SOUTH AFRICAN GENERATION Y STUDENTS' CONFLICT-RESOLUTION STYLES

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—Abstract —

Conflict is typically the product of differences in values, attitudes and expectations, together with clashes over resources and power. These factors are often also used to explain conflict between different generations. With more and more members of Generation Y entering the workforce and working alongside members of Generation X and the younger cohort of the Baby Boomer generation, so it is becoming increasingly important to understand their conflict-resolution styles. This study focused on discerning South African Generation Y university students' predominant conflict-resolution approach. A self-reporting questionnaire was distributed to a convenience sample of 279 Generation Y students registered at two South African higher education institutions situated in the Gauteng Province. The questionnaire included the extended five-component Dutch Test for Conflict Handling (DUTCH). Data analysis involved principle component analysis, reliability and validity analysis, descriptive statistics and an independent-samples t-test. Principle component analysis yielded a five-component solution in accordance with the literature. The Cronbach alpha values for the five components ranged between 0.69 and 0.81, thereby suggesting internal-consistency reliability. The mean inter-item correlations ranged from 0.36 to 0.51 for each extracted factor, and the Pearson's Product-Moment correlation coefficients between factors were low to medium, which suggests that convergent and discriminant validity may be assumed. The findings indicate that Generation Y students' predominant conflict-resolution style is the problem-solving approach, whilst their least favoured approach is yielding to others. Concerning gender differences, the only statistically significant difference between male and female participants was on the forcing conflict-resolution approach, with males scoring a higher mean. South African Generation Y students' preference towards the problem-solving conflict-resolution approach

suggests that they have a high concern for both themselves and others, and that, as much as a situation allows, they will seek to create a win-win agreement, whereby both their own and the aspirations of others are met.

Keywords: Conflict-resolution styles, Generation Y students, gender differences

JEL Classification: D74.

1. INTRODUCTION

Generational studies emanate from the notion that the shared historical events and social trends experienced during individuals' formative years "coalesce into a natural view of the world" (Mannheim, 1952[1927]:298) and have a profound influence on a particular generation's frame of reference and consequent values and attitudes (Schewe & Meredith, 2004:51). This generational consciousness refers to the collective attitudes and values of the prototypical member of a generation (Strauss & Howe, 1991:63) that serves to differentiate them from members of other generations (Ortega y Gasset, 1961[1923]:15). According to Strauss and Howe (1991:39), generational changes are cyclical in that members of each new generation of youths tend to try to correct or compensate for what they perceive as the mistakes of the mid-life generation in power at the time, which gives rise to generational conflict. Bourdieu (1993:101) views this generational conflict as a clash over resources and power, stating that "just as the old have an interest in pushing young people back into youth, so the young have an interest in pushing the old into old age".

Using 20-year increments, Markert (2004:21) defines the generations currently alive as Silents (individuals born between 1926 and 1945), Baby Boomers (individuals born between 1946 and 1965), Generation X (individuals born between 1966 and 1985), Generation Y (individuals born between 1986 and 2005) and the as yet unnamed generation of individuals born after 2005. Given that the typical working life of an individual starts between 18 and 24 years of age, depending on whether or not they pursue a higher education qualification, and ends at approximately 65 years of age, the current work force includes members of three generations, namely Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y – a situation which is no doubt a hotbed for potential conflict.

Hilmann (2014:241) opines that managers are more and more concerned with providing a multigenerational environment in an attempt to reduce the number of workplace conflicts occurring between different generations. As more members of Generation Y enter the workforce, understanding how their conflict-resolution

styles differ from the older generations already active in the workplace may be valuable, especially in light of management decision-making. This understanding is particularly relevant concerning Generation Y university students, given that a graduate qualification opens up the possibility for them potentially becoming industry leaders in the future. This may also lead to increased workplace conflict as management styles can be influenced by and affect older generations working under the leadership of such individuals. Another dimension worthy of noting when considering conflict-resolution styles is the differences between genders. Studies have found that males and females adopt different conflict-resolution styles in the workplace (Ndubisi, 2013:31; Chusmir & Mills, 1989:155). As such, understanding male and female conflict-resolution preferences could be valuable in the workplace from a management perspective. In light of this, the purpose of this study was to discern South African Generation Y university students' predominant conflict-resolution approach and to test if male and female students differed in their approach to handling conflict.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

