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CONFLICT RESOLUTION STYLES: A STUDY IN I.T. AND COMMERCIAL ORGANIZATIONS OF WESTERN U.P. REGION

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ABSTRACT:

Conflict is all pervasive in nature and organizations are not untouched with it. Present study deals with interpersonal conflict in the private enterprises (both corporate and academic) in Delhi and adjoining areas in India. The study has a non-experimental, descriptive, and quantitative research design, a sample size of 103 employees working in financial, IT, academic and marketing sectors were analyzed (stratified random sampling was used for the purpose). Statistical measures like Cronbach's alpha, independent samples t test, bivariate correlation, robust tests for equality of means, multiple comparisons (Tukey HSD) and chi square tests were employed to analyze the data. Research revealed that employees of fairer sex in Indian organizations used integrating, compromising and avoiding styles of interpersonal conflict handling. Dominating and obliging styles were followed by males and same was true for all the employees as their age increased. Additionally, employees having superior income and work experience were found to be less integrative and more dominating in their management of conflict. Further, marital status of the employees also affected the conflict handling style. Interpersonal conflict understanding is crucial for smooth functioning of the organizations. Managers today are devising innovative handling techniques as conflict poses a great challenge for them. The present study can facilitate the management practitioners in understanding the concept and its implications.

Key words: Organization, Conflict, Handling Style, Private Sector, India

INTRODUCTION:

Conflicts are the primary reality of organizational societies and the basic political systems in organizations through which conflict is signified is observed in many organizations (Burns and Stalker, 1961; Zald and Berger, 1978; Noon and Blyton, 2002). According to Roloff (1987), “organizational conflict occurs when members engage in activities that are incompatible with those of colleagues within their network, members of other collectivities, or unaffiliated individuals who utilize the services or products of the organization” (p. 496).

Interpersonal conflict –which is the underlying essence of the present research-is considered to be one of the most difficult challenges organizational members face (Phillips and Cheston, 1979) and one of the most frustrating and uncomfortable experiences for managers (Earnest and McCaslin, 1994). Conflict is a term commonly having negative connotation, but organizations today are trying to understand the functionalities of conflict as not all conflicts are good or bad (*interactionist viewpoint*). Understanding the optimal level of conflict, which is neither too much nor too little, is the best bet for businesses. Thus researches in organizational conflict and its management are gaining much currency in contemporary times.

The relevance of present study is that in organizations, interpersonal conflict is prevalent and troublesome for managers (Putnam, 1988), thus the need of the study. Further it is reported that middle managers are spending 25 percent of their time handling conflict (Meyer et al., 1997). Measures like proper planning, mediation, and evaluation of conflict management strategies and developing partnerships with workers are recommended by managers to deal with dysfunctional organizational conflict.

Directing conflict in a positive or negative way may affect the nature of the conflict whether beneficial or destructive (Cetin and Hacifazlioglu, 2004). It is imperative to understand that if interpersonal conflicts are not handled appropriately, it can lead to bad feelings, high turnover and costly litigation (Hirschman, 2001). Nonetheless, if dealt with suitably, conflict can increase the innovativeness and productivity of individuals’ (Uline et al., 2003), further offering the interpersonal relationship satisfaction, creative problem solving, the growth of the global workforce, and domestic workplace diversity (TingToomey and Oetzel, 2001, p. 3) and leads to “improved efficiency, creativity, and profitability” (Axelrod and Johnson, 2005, p. 42). The research at hand can help in understanding some aspects of conflict handling in Indian context.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Litterer (1966) defines conflict as “a type of behavior which occurs when two or more parties are in opposition or in battle as a result of a perceived relative deprivation from the activities of or interacting with another person or group”. Another definition of conflict given by Tedeschi et al. (1973) term conflict as “an interactive state in which the behaviors or goals of one actor are to some degree incompatible with the behaviors or goals of some other actor or actors” (p. 232). Here “actor” refers to any social entity, from the individual to the corporate body itself.

Smith (1966) defines conflict as “a situation in which the conditions, practices, or goals for the different participants are inherently incompatible”. The difference between the views of Smith

and Litterer is whereas former deem conflict as a situation, the latter considers it as a type of behavior. However, both of these authors and Tedeschi et al. consider conflict to result from incompatibility or opposition in goals, activities, or interaction among the social entities.

