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THE EFFECT OF RELATIONAL TYPE ON
CONFLICT MANAGEMENT PREFERENCE

By

Mary Deborah McEllistrem

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ABSTRACT

THE EFFECT OF RELATIONAL TYPE ON CONFLICT MANAGEMENT PREFERENCE

By

Mary Deborah McEllistrem

This study examined the relationship between conflict management and relational type. A questionnaire using the Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI) was modified to assess the effect of relational type on conflict management style. The questionnaire was distributed to 284 undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university. Two levels of the independent variable, relational type, were examined, i.e. friends and acquaintances. Conflict strategy was divided into three dependent variables, solution-oriented (comprised of compromising and collaborating strategies), control and nonconfrontation. The first hypothesis proposed that friends would use solution-oriented strategies more than acquaintances. The second hypothesis stated that acquaintances would use nonconfrontational (or avoidance) strategies more than friends. Finally, a research question stated that there would be a significant difference between friends and acquaintances choice of controlling strategies. Initial results confirmed the hypotheses and research question. However, a more in depth analysis of the results revealed that the significant findings were due to design problems.

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CHAPTER I: Conflict Overview

Conflict is an integral component of our lives (Putnam & Poole, 1987). It is present in daily interactions with friends, family members and co-workers. Many situations bring people with divergent, and often competing, viewpoints together. Distinctive backgrounds frequently generate different values and beliefs. This diversity in background and viewpoints is one reason conflict is so prevalent in organizations and other contexts as well. Even close friends or intimate couples will, occasionally, become involved in conflict. Healey and Bell (1990) summarize this concept well, "no matter how close we are to a friend, it is inevitable that he or she will occasionally say and do things that upset us" (p. 25).

An individual may choose to handle conflict differently based on his/her role in the relationship. A manager in an organization may choose to resolve conflict with her subordinates or co-workers in a straight-forward and open manner. However, that same manager may choose to avoid conflict entirely when faced with it at home. When attempting to determine how an individual will resolve conflict, one must take into account various factors, i.e., the depth of the conflict, the roles that the individual or group play in the situation, the personality characteristics

of the individuals and their previous history (Healey & Bell, 1990).

The relationship between relational type (whether two individuals are friends or acquaintances) and conflict style was examined. Although the literature concerning conflict is extensive, the research concerning how friends and acquaintances interact and resolve conflicts is limited. In order to make sense of this large amount of literature, it is necessary to describe a brief history of conflict style research and then examine each approach to defining conflict style separately.

Conflict Style History

Throughout the decades, conflict has been studied in three major areas, interpersonal, cross-cultural, and organizational (Putnam & Poole, 1987). Additionally, it has been examined in conjunction with a number of variables: personality characteristics (Bell & Blakeney, 1977), the structure of the organization, labor-management disputes (Corwin, 1970), factors which increase conflict (Putnam & Poole, 1987), role conflicts (Putnam & Wilson, 1982), and gender and situational variables (Sternberg & Soriano, 1984). Results in these areas have been diverse and often contradictory, particularly in regard to gender and contextual variables (Conrad, 1991; Corwin, 1970; Putnam & Wilson, 1982; Sternberg & Soriano, 1984). This may in part be due to the different methods these studies have utilized.

There is a large amount of literature concerning interpersonal conflict (Bell & Blakeney, 1977; Blake, Shepard & Mouton, 1964; Brett, 1984; Burrell, Buzzanell & McMillan, 1992; Conrad, 1991; Corwin, 1970; Donohue & Kolt, 1991; Hocker & Wilmot, 1987; Putnum & Wilson, 1983; Renwick, 1975; Sternberg & Soriano, 1984). These studies conceptualize and operationally define conflict in many different ways; some use quantitative methods, examining mean differences, ANOVAs and t-tests, while others use qualitative methods, like a metaphoric analysis. These analyses also reflect the predominant theory of their time periods. The majority of this research has focused on how conflict is handled in the various types of workplace situations, i.e. between superior and subordinates, between peers, and between departments (Renwick, 1975; Sternberg & Soriano, 1984). Since there is an abundance of literature in this area, it is helpful to review it within specified time periods. For the purposes of this overview, conflict research is examined by the decade in which it has been studied. Research which occurred before the 1960s depicted conflict as a negative aspect of life and something to be avoided (Bell & Blakeney, 1977; Putnam & Wilson, 1982; Nicotera, 1993). Conflict was portrayed as detrimental to the situation and the relationship between the disputants.

The Blake and Mouton study of 1964 shaped not only the theoretical viewpoints of that decade, but also several

decades to come. This study conceptualized conflict resolution as an individual style or personality trait. Over the next thirty years, this view became one of the most popular stances in conflict research.

Conflict style theory stipulated that if the conflict was handled in a certain manner, it could be productive. This was a turning point in conflict research; no longer was conflict to be avoided at all costs. Confronting the dispute/disputant, was viewed as more worthwhile and socially acceptable than avoiding or controlling the conflict. Studies focused on how to resolve conflict constructively and maintain the relationship of the disputants. Research also centered on what variables might contribute to an increased or decreased amount of conflict. The views of Blake and Mouton were carried over into the 1970s.

Bell and Blakeney (1977) exemplifies this viewpoint very well. They examined the correlation between personality variables and conflict resolution in different groups. This study viewed conflict as a positive occurrence, but warned that "whether conflict can realize its positive potential depends on how it is managed or resolved" (p. 850). Using Blake and Mouton's conflict style theory, they employed questionnaires and interviewing techniques to examine the conflict styles of both college students and members of a community organization. This

study found a significant, positive correlation between achievement and confronting conflicts, in both groups. Their findings indicated that individuals who are achievement-oriented will confront their conflicts. In addition, the results implied that confronting conflict was the "best" way of handling the conflict, especially since individuals who are achievement-oriented use this conflict style. This study is consistent with the Blake and Mouton research which depicts conflict in a more positive light, and not as something to be avoided.

During the 1980s, conflict research altered again. Specifically, conflict styles were no longer viewed as traits, but variables which could be affected by situational, personality and cultural factors. Conflict research began to focus on conflict "management" as opposed to conflict "resolution" (Putnam, 1988). This shift in terminology appeared to be the result of a shift in conceptualization of the construct. It was no longer necessary to "resolve" conflict, and come to an agreement about the topic, but to "manage" it. Whether the two parties agreed with one another was not important. The goal of conflict strategies changed. Conflict could facilitate change, promote cohesiveness and aid in the generation of new ideas (Krackhardt & Stern, 1988; Nicotera, 1993; Putnam, 1988).

For example, Morley and Shockley-Zalabak (1986)

conducted a study to determine what relationship exists between conflict style preference and the sending of different messages. They used self-report questionnaires to determine how professionals, managers and support personnel handled conflict with different members of their organization (i.e.) subordinates, peers and superiors). Results indicated that preference for the competitive conflict style was significantly related to position within the organization and that compromisers were likely to use more information-based messages than regulative (pertaining to rules, regulations), innovative or integrative (relationships between workers, organizational goals, support, etc.). In addition, those individuals who avoided conflict had negative correlations in overall communication satisfaction and conflict outcome. Morley and Shockley-Zalabak mentioned that management needed to "facilitate the participation of the avoider in conflicts" (p. 399). In addition, they conclude that "individuals who are most likely to be promoted are those who have a preference for a competitive conflict style, but are perceived by their superiors as having a preference for a collaborative conflict style" (p. 400). This study illustrates the predominant viewpoint of conflict in the 1980s. An individual's conflict style is affected by many things (e.g., who the individual is interacting with) and affects many things (e.g., message style).

Finally, in the 1990s, conflict research underwent more conceptual changes. Conflict style was initially conceptualized as a function of two constructs, concern for other people and concern for production. These two constructs could be mapped out on a grid. Individuals could be placed on this grid based on their concern level (low to high) for production and their concern level (low to high) for people. However, in the 1990s critics of conflict styles research examined this grid and theorized that it was an oversimplification. As Nicotera (1993) and Morley and Shockley-Zalabak (1986) describe, conflict is not merely a function of concern for other people and concern for production, it is contingent on several other variables. These variables include, but are not limited to, gender, situation/context, personality, the other disputant, and previous conflict history.

Nicotera (1993) stipulates that there are several variables which will influence the way an individual will handle a conflict, not just two. Her model uses self-report (open-ended and closed-ended) accounts of how individuals handle conflict. Her results indicated that there were three basic constructs involved in conflict management: making sure that one's own view was understood, that the disputant's point of view was understood and the emotional valence of the relationship. This study exemplifies the viewpoint that conflict is more than a function of concern

for people and production. She states that an individual's conflict style may change not only from situation to situation, but also within a situation, based on the other disputant.

This study examined how relational type affects conflict style choice. Specifically, whether two individuals are friends or only acquaintances may effect how they handle conflicts. The purpose of this study is to examine the affect of relational type on conflict resolution styles.

