

Relationship of Tolerance for Disagreement with Conflict Management Styles

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The aim of this study was to determine the relationship between tolerance for disagreement and conflict management styles. It was hypothesized that there would be a significant relationship between levels of tolerance for disagreement and conflict management style. Another assumption was that there would be a significant difference between tolerance for disagreement of males and females. The sample comprised of 170 employed young adults within the age range of 19 to 40 years out of which 54.71 % were males and 45.29% were females. Convenience sampling was used to obtain the data from employees that fulfilled the criteria. Responses were recorded through online form and manually on paper. Measures used to assess the participants were following: consent form, demographic form, Tolerance for disagreement Scale and Rahim's organizational conflict inventory-II. Statistical analysis through Chi-square test of association revealed that tolerance for disagreement was significantly associated with collaborating, accommodating and avoiding style of conflict management. Independent samples t-test showed that males had a higher tolerance for disagreement than women. Implications for organizational settings have been discussed

Keywords: tolerance, disagreement, conflict management style, and gender

Every organization wants to foster an environment where its employees can tackle challenges and deal with ambiguities tactfully. However, every unique member of your workforce will think differently and process the matters accordingly. This will always result in some

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form of disagreement on many issues. Today we are aiming for globalization and connecting people from every corner of the world. In this era of diversity, differences are bound to be present everywhere.

Disagreements give rise to conflicts which are more appropriately explained as incompatibility in goals or interest in any two-way process. As a metropolitan Karachi has a lot of cultural diversity to offer and people from different ethnic backgrounds have become part of the workforce. Cultural diversity has been found to cause problems in workplace due to difference in value system, beliefs and working style of employees (Chan & Goto, 2003; Saucedo, 2003). We can infer that employed population of Karachi also faces many conflicts of different nature at workplace specially between peers as the interaction with peers occurs on daily basis for coordination and other organizational functions. Reality remains that if an organization wishes to prosper then it needs positive-conflict and effective strategies to handle it (Tjosvold, 2008). We do not aim for eradicating the conflict completely because difference of opinion and unique perspectives give birth to new ideas and help bring innovation. The goal is to cultivate a dynamic challenging environment without compromising on organizational values and simultaneously managing the conflicts effectively. A need arises here regarding criteria for determining the usefulness of our approach towards conflict. It is evident through literature that an effective strategy should promote organizational learning through critical thinking and fulfill the needs of stakeholders but most importantly the strategy should always be drafted keeping ethical values in consideration (Rahim M. A., 2002).

Strategic dealing of conflict can be taught and employees can be trained to adopt different styles that may prove to be more useful in certain situations. Additionally, we also need to analyze our innate or learned dispositions that dictate how we behave in most of the situations. Our tendencies to respond to conflict in a particular manner may have been attributed to our gender (Rahim M. A., 1983b; Rubin & Brown, 1975; Bedell & Sistrunk, 1973) but the inconsistencies in the literature fail to support this assumption. Some other variables like gender roles and organizational status were in fact better related to conflict management styles than biological sex (Brewer, Mitchell, & Weber, 2002). Self-construal types can predict an individual's conflict style better than ethnicity or sex (Ting-Toomey, Oetzel, & Kimberlie, 2001). Belief is also a disposition that can stimulate us to act in a certain way and produce particular responses. Literature suggests that our beliefs

about arguing explained the variance in trait argumentativeness and underlying drive to argue (Rancer, Kosberg, & Baukus, 1992). In that case we need to incorporate more tolerance towards disagreement in our belief system which will allow us to listen to each other without perceiving the conflict situations as hostile (McCroskey J. C., 1992). As our beliefs differ, we assume that our levels of disagreement tolerance will vary which may determine our approach towards a conflict.

Tolerance does not require you to see every argument as equal in value. It only gives you the ability to see both sides of the picture and make a better more informed decision. John Stuart Mill argued that one must allow conflicting views to surface because dialogue and exchange of ideas will give you a vivid picture of your own reality (Gillmor, Barron, Simon, & Terry, 1990).

