

THE EFFECT OF ASSERTIVENESS ON CONFLICT HANDLING STYLES

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was determine the effect of assertiveness in predicting the preference of conflict handling style in the light of the authority position of the other party. We first explored assertiveness as determinant of preferred conflict handling styles and second; examined whether the status of the other party as a situational factor alters this relationship. Data were gathered using self-administered survey to 206 employees working at a textile manufacturing company. In conflict with superiors, hierarchical regression analysis revealed a direct negative effect of assertiveness on the avoiding style after controlling for gender. In conflict with peers, findings revealed a direct positive effect of assertiveness on dominating style. Its implications and limitations are discussed.

Keywords: Conflict handling styles, assertiveness, authority position.

Öz

Girişkenliğin Çatışmayı Ele Alma Yöntemleri Üzerindeki Etkisi

Bu çalışmanın amacı bireylerin girişkenlik düzeylerinin çatışmayı ele alma yöntemleri üzerindeki etkisini çatışmaya girilen tarafın pozisyonuna (üst- iş arkadaşı) göre incelemektir. Çalışmada öncelikle girişkenliğin çatışmayı ele alma yöntemleri üzerindeki etkisi incelenmiştir. İkinci olarak çatışmaya girilen tarafın pozisyonu durumsal bir değişken olarak kabul edilmiş , girişkenlik düzeylerine ve diğer tarafın pozisyonuna göre çatışmayı ele alma yöntemleri araştırılmıştır. Veriler, toplam 206 teksil işletmesi çalışanından anket yoluyla toplanmıştır. Hiyerarşik regresyon analizi sonucuna göre , cinsiyetin etkisi kontrol edildikten

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sonra üstler ile çatışmada girişkenliğin kaçınma yöntemi üzerinde olumsuz etkisi bulunmaktadır. İş arkadaşları ile çatışmada ise girişkenliğin hükmetme yöntemi üzerinde olumlu etkisi belirlenmiştir. Uygulamalar ve sınırlılıklar tartışılmıştır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Çatışmayı ele alma yöntemleri, girişkenlik, çatışmaya girilen tarafın pozisyonu.

INTRODUCTION

Conflict, an inescapable component of social life, also pervades in various organization processes (Rahim, 2001; Thomas, 1976: 890). In response to growing demands for workplace harmony and productivity (Chen and Tjosvold, 2002: 558) organizational researchers in past two decades have devoted considerable effort to understanding the dynamics of conflict (Tjosvold *et.al.*, 2006: 231). It has been mainly emphasized that the type of conflict can determine to group failure or success (De Dreu and Van de Vliert, 1997; Tjosvold *et.al.*, 2006: 231), the ability to resolve conflicts and the choice of suitable conflict handling styles have gained importance. In parallel with this notion, researchers have started to investigate various conflict management skills, which enable individuals function effectively at any level within an organization. These investigations resulted in different classifications of handling conflict (Blake and Mouton, 1964; Rahim, 1983: 190-193, Thomas, 1976: 890-893). Among those, Rahim (1983: 192) has studied five different styles of handling conflict as avoiding, compromising, dominating, integrating and obliging. However what determines the particular conflict handling style that an individual prefers is not certain (Antonioni, 1998: 337).

In this respect, researchers start to investigate certain conflict management skills which are important for the individuals to function effectively at any level within the organizations. Some researchers suggested that, consistent with contingency view, appropriateness of each conflict handling style depend on a conflict situation (Thomas, 1976; Rahim, 2001; Putnam and Wilson, 1982: 630). In other words, an individuals' preference for one or another conflict style may depend on a variety of factors such as the topic of the conflict (Kozan, 1990: 175-177) and/or type of the relationship (opposite/same sex partner; romantic relationships) (Cingoz-Ulu and Lalonde, 2007: 443-445) and the authority position of other party (Kozan, 1990: 175; Lee, 2002: 127). On the other hand, Antonioni (1998: 337) criticized that, contingency view fails to acknowledge the fact that some individuals may not be flexible enough to use which style is best for a particular situation.

