

# **Resolving Conflict Between Graduate Students and Faculty: A Two Phase Design Approach**

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## **Abstract**

This study was designed to better understand the conflict resolution preferences of graduate students and to ascertain the effects that a conflict resolution workshop has on those preferences. Forty-three graduate students completed questionnaires regarding their own conflict-resolution behaviors prior to a workshop on resolving conflict between graduate students and faculty and then approximately 2-3 months after the workshop. Three participants elected to participate in a 5-month follow-up focus group. Mean decreases in undesirable, controlling behaviors were documented. However, participants' general conflict resolution style was likely to be stable over time. Results of the study have implications for future interventions and research on graduate student-faculty relationships.

## **Introduction**

Graduate students, especially those at the doctoral level, regard their relationships with faculty members as the most important aspect of the quality of their graduate experience, but many also report it as "the single most disappointing aspect of their graduate experience" (Hartnett and Katz, 1977). Conflict between graduate students and faculty advisors can impair the graduate student-faculty relationship, with negative consequences for both parties (Golde, 2000; Keltner, 1998; Lovitts, 2001; Nerad and Miller, 1996). Therefore, efforts to maintain and/or foster the graduate student-faculty advisor relationship through preventing and/or constructively resolving conflict are important.

Researchers have constructed models and measures of conflict resolution styles to help define and understand responses to everyday conflict. The most widely used models and measures have been developed by Blake and Mouton (1964), Hall (1969), Thomas and Kilmann (1974), Putnam and Wilson (1982) and Rahim (1983). Adult educators often use these models and measures to evaluate the impact of conflict resolution training interventions by attempting to measure change in conflict resolution style before and after an intervention (Mikheev, 2005; Rashid, 2001; Deen, 2000; Watt, 1994; Johnson, 1991). Results of these studies are mixed. For example, Mikheev (2005) used an experimental design to evaluate the efficacy of a conflict resolution curriculum in reducing peer victimization and increasing the use of a cooperative strategy. The self-reported data suggested that the intervention was effective at significantly increasing the treatment group's use of a cooperative strategy in resolving conflict, while decreasing the use of avoidance in conflict situations. In contrast, Deen (2000) found no difference in conflict styles of 4-H leader volunteers who had participated in conflict resolution training and those that had not participated in training.

Though studies exist which seek to measure the conflict preference/style shift following a specified amount of conflict resolution training, we know of no evaluation published to date which seeks to understand the impact of a conflict resolution training program on the conflict style preference of graduate students. Furthermore, it is recommended that an investigation is needed in using conflict management interventions with various groups on college campuses to help with student retention (Rashid, 2001).

## Research Questions

Overarching Hypothesis: Active participation in a 6 hour conflict resolution workshop, using an interactive teaching method, would enhance the student's knowledge and understanding about the interest-based approach to resolving conflict thereby altering their perceived preference when selecting a conflict resolution strategy. Participation would reinforce pre-existing tendencies for conflict management that are consistent with the interest-based approach.

Prediction 1: Participant's scores would show a significant change in conflict resolution style from pre- to post- test such that in the post-test, participants would show higher scores on desirable types (collaboration) of conflict resolution strategies and lower scores on undesirable (positional/competitive) conflict resolution strategies.

Prediction 2: Participants with desirable conflict resolution strategy preferences would retain these preferences and people with undesirable strategies would shift to desirable preferences.

Prediction 3: Analysis of the transcripts of the focus groups would show that workshop participants would engage in the use of the interest-based approach to resolve conflicts with their faculty advisors.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants were 48 graduate students enrolled in the "Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflict Between Graduate Students and Faculty" workshop. Participants were 38% male and 62% female. Twenty-three percent were between 18-25 years old, 49% were between 26-35 years old, 13% were between 36-45 years old, 11% were between 46-55 years old, and 4% were between 56 or older. Forty-five percent were international students and 55% domestic students. Domestic students reported their ethnicity as 84% Caucasian, 4% African-American, 4% Chicano/ Mexican-American, 4% Hispanic, and 4% Asian/Pacific Islander. Most of the students (53.3%) indicated that they had recently begun their coursework. Participants were from both doctoral programs (57%) and (44%) masters programs.