Conflict Definitions

Overview. The main focus of studies concerning conflict in the past have been conflict management style or conflict resolution strategies and how they are used in interpersonal or organizational situations (Conrad, 1991; Killman & Thomas, 1975; Putnam, 1988; Putnam & Poole, 1987; Putnam & Wilson, 1982). Conflict management is the way in which people in conflict choose to handle the situation (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991). For the purposes of this thesis, conflict management style/strategy or conflict resolution style/strategy will be used interchangeably.

There is little agreement in the literature about the definition of conflict (Bell & Blakeney, 1977; Nicotera, 1993). However, there does appear to be agreement on the basic components of the definition. Conflict requires two or more entities, with interdependent goals, relying on one

another for achieving those goals and perceiving interference in attaining those goals (Donohue & Kolt, 1991; Hocker & Wilmot, 1991; Nicotera, 1993; Putnam & Wilson, 1982).

There are two advantages in applying the above interpersonal definition of conflict in organizations. First, although the disputes described in the scenarios to follow were within organizations, the central focus of this study was the conflict between two individuals. Therefore, we require an interpersonal definition.

Second, this definition differentiates between surface quarrels and actual disputes. Two parties who do not have interdependent goals, or do not perceive interference from each other in attaining their goals, might quarrel over the correct course of action. Yet, ultimately, each person will make the decision as she or he sees fit. Therefore, it is not necessary to try and resolve the conflict. The two parties can co-exist quite easily without concurring viewpoints. However, if the present definition of conflict is used, it becomes essential for the two parties to resolve their differences before they can pursue their goals. They will be more motivated to address their problems and not allow the conflict to just "blow over" (Donohue & Kolt, 1991; Hocker & Wilmot, 1991).

The conflict styles approach has undergone many changes throughout the decades, some of which were mentioned

earlier. However, conflict styles are still the dominant theoretical and applied reference for conflict theorists (Nicotera, 1993). Extensive studies have been conducted in the conflict research literature using various ways of conceptualizing this construct (Conrad, 1991; Renwick, 1975; Sternberg & Soriano, 1984). Now that the history and definitions of conflict are understood, a more in depth examination of the various conflict style approaches can be launched.

Conflict Styles

The conflict styles theory originally hypothesized that each individual handles conflict in one basic style or manner. These styles were conceptualized on one dimension: competition versus collaboration. Conflict resolution was goal-oriented and individuals were perceived as having a specific intent when they were embroiled in conflict.

Later, conflict styles were revamped and examined on two dimensions. Researchers altered these two dimensions slightly for the purposes of their studies. The two dimensions were generally conceived as "concern" for certain areas. For example, one factor might be "concern for others" while the other is "concern for self". "Concern for productivity" and "concern for people" were the original two-dimensions of conflict style theory. Individuals could range on these axes from 1, low, to 9, high. Within the past decade, this theoretical viewpoint has undergone many

criticisms, but it is still recognized as a prevalent framework for examining conflict.

Since this study will be using conflict styles, it is advantageous to examine previous studies using this approach. However, as noted, the research concerning relational type and conflict strategy is limited. Therefore, one must extrapolate from studies which are similar in nature.

Conflict Style as a Trait. Initially, conflict was considered to be a personality trait. A trait is consistent across all situations (Parks, 1980; Putnam, 1988). Theorists posited that disputants relied on the same style every time they were involved in a conflict (Putnam & Poole, 1987; Putnam & Wilson, 1982).

For example, Sternberg and Soriano (1984) conceptualized conflict as a personality trait and examined it in conjunction with several other variables. Although this is a recent study, Sternberg and Soriano (1984) provides an excellent example of the initial "conflict as trait" theory. They presented undergraduate university students with a set of stories involving real-world conflict situations. These stories described personal, organizational and international conflicts. Students could: take physical action, economic action, wait and see, accept the situation, step-down, have a third party intervene, and undermine esteem. Sternberg and Soriano found evidence that

conflict style is consistent across situations. They also found that "men seemed to show more commonality in conflict-resolution style across content domains than did women" (p. 126). Although the generalizability of these findings is limited by the use of college students and self report measures, the study does support the conceptualization of conflict as a trait.

Conflict Style as Individually-Based. An alternate view depicts conflict styles as dependent on several diverse relational, situational, contextual, cultural and personal factors (Korabik, Baril & Watson, 1993; Monroe, DiSalvo, Lewis & Borzi, 1990; Putnam & Poole, 1987). Conflict style is portrayed as a choice, an intention or set of strategies (Nicotera, 1993). It changes not only from situation to situation, but it also changes within the situations, depending on the disputants, the context, the culture, and the relationship in general. Conflict resolution is conceptualized as a dynamic process between two or more parties, not a trait or state which exists inside the individual (Putnam & Poole, 1987; Nicotera, 1993). People may choose a particular conflict style based on previous experiences, their organizational position relative to the other party, or a combination of other situational, contextual and cultural factors (Beatty, Balfantz & Kuwabara, 1989; Bell & Blakeney, 1977). Therefore, the conflict style they use will alter across situations.

For example, London and Howat (1978) examined how employee commitment affects conflict management style in parks and recreation districts. Specifically, two questionnaires were mailed to a supervisor and s/he was asked to give one to his/her subordinate. Respondents described their own conflict resolution style and the perceived conflict style of their counterpart. This study examined commitment level to the organization, commitment level to the community and commitment level to the profession as a whole. London and Howat found that each commitment level correlated differently with each conflict style. These findings indicate that level of commitment is an important determinant of conflict style choice and that choice may be affected by others. London and Howat (1978) conclude by saying that "other personal variables than employee commitment may influence the use of conflict resolution strategies either directly or indirectly" (p.12). London and Howat conclude their study by listing some of the other variables which may have affected the individual's conflict style, but were not taken into account. These included social pressure and the length of time the superior and subordinate have worked together.

In addition, Renwick (1975) examined interpersonal conflict between superiors and subordinates in a large manufacturing firm. Individuals completed a questionnaire concerning their own conflict management style and their

perception of one other party's conflict management technique (usually a supervisor). She focused on several factors: cause of the conflict, topic of conflict and perception of the conflict management techniques. She found that "conflict management was dependent to some extent on the status of the employee relative to the other party involved in the interaction" (Renwick, 1975, p. 452). However, the organizational climate in which Renwick did the study placed an emphasis on sustaining good relationships. Therefore, it may not be possible to generalize these findings to other situations.

In sum, both of these studies illustrate the perception of conflict resolution style as something which is context-dependent. Renwick (1975) found that conflict management was "to some extent" dependent on the relationship between two parties. London and Howat (1978) found that conflict management was affected by the level of commitment by the employee and his/her coworkers.

Conflict Style as Multi-dimensional. A third view postulates that conflict style is not limited to two dimensions (Nicotera, 1993; Van de Vliert, 1991). It is not dependent only on concern for others and concern for product. Instead, conflict styles are viewed as multi-dimensional and dependent on several diverse factors.

Nicotera (1993) finds evidence for three critical components of conflict style preference. After providing a

thorough critique of Blake and Mouton's conflict management styles, she conducted a survey using several organizations, including educational, financial, government, retail, computer and construction companies. The respondents provided written accounts regarding their last conflict in the work setting. Subjects described the conflict, what they did and what their feelings were. From these results, she derived a model of conflict-handling behavior which had three major themes or dimensions. Attention to one's own view (the other disputant understood the respondent's point of view), attention to other's view and the emotional/relational valence between the two parties. Her results indicated that Blake and Mouton's original two-dimensional approach was not adequate in describing conflict style. It did not utilize "real-world" accounts by the individuals in conflict and did not take into consideration other situational, personality and contextual variables.

Van de Vliert (1991) contributes to the dimensional critique of Blake and Mouton's original conflict management grid. He contends that the grid is an ambiguous visual field comprised of descriptions of each conflict style; number combinations, of each style ranging from 1 (low) to 9 (high); concern captions, of each dimension, concern for others and concern for self; and squares, each square representing a "theoretical position or mode [which predicts]...how a person operating under that mode is likely

to handle conflict" (Van de Vliert, 1991, p.7). Each of these dimensions "emphasize either the description or explanation of conflict management, in addition to emphasizing either different behaviors or different dimensions" (Van de Vliert, 1991, p.8). This multi-faceted view of Blake and Mouton's original grid illustrates the ambiguity associated with this theory. These different conceptualizations of the conflict management grid may affect how researchers view conflict and define these variables.

Summary. This debate is still present in conflict research today. Some theorists still posit that there is evidence of conflict as a trait and that it is consistent across situations (Sternberg & Soriano, 1984). Others believe that individual differences will help determine an individual's conflict style choice. The third view of conflict styles hypothesizes that a multi-dimensional or multi-faceted view of conflict would be more accurate (Nicotera, 1993; Putnam & Wilson, 1982). Although theorists may have difficulty conceptualizing what a conflict style is, there is evidence that it is parsimonious (London & Howat, 1978) and has moderate to high construct validity (Sternberg & Soriano, 1984). In order to have an in-depth understanding of the conflict style theory, it is advantageous to examine and define each style separately.