This study will measure the level of tolerance for disagreement which reflects to what extent an individual can tolerate other people disagreeing with what they believe to be true. This disagreement tolerance will be related to conflict management style which refers to the approach that an individual adopts when a conflict arises to minimize the negative repercussions and maximize the positive outcomes.

Theoretical Frameworks

A dynamic definition of conflict

Many scholars have attempted to define conflict but their definitions were considered either too broad (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003; De Dreu, Harinck, & Van Vianen, 1999) or too narrow (Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994; Lewicki, Saunders, & Minton, 1997; Barki & Hartwick, 2004) to be taken as dynamic (Tjosvold, 2006). In this study we will consider the definition by Rahim (2002) which is dynamic for us because it encompasses the aspects of conflict that fall under the scope of our research. "Conflict is an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities i.e., individual, group, organization, etc." (Rahim M. A., 2002).

This interactive process has been researched well through many lenses. Research has shown how its management can have merits like endorsing learning and understanding as person under conflict may realize that their knowledge may not be sufficient and they need to attain more for gaining a better perspective (Johnson, Johnson, & Tjosvold,

2006; Tjosvold, Sun, & Wan, 2005) Effective conflict management also endorses citizenship behavior and team performance (Tjosvold, Poon, & Yu, 2005; Alper, Tjosvold, & Law, 2000).

However, if a conflict is not managed efficiently it may deteriorate employee learning, productivity and job performance (Meyer, 2004). Conflict among people in organization has been related to counterproductive workplace behaviors (Kisamore, Jawahar, Liguori, Mharapara, & Stone, 2010). Though one thing is certain that the process needs to be managed effectively to attain the benefits and minimize the potential damage it may cause.

Conflict management styles

It is a communication orientation or pattern that shows one's tendency to approach conflict in a specific manner across a variety of interactive situations. This consistency of usage across different situations is evident from Barsky and Wood's statement regarding these tendencies or preferences that "do not predict how a person will react in a single incident, with its idiosyncratic factors, but rather how a person tends to react across a range of conflict situations"(2005, p. 250). Kuhn and Poole's study on group decision making (2000) described conflict management styles as "a general and consistent orientation toward the other party and the conflict issues, manifest in observable behaviors that form a pattern and share common characteristics over time".

One of the earliest work on typology of conflict management was done by Mary P. Follett in 1920s. She pointed out three primary ways for approaching a conflict namely domination, compromise and integration; with two additional secondary ways called avoidance and suppression(Follett, 1940). Another notable effort was carried out by Deutsch (1949) in his "Theory of Cooperation and Competition". He suggested that nature and consequences of conflict could be explained through a dichotomous framework of cooperation and competition for two people involved in it. This rather simplistic view was criticized because it did not take into account any other intricacies that may play a role in determining the behavior during a conflict (Ruble & Thomas, 1976; Smith, 1987).

In (1964), Blake and Mouton's managerial grid proposed a more sophisticated taxonomy for approaches towards conflict management. It considered two distinct dimensions of "concern for production" and

“concern for production” to determine which style will be used by a manager in conflict. The suggested five styles based on these two dimensions were forcing, withdrawing, smoothing, compromising and problem solving (Blake & Mouton, 1964). Thomas’s (1976) revised the same model and presented his interpretation of two dimensions reflecting intention for assertion as “desire to satisfy one’s own concern” and intention for cooperation as “desire to satisfy other’s concern”. This two-dimensional model yielding five different styles was supported through studies and it compensates for the intricacies that earlier theoretical frameworks lacked like individual’s perception and motivation (Rubin & Brown, *The social psychology of bargaining and negotiation*, 1975; Ruble & Thomas, 1976; Van de Vliert & Kabanoff, 1990). This model also formed the basis or provided ideas for development and validation of important instruments some of which are till date employed to assess conflict management styles (Pruitt, 1983; Rahim & Magner, 1994; 1995; Rahim M. A., 1983b; Putnam, 1988; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974).