### Measures

Conflict resolution style. Conflict resolution style was assessed using an adapted version of the Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI; Putnam & Wilson, 1982). The original measure is a 30-item scaling that measures communicative behaviors in the management of interpersonal conflict. For this study, items were split into two parallel forms, resulting in 14 items on the pre-test and 14 items on the post-test surveys. For example, 12 of the 30 items in the original OCCI measure were statements representing non-confrontational behaviors. These 12 items were split in half, with 6 items placed in the pre-test and 6 items placed in the post-test. Prior to completing the pre-test, participants were asked by the evaluator to consider past disagreements with supervisors and then asked to rate how often they were likely to respond as described in a statement on a scale ranging from 1 (always) to 7 (never). Examples of items include "I assert my opinion forcefully" and "I steer clear of disagreeable situations." The scale derives three factor scores; non-confrontation, solution-orientation, and control. Of these three factors, solution-orientation is considered to represent a more desirable conflict resolution style. These three factors 1) instantiate the five conflict orientations of compete, cooperate, avoid, accommodate and compromise (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974); 2) describe concrete verbal and/or non-verbal behaviors, and 3) focus on goal oriented disagreements. Putnam & Wilson (1982) report subscale coefficient alphas of 0.88 for non-confrontation, 0.83 for solution orientation, and 0.77 for control. In the current study, coefficient alphas (computed across both pre-test and post-test) were 0.84 for non-confrontation, 0.66 for solution orientation, and 0.67 for control.

Focus Group. Focus group participants attended a semi-structured focus group interview led by a facilitator who was independent of the research study. The protocol consisted of six questions such as, “Do graduate students attempt to prevent or manage conflict with faculty?”. The semi-structured nature of the protocol allowed the facilitator to ask clarifying questions and to probe participants’ answers to the main protocol questions.

#### Procedures

This research study is in its first year of a three-year research project. Participants self-selected to enroll in a workshop sponsored by the Graduate School at Michigan State University entitled “Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflict Between Graduate Students and Faculty”. The workshops were advertised via e-mail sent out by graduate secretaries to all graduate students and via fliers posted on-campus. This workshop strives to teach graduate students and faculty a cooperative or integrative approach to preventing and resolving conflicts within the faculty-graduate student relationship.

Upon arriving at a workshop, the researcher introduced the intent to evaluate and presented participants with consent forms for their review, along with the survey instrument and re-contact information. Participants completed the informed consent procedure and then proceeded to complete the survey instrument. All complete and incomplete surveys were collected by the researcher who then exited the location. The workshop was then conducted by presenters from the Graduate School. Approximately two months later, a post-survey instrument was mailed to all subjects, with a self-addressed, stamped return envelope.

Approximately five months following the completion of the pre-test, subjects received an invitation to attend a focus group session. Three participants completed a focus group designed to gather qualitative information regarding changes in conflict resolution style as a result of participation in the initial workshop. The focus group interview was tape-recorded and transcribed. The next focus group is planned for September, 2006. A financial incentive is planned to improve participation.

## Results

### Preparation Data

The current study included data from 48 participants. These data included some missing values, largely due to post-test surveys in which it was impossible to reach the participants by mail due to incorrect mailing addresses ( $n=4$ ) or because a participant simply did not return the post-test survey ( $n=10$ ). In one case, a participant failed to complete the pre-test survey. Because it was not suspected that participants who did not complete the post-test differed systematically from those who did [missing data were found to be missing completely at random (Little MCAR test statistic=40.57,  $df=36$ ,  $p=.28$ )], missing data were imputed using the EM algorithm in SYSTAT 11.0, resulting in a complete dataset.

### Prediction 1: Mean Changes in Desirable and Undesirable Behaviors

To examine whether significant change occurred in conflict resolution style, two methods of analysis were employed. First, paired t-tests were used to compare pre- and post-test subscale scores on the OCCI. In general, participants showed a reduction in controlling behaviors at post test ( $M=10.05$ ,  $SD=2.98$ ) as compared to at pretest ( $M=10.81$ ,  $SD=2.76$ ) [ $t(47) = 2.14$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ]. Significant mean differences were not found for non-confronting behaviors [ $t(47) = 0.83$ ,  $ns$ ] or solution oriented behaviors [ $t(47) = -0.48$ ,  $ns$ ].

### Prediction 2: Change & Stability in Resolution Style Preference

To examine participants’ conflict resolution style before and after the intervention, participants were classified into 1 of 3 conflict resolution styles as follows. First, all scores were

standardized. Next, standardized values were compared across the three conflict resolution types. The subscale for which a given participant received the highest standardized value was considered to represent the participants' conflict resolution style preference at that time. Table 1 below indicates the number of participants per conflict resolution style at pre- and post-test.