Rahim Organisational Conflict Inventory (ROCI I and II) instruments have been widely used in various researches on organizational conflict. A study done by Lee (2008) in major industries of Malaysia found that subordinates were more satisfied with their superiors' supervision through their exercise of integrating, compromising, and obliging styles. Meanwhile, subordinates who perceived their superiors as primarily utilizing dominating and avoiding style viewed them as incompetent in supervision and thus lowering their level of job satisfaction.

Analyzing the relationship between biological sex, gender role, organizational status and conflict management behavior in three comparable organizations, Brewer et al. (2002) found dominating style among masculine and avoiding style among feminine individuals. Additionally it was confirmed that employees on upper level positions used integrative while lower level management cadres used avoiding and obliging styles of conflict handling.

The main focus of the present study is interpersonal conflict. Antonioni (1998) has opined that interpersonal conflict tend to occur when there is a struggle or between people with opposing needs and ideas, beliefs and goals and he further reports that gender in general had little relationship with the variance of the conflict-management style. Researches have also found no difference between men and women in conflict handling if they were on same status in the organization (Brewer et al. op. cit.; Korabik et al., 1993; Renwick, 1977).

Many studies have dealt with the sources of conflict but there is a general lack of empirical support as they are mostly theoretical conceptualizations (Van Tonder, Havenga and Visagie, 2008). Nelson and Quick (2001, p. 424–8) has given structural reasons (those that develop from within the organization and initiate from the manner in which work is organized), and personal factors, which crop up as a result of individual differences among employees as sources of conflict.

Antonioni op. cit. claims that age usually had little relationship with the conflict-management style. Friedman et al. (2000) associate individual conflict styles and employees' experience of stress. His research emphasizes that those who use a more integrative style experience lower levels of task conflict, reducing relationship conflict, which reduces stress. Further those who exercise more of dominating or avoiding style experience higher levels of task conflict, increasing relationship conflict and stress.

An exploratory study of interpersonal conflict handling in multinational organizations in India reported one third of all the conflicts and that of boss-subordinate (often) did not get resolved. Additionally, communication, whether by mutual consent, by management intervention, or by developing better interpersonal relationship helped in conflict resolution in majority of the cases (Gupta and Sasidhar, 2010).

Numerous studies (De Dreu and Vliert, 1997; Tjosvold, 1997) propose that conflict is a positive force if handled appropriately. In contemporary heterogeneous organizational environment the

possibility of using conflict as a driving force to sustain competitive spirit, growth and innovation rather than an unconstructive, crippling force, is crucial. Consequently the focus has therefore shifted from prevention of conflicts to management of conflicts (Callanan et al., 2006).