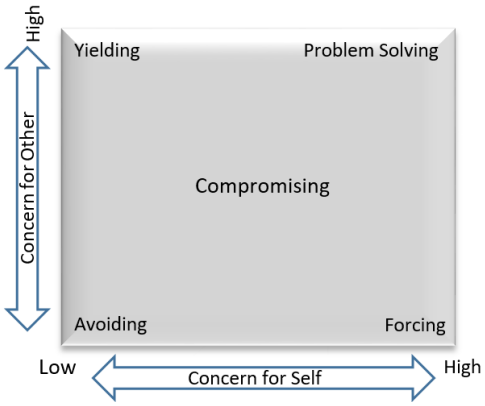
Conflict situations between individuals in and outside the workplace are inevitable and may occur due to a number of reasons. Possible reasons for conflict include differences in expectations, requirements, morals, practices within the workplace and personalities (Messarra, Karkoulian & El-Kassar, 2016:732). Kilmann and Thomas (1978:60) mention that emotional states, for example the level of tension, stress, hostility and anxiety of an individual may heighten a potential conflict situation. Furthermore, Chen and Starosta (1997:2) indicate that conflict can also originate from a lack of proper communication, as well as from differences in cultural, social, historical and political conditions within a group, team or organisation. Although most conflict situations are viewed as negative or destructive, constructive conflict may hold various positive function, depending on their attributes in terms of type, size and rigidity. Concerning the type of conflict, certain conflict issues may be less or more favourable to certain management styles and less or more inclined to constructive conflict-resolution. The size of the conflict situation is another factor. Smaller conflict situations may be easier to resolve in a constructive manner compared to larger situations. The rigidity of conflict refers to the availability of reasonable alternatives for all parties involved in solving the conflicting issue at hand (Deutsch, 1994:13-19).

When conflict situations occur in the workplace it should be managed in an appropriate way. De Dreu, Evers, Beersma, Kluwer and Nauta (2001:645)

mention that managers spend up to 20 percent of their time trying to resolve and manage conflict situations. Non-management or mismanagement of conflict can result in larger and more uncontrollable situations if not resolved timeously. Some of the consequences of unresolved conflict include, reduced performance, hostility towards managers and colleagues, non-cooperation, possible resignation from the company and even developing health problems (Meyer & Surujlal, 2013:105; Messarra *et al.*, 2016:793).

People manage conflict in different ways and understanding these management styles may result in resolving conflict situations quicker and easier. Over time, several conflict management styles have been identified. For example, Tsai and Chi (2009:958) refer to the five handling approaches as collaborating, dominating, compromising, avoiding and accommodating, whereas Mukundan, Dhanya and Saraswathyamma (2013:85) refer to resignation, withdrawal, confrontation, compromise and negotiation styles. Most conflict-resolution typologies are rooted in the Dual Concern Theory (Pruitt & Rubin, 2004:40), which contends that conflict management is a function of either low or high self-concern in combination with low or high concern for other individuals (Pruitt & Rubin, 2004:40; De Dreu *et al.*, 2001:646). This is visually depicted in Figure 1. Based on the Dual Concern Theory, several conflict measurement instruments have been developed over time. Some of these include the Conflict Measurement Survey (Kilmann & Thomas, 1977), Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory (Rahim & Magner, 1995) and Van de Vliert's (1997) DUTCH Test for Conflict Handling, which includes measuring the four management styles of yielding, dominating, collaborating and avoiding. Although this measurement scale is widely recognised, there is the argument that a fifth style, namely compromising, should be added to the instrument (De Dreu *et al*., 2001:656).

Figure-1: Representation of Dual Concern Theory



Source: De Drue *et al.* (2001:646)