However another view holds that individuals tend to use a particular style in a conflict handling as a based on their personality or other individual factors. For instance Kilmann and Thomas (1975: 971) argued that “the identification of individuals ‘natural’ predisposition’s toward conflict situations is a logical and potentially productive avenue of research. Renwick’s (1975: 416) study results showed that individuals have preferences for a particular style and that they will be predisposed to use this style to deal with conflicting situations. Thus considerable research examining individual differences in conflict handling styles has heavily focused on gender (Brewer *et.al.*, 2002: 78; Chan *et.al.*, Tan; 2006; Atıcı, 2007: 83) and some personality variables such as locus of control (Kabanoff, 1987: 160), personality types and typologies (Moberg, 1998: 258; Kilmann and Thomas, 1975: 972; Terhune, 1970: 194; Sternberg and Soriano, 1984: 115) as explanatory variables. Although prior studies have demonstrated the importance of some individual characteristics on conflict handling styles, there seems to be a lack of research investigating the effect of assertiveness as an individual characteristic. Assertiveness is accepted as a dimension describing people’s inclination to speak up for, defend and act for themselves (Ames and Flynn, 2007: 124). It refers to the ability of an individual to identify rights and choices in various situations and act on these insights while respecting others’ rights and choices (Scott, 1979: 450). People who are assertive are expected to acknowledge the problems more effectively, and result in goal achievement by increasing organizational outcomes in conflict handling. Prior research has mostly recognized the importance of assertiveness particularly on educational settings with a sample of undergraduate students or teenagers, however neglecting working employees. Moreover, the specific role of assertiveness relative to conflict handling has not been directly established in both Western and Turkish literature although an association is implied (Ma and Jaeger, 2010: 333). Associations and frameworks have been developed and validated using U.S. subjects, making its unclear whether those frameworks are also valid in other cultures as well. Therefore, it might be useful for understanding the impact of assertiveness on the preference of different conflict handling styles in a real-life organizational setting.

The current study tries to examine what determines the particular conflict handling style that an individual uses. The individual’s characteristic patterns of assertiveness in normal life may provide information about their conflict handling styles. Thus, one might expect that the proposed effects of assertiveness would be in the same direction no matter the other party in conflict is a peer or superior. On the other hand, if one acknowledges the contingency view which proposes that conflict handling is relatively inconsistent across situations; one might expect that the authority position of the other party would override the predispositions and the proposed effects of those variables would differ in conflict with peers and superiors.

Building on both theories, current research differs itself from the previous studies by exploring assertiveness as an independent personality variable determining conflict handling styles in other than North American context and second, examining whether the status of the other party as a situational factor alters this relationship.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Conflict, as an important issue in organizational settings, is defined as an “interactive process manifested in incompatibility between social entities” (Rahim, 1992: 16). When conflict in organizations is managed properly, it can contribute to an organization’s adaptive and innovative capabilities (Callanan *et.al.*, 2006: 69), increase organizational effectiveness (Sergiovanni, 1987: 17) and improve decision making quality within organization (Amason, 1996: 123). The importance of conflict has led researchers to examine conflict handling strategies (Blake and Mouton, 1964; Follet, 1940: 32; Rahim and Bonoma, 1979: 1323; Thomas, 1976: 890). Follet (1940: 32) stated that there were three ways of dealing with conflict which are domination, compromise and integration. Blake and Mouton (1964) were the first to conceive a grid for classifying the styles for handling conflict: force, withdrawal, smoothing, compromise, and confrontation. Blake and Mouton’s (1964) conceptualization was later expounded and differentiated by other researchers (Rahim 1983: 189; Rahim and Bonoma, 1979: 1323) on two dimensions: concern for self and concern for others. Concern for self dimension measures the degree (high or low) to which a person attempts to satisfy his own concerns while the latter dimension explains the degree (high or low) to which a person wants to satisfy the concerns of others. A combination of the two dimensions results in five specific conflict handling styles: *Integrating* indicates high concern for self and other; *obliging* involves low concern for self and high concern for others, *dominating* is based on the high concern for self and low concern for the other party, *avoiding* means low concern for self and others; *compromising* reflects moderate concern for self as well as for the other party.

1.1. Assertiveness and Conflict Handling Styles

Assertiveness is the ability to express and defend one’s own needs, interests and positions (Rathus, 1973: 398). Most of the definitions of assertiveness give importance on the direct expression of feelings, desires and thoughts in interpersonal settings (Eskin, 2003: 8). Galassi and Galassi (1977: 3) stated that “assertion is the direct and proper communication of an individual’s needs, wants and opinions without threatening and putting down others”. Ames and Flynn (2007: 308) showed assertiveness as a dimension

describing people's inclination to speak up for, defend and act for themselves and for their own values, preferences and goals.