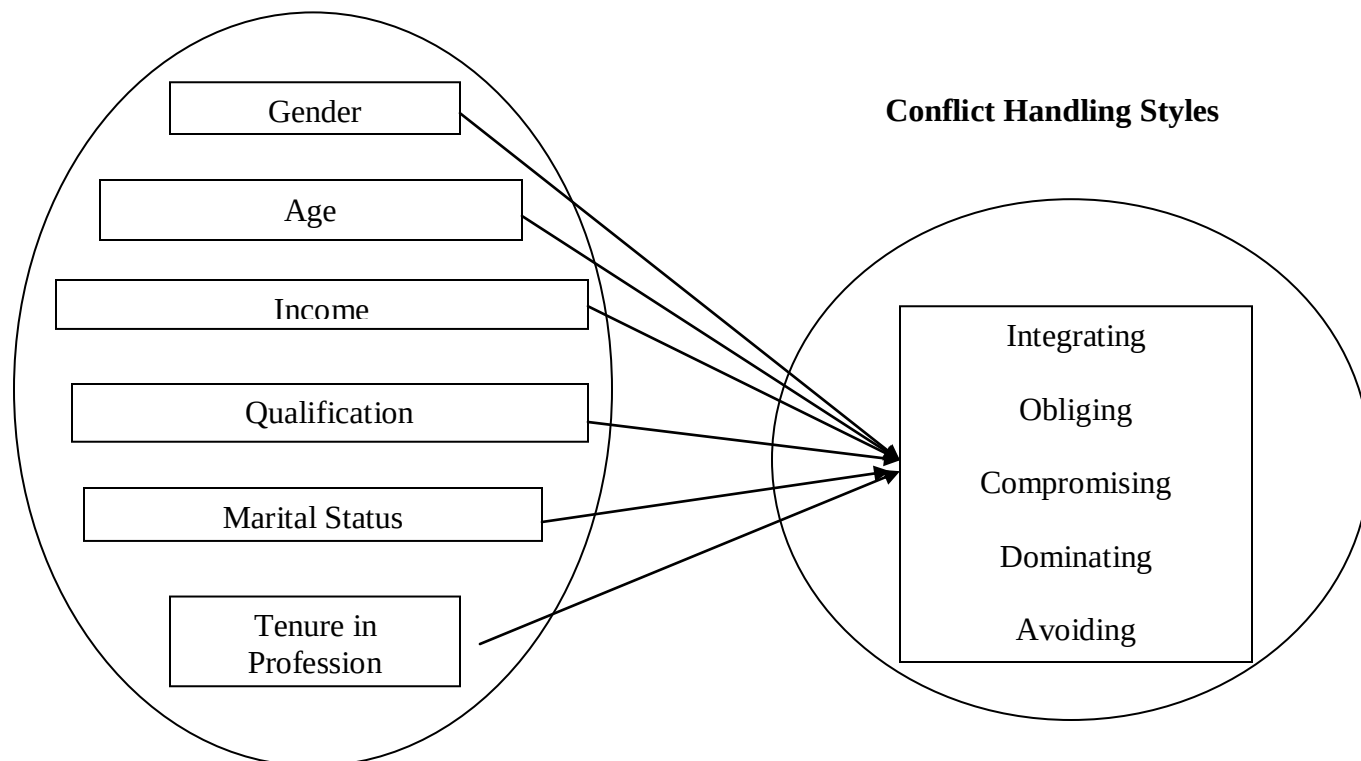
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Ohbuchi and Fukushima (1997) describe interpersonal conflict as an event in which an individual potentially jeopardizes another's goals, wishes, or expectations. The conceptual framework for the study encompassed independent and dependent variables as illustrated in figure 1. The independent variables included the demographic ones like gender, age, income, qualification, marital status and employees' tenure in the profession.

The dependent variables comprises of conflict handling styles which are typically seen as a response to particular situations. According to Wilmot & Hocker (2001), conflict management styles are patterned responses or clusters of behavior individuals' use in conflict situations utilizing various interaction methods (p. 130). Concern for self and for others has been identified as two fundamental elements of handling interpersonal conflict (Follet, 1940; Thomas, 1976; Rahim and Bonoma, 1979). On the basis of them five styles of handling conflict have been described by Sorenson and Hawkins (1995) as follows:

- a. **Integrating style**, identified with problem solving, has high concern for self and others. It involves the assessment of differences so that an effective solution can be reached, acceptable to conflicting parties. It is further associated with openness and exchange of information for the purpose.
- b. **Obliging Style** has high concern for others and low for self, it is related to emphasizing commonalities and playing down the differences to satisfy the concern of other party.
- c. An employee having **Compromising Style** acts to serve as intermediary in concern with self and others, which means a reciprocal relationship to make a mutually acceptable decision.
- d. **Dominating style** has high concern for self and low for others. This style is associated with forcing behavior to win one's position.
- e. **Avoiding style** is associated with pulling out or sidestepping from a situation and passing the buck. The peculiarity of this approach is low concern for others as well as for self.

Figure: 1 Conceptual Framework of the Study
Independent Variables



The conceptual suggestion of the study is employees' conflict handling styles (dependent variables) would be affected and differed by the independent variables.

OBJECTIVES:

The major purpose of conducting the present study was to investigate the conflict management styles based on variables gender, age, income, qualification, marital status and employees' tenure in the profession among the Indian employees. The researcher also sought to comparatively appraise the extent of gender differential in conflict management style among Indian corporate employees. The below mentioned hypotheses were tested for the study. According to Weathington et al., (2010), "a hypothesis is a specific prediction about the relation among two or more variables based on theory or previous research" (p. 67).