Rahim’s (1983) Five Conflict Management styles

Drawing inspiration from the same dichotomous classification system that was used in Blake and Mouton’s (1964) and Thomas’s (1976) work, Rahim and Bonoma (1979) classified the style of dealing with conflict on two dimensions of “concern for self” and “concern for others”. The first aspect relates to how much a person tries to satisfy his own concern or work towards personal interest during a conflict. The second aspect relates to how much a person tries to satisfy the concern of others or gratify the general needs of opposing party. A juxtaposition of these two aspects yields five particular styles that can be differentiated as integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising. As mentioned before, there exists a strong support through literature for this taxonomy and this research will employ Rahim’s (1983b) classification to assess the conflict management styles.

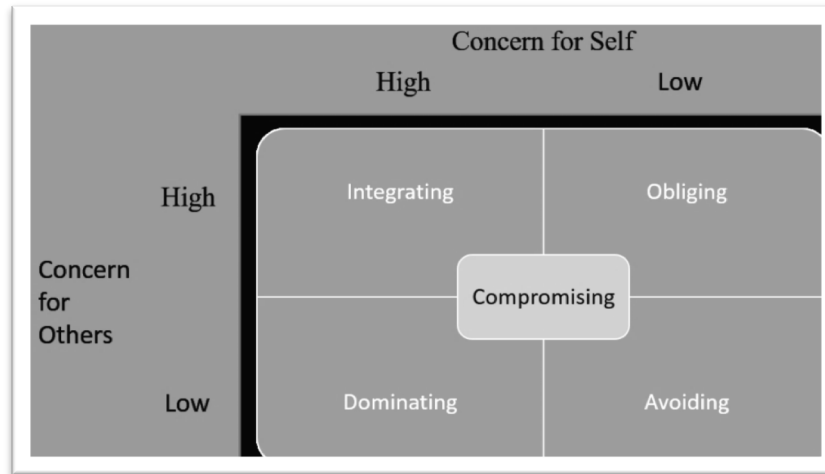


Figure 1 Rahim's Classification for Styles of Handling Interpersonal Conflict

As shown in Figure 1, The integrating or collaborating style represents great interest in personal needs and equal concern for others as well. It requires an individual to give and receive information while showing openness to work out a mutually beneficial solution or create the win-win scenario. The obliging or accommodating style represents a lower interest in personal gain and greater concern for welfare of the others. On the contrary, dominating or competing style represents a higher concentration on personal interest and a low consideration for what others need. The avoiding style reflects no interest in needs of self or other and only shows withdrawal towards the conflict. The compromising style involves intermediate interest towards oneself and others. This style aims for reaching a mutually acceptable decision for both social entities by giving in order to gain something.

Tolerance for Disagreement

The origin of concept for disagreement tolerance which can be traced back to time of debate over differentiation of good and bad conflict (Burgoon, Heston, & McCroskey, 1974). McCroskey and Wheelless (1976) sensed this need to differentiate the term “disagreement” from “conflict”. They described the two terms distinctly,

the former was explained as “differences of opinion on issues” and the later was characterized as “competition, hostility, suspicion, distrust and self-perpetuation” (McCroskey & Wheelless, 1976). Their differentiation clearly showed that disagreement and conflict are two different concepts but the progression of any disagreement depends on the relationship dynamics and the tolerance for disagreement of the people involved. What transforms a simple disagreement into a conflict is the low threshold of an individual to deal with anything that goes against their views (McCroskey & Wheelless, 1976).

Based on this concept, McCroskey (1992) proposed that “people with a high tolerance for disagreement are relatively conflict resistant, whereas people with a low tolerance for disagreement are highly conflict prone” (p. 172). High tolerance for disagreement enables a person to present their ideas and frame the arguments more appropriately (Richmond & McCroskey, 2010). These propositions can be related to how people with varying levels of tolerance disagreement have different perceptions towards conflict and therefore opt for different styles for managing them.