As seen from Figure 1, having a high concern for self and subsequent low concern for other individuals leads to the predominant forcing style preference. The forcing style mainly involves imposes one's own will onto others (De Drue *et al.*, 2001:646). Tsai and Chi (2009:957) refer to this style as dominating or competing and explains it as an assertive or aggressive approach. Morris-Rothschild and Brassard (2006:108) refer to this type of style as a 'win-lose' approach, which does not include multi-party cooperation and may even be forced at the expense of the other party. On the opposite side of this style is the yielding style. This style has a high concern for others and a low concern for self. This style involves accepting the will of others over your own (De Dreu *et al.*, 2001:646). Also referred to as the obliging or accommodating style, this style has a high-degree of cooperation with other parties or concern with fostering positive relationships, sometimes at the expense of one's own personal objectives and goals (Tsai & Chi, 2009:958). Having a low concern for both others and self, leads to an avoiding style. This style typically results in avoiding the situation or by remaining neutral in controversial situations (Morris-Rothschild & Brassard, 2006:108). Tsai and Chi, (2009:958) explain this style as putting problems on hold or eluding solutions leading to a 'no-win' outcome. The problem solving style involves high degree of concern for self and for others. De Drue *et al.* (2001:646-647) explain this style as finding an agreement that pleases all parties' objectives as much as possible. This style aims at information exchange between all parties regarding insights, preferences, priorities and negotiating between significant and non-significant matters. Also referred to as the integrating or collaborating style, this style

involves all parties working towards achieving all or most goals (Tsai & Chi, 2009:958). This style is sometimes complex and time-consuming as a great degree of trust and negotiation is needed in such a situation. Morris-Rothschild and Brassard (2006:108) refers to this style as a 'win-win' strategy and indicate that it is focused on optimising rather than sacrificing. These four styles make up the 'lean' version of the DUTCH Test for Conflict Handling. The 'expanded' version includes the compromising style, which may result in neither parties achieving their goals and is in some cases referred to as the 'lose-lose' situation. Contrasting views on the compromising style include some seeing it as a lukewarm version of the problem solving style. However, others opine that it may be seen as a distinct strategy that involves searching for consensus between parties (De Drue *et al.*, 2001:647). This style requires both parties to enter a give-and-take situation through making equally acceptable decisions (Tsai & Chi, 2009:958). This study made use of the five style 'expanded version of the DUTCH Test for Conflict Handling.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

In order to determine Generation Y university students' conflict-resolution styles in the South African context, a descriptive research design was followed making use of a single cross-sectional sample.

3.2 Sampling method and data collection

The focus of this study was on Generation Y university students in South Africa. Accordingly, the target population was defined as Generation Y students aged between 18 and 24 years, enrolled at registered public South African higher education institutions (HEIs). Owing to time and cost constraints, the sampling frame was limited to the campuses of two HEIs located in South Africa's Gauteng and North-West provinces, and included the campus of one traditional university and the campus of one university of technology. For the sample, 350 questionnaires were distributed by fieldworkers to a convenience sample of students who agreed to participate in the study across the two campuses (175 per campus). These fieldworkers followed the mall-intercept survey method in soliciting the students' participation in the study.

3.3 Research instrument

A self-reporting questionnaire was used to collect the required data. The first section of this questionnaire was designed to record demographic data and the

second section contained the extended five-component Dutch Test for Conflict Handling (DUTCH) tested by De Dreu *et al.*, (2001:668).

Each of the five conflict-resolution styles of the extended five-component DUTCH scale were preceded by the phrase 'When I have a conflict situation with someone in the university context, I do the following'. The first component of DUTCH measures the yielding style and comprises four items, namely 'I give in to the wishes of the other party', 'I concur (agree) with the other party,' 'I try to accommodate the other party' and 'I adapt to the other parties' goals and interests'. The second component of DUTCH measures the compromising style and consists of four items, namely 'I try to realise a middle-of-the-road solution', 'I emphasise that we have to find a compromise solution', 'I insist we both give in a little' and 'I strive whenever possible towards a fifty-fifty compromise'. The third component of DUTCH measures the forcing style and comprises four items, namely 'I push my own point of view', 'I try and gain benefits for myself', 'I fight for a good outcome for myself' and 'I do everything to win'. The fourth component of DUTCH measures the problem-solving style and comprises the four items of 'I examine issues until I find a solution that really satisfies me and the other party', 'I stand for my own and other's goals and interests', 'I examine ideas from both sides to find a mutually optimal solution' and 'I work out a solution that serves my own as well as other's interests as good as possible'. The last component of DUTCH measures the avoiding style and, again, contains four items, namely 'I avoid a confrontation about our differences', 'I avoid differences of opinion as much as possible', 'I try to make differences seem less severe' and 'I try to avoid a confrontation with the other person'.

The sample's responses to these five DUTCH subscales were measured using a six-point Likert-type scale that ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6).

3.4 Ethical considerations

As per the ethics conventions of marketing research, the confidentiality of participants' responses was maintained, with responses only reported in aggregate. In addition, the students' participation in the study was voluntary.