Individuals' behavior ranges from high to low assertiveness. In a continuum where, assertiveness lies between the two extremes (Hulbert and Hulbert, 1982: 25), high assertive individuals, stand up for their rights in ways that violate others' rights. They can create defensive communication and provoke arguments. This, in turn, can prompt uncooperative behavior in conflict situations.

In organizational settings, assertive individuals are seen as more powerful and they can adopt more advantageous situations. High levels of assertiveness may bring instrumental rewards and short term achievements; however, it can be costly when long term relations are considered. Low levels of assertiveness may bring social benefits but it may undermine goal achievement (Ames and Flynn, 2007: 307). De Dreu *et.al.*, (2000: 889) investigated the effect of social motives (prosocial vs. egoistic) and resistance to yielding (high vs low) in the light of two theories. Results showed that negotiators engaged in more problem solving and achieved higher joint outcomes when they had a prosocial rather than egoistic (competitive) motive. Moreover Hulbert and Hulbert, (1982: 24) argued that especially in conflict situations, assertive action equalizes the balance of power between individuals so that each wins something.

Arisohn *et.al.*, (1988: 336) examined the impact of assertiveness on outcome expectancy in response to some situations where unreasonable requests were made. They found that assertive participants believed that they could handle the situation and expect more positive outcomes than did the non-assertive participants. Similarly, Eisler *et.al.*, (1973: 419-422) found that in problematic situations, assertive individuals acknowledged and addressed the problems more effectively than did the non-assertive participants who preferred avoidance. In a study of examining the association between social skills and adolescents' conflict resolution strategies, Borbely *et.al.*, (2005: 279) reported that assertiveness was positively associated with the effective conflict resolution with their peers. Depending on the same sample, assertiveness was also found to be associated with effective conflict resolution strategies with their parents. Moreover, in a recent cross cultural study of Ma and Jaeger (2010: 333) provided support for the effect of assertiveness on negotiation outcomes including economic and effective and also reported the relation between assertiveness and negotiation are culture dependent.

Alberti and Emmons (1990) suggests that assertive individuals are more likely to engage particularly in three type of behaviors like acting in their own interests, standing up for themselves, and exercising personal rights. Likewise,

Ma and Jaeger (2010: 334) explained that the skills required for high assertiveness in negotiation context include the ability to identify one's own interests, make arguments and listen to the other party. On the other hand, in conflict handling styles, when concern for self is high or moderate, negotiators either try to maximize their own outcomes, with no regard or negative regard for the outcome obtained by their opposing party (De Dreu *et.al.*, 2000: 889) or at least try to reach integrative agreements and engage in effective problem solving which ultimately leads to good outcomes for all parties as well. Such that, a person using a dominating strategy has to be assertive because s/he will attempt to convince the other party that their conclusion is right, or a person using an integrating style will attempt to seek a win-win solution in which both parties' goals are completely achieved. Moreover assertiveness plays an important role in arriving integrative outcomes as assertive employees advocate their interests openly which in turn result in clearer communication between the parties (Ma and Jaeger, 2010: 335). Assertive negotiators tend to get what they want, obtain big share of the pie. Thus, it can be presumed that as assertiveness increases, the tendency of using conflict handling styles, where concern for self is moderate or high, increases. So:

H1: Assertiveness will be positively related to the conflict handling styles of dominating, integrating and compromising in conflict with superiors or peers.

Individuals, low in assertiveness, in contrast, give up their rights to defend others. Their rights are violated since they ignore their own needs or else permit others to neglect their rights. They try to hide their feelings and desires, prefer to stay in the background, allow others do the talking and let others make choices for them (Troutman *et.al.*, 2000: 65-67) and thus show submissive and withdrawn behavior (Alberti and Emmons, 1974).

In conflict handling styles, when concern for self is low, negotiators do not put their energy to maximize their outcomes, rather they attempt to satisfy the other person's concerns by neglecting his/her own concerns. They also may try to stay away from disagreement with their opposing party or postpone the issue until a better time. This style of behavior is often characterized by an unconcerned attitude toward the issue or opposing party (Rahim *et.al.*, 2000: 10-15). We argue that those kinds of differences in conflict handling styles may be rooted in individual characteristics. Thus, individuals low in assertiveness might mostly concern about other's feelings and welfare in conflicting situations. Since less assertive individuals exhibit more self-denial and are more likely to allow others to make their choices for them and are characterized by strong concern for others over work outcomes (Weiss, 2010), thus one might assume that those individuals are expected to use mostly obliging and avoiding styles where concern for self is low:

H2: Assertiveness will be negatively related to conflict handling styles of avoiding and obliging in conflict with superiors or peers.