Disagreement tolerance would not only shape your own perceptions but it will also influence how others see you. Teven(2000) has applied the concept of tolerance for disagreement in academic settings and attempted to create a measure especially for teachers. He also explored how tolerance for disagreement affected the perceptions of students regarding their teachers. Teven’s findings (2000; 2005) suggest that the teacher was viewed as more caring when the teacher’s disagreement tolerance was higher in student’s perception and they reported higher affect for the course and less cognitive learning loss.

Gender differences in tolerance for disagreement and conflict management styles

Literature reveals that some studies have suggested gender-related differences when conflict management styles were explored (Bedell & Sistrunk, 1973; Rubin & Brown, 1975). On the contrary some studies reject the notion that males and females use have different preferences for conflict management styles (Shadare, Chidi, & Owoyemi, 2011; Šimović, et al., 2014). This shows that gender may or may not necessarily determine how we choose to respond to situations where differences and disagreement arise.

Need for conflict management and building tolerance for disagreement

We have so far established the fact that conflict may be destructive for employees when it reduces the organizational commitment (Thomas, Bliese, & Jex, 2005) and increases absenteeism and sickness (Giebels & Janssen, 2005). To attain any benefits out of conflict we need to adapt an effective strategy to deal with it. The decision rests with the dealer how he/she wants to manage the conflict (Tjosvold, 2006).

Disagreements or differences in opinion are inevitable but if one is armed with good communication skills then the outcome can be constructive without allowing it to become a conflict (Teven, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1998). Some dispositional factors may determine how an individual may communicate and what degree of tolerance for disagreement may be expected of them (McCroskey, Heisel, & Richmond, 2001). Thus, personality dimensions may determine our way of dealing in situations to some extent but through cognitive and behavioral trainings the relatively stable pattern of responses toward conflict can be changed (Brockman, Nunez, & Basu, 2010).

Presence of a conflict will orient you towards a problem, enhance productivity, bring organizational change, foster personal development, improve knowledge and creativity, increase self-acceptance, facilitate psychological maturity and boost your morale (Tjosvold, *Learning to Manage Conflict: Getting People to Work Together Productively*, 2000). Hence, it is absolutely necessary to manage a conflict in such a way that most benefits are achieved through it and minimum adverse effects remain. This effective management is possible specially when a person shows more tolerance towards disagreements and handles the conflict in a considerate manner.

For management of conflicts many theoretical models and instruments have been presented that propose different styles that people adopt to deal with conflicts (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967; Hall, 1969). This study used Rahim's Organizational Conflict Inventory - II (ROCI - II) to map out different conflict management styles (Rahim M. A., 1983b). To measure the construct of disagreement tolerance, Tolerance for Disagreement Scale (TFD) was used (Teven, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1998).

Method

Data

Primary data was used by obtaining responses from employees through online Google™ forms and manually on printed questionnaires.

Variables

Tolerance for disagreement will serve as the predictive variable whereas conflict management styles will be the response variable.

Inclusion criteria

Employed adults ranging between the ages of 19 to 40 years participated in this research. This age range of young adulthood is mostly recognized for relationship development in Ericson's model of psychosocial development (Weiner, 2003). Hence this age range can show more diversity on our variables. Employees who do not have a working experience of more than 6 months in organizational setting were excluded from the sample as their instances of dealing with a conflict would be too low to develop their conflict management style.

Sample and sampling technique

A sample of 170 employed young adults falling in the age range of 19 to 40 years participated in this research. 54.71 % males and 45.29% females formed this sample. Convenience sampling was used to obtain the data and reach out to employees who fulfilled the criteria.

Tools

Consent form

A detailed consent form was presented first to seek participants' approval to participate in the study with knowledge of their rights and assurance of confidentiality.

Demographic form

A form inquiring basic demographic details like age, gender, income group, duration of working experience was attached. Level of seniority with respect to organization was also asked based on seniority codes from world's largest professional network, LinkedIn Corporation © 2016 (Seniority Codes).