Five Conflict Styles

The five styles of dealing with conflict are: avoiding, collaborating, competing, accommodating and compromising. Some researchers may use five, four or three styles, but they generally use the same two dimensional base, concern for people and concern for productivity (Bell & Blakeney, 1977; Blake, Shepard & Mouton, 1964; London & Howat, 1978; Donohue & Kolt, 1991; Killman & Thomas, 1975; Nicotera, 1993; Putnam & Poole, 1987; Putnam & Wilson, 1982). Some others use five conflict styles, but put each on a continuum, i.e., concern for self and concern for others; activity and passivity (Blake, Shepard & Mouton, 1964; Nicotera, 1993). To provide a more complete and accurate view of these styles, one must examine each style separately.

Avoiding. A person is said to be avoiding a conflict if they attempt to remove themselves from the scene either physically or psychologically. Blake, Shepard and Mouton (1964) describe this conflict style as "assume [ing] that conflict is not inevitable, yet agreement is not possible...it [avoiding] can be displayed through indifference, isolation or withdrawal" (Blake, Shepard & Mouton, 1964, p 64). Peterson and Peterson (1990) found that avoidance was recommended twice as often as other conflict strategies and it was used very often in the peer social relations of both male and female children and adults

in America.

Collaboration. Collaboration requires that the disputants agree to work together to resolve the conflict; they face the problem head-on (Blake, Shepard & Mouton, 1964; Putnam & Poole, 1987). This has also been known as the "problem-solving style" It "requires a more positive mentality. Solving the problem, not accommodating different points of view...alternative ways of approaching conflict resolution are explored (Blake, Shepard & Mouton, 1964, p. 86-87). This has traditionally been seen as the "best", or most socially desirable, conflict style to use in American cultures, because it involves both parties working together to resolve the conflict. Early research indicated that a collaborative conflict style was not only productive in solving the conflict, but it was also helpful in saving the relationship from possible failure. Reportedly, both parties can get what they want and have the conflict resolved at the same time when disputants utilize a collaborative strategy.

Competition. The competitive conflict style involves the use of assertiveness or power by one or both parties in order to get what they want (Blake, Shepard & Mouton, 1964; Putnam & Poole, 1987). Some researchers refer to this style as controlling or forcing. The disputants often see their goals as mutually exclusive. Agreement is not possible and conflict is inevitable (Blake, Shepard & Mouton, 1964).

Research prior to Blake & Mouton's managerial grid conceptualized conflict on a singular dimension; competition versus collaboration. Both competition and collaboration are considered confrontational styles and require time and effort on the part of the disputants. Competition is frequently viewed in a negative light. It is seen as adversarial and detrimental to both the parties and the relationship.

Accommodation. Accommodation involves playing down the conflict and focusing on the similarities or aspects that the two parties agree upon (Blake, Shepard & Mouton, 1964; Putnam & Poole, 1987). This is also called smoothing or ignoring. In the past, accommodating was viewed as the most constructive way of handling conflict in organizations (Nicotera, 1993; Putnam & Wilson, 1982). Accommodating is used when disagreement is present, yet agreement is possible. Disputants peacefully coexist with one another, focus on commonalities and get along because they know they must live and work together (Blake, Shepard & Mouton, 1964). Research in this area has aided in the development of training programs in organizations; employees are trained in how to resolve conflicts by making differences appear small.

Compromise. Finally, compromising involves gaining some of what each disputant wanted originally, but not everything. Each side gives a little until they can reach a mutually beneficial agreement. However, no one gets his/her

differences resolved, the real problems are not solved. This is the most frequently used conflict styles (Blake, Shepard & Mouton, 1964; Putnam & Poole, 1987). Prior studies have indicated that accommodating and compromise "may not be sufficiently well identified or distinct from other modes of conflict" (Killman & Thomas, 1975). When researchers implement four strategies, they frequently leave compromise out. When they utilize three strategies, they begin to collapse across conflict styles. For example, Putnam and Wilson's (1982) questionnaire uses controlling, nonconfrontational and solution-oriented styles. The latter style combines both compromising and collaborative techniques.

Flaws. There are several flaws with the original Blake, Shepard and Mouton view of conflict styles. First, the definitions are ambiguous (Nicotera, 1993; Putnam, 1988). Although most researchers agree on the basic components for a definition of conflict, they cannot agree on the basic definition of conflict style. Some researchers still purport that conflict styles are personality traits which have consistency across situations (Sternberg & Soriano, 1984). Others view it as an orientation or preference (Bisno, 1978; Donohue, 1991; Erbert, 1992; Frost, 1978; Hocker & Wilmot, Sternberg & Soriano, 1984; Putnam & Wilson, 1982). As a result of these disagreements regarding definition, researchers may conceptualize these variables

differently. This lack of consistency between researchers could affect their results. For example, if two individuals are fighting and one of them says, "Okay, we'll do it your way; I don't want to fight anymore. I can't stand fighting". Would that individual be accommodating or would they be avoiding a conflict? It is easy to see how two researchers might view this statement differently.

Second, there is a low reliability of many self-reported questionnaires that are used to assess conflict resolution style (Putnam & Wilson, 1982; Nicotera, 1993). A large number of conflict studies use self-report questionnaires when examining conflict style. Several of these questionnaires have a low inter-correlation for the variable of conflict style (Killman & Thomas, 1975). This may be due to an inherent flaw in self-report measures. These questionnaires allow for "perceptual distortion and...memory distortion as the bases for conflict resolution behavior" (Sternberg & Soriano, 1984, p.116). Respondents may not recall or may not want to relate what they actually did, and may report strategies which they consider socially desirable.

Third, the assumption that there are two basic dimensions which drive individuals' conflict resolution styles does not make intuitive sense. One would suppose that there are several situational, personal, actor and contextual variables (Nicotera, 1993; Putnam & Poole, 1987)

which interact to create a conflict style preference. For example, a manager would use different conflict styles depending if s/he was involved in a conflict with his/her subordinate or a peer. The hierarchical relationship between the disputants is a critical component of conflict style choice. However, these variables were not considered when the conflict styles theory was originally hypothesized.

Fourth, the confrontational styles (compromise and collaboration) require demands of time, money and the direct expression of the disputants' opinions (London & Howat, 1978). When respondents mention that they would use a confrontational style, they may not take into account these disadvantages. Since many respondents do not realize the effort involved, the validity of their responses is questionable. Researchers do not indicate in their questionnaires that these strategies will require time, effort and open communication between the two parties. Since the disadvantages are not known and confronting a dispute is the socially acceptable method of dealing with conflict, it is a commonly chosen conflict style. Respondents may report that they would confront the conflict but, in the real-world, use a completely different conflict style.

Although conflict style has been studied in many situations and with many variables, it has not been extensively examined in conjunction with relational type.

Whether two disputants are close friends or merely acquaintances would seem to impact the conflict style preference and the effects of that conflict style. However, there is almost no literature which takes this relationship into account.

Relational Type

Overview. The relational type construct has been examined extensively in many situations and in conjunction with several variables other than conflict. Research on friendship has focused on such diverse topics as taxonomies, definitions and distinguishing between friends and acquaintances (Duck, 1976; Morton, Alexander & Altman, 1976). Relationships have been studied between family members, divorced couples, married couples and the elderly (see Bell, 1981, for an excellent summary of the above studies).

Unfortunately, it is difficult to categorize all of the studies which have been written in this area. Cahn (1990) stipulates "the problem is that these different lines of research lack coordination" (p. 2). Theorists studying relational type focus on their main area of investigation and do not attempt to integrate it into the larger scheme of things.

Relational History. During the 1960s, much of the research concerning friendship focused on attraction. It wasn't until the mid-1970s that research began to look at

the more real-life relationships (Duck & Perlman, 1990; Wright, 1985). There were several independent studies from researchers in social psychology, communication and sociology which were conducted without much consideration to prior results.

For example, while Frost and Wilmot (1978) posit that there are three relational styles: parallel, complementary and symmetrical, Paine (1969) examined the components that create a friendship or acquaintanceship. It is likely that some of Frost and Wilmot's styles have the components Paine discusses. However, the two authors make no attempt to incorporate one another's research into their own. Other researchers postulate that there are social, psychological and gender variables which affect all relationships (Bell, 1981). Still other researchers examine the relational process from beginning to end and the factors which affect this process, i.e. propinquity, attraction, etc. (Duck, 1981; Wilmot, Carbaugh & Baxter, 1985). If early friendship researchers were to incorporate one another's research into their own studies, this would provide some continuity and progression to this area of examination. Unfortunately, it wasn't until the early 1980s that these researchers joined forces and friendship became it's own separate area of study (i.e. not just an offshoot of communication or psychology).