In consistent with contingency view, the last hypothesis of the study will be based on the argument that the relationship between individual characteristics and conflict handling styles may vary when the authority position of the other party differs. It can be assumed that the effect of the same personality trait (assertiveness) on conflict handling may lead to different results depending on the context in which conflicting situation takes place, such as the hierarchical position of the other party. Relevant literature investigating the conflict management styles of Turkish employees reported that status of the other party whether s/he is a subordinate, superior or peer has an effect on the preferred conflict handling styles (Kozan, 1989: 787; Ozkalp *et.al.*, 2009: 419). Kozan (1989: 787) found that hierarchy plays a significant role in impacting the conflict management styles of Turkish employees. Overall, the tendency was to be more accommodative towards one's superiors (respect for authority); suppressing/and or avoiding competition between peers (focus on collectivism and group harmony); and imposing solutions on subordinates (analogous to a parent-child relationship). Similarly, the findings of Özkalp *et.al.* (2009: 419) revealed that integrating was the most preferred styles in handling conflict, while obliging is the most used one particularly in conflict with superiors. Moreover, Atıcı (2007: 83) reported that problem solving strategies were the most preferred among the students in conflict with their peers.

One of the major situational factors that may affect assertiveness – conflict handling relationship is a cultural dimension of power distance (Hofstede, 2001) and hierarchy (Schwartz, 1992). Power distance refers to extent to which members of a society expect power to be unequally distributed, stratified power and concentrated at higher levels of an organization. High power distance reflects a culture's attitude towards human inequality which defines itself inside organizations through a manager subordinate relationship.. Hofstede (2001)'s research findings showed that Turkey can be classified as a relatively high power distance.

Turkey's standing on power distance is particularly an important issue. Consistent with the contingency view, although individuals' assertiveness level is high, they may not prefer using self-concerned conflict handling styles like dominating especially in conflict with the other party who has relatively higher in authority position. In other words, as high power distance thrives inside hierarchical organizations where importance is placed on social status of employees, employees might be less responsive to the actions of the authorities and their supervisor. Hence, it may be assumed that Turkish subordinates may not be willing to engage in any conflict style that challenges a superior.

Although individual traits (assertiveness) might be expected to be related to particular conflict-handling-styles as discussed in H1 and H2, depending on the authority position of the other party individuals might alter their preferred conflict handling styles. Therefore, regardless of the assertiveness level of individuals, the obvious interest is to examine the impact of the authority position of the other party during the conflict handling. Thus:

H3: The relationship between assertiveness and conflict handling style will vary depending on the authority position of the other party whether he/she is superior or peer.

2. METHODS

2.1. Sample and Procedure

The data analyzed in this study was a part of a larger ongoing project addressing organizational climate. This study consists of convenience sample of employees from a textile manufacturing company. The sample included non-supervisory, blue-collar employees such as overlock workers (*overlokçu*), jig workers (*şabloncu*), designers (*modelci*) working in different specialized units. Managers and supervisory staff were excluded to eliminate potential difficulties caused by differences in how they handle conflict. Participants were given envelopes and requested to put their sealed response sheet in it upon completion. The final sample size was 206 employees with a response rate of 64%. A detailed profile of the sample is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Sample

Demographic variables	Frequency (n)	Percentile (%)
Gender		
Women	31	15
Men	174	84.1
Years of work experience		
1-5 years	43	20.8
6-10 years	78	37.7
11-15 years	62	30
15-20 years	17	8.2
More than 21 years	5	2.1
Age		
20-29	26	12.6
30-39	89	43.4
40-49	78	38.0
50 and over	12	5.8

2.2. Measures

The measurement instrument includes the following parts.

2.2.1. Rahim's Organizational Conflict Inventory

Rahim's Organizational Conflict Inventory ROCI-II¹ Form A and C were used to measure conflict handling styles. ROCI-II Form A and C, each of both containing 28 items, measures five independent conflict management dimensions that represent styles of handling interpersonal conflict with superiors and peers. The responses are measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" (1) to "strongly disagree" (5). The five styles of resolving conflict are: avoiding (6 items), compromising (4 items), integrating (7 items), dominating (5 items) and obliging (6 items). Responses were then reverse coded, calculated for each dimension, with higher scores indicating greater use of a particular conflict handling style. Translation and backward-translation of the instrument were conducted by two independent bilingual individuals. No anomalous items were identified in the final stage of the translation procedure. As a result, the comparability of the translations is assumed. The internal reliability estimates are seen in Table 4 and 5.