Tolerance for disagreement

To assess levels of disagreement tolerance, Tolerance for Disagreement Scale, refer to Appendix C, (Teven, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1998) was used. This 15 item scale has a 5-point rating scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Statements such as, "Disagreements are generally helpful" and "I don't like to be in situations where people are in disagreement" are included in this measure. To calculate the total score of tolerance for disagreement, scores for items 1, 2, 5, 7, 8, 14 and 15 were added whereas the scores for items 3, 4, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13 were subtracted from 48. Scores under 32 were categorized as low levels of TFD, between 32 and 46 as moderate and exceeding 46 as high. The Cronbach's alpha was reported as 0.86 (Teven, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1998) whereas in this study the value is 0.83.

Rahim's organizational conflict inventory – II (ROCI-II)

This 28-item inventory yields mean scores for five different styles of conflict management namely collaborating, accommodating, compromising, avoiding and competing. Responses are made on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree', refer to Appendix D. Items include statements such as, "I try to find a middle course to resolve an impasse" and "I enjoy arguing with other people about things on which we disagree". Rahim and Magner (1995) reported the value of Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.72 to 0.76 for managerial and 0.65 to 0.80 for collegiate samples. In this study, the internal consistency reliability coefficient for subscales of ROCI-II through Cronbach's alpha range from 0.67 to 0.92.

Model/ statistical technique

For this correlational study which employed quantitative research method by generating priori hypotheses, descriptive statistics were analyzed through IBM® SPSS® Version 20. Chi-square Test of association was applied to determine if there is a significant relationship between tolerance for disagreement and conflict management styles.

Results

Descriptive statistics of age, income group and seniority of the data obtained from 170 respondents were calculated. To determine the reliability of the measures used for this research, Cronbach's alpha coefficient for internal consistency assessed the reliability of Tolerance for Disagreement Scale(Teven, Richmond, & McCroskey, 1998) and each of the five conflict management styles separately for Rahim's Organizational Conflict Inventory – II (Rahim M. A., 1983b). Chi-square test of association was applied to find out if there is a significant relationship between tolerance for disagreement and conflict management styles.

Table 1

Mode values for Age, Income Group and Seniority level of the respondents

	Mode
Age	23 to 26
Income Group	20,000 to 40,000
Seniority	Senior

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the demographics of respondents for this study (n=170).

Table 2

Reliability Statistics for the Measure of Tolerance for Disagreement and Rahim's Organizational Conflict Inventory - II

Scale	Cronbach Alpha's	No of items
Tolerance for Disagreement Scale	.83	15
Collaborating Style (ROCI-II)	.92	7
Accommodating Style (ROCI-II)	.80	6
Competing Style (ROCI-II)	.66	5
Compromising Style (ROCI-II)	.79	4
Avoiding Style (ROCI-II)	.75	6

Note: ROCI-II = Rahim's Organizational Inventory-II

Table 2 shows that the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for internal consistency reliability of scales is acceptable for Tolerance for Disagreement Scale, Collaborating Style, Accommodating Style, Compromising Style and Avoiding Style, $\alpha \geq 0.7$. However, the Cronbach's alpha value for Competing style $\alpha = 0.66$ suggests that any correlations found should be interpreted with slight caution due to relatively low internal consistency of this scale.

Table 3

Chi-Square Test of Association for Levels of Tolerance for Disagreement with Conflict Management Styles

	Value	Likelihood Ratio	
		df	Asymp.Sig (2sided)
TFD Levels \times Collaborating Style	81.246	54	.010*
TFD Levels \times Accommodating Style	92.242	46	.000*
TFD Levels \times Competing Style	48.127	36	.085
TFD Levels \times Avoiding Style	88.191	44	.000*
TFD Levels \times Compromising Style	42.842	32	.095

Note: *. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
TFD = Tolerance for Disagreement

Table 3 represents the analysis of Chi-square test of association for tolerance for disagreement levels with conflict management styles. It

shows that we reject null hypotheses H_{10} that there would be no significant relationship between levels of tolerance for disagreement and conflict management style, $p < 0.05$.