The content under examination has undergone many shifts since the 1970s as well. The first topic shift was away

from the topic of attraction and towards a developmental perspective of relationships (Duck & Perlman, 1990). Other topic changes have included, but are not limited to, labelling relationships, examining situational, personal and contextual variables which affect the relationship, quality of relationships and practical issues (i.e. how to improve relationships). At this time there was a shift away from laboratory examinations and toward observing relationship in their natural environment.

Friends. Research concerning friendship appears to focus in two main areas: what friends are expected to do and the rules that friends follow. Duck (1990) specifically lists the rules (hold conversations, don't tell secrets, don't criticize in public) and expectations (loyalty, openness, honesty) of an ideal friendship. Unfortunately, many relationships do not adhere to these ideal features. Therefore, it is difficult to know which characteristics to include in a definition of friendship.

In addition, there is little research which defines friendship. As Bell (1981) purports, it is "clear that friendship has undergone and continues to undergo change in America...one indication of this is the difficulty in defining friendship, because there are many kinds of relationships in which 'friend' may be applied" (Bell, 1981, p.27). There are many different ways friendship can be defined, i.e. as a gift, an obligation, a voluntary

characteristic or a close and enduring social relationship (Bell, 1981, p. 12).

These vague definitions often make it difficult to study friendship. Therefore, it will be necessary to define the term "friendship" clearly prior to examining its relationships with other variables. Although there is not one precise definition of friendship, researchers appear to agree on a few basic components of which it is comprised.

For the purposes of this study, a friendship is defined as two or more people who voluntarily spend time with one another and have developed a positive, platonic affection for one another. They have a concern for one another's well being as well as their own. Their relationship goes beyond the surface; they share a personal intimacy with one another that is absent in acquaintances.

Friends and Conflict. Although the research concerning friendship is extensive, there are not many studies pertaining to how friends resolve conflicts with one another. Therefore, it is necessary to extract from other studies and apply to this specific situation. It is important to determine which studies can be generalized to interpersonal, adult friendships. As Healey and Bell (1990) state, "surprisingly little is known about how friends deal with their differences" (p. 26). Indeed, there is "remarkably little information on interactions between close friends" (Roopnarine & Field, 1984 p. 89). One must infer

from the studies which have been conducted in the same manner and focusing on the same variables, although in different contexts.

Although all of these studies on relationships are of interest and their findings are pertinent to many areas, one is forced to limit the area of examination due to the relevancy to this thesis. For example, one domain of study in friendship which is not easily generalized to the specific situation in this study is the friendship between family members. This is because there is little choice involved. One does not voluntarily choose his or her family members like one chooses his or her friends. Voluntary interaction is one of the key definitional components of friendship; this difference could affect how the individuals interact and resolve their conflicts. Therefore, it would be difficult to generalize from family studies to this particular situation.

There is some controversy concerning whether the findings concerning intimacy in relationships (i.e. "dating" couples) can be generalized to platonic friendships. Healey and Bell (1990) attempted to generalize an intimacy theory created by Rusbult (1987) to platonic friendships and found that the theory did not match their findings well and accounted for a small amount of their variance. They state that due to "the absence of an exclusivity expectation in friendship, we are hesitant to draw conclusions about

conflict management in friendship on the basis of such research" (Healey & Bell, 1990, p. 27).

One area that may generalize easily to the relationships under study is friendship in children. Duck, Miell and Gaebler (1980) found that there is a "marked parallelism between the way in which adult acquaintances develop with time and the basis on which children form their relationships at different ages: both start with the influence of the objective characteristics of the partner (like physical attractiveness, status); are subsequently influenced by behavioral style (e.g. non-verbal activity, aggressiveness); [and] become centered on the understanding of motives behind the observed behavior (e.g. by means of attribution or role taking). "Although children go through many changes as they progress into their adult years, it appears that their manner of relating to other people stays, mainly, the same" (Duck, Miell & Gaebler, 1980). Therefore, it may be possible to relate the findings found in research with children to this particular study.

For example, Roopnarine and Field (1984) observed children playing, asked teachers about friendships, and rated children to determine friendship pairs. Then, each child was observed playing again and their behaviors were coded into categories i.e. domestic fantasy, adventure fantasy, social behaviors and verbal interaction. Children were observed over a six week period for five minute

intervals. Results indicated that children who had "close friends engaged in more of those behaviors which appear to be conducive to friendship formation, whether they were playing with their close friends or acquaintances" (p. 97). Children who did not have close friends often fought with similar children and watched the activities of close friends (Roopnarine & Field, 1984). It may be that people learn how to interact with their friends as children and continue to use that interaction technique later in life.

Another study which examines how friends resolve conflicts is Nelson and Aboud's (1985) analysis of conflict in children. They examined third and fourth graders to determine if friendship affected their responses to conflict. The researchers examined the "interaction between friends and nonfriends in a conflict situation" (p 1010). Reciprocal friendship was determined if each child named the other as a friend. The study examined the differences in amount of discussion and response change. The respondents were pre-tested on social knowledge and dyad interaction and were then assigned to two conditions. Each dyad was then given a problem and asked to discuss it. Conversations by friends included more explanations of their position and more criticisms of their partner than those of nonfriends. Results indicated that "friends respond to a conflict in different ways than nonfriends" (p. 1015). Friends explained their position more and were more critical of one

another. Nelson and Aboud theorize that this is due to "the demands of resolving a conflict where one partner tries to change the other by both explaining his or her own position and criticizing the other's" (p 1015). Their results do support the view that "friends differ from nonfriends in their problem-solving interactions" (p 1013).

Acquaintances. Acquaintanceship, unlike friendship, can be clearly defined. It is considered to be "(1) an ongoing relationship without confidence or intimacy; (2) [acquaintances] deviate little from members of conventional society in their mutual comportment, giving the relationship a superficial quality; (3) acquaintances interact only because the social situation requires them to; (4) acquaintances may portray a front of congeniality which may be either mandatory or a sensible precaution; (5) the interaction of acquaintances changes minimally when other persons join them" (Paine, 1969). An acquaintance might be an individual with whom one exchanges "social pleasantries", but does not disclose personal information. This will be the definition used in this study.

Acquaintances and Conflict.

As mentioned earlier, there is not a great deal of research concerning relational type and conflict. Many studies concerning friendship do not differentiate between friends and other relational types. They merely compare two large groups: friends and nonfriends. It is difficult to

determine if these non-friends are acquaintances, strangers or complete enemies. Although studies concerning children do examine interactive behaviors in friends and nonfriends, they do not explore conflict resolution styles to any extent.

Roopnarine and Field (1984) do discuss the differences between friends and nonfriends. Children who "interacted with one another for less than 25% of the time observed were considered nonfriends" (p 91). They mention in their findings that "interactions with close friends versus interactions with acquaintances [nonfriends] were noticeably different" (p. 96). Results indicated that nonfriends fought more frequently than did friends and were more aggressive, but the researchers did not go on to specify how they resolved their conflicts. Therefore, it is difficult to predict from that study how acquaintances will resolve their conflicts.

Acquaintances vs. Friends. Although acquaintances and friends are similar in that they are both examples of relational type, there are some major differences. Bell (1981) expresses the difference between friends and acquaintances well. He states, "the word 'acquaintance' implies a relationship much less significant than friendship...in acquaintanceship [there is] very little revealed about oneself...there is little elaboration as to any code of conduct, and typically the relationship is a

surface one...although a great amount of information is exchanged, there is little intimacy or exchange of confidences" (Bell, 1981, p.22).

If one were to consider relational type on an intimacy continuum, one could conceive of friendship as a more intimate relationship than acquaintanceship. Acquaintances do not share the same level of intimacy, familiarity, affective bond or experiences that friends do.

Paine (1969) concurs with this "difference in intimacy" viewpoint and stipulates that acquaintances and friends are mutually exclusive categories. He states that the lack of intimacy between acquaintances can be used as a delineation point between acquaintanceships and friendships.

Bell (1976) and Paine (1969) describe the overall differences between friends and acquaintances in clear and concise terms. Bell state that, "Friendships come about because the individuals find their interpersonal exchanges to be personally rewarding" (Bell, 1976; p.10). Paine goes on to stipulate that acquaintances do not actively seek one another out in order to spend time with one another or converse on an in-depth level. By definition, acquaintances interact mainly because the situation requires it of them (Paine, 1969).

Friends have a previous history, an affective bond and a comfort level that does not necessarily exist between acquaintances. Therefore, it is logical that friends will

communicate in a different manner than acquaintances. Since conflict is a communication construct, it is logical that friends and acquaintances will resolve their conflicts in a different way as well.