2.2.2. Assertiveness

The assertiveness degree of the individuals was measured by using DuBrin's (1989) assertiveness scale. This is a 30-item scale with response format ranging from mostly true (1) to mostly false (4). The instrument includes some sample questions such as "I express criticism freely/ Work is no place to let your feelings show / I have been described as too outspoken by several people/ I dread having to express anger toward a coworker". Assertiveness scale was adapted to Turkish by the authors following the standard translation and back translation procedure. No anomalous items were identified as a result of the translation procedure. The internal reliability estimate for the translated Turkish version of the instrument was .73, suggesting an acceptable level of consistency.

Some demographic variables including age, gender and tenure were also added in the questionnaire.

¹ The Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II was used with permission from the Center for Advanced Studies in Management.

3. RESULTS

Prior to analysis, the data was screened for normality, linearity and homogeneity of variance assumptions. As all the data were collected from one survey package, Harman's one-factor test (Podsakoff and Organ, 1986: 532) was conducted to examine whether common method variance may have increase the strength of the correlations. All items (38 items from the ROCI-II and 30 items measuring assertiveness) were entered together in to a factor analysis, the results of unrotated factor solution were examined. As a result no single factor accounted for the majority of the covariance and no general factor was apparent, suggesting that common method variance was not a serious issue in this study.

In order to identify the underlying subdimensions of conflict handling style questionnaires (ROCI-II A and C), the item scores were subjected to principal component analysis (PCA) followed by varimax rotation. For factorability of the items, the *Bartlett's test of sphericity* was significant and the *Keiser-Meyer-Olkin* measure of sampling adequacy was .81. The factor subscales were derived by assigning to each subscale all items loading .40 or higher. Exploratory factor analysis of the ROCI-II A results confirmed the existence of the anticipated 5 subscales with similar items with the criteria of eigen value greater than 1.00. Altogether accounted for 73.88% of the total variance. Item 24 (having a loading of less than .40 on factors), item 12 and item 3 (having loadings of higher than .40 on more than one factor) were excluded from the analysis. Furthermore "item 15" was found to highly load under the dominating factor in contrast to its original version loading on compromising factor. Final factor loadings, percentage of the variances and reliability coefficients of the subscales for ROCI- II Form A are illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: ROCI-II FORM A (Conflict Handling Style with Superiors)

Items	Factor 1 Dominating	Factor 2 Integrating	Factor 3 Obliging	Factor 4 Avoiding	Factor 5 Compromising
CF9	.840				
CF25	.783				
CF18	.780				
CF21	.762				
CF8	.685				
*CF15	.573				.271
CF28		.783			
CF23		.752			
CF22		.697			
CF1		.685			
CF5		.651			
CF4		.590			
*CF12		.573			.541
CF10			.747		
CF2			.740		
CF19			.696		
CF13			.610		
CF11			.554		.411
*CF24	4.82E-03	.201	.340	.190	.122
CF6				.641	
CF17				.554	.505
CF16				.507	
CF26				.421	
CF27				.783	
*CF3		.434	.508	.585	
CF20					.870
CF14					.550
CF7					.501

*denotes the inventory items that were excluded from the analysis.

The same procedure was applied for the ROCI-II Form C. After varimax rotation, the proper component solution was determined to be 5 factors similar to the original version and similar to the ROCI- II Form A, accounting for 74% of the total variance. However, item 12 and 24 were excluded from the study as item 12 had loadings of higher than .40 on both factors while item 24 was found to have loading of less than .40 on each factor. Similarly, item 15 was found to be highly loaded under the dominating factor compared to the compromising factor. Final factor loadings, percentages of the variances and reliability coefficients of the subscales for ROCI-II Form C are given in Table 3.

Table 3: ROCI-II FORM C (Conflict Handling Style with Peers)

Items	Factor 1 Dominating	Factor 2 Integrating	Factor 3 Obliging	Factor 4 Avoiding	Factor 5 Compromising
CF 18	.899				
CF 9	.873				
CF 25	.851				
*CF 15	.799				.219
CF 21	.644				
CF 8	.540				
CF 22		.874			
CF 23		.704			
CF 28		.641			
CF 5		.602			
CF 4		.595			
CF 1		.590			
*CF 12		.560			.491
CF 13			.809		
CF 11			.756		
CF 10			.663		
CF 2			.603		
CF 19			.581		
*CF 24			.342		
CF 26				.873	
CF 3				.851	
CF 6				.799	
CF 17				.655	
CF27				.601	
CF 16				.600	
CF 14					.701
CF 7					.642
CF 20					.451

*denotes the inventory items that were excluded from the analysis.