3.5 Data analysis

The IBM Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), Version 25 for Windows was used for analysing the collected data. The statistical analysis procedures applied to the data included frequencies and percentages, principle component

analysis, internal-consistency reliability analysis, convergent and discriminant validity analysis, descriptive statistics and a two independent-samples t-test.

4. RESULTS

Following data collection by the fieldworkers, 279 completed questionnaires were returned, which, given the 350 distributed, equals a response rate of 80 percent. The sample contained more male (55%) than female (45%) participants and, while each of the specified seven age categories were represents, most of the participants were in the 20- to 21-year old range (51%). There were participants from each of South Africa's nine province, but a large portion of the sample indicated their home province as Gauteng (47%). In terms of the type of HEI to which participants indicated being registered, there were slightly more from the university of technology's campus (Technology) (54%) than from the traditional university's campus (Traditional) (46%). A description of the demographics of the sample is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample description

	Frequency	**Percent (%)**		**Frequency**	**Percent (%)**
Gender			**Province**		
Female	125	44.8	Eastern Cape	8	2.9
Male	154	55.2	Free State	29	10.4
Age			Gauteng	130	46.6
18	10	3.6	Kwazulu-Natal	7	2.5
19	36	12.9	Mpumalanga	19	6.8
20	70	25.1	North West	18	6.5
21	72	25.8	Northern Cape	2	0.7
22	47	16.8	Western Cape	1	0.4
23	26	9.3	Limpopo	61	21.9
24	18	6.5	Missing	4	1.4
Institution					
Traditional	128	45.9			
Technology	151	54.1			

In order to assess the dimensionality of the extended five-component DUTCH scale in the South African environment, principle component analysis with the

varimax rotation was conducted. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and the Bartlett Test of Sphericity was calculated to ascertain the factorability of the data set, where a KMO value above 0.6 and a significant Bartlett's Test value indicate that the data is suitable for factor analysis (Field, 2009:659). These computations resulted in a KMO value of 0.757 and a significant Bartlett's test of sphericity (chi square = 1910.716; 190 dfs; $p \leq 0.01$), indicated the sampling adequacy and factorability of the data. In addition, the Cronbach alpha values of the extracted factors were calculated to ascertain their internal-consistency reliability, where values greater than 0.60 indicate acceptable reliability (Malhotra, 2010:319). Furthermore, the mean inter-item correlation coefficients were computed to provide an indication of the convergent validity of the items within each factor, where values between the range of 0.15 and 0.50 are recommended (Clark & Watson, 1995:316). The varimax-rotated factors, communalities, eigenvalues, percentage variance extracted, mean inter-item correlation values and Cronbach alpha values for the extracted factors are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Varimax-rotated factors, communalities, eigenvalues, percentage variance extracted, mean inter-item correlation and Cronbach alpha values

Items	**Factors**					**Communalities**
	1	2	3	4	5	
1					.736	.572
2					.856	.774
3					.514	.511
4					.620	.603
5				.773		.621
6				.706		.539
7				.493		.416
8				.652		.529
9			.703			.514
10			.854			.740
11			.845			.736
12			.751			.623
13	.793					.666
14	.766					.623
15	.756					.630
16	.685					.606
17		.759				.618
18		.846				.742
19		.761				.608
20		.756				.623
Eigenvalue	4.13	2.76	2.53	1.64	1.23	
Percentage variance	20.66	13.79	12.66	8.21	6.16	
Mean inter-item correlations	.49	.51	.51	.36	.38	
Cronbach alpha	.79	.81	.81	.69	.71	

In accordance with the findings of De Dreu *et al*. (2001:657), five factors with eigenvalues greater than one were extracted, and these five factors explained 61.5 percent of the variance. The factor loadings in Table 2 are statistically significant ($p \leq 0.01$) given the sample size of 279 (Stevens, 2002:394). Furthermore, with the exception of one item, all of the variables have communalities above 0.50, suggesting that each of the items has an acceptable fit with the other items in their respective component (Pallant, 2010:198).

The Cronbach alpha values for each of the five extracted factors all exceeded the acceptable level of >0.60 (Malhotra, 2010:319), and were very close to or above the recommended 0.70 level, thereby indicating internal-consistency reliability (Field, 2009:675). With mean inter-item correlation coefficients ranging from 0.36 to 0.51, convergent validity may be assumed (Clark & Watson, 1995:316).