Flaws. There are three key shortcomings associated with relational type research. First, there is a need for a clear, concise definition of friendship; researchers frequently define friendship differently. Although they may agree on the basic components of the definition, researchers may also include different elements in their definition of conflict. These "extraneous" elements in the definition may be what causes the differences in respondents - not the actual core components of the definition. Consequently, there is a low reliability between studies and it becomes difficult to generalize from several different friendship studies. Although this low reliability may be due to several factors, a clear definition agreed on by researchers in this area may serve to increase the reliability and generalizability among studies.

The second criticism of this research is its reliance on the self-report method. This is an inherent flaw of both conflict and relational type research. Individuals' actual behavior may differ strongly from the way they respond to paper and pencil questions. Research on relationships attempts to limit this flaw by observing children, communicating with teachers and questioning the subjects

orally.

A third flaw is the lack of continuity in relational studies. Researchers examine a small, specified number of variables without taking the larger picture or previous research into account. Since the existing studies frequently do not take other relational variables into account, the generalizability of the study is limited.

Theoretically, when two individuals have known one another for an extended period of time, they may have a greater investment in the relationship and therefore go to greater lengths to preserve that friendship. Acquaintances do not have that same investment, affective bond or share the same level of familiarity as friends; therefore, they may communicate and resolve conflicts in a different fashion.

Current Study

Although conflict has been studied for several years, there are certain situations which have not been examined in great depth. For example, there is little research concerning conflict between friends. Conflict style research has focused on components of the definition of conflict and whether or not conflict styles are generalizable across situations; it has also focused on what factors affect conflict style. Unfortunately, this latter line of research has not extended to friends and how that particular relationship effects conflict style choice.

Research on friendship has not focused on conflict to a great extent. Literature in this area has largely been descriptive in nature and focused on friendship in different situations, i.e. in children, adults and the elderly (Bell, 1981). It describes the process of friendship; i.e. how it begins, is maintained and is ended (Duck, 1990). Research has also focused on different friendship "types", i.e. parallel, complementary and symmetrical (Hocker & Wilmot, 1991). However, as mentioned above, there is little research concerning how friends resolve conflicts. Since there is a gap in the available knowledge in this area, one might consider this a relevant area of study.

Relationships. As noted, the study focused on two levels of relational levels: acquaintances and friends. The independent variable, relational type, was manipulated by creating two questionnaires; one contained a scenario concerning friends and another contained a similar scenario concerning acquaintances. The researcher attempted to stress the quality of the friendship, in the hope that this would help the respondents differentiate between the two relational types. This was done by describing how the two friends spent time with one another outside of work and were "there for one another" when the other needed help or advice. In contrast, the acquaintances were described as having almost nothing in common and having a hard time coming up with conversation on a social level.

For the purposes of this study, long-time acquaintances were examined. This was done to avoid a possible predicament where the respondent conceptualized two individuals who were acquaintances but could develop into friends. In addition, this thesis examined only same-sex peer relationships. Cross-sex relationships are not within the scope of this thesis.

OCCI. Conflict resolution style was divided into three dependent variables based on the Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI; see Appendix A). These were control, solution-orientation and nonconfrontation. Control was comprised of competitive or forcing styles (i.e. "I would insist my position be accepted"), solution-orientation included both compromising and collaborative styles (i.e. "I would suggest solutions which combine both of our viewpoints" and "I would give in a little on my ideas if [the other disputant] also gives in") and nonconfrontation contained avoiding and accommodating styles (i.e. I would shy away from the topic or source of disagreement). However, nonconfrontation excluded withdrawing from conflicts after they escalate. In addition, controlling strategies excluded using an organizational position to resolve a conflict (Wilson & Waltman, 1988).

Although the OCCI was originally intended to be used in organizational studies, it was adapted for the purpose of

this thesis. The OCCI was chosen because of the high reliabilities it has illustrated in test-retest studies and because it was created to measure interpersonal strategies in organizational conflict. This conflict instrument also focuses on disagreements which, "entail deep-seated latent differences rather than surface misinterpretations or semantic quibbles" (Putnam & Wilson, 1982, p. 633). This is consistent with the definition of conflict presented earlier. The definition requires that the disputants have interdependent goals, rely on one another to achieve those goals, and perceive interference in attaining those goals (Donohue & Kolt, 1991; Hocker & Wilmot, 1991; Nicotera, 1993; Putnam & Wilson, 1982).

The OCCI assumes that conflict style is a situational variable and that there is no one "best way" to resolve conflict. Since the OCCI tests the effect of three conflict resolution styles, it minimizes the flaw inherent in other studies that collaboration and compromise are not defined sufficiently and are highly intercorrelated (see Putnam & Wilson, 1982 for an excellent critique). The OCCI counters against this flaw by combining competition and collaboration into one conflict strategy. Furthermore, respondents were encouraged to describe what they would actually do, not what they SHOULD do. This was done to limit subjects' tendency to choose socially desirability responses.

Summary. Two levels of relational type were considered, acquaintances and friends. Conflict resolution style was determined by the OCCI (Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument) which posits three conflict management styles, solution-orientation, nonconfrontation and control. Three hypotheses were postulated concerning relational type. The central purpose of this study was to examine the association, if any, between relational type and conflict styles. The study focused its examinations on peer relationships.

Hypotheses

Prior to stating and examining these hypotheses, it is necessary to discuss a basic assumption made by conflict style theory. Since conflict strategies are conceptualized as goal-oriented strategies, the theory assumes that disputants focus mainly on the outcome of the conflict. Disputants usually have a particular goal in mind and will choose the conflict strategy which they feel will best attain that end.

In this study, one can assume that unless the relationship is harmful to one or both parties, the goal is to maintain the status quo. It is feasible to assume that both friends and acquaintances would like to maintain their relationships. Friends have invested a large amount of effort into their relationship and would like to keep their friend, with whom they have a previous history and a mutual

association.

The same assumption can be made of acquaintances; they have some reason to want to maintain the relationship. Although they may not have invested the same amount of time or effort as friends, acquaintances may obtain some sort of benefit from the relationship. An acquaintance can be an important source of information or fulfill the need for social contact. Therefore, it is assumed that both relational types will choose a strategy which will maintain the status of their relationship.

In addition, some people have a natural propensity against change. The status quo is familiar and comfortable and often difficult to give up. Therefore, people may be motivated to keep the relationship as a way of maintaining this familiar and comfortable position.

H₁: Friends will choose a solution-oriented strategy more often than acquaintances.

Friends will choose a solution-oriented strategy, because they will consider it to be "par for the course". Resolving conflicts may be one of the costs required of the individuals in order to benefit from the relationship. Solution-oriented strategies frequently involve a lot of work, commitment and risk by both parties (London & Howat, 1978).

In order to benefit from the long term relationship, one must work through some difficult times. This mentality

of "working with the disputant to resolve the problem" may also indicate how important the relationship is to the other disputant. The more intense the relationship, the more time and effort one would be willing to spend in resolving the conflict. The disputants have invested a lot of time and commitment into the relationship previously and would feel a sense of loss if the relationship dissolved because of the conflict. The friendship, and the positive affect it creates, would motivate the disputants to resolve the conflict with a heads-on "let's get it figured out" approach. Nelson and Aboud (1985) found that friends spent more time explaining their viewpoints than nonfriends. This illustrates the mentality of trying to work through a problem and come up with a solution.

Friends are more likely to use a solution-oriented strategy than acquaintances because they both have similar attitudes. Individuals with similar attitudes are frequently drawn and attracted to one another (Duck, 1987). It is plausible that these similar attitudes may include views toward conflict resolution. Both individuals have the attitude that their friendship is worth the time and investment this strategy needs.

Friends will not choose a controlling strategy for fear of losing one another. One of the disputants might become angry and decide that the friendship is not valuable after all (since s/he is being treated so poorly). This strategy

could result in the loss of the friendship and that is not a chance that friends are willing to take.

Friends will not choose an avoidance strategy because the other party may perceive it as a lack of caring. Or the disputant might interpret the avoidance as a sign that the friend would like to dissolve the friendship. This is especially true if there is physical avoidance. If the party does not return phone calls, attempts at contact, etc., then it can be inferred that s/he would like to terminate the relationship.

If the avoidance strategy does not involve a physical avoidance, but avoiding the topic of conversation, the other party may also interpret this as a lack of caring. If an individual did not confront the conflict, it may be interpreted as a sign that s/he did not care enough to make the effort and work through the dispute. The risk may be minimal, but it is enough that friends would not want to try this strategy for fear of losing the friendship. Losing the friendship would result in the loss of the friend, the loss of a positive affect and, essentially, wasted time and effort that went into creating the relationship, and the ending of a positive, enduring, close relationship.

Although friends do keep secrets from one another, they generally do not involve topics of conflict. The situation may be too volatile to not communicate on this topic. It is one thing to have a secret that will not really affect the

relationship, however to not communicate regarding this conflict might be perceived as a lack of caring or create a latent conflict between the two parties.