Means, standard deviations and correlations among the variables are illustrated in Tables 4 and 5. As it can be seen, the pattern of the correlations between five conflict handling styles was quite similar to those reported by Rahim (1983: 192). The final reliability coefficients of the scales and subscales yielded high internal reliability coefficients (in a range between .60 and .87) consistent with Rahim's (1983: 192) original scales.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics, Cronbach Alpha Values and Intercorrelations Among Study Variables (conflict handling style dimensions with superiors)

Variable	α	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Avoiding	.87	3.36	.57	1.00	.790**	.618**	-.768**	.581**	-.237	.462**	.178*	-.051
2. Compromising	.76	3.99	.99		1.00	.800**	.807**	.389**	-.118	.317**	.137	.012
3. Integrating	.83	4.09	.39			1.00	.636**	.367**	.070	.119	.058	.099
4. Dominating	.84	3.96	.54				1.00	.388**	.107	.284**	.174	-.022
5. Obliging	.60	3.57	.51					1.00	-.124	.320**	.126	.003
6. Assertiveness	.73	25	5.8						1.00	-.247*	-.05	-.069
7. Gender	-	-	-							1.00	.342**	.041
8. Age	-	34.4	7								1.00	.302**
9. Work exp.	-	9.4	3.7									1.00

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$, N=206

Gender (coded as 1= male, 0=female)

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics. Cronbach Alpha Values and Intercorrelations Among Study Variables (Conflict Handling Style Dimensions with Peers)

Variable	α	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Avoiding	.77	3.67	.56	1.00	.516**	.346**	-.680**	.561**	-.170	.400**	.122	.030
2. Compromising	.69	4.04	.43		1.00	.827	.509**	.021	-.075	.066	.093	.121
3. Integrating	.80	4.12	.38			1.00	.375**	-.097	.089	-.013	.084	.033
4. Dominating	.86	3.91	.61				1.00	.242**	.228*	.274**	.109	.026
5. Obliging	.67	3.19	.54					1.00	-.196	.217**	.095	-.036
6. Assertiveness	.73	25	5.8						1.00	-.247*	-.005	-.069
7. Gender	-	-	-							1.00	.342**	.041
8. Age	-	34.4	7								1.00	.302**
9. Work exp.	-	9.4	3.7									1.00

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$, N=206

Gender (coded as 1= male, 0=female)

3.1. Hypotheses Testing

The aim of the current research is twofold: First, in parallel with the predispositional view, to investigate whether and to what extent assertiveness as individual characteristics predict conflict handling styles. Second, in parallel with the contingency view to examine whether the effects of assertiveness differ depending on the authority position of the other party whether s/he is a peer or superior.

To test the research hypotheses identifying the role of assertiveness (H1, H2 and H3) on conflict handling styles of participants with their superiors and peers, two groups of hierarchical regression analyses are conducted.

The first group of analyses regressed each of the five conflict handling styles for the effects assertiveness. In other words, each conflict handling style with superiors was taken as dependent variable assertiveness as the independent variable and gender as a control variable in hierarchical regression equations (Table 6). Among the demographic variables, since gender significantly correlates with the outcome variables (See in Table 4 and 5), we have included gender as a control variable into the subsequent analyses.

In conflict with superiors, the regression analysis revealed that gender accounted to a significant extent for avoiding, compromising, dominating and obliging conflict styles of variability in the first step. The second step of the hierarchical regression analysis revealed a direct negative effect of assertiveness ($\beta = -.121$, $p < .05$) accounted on the avoiding after controlling for gender [$F(2, 199) = 29.519$, $p < .01$]. However, no significant negative effects of assertiveness were reported on obliging style as hypothesized. Nor were any significant positive effects of assertiveness reported on integrating, dominating and compromising styles in conflict with superiors as purported in the relevant hypotheses.

The second group of regression analyses regressed each conflict handling style for the effects of assertiveness in order to identify the conflict handling styles of participants with their peers (Table 7).