STATEMENT OF HYPOTHESIS:

Null Hypothesis (H₀)

There is statistically no significant gender difference in conflict management style used among employees in organizations.

Alternative (H₁)

There is statistically significant gender difference in conflict management style used among employees in organizations.

Null Hypothesis (H₀)

Variation in employee age has no significant difference in conflict management style used by them.

Alternative (H₁)

Variation in employee age has significant difference in conflict management style used by them.

Null Hypothesis (H₀)

There is statistically no significant difference in conflict management style among workers based on income earned.

Alternative (H₁)

There is statistically significant difference in conflict management style among workers based on income earned.

Null Hypothesis (H₀)

There is statistically no significant difference in conflict management style among workers based on qualification.

Alternative (H₁)

There is statistically significant difference in conflict management style among workers based on qualification.

Null Hypothesis (H₀)

There is statistically no significant difference in conflict management style among workers based on employees' marital status.

Alternative (H₁)

There is statistically significant difference in conflict management style among workers based on employees' marital status.

Null Hypothesis (H₀)

There is no significant variation in conflict management style among employees based on tenure.

Alternative (H₁)

There is significant variation in conflict management style among employees based on tenure.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Sample: The present study employed a non-experimental, descriptive, and quantitative research design with primary data of a sample size of 103. The employees were from myriad sectors of Indian economy like financial (38.8%), insurance (29.1%), information technology (IT) with 17.5% and marketing (14.6%) in Delhi NCR region. The data was collected using stratified random sampling. The strata were male and female employees working in sectors already mentioned (six strata) randomly selected from forty two relevant organizations. Due to certain discrepancies 31 responses were rejected out of 180 total questionnaires sent while 46 of them were not returned, the response rate being 74.44%. There were 45 males and 58 females in the total sample out of which 54.4% were married. Majority of the sample was in the age group of 25-30 years (61.2%) with their income ranging from INR 15 to 25000 (62.1%). The sample also shows post graduate degree for most (72.8%) respondents and 54.4% having work

experience of 1-3 years. Statistical Package Social Sciences (SPSS) version 16 was used for all type of analysis.

INSTRUMENTATION

Reliability Statistics:

A pilot study with sample size 39 preceded the actual study. The reliability coefficient for the factors was: Integrating Style, .603; Obliging Style, .588; Compromising Style, .634; Dominating style, .660; Avoiding Style, .694 and the overall scale value being .757. Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) consider values that vary around 0.50 as being the lower limit of acceptability and all the above mentioned values are thus deemed acceptable. Table 1 demonstrates the reliability statistics of the present study, having constructs with adequate reliability.

Table 1: Reliability Statistics

Reliability Statistics		
Factors	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
Integrating Style	.603	6
Obliging Style	.588	6
Compromising Style	.634	3
Dominating Style	.660	4
Avoiding Style	.694	5
Overall Scale	.757	24

RESULTS:

Tests of Hypotheses

Accordingly the stated hypotheses were tested. "Hypothesis testing is a systematic procedure for deciding whether the results of a research study, which examines a sample, support a particular theory or practical innovation, which applies to a population" (Aron et al., 2007, p.115).

Gender Differences in Conflict Handling

a. Descriptive statistics

Table 2: Descriptive Group Statistics and Directional Measures-Gender (n=102)
(*independent sample t test*)

Factors	Gender	M	SD	T	Df	Sig (2-tailed)
Integrating Style	M	3.80	.726	-2.299	101	.024
	F	4.10	.612			
Obliging Style	M	3.22	.599			

	F	3.19	.512	.297	101	.767
Compromising Style	M	3.60	.986	-2.404	101	.018
	F	3.93	.317			
Dominating Style	M	3.31	1.041	4.544	101	.000
	F	2.52	.731			
Avoiding Style	M	3.31	1.041	-3.821	101	.000
	F	3.93	.588			

Table 2 displays the differentials in conflict handling styles with the variable gender. It is apparent that women excel in integrating, compromising and avoiding styles of conflict handling (their mean scores being 4.10, 3.93 and 3.93 respectively). While men score more in obliging and dominating styles with mean score of 3.22 and 3.31 in that order. The t-tests revealed significant differences among men and women in integrating, $t=.024$, $p<.05$, compromising, $t=.018$, $p<.05$, dominating $t=.000$, $p<.05$ and avoiding styles, $t=.000$, $p<.05$ thereby rejecting the null hypothesis that there is no significant gender difference in conflict management style used among employees in organizations. While there was no significant difference in obliging style of conflict handling among men and women with $t=.297$, $p>.05$, which accepts the null hypothesis for this factor.