Although some acquaintances may choose a solution-oriented strategy, they will not do so to the extent that friends do. Acquaintances have not invested the time and effort that friends have, so they would not feel such a sense of loss as friends would if the relationship ended. Although it is important to maintain the relationship for acquaintances, they will choose an easier, less time-consuming and less risky strategy.

An acquaintance would not want to put as much effort into resolving the conflict as a friend would because they do not have a strong affective connection with the other person. They may not benefit from the maintenance of the relationship as a friend might. By definition, there is no intrinsic, positive affect generated by an acquaintanceship. Therefore, they would not be as motivated to invest time and effort into resolving the conflict as friends would be. Acquaintances would still attempt to maintain the relationship, but would do so by avoiding the dispute.

For example, Bob and Tim are friends. They have known one another for several years and they enjoy each other's company. They frequently discuss sports, work and life in general with one another. If they have a dispute, it is likely that they would attempt to work it out and try to

come to some sort of resolution. Both Bob and Tim would try and work through the conflict and come to an understanding of one another's viewpoints in an effort to resolve the conflict. If they avoided the conflict, it may become a latent issue between the two parties and cause more problems down the road. Or, avoidance of the topic may lead to long silences or discomfort between two individuals who normally communicate openly or freely.

A controlling strategy might be perceived as unkind or insulting by friends. It may escalate the conflict and makes the relationship between the disputants worse. Therefore, it would be dangerous to the relationship to choose a controlling strategy.

H₂: Acquaintances will use an avoidance conflict strategy more than friends.

Acquaintances will avoid conflict more than friends because it will help them maintain the status of their relationship with minimal risk. Acquaintances do not share the personal history that friends do. Therefore, they would be unsure how their partner would react to a dispute. They would opt to "play it safe" and hope that the conflict would take care of itself.

Acquaintances, by definition, do not disclose much about their personal selves. Therefore, they would be able to keep all communication on a superficial or (if they are co-workers), a business-related topic without a significant difference in communication context. For acquaintances, the

best way to maintain the status quo would be to avoid the conflict in the hope that it would 'blow over'. Avoiding the conflict would maintain that "front of congeniality" (Paine, 1969) which is common in acquaintances. Since acquaintances, by definition, maintain such a superficial level of communication, it is feasible that the topic of conversation might not be brought up for an extended period of time. Therefore, they could avoid the topic of conflict easily without harming or disrupting the relationship.

Another reason acquaintances would not use solution-oriented conflict styles is because the parties do not hold the same affective bond as friends. An acquaintance, by definition, is a superficial relationship. The parties do not obtain the same level of positive affect or investment as friends do. Therefore, they would not be motivated to talk about the conflict and resolve it in a hands-on or confronting manner.

Acquaintances will not use a confronting strategy due to the high probability of ending the relationship. Although the two parties do not derive an affective bond from one another, they do achieve some sort of benefit from the relationship. A confrontational strategy might be interpreted as insulting and unkind or escalate the conflict. The other party might decide to terminate all contact with the other disputant. This would not be consistent with the goal of maintaining the relationship.

For example, Sue and Michelle have been friends for over two years. They work in the same department and see each other at meetings or at the coffee machine occasionally. Their conversations, when they occur, are usually short and superficial. If Sue and Michelle are suddenly required to work together on a project and have a dispute; they would avoid the conflict. Prior interactions have been superficial and congenial. Therefore, they would interact in the same manner when a conflict arose. Sue or Michelle might make small comments regarding the conflict, but for the most part, would avoid it.

RQ₁: What will happen between friends' and acquaintances' usage of controlling conflict strategies?

There is limited research concerning relational types and specific conflict styles. Therefore, it is difficult to determine who will use controlling conflict styles. The majority of research concerning conflict indicates that disputants do not use controlling conflict styles except in circumstances where protecting oneself (Donohue & Kolt, 1991).

There is some literature which states that nonfriends are likely to be more aggressive than friends (Roopnarine & Field, 1984). Therefore, it is feasible that acquaintances would use a more aggressive, confronting conflict style. In addition, due to the superficial nature of the relationship, acquaintances may interpret a conflict as a personal attack

and choose to confront the disputant in an effort to minimize damage and protect him/herself.

CHAPTER II: Methods

The subjects were students at a large university. Two self-report questionnaires were distributed, one with a scenario concerning friends; the other with a scenario concerning acquaintances. The Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI) was used to assess conflict style. Independent t-tests and Pearson's r were used to interpret results.

Subjects

The respondents in this study were undergraduate students at a large, Midwestern university. Ten students were surveyed to aid in questionnaire development. In accordance with their input, the questionnaire was shortened. There were a total of 284 students polled; the questionnaire was distributed to a large Introductory Communication class. 140 subjects completed a questionnaire concerning acquaintances and 144 subjects completed a questionnaire concerning friends. The questionnaire was administered during regular class time. Subjects received two points extra credit for completion of the questionnaire. The subject pool consisted of 124 males and 159 females. The majority of the respondents, 75 percent, were Caucasian. 40 percent of the respondents were Freshman, another 44 percent were either Juniors or Sophomores. The mean, median and mode age was 19 with a restricted range of 18-24. The majors of the respondents varied extensively. The largest

group, 13 percent, was "undeclared". In total, there were 54 majors represented, ranging from accounting to zoology.

Although 92 percent of the respondents had been previously employed, their median length of employment was only 1 year. The positions listed were those typically chosen by full-time college students. The largest number of positions included restaurant work and sales staff. Most managerial positions described were either for fast-food restaurants or retail sales stores.

The open-ended questions revealed that most of the individuals had an in depth cognitive plan of their actions. These responses also illustrated a process mentality. This was typified by an "if..then" statement. For example, respondents might say "first, I'd sit down and try and work it out...if that didn't work, I'd take it to a third party..". Roughly 50 percent of the participants described their actions in a process-oriented, "if..then" type of statement.

Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument

The OCCI was slightly altered to fit this study. Respondents read a statement and then rated on a 7-point Likert scale how likely or unlikely it was that they would do such an action (i.e., "I would stand firm in expressing my viewpoints"). The fourth choice was a "Don't Know" response and was eliminated from statistical calculations. Refer to Appendix A for more details. All of the OCCI

questions remained in the final version of the questionnaire. It consisted of 12 nonconfrontation items, 11 solution-oriented items (compromise or collaboration) and 6 control items.

The effect of relational type was examined on each one of the three conflict resolution styles. To minimize the possibility that respondents might choose the most socially desirable response, instructions indicated they should stop and think about their response. An open-ended question asked the subjects to describe what they really would do, not what they thought they should do. It stated "knowing how you usually respond in these situations, what are you most likely to do (not what you should do)".

There were two versions of the final self-report questionnaire. One, questionnaire A, depicted a conflict scenario between two managers, in the same organization, who were of the same hierarchical level and were close friends. The second version, questionnaire B, depicted the same, basic scenario except that the two managers were not close friends, merely acquaintances.

Administration Procedures

Permission was obtained from a professor to distribute the questionnaire to a large, introductory Communication class at Michigan State University. The participants were assured of complete anonymity; no one would be able to link the questionnaire with the respondent. The questionnaire

took approximately ten minutes for the respondents to complete. Two-hundred and eighty four completed questionnaires were received. The data were analyzed using a statistical computer package for the social sciences (SPSS).

significance. The means and standard deviations for acquaintances and friends (for each conflict style) were calculated using SPSS/PC+ (Statistical Analysis Package for the Social Sciences). Questions were answered on a seven-point Likert scale. Respondents indicated if the action was "Very Likely" of them by entering a 1 or "Very Unlikely" of them by entering a 7. The obtained means were divided by the number of questions in order to account for the different number of questions.

First Hypothesis. The first hypothesis stated that friends would choose a solution-oriented strategy more than acquaintances. Results indicated that friends (Mean = 2.60; $S_d = 1.01$) were more likely to use a solution-oriented style than acquaintances (Mean = 2.83; $S_d = .99$ $t = -1.86$; 282 DF, $p \leq .05$). As mentioned earlier, the solution-oriented variable is found by compiling the compromise and collaboration results to form one style. Although this confirms the first hypothesis, a closer inspection of the results reveals surprising results.

As noted earlier, the solution-oriented variable is comprised of the compromise variable and the collaboration variable. A closer inspection of these results reveals that the significant results occurred on the compromise variable. Namely, friends (Mean = 2.93; $S_d = 1.07$) were more likely to use a compromising conflict style than acquaintances (Mean = 3.23; $S_d = 1.16$; $t = 2.33$, DF=282; $p \leq .01$). There was no

significant difference in the use of collaboration conflict styles between friends and acquaintances.

These findings do not confirm the theory that compromise and collaboration are different aspects of one variable, namely solution-orientation. Although compromise and collaboration are highly correlated ($r' = .79$; $p \leq .0001$), it appears that respondents do differentiate between the two; specifically, friends prefer to utilize compromising strategies significantly more than acquaintances.