Table 6: Conflict with Superiors

Avoiding						
Predictors	R ²	Adj R ²	F	ΔR ²	F Change	B
Step 1	.224	.220	57.01**			
Gender						.473*
Step 2	.231	.223	29.519**	.007	3.55**	
Gender						.462*
Assertiveness						-.121*
Compromising						
Predictors	R ²	Adj R ²	F	ΔR ²	F Change	β
Step 1	.092	.088	20.129**			
Gender						.304**
Step 2	.093	.084	10.077**	.001	.115	
Gender						.301**
Assertiveness						-.023
Integrating						
Predictors	R ²	Adj R ²	F	ΔR ²	F Change	β
Step 1	.007	.002	1.425			
Gender						.085
Step 2	.010	.000	.1,025	.003	.629	
Gender						.092
Assertiveness						.057
Dominating						
Predictors	R ²	Adj R ²	F	ΔR ²	F Change	B
Step 1	.067	.062	14.118**			
Gender						.258**
Step 2	.067	.057	7.034**	.000	.888	
Gender						.257**
Assertiveness						.014
Obliging						
Predictors	R ²	Adj R ²	F	ΔR ²	F Change	β
Step 1	.120	.116	27.061**			
Gender						.347**
Step 2	.122	.113	13.727**	.002	.466	
Gender						.341**
Assertiveness						-.046

* p<.05

** p<.01

Table 7: Conflict with Peers

Avoiding						
Predictors	R ²	Adj R ²	F	ΔR ²	F Change	β
Step 1	.177	.173	42.57**			
Gender						.421**
Step 2	.179	.171	21.50**	.002	.46	
Gender						.414**
Assertiveness						-.048
Compromising						
Predictors	R ²	Adj R ²	F	ΔR ²	F Change	β
Step 1	.006	.001	1.15			
Gender						0.76
Step 2	.006	-.002	.834	.003	.472	
Gender						.069
Assertiveness						-.052
Integrating						
Predictors	R ²	Adj R ²	F	ΔR ²	F Change	B
Step 1	.005	-.012	.004			
Gender						.005
Step 2	.011	.000	.012	.006	.888	
Gender						.006
Assertiveness						.010
Dominating						
Predictors	R ²	Adj R ²	F	ΔR ²	F Change	B
Step 1	.079	.074	16.96**			
Gender						.281**
Step 2	.084	.075	9.06**	.005	.285	
Gender						.271*
Assertiveness						.174*
Obliging						
Predictors	R ²	Adj R ²	F	ΔR ²	F Change	β
Step 1	.057	.052	11.877**			
Gender						.238**
Step 2	.063	.053	6.59**	.006	.256	
Gender						.227**
Assertiveness						-.079

* p<.05
 ** p<.01

In conflict with peers, the regression analyses revealed that gender accounted to a significant extent for avoiding, dominating and obliging styles of variability in the first step. After controlling for gender, the second step of the hierarchical regression analysis revealed a direct positive effect of assertiveness ($\beta=.174$, $p<.05$) accounted on dominating [$F(2, 199) = 9.06$, $p<.01$]. However, no significant predictive negative effects of assertiveness were reported on obliging and avoiding style as hypothesized. Neither were there any significant positive effects of assertiveness on integrating and compromising styles in conflict with peers as presumed in the relevant hypotheses.

DISCUSSION

First attempt of this study is to comprehend to what extent assertiveness as individual characteristics would affect the conflict handling styles of employees. If so, to explore whether the effect of assertiveness on conflict handling styles would vary according to the authority position of the other party. In this respect, the present study makes a contribution to the body of knowledge concerning about the role of assertiveness and its relationships to conflict handling styles.

The first result of the study revealed a partial support for H1 such that there is a positive association between assertiveness and dominating style of employees in conflict with their peers. These finding was in line with the argument that assertive negotiators tend to get more of what they want, thus obtaining a larger share of the pie in conflicting situations (Ma and Jaeger, 2010: 339). Moreover, it was supported that demonstrating higher levels of assertiveness is associated with use of effective conflict resolution strategies in conflicting interactions with peers. However, no significant relationships were reported between assertiveness and compromising, obliging and integrating when handling conflict with either superiors or peers. Presumably, some other factors may be affecting or interfering the preferred conflict handling styles. This may be partly because the type of the task held by the current sample. The participants are responsible from specialized and routine tasks where there is a fixed way of doing something and prescribed rules and procedures are followed. This type of repeatedly done routine tasks may prevent the emergence of functional conflict and inhibit the integrating and compromising situations where mutually agreed solutions are set upon. Therefore, future studies may also examine some other situational factors like the cause of the conflict, the type of the task or dispositional factors such as negotiation related self-efficacy.