As a measure of discriminant validity, the Pearson's Product-Moment correlation coefficients between the five factors were computed, where low *(r* = 0.10 to 0.29) to moderate (*r* = 0.30 to 0.49) coefficients (Cohen, 1992:158) suggest discriminant validity (De Dreu *et al*., 2001:658). The correlation matrix is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Correlation matrix

Conflict-resolution styles	Yielding	Compromising	Forcing	Problem solving
Yielding				
Compromising	.249			
Forcing	.109	.026		
Problem solving	.156	.497	.115	
Avoiding	.315	.119	.087	.078

The correlation coefficients reported in Table 3 are generally low, with only two (compromising and problem solving, and yielding and avoiding) falling in the moderate range, which suggests the discriminant validity of the scales (De Dreu *et al*., 2001:658).

After establishing the dimensionality and psychometric properties of the extended five-component DUTCH scale in the South African context, the next step was to compute the means and standard deviations for each of the constructs in order to determine Generation Y students' predominant conflict-resolution style. The computed means, standard deviations and ranking of Generation Y students' conflict-resolution styles are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics and ranking

Conflict-resolution styles	Means	Standard deviations	Rank
Yielding	3.94	.867	5
Compromising	4.46	.760	2
Forcing	4.12	1.09	4
Problem solving	4.67	.812	1
Avoiding	4.28	1.00	3

According to the results displayed in Table 4, in the South African context, Generation Y students' predominant conflict-resolution style is that of problem solving (mean = 4.67), followed by compromising (mean = 4.46). Yielding (mean = 3.94) appears to be their least favoured conflict-resolution style, followed by forcing (mean=4.12). These findings correspond to the findings of Mukundan *et al.* (2013:86), who identified that Indian Generation Y students' predominant conflict-resolution style was also problem solving or negotiation (mean = 13.20) followed by compromising (mean = 12.40). Their two least preferred styles included yielding (resignation) with a mean of 12.25 and forcing (confrontation), which returned a mean of 11.61. Therefore, the findings infer a preference for the problem solving and compromising conflict-resolution styles, where the problem solving style indicates a high concern for others and for self, and compromising indicates an intermediate concern for others and self (De Dreu *et al.*, 2001:646; Rahim & Magner, 1995:123).

Following this, a two independent-samples t-test was performed to determine whether male and female Generation Y students differ in their preference of conflict-resolution styles. The results of this procedure are outlined in Table 5.

Table 5. Gender differences

Conflict-resolution styles	Means females	Means males	t-statistic	p-value
Yielding	3.93	3.93	-0.57	.95
Compromising	4.55	4.38	1.81	.071
Forcing	3.88	4.32	3.42	.001*
Problem solving	4.75	4.60	1.57	.12
Avoiding	4.29	4.28	0.12	.91
Statistically significant at $p \leq 0.01$				

As shown in Table 5, the only statistically significant difference ($p \leq 0.01$) between male and female's preferred conflict-resolution style occurred on the forcing style, with males being more likely than their female counterparts to evoke this style to resolve a conflict situation. Findings by Mukundan *et al.* (2013:86) indicated that Indian Generation Y female students only reported a higher mean for the avoiding conflict-resolution style.

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to determine South African Generation Y university students' predominant conflict-resolution approach and to test if male and female students differed in their approach to handling conflict. The main findings from

this study indicate that South African Generation Y students mainly prefer to resolve conflict through a problem-solving approach. This suggests that they have a high concern for both themselves and others and that as much as a situation allows, they will seek to create a 'win-win' agreement, whereby both their own and the aspirations of others are met. This implies that Generation Y may be part of the solution rather than the problem in conflict situations. Although this study contributed to the existing body of knowledge, it is not without its limitations, which potentially could contribute to future research projects. The first identified limitation involved the use of a convenience sampling technique and including only two universities in Gauteng. This restricts the representativeness of the study. Furthermore, and also stemming from the research design, is the use of a single cross-sectional design. This type of design only provides insight into specific problems during a single point in time. As mentioned by Kilmann and Thomas (1978:60), emotional states may heighten a potential conflict situation and could perhaps influence the preference for a specific style momentarily. Future studies could include expanding the sample to include more students from other provinces and universities, determining reasons for conflict-resolution preferences through a qualitative research design approach and determining preference styles amongst different racial and cultural groups.

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