Relationship between age and Conflict Handling

Table 3: Bivariate Correlations (Age)

		Age	Integrating Style	Obliging Style	Compromising Style	Dominating Style	Avoiding Style
Age	Pearson Correlation	1	.017	.463**	.153	.489**	.011
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.868	.000	.122	.000	.912
	N	103	103	103	103	103	103

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Employing bivariate correlation to measure relationship between the independent variable age and all the five conflict handling styles found a positive correlation, thereby implying that as the age increases the usage of these styles also increases. In obliging style with a correlation coefficient of $r = .463$ which is highly significant at $p<0.01$ (one-tailed significance value $= .000$) and dominating style ($r=.489$, $p<0.01$) we find decidedly significant positive correlation. Statistically speaking, it can be thus safely said that among the employees surveyed, as their age increases, they become more obliging as well as dominant in their way of handling the conflicts at workplace.

Income based differentials in Conflict Handling

Table 4: Bivariate Correlations (Income)

	Income	Integrative Style	Obliging Style	Compromising Style	Dominating Style	Avoiding Style
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Income	Pearson	1	-.262**	.207*	-.050	.701**	-.191
	Correlation						
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.008	.036	.614	.000	.054
	N	103	103	103	103	103	103

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Integrative style ($r = -.262$, $p < 0.01$) was found to be having highly significant negative correlation with income of the employees, which means a person having more income would be less integrative in handling conflict and vice versa. Dominating style had a highly significant positive correlation with income ($r = .701$, $p < 0.01$) which implies that as the income of the employee increases, he becomes more dominant in handling conflict. One more significant positive relationship is also between income and obliging style ($r = .207$, $p < 0.05$). Compromising style ($r = -.050$, $p > 0.01$) and avoiding style ($r = -.191$, $p > 0.01$) have negative correlation with income of a worker, nonetheless it is not significant.

Conflict Handling on the basis of Qualification of Employees

Among all the styles, only in dominating style does the findings suggest a significant difference in conflict handling by the employees based on their qualification, $F(2,100) = 7.344$, $p < .05$. Levene statistic (3.024) further shows that group variances are equal as .053 significance, is not significantly different ($p > 0.05$).

Table 5: Robust Tests of Equality of Means

		Statistic ^a	df1	df2	Sig.
Dominating Style	Welch	12.716	2	21.783	.000
	Brown-Forsythe	12.267	2	29.243	.000

a. Asymptotically F distributed.

The Welch statistic is more powerful than the standard F or Brown-Forsythe statistics when sample sizes and variances are unequal. The results of the statistics conform that the differences between group score (dominating style) vis-à-vis qualifications is significant.

Table 6: Multiple Comparisons (Tukey HSD)

Dependent Variable	(I) Qualification	(J) Qualification	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Dominating Style	Undergraduate	Post Graduate	-.856*	.233	.001	-1.41	-.30

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Tukey HSD test shows that there is significant difference in dominating conflict handling style only among the undergraduate and post graduate employees ($p < .05$). Therefore the null hypothesis that there is statistically no significant difference in conflict management style among workers based on qualification is rejected only for this factor and not for any other factor.

Marital Status and Conflict Handling

In a study of military personnel in Nigeria on conflict handling strategy, main and interactive effect of marital status was found to be insignificant (Yara and Tunde-Yara, 2010). Chi-square value (Fisher's exact test) of 9.213 exact significance .009 ($p < .05$), rejects the null hypothesis that there is statistically no significant difference in conflict management style among workers based on employees' marital status for obliging style of conflict handling.