Second finding of the study provided a partial support for our hypotheses (H2) that assertiveness is a negative predictor for the preference to handle conflict by means of avoiding with superiors. This finding is congruent with the past research that individuals low in assertiveness give up their rights, prefer to stay in background and undermine goal achievement (Alberti and Emmons, 1974; Troutman *et.al.*, 2000: 63) which makes them to prefer avoiding style in conflicting situations with their superiors. Indirectly, this result is consistent with Cingöz-Ulu and Lalonde (2007: 443)'s study which reported that Turkish employees were more likely to both refrain from and postpone conflict.

The insignificant negative association of assertiveness with avoiding in conflict with peers and invalid positive association of assertiveness with dominating in conflict with superiors reveals that individuals' conflict handling styles were more complex and more likely to be a situation specific as H3 proposed. Eisler *et.al.*, (1975: 332) revealed that individual behavior is functionally related to the social context of interpersonal interaction. They indicated that an individual who is assertive in one interpersonal context may not be assertive in a different interpersonal environment. Such that, lower levels of assertiveness fostered the use of avoiding style (H2) with superiors while higher levels of assertiveness fostering the preference of dominating style only within the same authority relation (H1). Those findings suggests that despite one's natural predispositions, given the power differences, a subordinate may not be willing to engage in any conflict style that challenges a superior (Rahim and Buntzman, 1989: 195) as H3 indicates. Hence, cultural values might explain the individual's selection of conflict handling style usage toward different counterparts over another. Hofstede (2001) states that the effect of acquiescence had to be taken into account in high power distance countries like Turkey. Subordinates are influenced by formal authority and sanctions. Relationships are largely based on a person's hierarchical position and status, and obedient behaviors of subordinates are expected (Hofstede, 2001). Thus, it seems reasonable that individuals adopt uncritical and submissive attitudes toward the more powerful person as power distance influences the decision making structure in our culture. As, centralized decision making and autocratic leadership style are the dominant characteristics of Turkish management (Aycan *et.al.*, 2000: 192), therefore it may direct individuals to withdrawal and sidestepping kinds of behavior especially in conflicting situations with their superiors. Therefore, the aforementioned reasons might explain why association between assertiveness and avoiding is significant with superiors while insignificant with peers.

Chiazzu and Heimberg (1986: 3) found that high assertiveness showed superior problem orientation, better definition and formulation skills, making individuals viewing themselves as more capable of responding effectively. In

terms of practical implications, organizations need to examine ways to increase the effects of assertiveness on conflict handling styles. Obviously, since assertiveness is associated with effective problem solving as well as standing up the rights; attempting to increase assertiveness is organizationally and personally functional. In this respect, managers need to know whether assertiveness is an important element of successful conflict resolution so that organizational interventions could be designed accordingly. This might be achieved through promoting programs to enhance behaviors of employees in terms of defending their rights, needs and desires. However, it also has to be kept in mind that training outcomes might partially depend on whether newly acquired skills will occur in similar events. Moreover, precaution has to be taken into account that organizational culture, cultural values may also influence conflict handling styles of the employees. Moreover, apart from training some other human resource practices, such as recruitment, selection, and promotion decisions have to be implemented by taking into account the differences in assertiveness and its relation to effective conflict resolution.

The present study is not without limitations. First, the nature of the participants (low-educated and blue-collar workers) may limit the generalizability of the study. Therefore, it might be useful to replicate the study in different organizational settings, including different positions, with a more heterogeneous sample. This would increase the power and the extent to which the results could be generalized. Second, this study may reserve some conceptual and methodological difficulties regarding the interpretations related with cultural dimensions. Although, referring to Hofstede (2001) and Schwartz (1992) studies are widely accepted and useful in understanding the variety of cross cultural differences; those the culture-nation variables like power distance has not been operationalized at the individual level. Therefore, future studies may also specifically include those constructs in the survey since individuals might differ in their personal level of cultural constructs as within any given society regardless of how it is broadly construed (Chen *et.al.*, 2002: 485-490). Finally, validating self-report data on conflict style and assertiveness with other measures like direct observation of actual behavior or behavioral/peer assessment might be useful for decreasing social desirability (Brewer *et.al.*, 2002: 89).

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