Table 4

Groups Statistics for t-test of Comparison of Males and Females on Tolerance for Disagreement

Gender	N	M	SD
Males	77	48.82	11.44
Females	93	44.68	11.21

Table 5

t-test of Comparison of Males and Females on Tolerance for Disagreement

	Levene's Test for Equality of variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	Df	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% CI		
							LL	UL	
TFD	$\sigma_1^2 = \sigma_2^2$.796	.396	2.37	168	4.14	1.74	.70	7.58
	$\sigma_1^2 \neq \sigma_2^2$			2.37	160	4.14	1.74	.69	7.59
					.86				

Table 5 represents the t-test for comparison of males and females on tolerance for disagreement. It shows that we fail to reject H_0 i.e. $\sigma_1^2 = \sigma_2^2$, $p > 0.05$. Therefore, there would be a significant difference $t(168) = 2.37$, $p < .001$, between tolerance for disagreement of males ($M=48.82$, $SD=11.44$) and females ($M=44.68$, $SD=11.21$) as per Table 4.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to find out the relationship of tolerance for disagreement with conflict management styles. Based on the current literature, it was hypothesized that there would be a significant relationship between levels of tolerance for disagreement and conflict management style. It was also hypothesized that there would be difference between males and females on their tolerance for

disagreement. As evident from Table 2, some styles of conflict management were significantly associated with levels of tolerance for disagreement. Our assumption of gender differences in tolerance for disagreement were also supported by the statistical analysis shown in Table 4. Tolerance for disagreement levels have been found to be significantly associated with collaborating, accommodating and avoiding style of conflict management in this study. Accommodating and Collaborating styles are adopted by people who have a high concern for opinion and views of other people. In such cases, an individual who has more acceptance towards ideas that may differ from theirs may adopt an integrating or/and accommodating style. This means that they might be more open towards innovative ideas and heavily incorporate feedback from their colleagues in times of conflict. Another possibility remains that they might completely avoid the conflict and not be concerned with the welfare of themselves and others.

The study found out that males have relatively high tolerance for disagreement than females. This study supports some previous researches that suggested women competitively manage the conflict thus indicating a gender difference in response to conflict and disagreement (Bedell & Sistrunk, 1973; Rubin & Brown, 1975). Competitive style would require them to be less accepting toward ideas opposing theirs and remain solely on their own needs. These results contradict the findings of Šimović's (2014) study which showed no significant gender differences in a sample of 147 students. Literature gives us contradictory proof when gender differences are explored based on any personality variable. The gender differences simply cannot be attributed to anatomical variation because the term gender is widely considered as biological sex. These could be present due to many reasons which should be explored in more detail with variables such as gender roles, cultural stereotypes or any other social factors.

Conclusion

The present study suggests that tolerance for disagreement may be significantly associated with collaborating, accommodating and avoiding style of conflict management. Males have shown higher tolerance for disagreement than women. This is a contribution to the current literature on employees' tolerance for disagreement levels and their associated conflict management styles.

Limitations and Recommendations

The rating scale of the two measures used in this research were opposite in direction with each other. Where it helps to demand and increase the attention of the participant, a possibility remains that they may have faced confusion while responding. The option of 'Undecided' on any rating scale could be perceived as an alternative choice for not responding to a statement at all. Such words could be replaced or removed altogether for achieving a better response. Reliability of any self-report questionnaire decreases because of the social desirability factors. Hence, the respondent's answer may not be a true representation of their personality.

The findings of this study suggest that organizations may check employees' levels for disagreement tolerance and train them accordingly to ensure a better conflict management. An ideal employee would develop his conflict management style with time but should possess the ability to read the situation and adopt a style which would be best suited. Assertiveness trainings can help employees with high tolerance for disagreement keep their self-interest thriving as opposed to completely obliging to requests from their colleagues or supervisors. Organizations need to cultivate an environment for accepting differences respectfully. This initiative will not only breed innovation but create a more open atmosphere that encourages people to express themselves without any hesitation. People would feel more valued when their opinions would be heard. Such practices of healthy communication are used to develop a sense of ownership and responsibility in employees. A culture of ownership will never let employees avoid conflict completely. Consequently, irrespective of their increased acceptance towards opposing views their motivation to handle conflict would be geared the right way by the sense of responsibility they feel.

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