Table 7: Chi-Square Tests

	Value	Df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)	Point Probability
Pearson Chi-Square	8.971 ^a	2	.011	.010		
Likelihood Ratio	11.619	2	.003	.006		
Fisher's Exact Test	9.213			.009		
Linear-by-Linear Association	2.729 ^b	1	.099	.107	.070	.037
N of Valid Cases	103					

a. 2 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.19.

b. The standardized statistic is 1.652.

The Fisher's exact test value of 19.386, and exact significance .000 ($p < .05$) for dominating style of conflict handling provides the null hypothesis that there is statistically no significant difference in conflict management style among workers based on employees' marital status rejected. Same is true for avoiding style of conflict handling.

Table 8: Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)	Point Probability
Pearson Chi-Square	19.736 ^a	4	.001	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	23.801	4	.000	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test	19.386			.000		
Linear-by-Linear Association	.082 ^b	1	.775	.838	.427	.078
N of Valid Cases	103					

Table 8: Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)	Point Probability
Pearson Chi-Square	19.736 ^a	4	.001	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	23.801	4	.000	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test	19.386			.000		
Linear-by-Linear Association	.082 ^b	1	.775	.838	.427	.078
N of Valid Cases	103					

a. 4 cells (40.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.83.

b. The standardized statistic is -.286.

Fisher's exact test value of 18.356, and exact significance .000 ($p < .05$) rejects the null hypothesis that there is statistically no significant difference in conflict management style among workers based on employees' marital status (for avoiding style). Therefore it can be safely ascertained from the analysis that only for obliging, dominating and avoiding styles the conflict handling is significant between married and unmarried employees. Nonetheless for integrative and compromising styles statistically the conflict handling difference is not there.

Table 9: Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)	Point Probability
Pearson Chi-Square	18.342 ^a	4	.001	.000		
Likelihood Ratio	23.256	4	.000	.000		
Fisher's Exact Test	18.356			.000		
Linear-by-Linear Association	.201 ^b	1	.654	.735	.372	.082
N of Valid Cases	103					

a. 6 cells (60.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.83.

b. The standardized statistic is -.448.

Conflict Handling based on Number of Years Experience of Employees

The study also found that work experience of an employee has negative highly significant correlation ($r = -.260$, $p < 0.01$) with integrating style of conflict handling.

Table 10: Bivariate Correlations

	Experience	Integrating Style	Obliging Style	Compromising Style	Dominating Style	Avoiding Style
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Experience Pearson Correlation	1	-.260**	-.053	-.064	.205*	-.066
Sig. (2-tailed)		.008	.592	.521	.038	.506
N	103	103	103	103	103	103

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As the experience increases, a worker becomes less integrative. Whilst experience has positive significant correlation with dominating style ($r=.205$, $p<0.05$), thereby meaning as the work experience increases, it results in increase of domination of the employee in treatment of conflict. Obliging, compromising and avoiding styles of conflict handling have negative correlation with the work experience, but they are statistically not supported.

DISCUSSION, LIMITATION, IMPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

In the present study interpersonal conflict and its handling is researched in the Indian context. After establishing the reliability of the study through Cronbach's alpha, the hypotheses of the study were tested. The results after the application of independent sample t test, it was found that the female employees outshine their male counterparts as they use integrating, compromising and avoiding styles of conflict handling more, while same is true for men in obliging and dominating styles.

Further, bivariate correlation shows that as the age of the employees increase they become more obliging as well as dominant in the manner they handle interpersonal conflict. The same statistical test additionally conforms that an employee having better income status are less integrative and more dominating in handling conflict. It was also established that the experience/tenure of a worker increases, he/she become less integrative and more dominating in the manner they handle conflict. Tukey HSD test additionally shows statistically there is significant difference in conflict management style between the undergraduate and post graduate workers based on qualification just for dominating style not others. It is further found in the study that married and unmarried statistically differ in handling their conflicts only for obliging, dominating and avoiding styles.

Knowing the causal relationship between conflict and its sources and secondly outcome of the same are limitations of the present research and implication for further researches. Nonetheless, development of valid and reliable measure of interpersonal conflict in Indian context can be facilitated through the study, in organizations and affiliated teams. It can be easily concluded here that several demographic variables have important role to play as far as conflict and its handling is concerned. A better understanding of discrepancies, disagreements, unconstructive and negative perceptions and emotions can be facilitated through the use of present paper for further researches.

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