Table 1

*Number of Participants Who Preferred Each Conflict Resolution Style at Pre-Test and Post-Test*

	Pre-Test	Post-Test
Non-Confronting	16	15
Solution Oriented	13	16
Controlling	19	17

To examine change and stability in conflict resolution style preference at pre- and post-test, a configural frequency analysis CFA (von Eye, 2002; von Eye & Gutiérrez Peña, 2004) was employed. This method of analysis determines whether a particular configuration of classifications differs significantly from chance expectation by comparing observed and expected cell frequencies. In this case, *CFA types* are combinations of pre- and post-test style preferences that occur significantly more often than expected; *CFA antitypes* are combinations of pre- and post-test style preferences that occur significantly less often than expected. A first order CFA (testing against a null model of main effects) was conducted using Lemacher's test. This test revealed the presence of three CFA types and two antitypes. More participants than would be expected due to chance had stable classifications at pre-and post-test; these CFA types were: (1) non-confronting at both pre- and post-test, (2) solution oriented at both pre- and post-test, and (3) controlling at both pre- and post-test. Fewer participants than would be expected due to chance (the antitypes) were (1) solution oriented at pre-test and controlling at post-test, and (2) controlling at pre-test and non-confronting at post-test, suggesting that these patterns of change would be unlikely.

### Prediction 3: Focus Group Transcript Analysis

Major themes revealed in the focus group were concerns about time (e.g. how to best make use of/get access to advisor's time, planning schedules for completing work, etc.), a preoccupation with self-presentation, awareness of the importance of the graduate student-faculty relationship, the general uncertainty about the graduate process, and the use of avoidance as a conflict-management strategy.

### Discussion and Implications

Partial support was found for study hypotheses. Examining mean changes in employment of conflict resolution strategies across the group as a whole, participants showed lower scores on undesirable (controlling) conflict resolution strategies at post-test. However, there was no significant increase documented in solution oriented behaviors nor was there a significant decrease documented in non-confronting behaviors. Partial support was also found for the prediction that participants with desirable conflict resolution strategy preferences would retain these preferences and people with undesirable strategies would shift to desirable preferences. Consistent with expectations, solution-oriented styles were likely to be stable over time. However, competitive and non-confrontational styles were also likely to be stable over time. Contrary to expectations, transitions from either of the undesirable styles to solution-oriented styles did not emerge as particularly likely. Participants were unlikely to transition from a solution oriented to a controlling style or to transition from a controlling to a non-confronting

style. In terms of the focus group prediction, three researchers who independently conducted a thematic content analysis of the focus group transcripts identified a theme of avoidance as a conflict-management strategy used by focus group participants. As one student commented, "...being careful of what you say on certain topics you know could have bad consequences so you wisely avoid them...just forgetting about them completely." Another stated, "(we manage conflict)...by avoiding it."

Though this is only the first of a three year study and despite limitations (e.g., self-reporting, lack of a control group, and small effect size) the findings suggest that some participants did experience minor shifts in their conflict resolution style preferences post-intervention. Such findings are consistent with Watt's (1994) study wherein he sought to examine whether an individuals' approach to conflict management could be altered by completing a college conflict resolution course. He concluded that individuals shifted toward a preference in using a collaborative management style but continued to use competing and compromising styles. Evidence for such a pattern of results exists in this study. Though conflict resolution style preferences in this study showed remarkable stability from pre- to post-test, it is also true that a significant overall decrease in mean levels of controlling behaviors was indicated. In addition, the likelihood that a participant might switch from a solution-oriented preference at pre-test to a controlling preference style at post-test is statistically lower than would be expected. It is also interesting to note that there was no indication of behavior change as in prediction three. It may be that such a brief intervention would not affect a comprehensive change in conflict resolution style. Pronounced behavior change may simply be too ambitious for a brief intervention. What may be more reasonable to predict is a change in awareness that may result in slight behavior changes post intervention. As one focus group participant stated,

The thing that I actually learned a little bit from the conflict resolution (workshop) is to not only just tell them what you want. Sort of make it a relationship. Show the advisor that this is in their best interest as well. And I think that's the thing I really wasn't aware of. This study, supported by similar studies in the literature, implies that a conflict resolution intervention which focuses on using collaborative skill techniques may affect conflict resolution preference for participants who attend conflict resolution training. Graduate student educators, defined broadly, are interested in improving the graduate school experience for graduate students which necessarily includes interventions which support effective relationships among students and faculty.

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