consistent behaviors toward others can create an environment that is unique to that person. Simply put, an individual's work environment is (at least partly) of his or her own making.

This raises the possibility that each member of an organization may live in a unique environment, or at least one that has been significantly shaped by the behaviors that their personal styles generate in others. This type of individualized environment might be called an organizational "micro-environment." While those who study organizational culture or teams theorize about and try to measure what is common across these groups, just as important is the way in which individual experiences of the same group vary-not just due to differences in perception or imperfect measures, but also due to the ways in which people make that environment different for themselves.

We have shown that people who favor a particular approach to disputes may create environments with varying degrees of conflict. Those who are more integrating produce an environment with less conflict, while those who are more dominating or avoiding produce an environment with more conflict. These differences in conflict level, in turn, affect stress, so that exposure to stressors is, in part, a function of individual differences, not just external conditions. These results suggest that employees facing high-conflict, high-stress environments may be able to shape that environment by modifying their approach to conflict. While there is evidence that conflict styles may be treated as stable individual dispositions, there is also evidence that people can and do override personal biases of all types with appropriate training and support (Thorpe & Olson, 1990). Training in mutual-gains bargaining, or creative problem-solving, may help people to learn to act in ways that improve their work environment and decrease their individual experience of stress.

The specific types of behavior that are most beneficial to an individual, according to our data, are the ones that have been previously suggested as the normative ideal. Integrating reduces experience of task conflict and relationship conflict, thereby reducing stress. By contrast, avoiding and dominating increase task conflict, which, in turn, increases relationship conflict and stress. Obliging has a more complicated story. It does help to decrease the experience of relationship conflict, reducing stress, but it also increases stress because those who favor obliging (and avoiding) lack one resource needed to manage the stress that comes from heightened conflict-an

ability to assert their own interests. Thus, the recommendations for obliging are less clear-cut.

Lastly, our results suggest that the emerging distinction between task and relationship conflict is central to the study of conflict styles. Although styles have a more direct impact on task conflict, negative interpersonal effects of conflict styles occur because of the high correlation between task conflict and relationship conflict. Once task conflict—which has significant benefits (De Dreu & Van de Vliert, 1997)—is transformed into relationship conflict, its interpersonal effects are highly negative. This suggests that one of the key areas to manage is the connection between task conflict and relationship conflict. In order to get the benefits of the former without the negative effects of the latter, this connection must be broken. As the work of Simons and Peterson (2000) suggests, one way to break this relationship is to develop higher levels of trust.

Several potential limitations in our research design should be noted. Our study relied upon self-report measures, and as a consequence runs the risk of potential common method variance. However, several factors reduce this concern. First, Spector (1987) has shown that studies using properly developed and standardized instruments are resistant to method variance. All of our scales have been used previously, some, such as the ROCI-II scales, extensively. Second, the conflict style measures were differentially related to both task and relationship conflict and to stress, a finding unlikely to occur as a consequence of common method effects. The relatively small sample used for this study may limit the generalizability of the results. However, because we were able to capture an entire department, consisting of a variety of jobs, we are assured that our results are not biased by differential response due to either measured or unmeasured variables.

And lastly, as with all cross-sectional research designs, this study cannot definitively state the causal direction of the hypothesized relationships. However, as we have stated, conflict styles have a dispositional as well as a situational component. The dispositional component should unambiguously be viewed as antecedent to the experience of conflict and stress. Future longitudinal research should measure conflict styles before organizational entry to assess whether the long-term experience of conflict and stress also shapes the situational component of conflict style.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have argued for a broader conceptualization of conflict styles than has perhaps been the norm. The findings of our study suggest that, in contrast to more traditional explanations, conflict originates not only in circumstances but also in the styles that individuals use when faced with disagreement. The ways in which an individual responds to the ambiguity, uncertainty, and discord that help define organizational life also shape the responses of others and, ultimately, help to create the individual experience of work. An awareness of the potential approaches one can take in dealing with conflict, as well as an understanding of their consequences, can provide employees with a powerful set of tools with which they can help shape their own work climate.

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