Second Hypothesis. The second hypothesis stated that acquaintances will use an avoidance or nonconfrontation conflict strategy more than friends. Results indicted that all respondents (acquaintances and friends) were unlikely to choose a nonconfrontational style (Mean = 5.26; $S_d = 1.02$). In addition, the results indicated that friends (Mean = 5.37; $S_d = 1.00$) were significantly less likely to use nonconfrontational styles than acquaintances (Mean = 5.15; $S_d = 1.04$; $t = -1.87$; $DF = 282$; $p \leq .05$).

Research Question. The research question asked if there would be a difference between friends' and acquaintances' use of controlling conflict style. There was no significant difference. All respondents (both friends and acquaintances) were unlikely to choose a controlling conflict strategy (Mean = 3.74; $S_d = 1.09$).

Overall, the respondents indicated they would be most

likely to choose collaboration in this situation. The second most likely choice was compromise. Subjects indicated that they would be unlikely to choose a controlling strategy and very unlikely to choose a nonconfrontational strategy. The researcher presumed that the respondents would be least likely to choose a controlling strategy. However, respondents were more unlikely to use a nonconfrontational strategy than any other. These results may be a feature of this particular population (undergraduate students).

If one examines the results in detail, a startling fact is revealed. The mean of compromise is 3.23 ± 1.2 (S_d). If one subtracts the standard deviation, the mean is now less than the mean for collaboration. The two means overlap and are NOT significant. The same statement can be made for all the dependent variables. This finding illustrates that the sample size (140 for friends and 144 for acquaintances) inflated the t statistic and increased it's likeliness of being significant.

The following table provides means and significance levels for acquaintances and friends on all three dependent variables.

Table 2: Means and Standard Deviations of Relational Type on Conflict Strategy

Conflict	Acquaint	Friends	T score	Sig. of T
Compromise	: 3.23 St.Dev 1.2	: 2.92 St.Dev 1.1	t=2.33 DF=282	.01**
Control	: 3.66 St.Dev 1.1	: 3.82 St.Dev 1.1	t=-1.20 DF=282	.11
Avoidance	: 5.14 St.Dev 1.0	: 5.37 St.Dev .99	t=-1.87 DF=282	.029*
Collaborate	: 2.42 St. Dev.93	:2.28 St.Dev .91	t=1.30 DF=282	.095

* $p \leq .05$ ** $p \leq .01$

Conflict Style Correlations

The different types of conflict style choice are interrelated and, for the most part, correlate highly. When the OCCI was originally conceptualized, Putnam and Wilson (1982) advocated collapsing across the collaboration and compromising conflict styles to create one overall style: solution-orientation. This was due to the fact that there is a significant correlation between compromising strategies and collaborating strategies. This study's findings confirm the significant, positive correlation between collaboration and compromise. ($r'=.79$; $p \leq .001$).

There are significant correlations between the other conflict styles as well. There is a negative correlation between collaboration and nonconfrontation ($r' = -.35$; $p \leq .001$) and between collaboration and controlling conflict

styles ($r' = -.36$; $p \leq .001$). This makes intuitive sense; one could see how an individual might prefer a collaborating style and therefore refrain from the use of nonconfrontational or controlling conflict styles. This rationale also explains the negative correlation found between nonconfrontational styles and controlling conflict styles ($r' = -.14$; $p \leq .05$). Control denotes a strong interaction between disputants, whereas nonconfrontation signifies avoidance.

There is a significant, positive correlation between controlling and compromising conflict styles ($r' = .36$; $p \leq .001$). This correlation may be due to the respondents tendency to meet the conflict in a confrontational manner. Both styles propose that the individual meet the conflict "head on" and attempt to resolve the issues by facing the other person. The table below depicts the correlations (and their significance levels). In addition, Appendix B contains the confidence intervals for the correlations.

Table 3: Correlations between dependent variables

Collaboration & Compromise	.70**
Collaboration & Avoidance	-.35**
Collaboration & Control	-.36**
Compromise & Avoidance	.09
Compromise & Control	.36**
Control & Avoidance	-.14*

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .001$

In addition to examining overall correlations, it may be helpful to examine the correlations of the dependent variables for each relational type (friends and acquaintances). The majority of the correlations are around or above .50. Such correlations indicate that the OCCI may

not be measuring three separate variables, but one variable, namely conflict style. The table below depicts the correlations between dependent variables within relational type.

Table 4: Correlations within Relational Type

	Acquaintances	Friends
Control & Collaboration	.59	.47
Control & Avoidance	.61	.57
Compromise & Collaboration	.61	.49
Control & Compromise	.57	.55
Avoidance & Collaboration	.55	.49
Compromise & Avoidance	.50	.36

Open-ended Questions

The findings concerning conflict styles are not only limited to the quantitative data. The open-ended questions partially confirmed the theory posited by Nicotera (1993). She postulated that conflict style is a three-dimensional variable. These variables are: an awareness of one's own views, an awareness of the other disputant's views and emotional valence of relationship (Nicotera, 1993). Over 50% of the respondents in this study indicated that it was important "to get their point across", to make sure their counterpart "understood their point of view", and that they understand the other disputant's point of view. The third dimension, emotional valence of the relationship, was difficult to determine from the brief written comments.

CHAPTER IV: Discussion

One must keep in mind when discussing implications that this is a preliminary study in this field. There is little research examining relational type and conflict style. Since real-world individuals might behave differently, this limits the generalizability of these results.

Although the initial findings indicate that resolving conflicts is somewhat dependent on relational type, the error found due to the large sample size limits the results regarding how friends and acquaintances resolve conflicts. However, one can examine the overall results and determine that individuals were most likely to use collaborative techniques rather than any other style. In addition, the respondents indicated that they would be very unlikely to use either a nonconfrontational or controlling conflict style.

One reason for these results may be that the respondents chose the most socially-desirable response. Although social desirability has always been a problem, it may have increased during the 1990s due to a new social trend called political correctness. Subjects may have responded in a way that was politically or socially correct instead of indicating their true actions.

Implications For Organizations

Prior research has theorized that a solution-oriented conflict strategy is the most effective and amicable

approach when resolving conflicts; therefore, this approach is advocated by many organizations. This strategy is frequently viewed as the "best" strategy to use when the goal is to come to a constructive and integrative solution for all parties involved (Blake, Shepard & Mouton, 1964).

The results of this study indicate that, for the most part, individuals are likely to choose a solution-oriented conflict style; however, some training regarding how to implement those solution-oriented conflict styles may be advantageous. Frequently, respondents will indicate a preference for a solution-oriented style without examining the time, effort and consideration that it involves. Choosing to resolve the conflict by working through it and coming to an understanding of each party's views involves a lot of forethought and consideration (London & Howat, 1978). Training on how to implement this conflict style may increase its use between disputants.

Organizations should be wary of the political correctness trend mentioned earlier. Although it may initially appear that respondents will choose a solution-oriented conflict style, what they do in an actual conflict may not be affected by the political correctness or social desirability factors. Therefore, respondents should be trained on specific actions to implement when a conflict arises. The employees could view tapes regarding "how to" resolve a conflict productively or even enact certain

conflict strategies.

One-on-one training may also be useful. As mentioned earlier, one should focus not on the individual, but the actions/behavior that took place. Part of this training (either one-on-one or group training) may incorporate a Fourth Generation Management technique called Totally Quality Management (TQM). This management technique advocates a focus "on the process, not the person". Which means if a mistake is made or if a problem arises, the solution should focus on how the problem or mistake arose in the first place, not blaming the individual who made the mistake. This position of separating the person from the problem and focusing on resolving the problem (and not blaming the person) is also advocated by Fisher and Ury in their book, Getting to Yes. Although Fisher and Ury (1981) focus on negotiation techniques and TQM is a management style, both focus on resolving problems or conflicts by facing them head on and working through them without blaming the individual. TQM advocates, negotiation theorists and conflict style researchers in the 1990s all view the end goal as resolving the conflict in a productive manner while maintaining the relationship between the two disputants. This central goal should be communicated the employees of any organization and steps taken to advocate such a stance.

Limitations

For the purposes of this study, it may have been more realistic if the subjects were observed in a more natural setting so that their behaviors could be directly examined. The use of 18 to 24 year-old college students limits the results of this study to other cultures, ages and interpersonal interactions. Using a more diverse population might have increased the validity of the findings.

Statistically, if relational type had more than 2 levels, one might be able to fit contrasts to it and determine if there was indeed a significant relationship factor. Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing the extent to which relational level might influence conflict resolution style, since only two levels were considered.

Another limitation involves the error mentioned earlier. Due to the large sample size, the *t* statistic was enlarged and, subsequently, the probability of finding significant differences was increased. Therefore, for future studies, it may be advantageous to limit the sample size.

A fourth limitation deals with the overall design of the study. The reliability of the OCCI, although acceptable, was not high. The collaboration variable's reliability might have improved if more sensitive or more direct questions were used. In addition, examining actual

behavior instead of self-report questionnaires would have enabled the researcher to generalize this study to other situations.

Avenues for future research might examine interpersonal interactions across cultures, with individuals of various ages and viewpoints. As mentioned earlier, it is often differences in viewpoints and backgrounds that encourage conflict. Therefore, a more diverse sample might be more representative of the "real" world.

Future studies might also examine the acquaintance relationship in more depth. Although prevailing research indicates that the acquaintance relationship is superficial and socially-based, there is little knowledge of how the acquaintance relationship is developed and maintained. Studies might determine what topics are acceptable and what topics are too intimate to be discussed in an acquaintance relationship.

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APPENDIX A

Appendix A

Conflict In The Workplace (Scenario A)

This questionnaire concerns friendship between middle level managers and how they resolve conflict.

Read the following scenario and answer the questions as honestly and completely as you can. The scenario involves a person named Pat. **Pat is the same gender as you. If you are a woman, Pat is a woman, if you are a man Pat is a man.** Please keep this in mind when you are answering the questions which follow the scenario. Try to imagine exactly what you would say or how you would respond if you were in that situation. This survey will take about 10 to 15 minutes to complete and the results will be used for a master's thesis project.

IMPORTANT: You indicate your voluntary agreement to participate by completing and returning this questionnaire.

Computer Software Consulting

You and Pat are managers at Computer Software Consultants, (CSC). CSC is generally hired by large accounting firms that are looking for new computer packages which are compatible with their existing software and will lighten the accountants' workload.

Both you and Pat have been working for CSC for ten years. You are both mid-level managers and although you work in different departments, you are close friends.

Pat works in the systems integration department. The job requires Pat to review the available software packages and determine which one(s) will best serve their needs.

You work in the training department. The job requires you to train the client's personnel on how to use the new computer system and what to do if a mistake is made or a computer breaks down.

Both you and Pat have ten subordinates in your department, are hard workers and are highly valued by the organization. Both of you were hired about the same time and, over the years, have worked on several projects together. You eat lunch together almost everyday and work-out at the same health club.

Your friendship extends beyond the workplace as well. You play golf, watch football, go shopping, and go out for drinks or dinner together after work. Whenever you have a problem, with work or otherwise, Pat is there to help or offer advice.

A large accounting firm hires Computer Software Consulting to update their computer system and train the personnel on the new system. The CEO has recommended you and Pat to work on the project. Both of you are happy to work together again. However, one week before the assignment is due, you and Pat have a disagreement. Pat thinks the software s/he initially chose might not work well; a new, innovative software might suit the client's needs better. This new software will force you to re-vamp your training program. You think the present software is fine and just what the accounting firm needs. Neither of you wants to get the whole department involved in this and create a whole mess. You decide to resolve the situation just between the two of you.

Stop: Before you answer the following questions, stop and think about what you would do (or, alternatively, not do) to handle this conflict.

Knowing how you usually respond in these situations, what are you most likely to do (not what you should do)? Please be specific.

Section I

Instructions

For the following questions, select the number that represents the behavior you are **most likely** to exhibit. There are no right or wrong answers. Please respond to all items on the scale. Remember, **Pat is the same gender as you.**

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very Likely	Likely	Somewhat Likely	Don't Know	Somewhat Unlikely	Unlikely	Very Unlikely

- | | | | | | | | | |
|----|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | I would blend my ideas with Pat's ideas to create new alternatives for resolving our disagreement. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| 2. | I would shy away from the topic or source of disagreement. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| 3. | I would make my opinion about the plan known to Pat. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| 4. | I would suggest solutions which combine both of our viewpoints. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| 5. | I would steer clear of the disagreement when talking with Pat. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| 6. | I would give in a little on my ideas if Pat also gives in. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| 7. | I would avoid Pat when I suspected s/he wanted to talk about the disagreement. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| 8. | I would integrate my arguments into a new solution from the issues raised in the dispute with Pat. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

1	2	3	4	5	6	7				
Very Likely	Likely	Somewhat Likely	Don't Know	Somewhat Unlikely	Unlikely	Very Unlikely				
9.	I would go 50-50 to reach a settlement with Pat.			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10.	I would raise my voice when trying to get Pat to accept my position.			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11.	I would offer creative solutions when we discussed the disagreement.			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12.	I would keep quiet about my views in order to avoid the disagreement.			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13.	I would give in if Pat would meet me halfway.			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14.	I would downplay the importance of the disagreement.			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15.	I would reduce the disagreements by making them seem insignificant.			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16.	I would meet Pat at a mid-point in our differences.			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17.	I would assert my opinion forcefully.			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18.	I would dominate arguments until Pat understood my position.			1	2	3	4	5	6	7

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very Likely	Likely	Somewhat Likely	Don't Know	Somewhat Unlikely	Unlikely	Very Unlikely

- | | | | | | | | | |
|-----|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 19. | I would suggest we work together to create a solution to the disagreement. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| 20. | I would try to use Pat's ideas to generate solutions to problems. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| 21. | I would offer trade-offs to reach solutions. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| 22. | I would argue insistently for my stance. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| 23. | I would withdraw when Pat confronts me about the disagreement. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| 24. | I would side-step the disagreement when it comes up. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| 25. | I would try to smooth over the disagreement by making it appear unimportant. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| 26. | I would insist my position be accepted by Pat. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| | | | | | | | | |
| 27. | I would make our differences seem less serious. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very Likely	Likely	Somewhat Likely	Don't Know	Somewhat Unlikely	Unlikely	Very Unlikely

28. I would hold my tongue rather than argue with Pat. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

29. I would ease conflict by claiming our differences are trivial. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

30. I would stand firm in expressing my viewpoints to Pat. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7

What factors were important in determining how you would handle the conflict?

Section II

Finally, please fill out the following information about you or your background. Remember, no one will be able to associate you with this questionnaire, so please be honest.

What sex are you?

____ Male

____ Female

What class standing are you: (please check one)

____ Freshman/First Year

____ Sophomore/Second Year

____ Junior/Third Year

____ Lifelong Education

____ Senior/Fourth Year

____ Super Senior/Fifth Year

____ Graduate Student

____ Other (please specify):_____.

How old are you? _____

To which ethnic group do you belong?

____ African-American

____ Asian

____ Caucasian

____ Hispanic

____ Other (please specify) _____.

What is your major? _____.

Please briefly describe some work experience you have had:

What was your job title?

What were some of your duties?

How long were you employed there? _____

Thank you for participating in this survey!!!

Conflict In The Workplace (Scenario B)

This questionnaire concerns friendship between middle level managers and how they resolve conflict.

Read the following scenario and answer the questions as honestly and completely as you can. The scenario involves a person named Pat. **Pat is the same gender as you. If you are a woman, Pat is a woman. If you are a man Pat is a man.** Please keep this in mind when you are answering the questions following the scenario. Try to imagine exactly what you would say or how you would respond if you were in that situation. This survey will take about 10 to 15 minutes to complete and the results will be used for a master's thesis project.

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Pat works in the systems integration department. The job requires Pat to review the available software packages and determine which ones will fit best with the client's existing computer software.

You work in the training department. The job requires you to train the client's personnel on how to use the new computer system and what to do if a mistake is made or a computer breaks down. Both you and Pat have ten subordinates in your department, are hard workers and are highly valued by the organization. Both of you were hired about the same time and, over the years, have not had much contact with one another. You almost never eat lunch together and when you do, you have a hard time coming up with conversation.

At one time you thought that you and Pat could be good friends, but it just didn't seem to work. It was no one's fault, the two of you are just different people, you have almost nothing in common.

A large accounting firm hires Computer Software Consulting to update their computer system and train the personnel on the new system. The CEO has recommended you and Pat to work on the project. However, one week before the assignment is due, you and Pat have a disagreement. Pat thinks the software s/he chose might not work as well. S/he thinks that a new, innovative software might suit the client's needs better.

This new software will force you to re-vamp your training program. You think the present software is fine and just what the accounting firm needs. Neither of you wants to get the whole department involved in this and create a mess. You decide to resolve the situation just between the two of you.

APPENDIX B

Appendix B

Confidence Intervals for Conflict Styles
(utilizing a .05 alpha coefficient).

Collaboration and Control:

$$P(-.3602 \leq \text{RHO} \leq -.2587) = .95$$

Control and Nonconfrontation:

$$P(-.0231 \leq \text{RHO} \leq .2077) = .95 \quad \text{is not significant}$$

Compromise and Control:

$$P(.2603 \leq \text{RHO} \leq .4629) = .95$$

Control and Nonconfrontation:

$$P(-.2507 \leq \text{RHO} \leq -.0223) = .95$$

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