

Do Stages of Moral Development Matter in the Preference of Conflict Handling Styles with peers?

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between the stages of moral development (pre-conventional, conventional, post-conventional) and conflict handling styles. Sample including 151 academicians completed Rahim's Organizational Conflict Inventory ROCII-Form C and DIT with three scenarios. MANCOVA analysis did not reveal a significant main effect for the levels of moral development on conflict handling styles. However, supplementary univariate analyses reported that individuals at higher stages of moral development use obliging styles and individuals at lower stages of moral development use dominating style after controlling for gender. Implications of the study, and directions for future research were discussed.

Keywords: Conflict handling styles, Moral development, Turkey, DIT

1.Introduction

Conflict, an inevitable component of social life, has been highly prevalent in organizational settings where people work together (Cosier & Ruble, 1981). In response to growing demands for workplace harmony and productivity, effective conflict management is increasing its popularity. The literature on organizations acknowledges the potential for both negative and positive effects of conflict. As recent research has emphasized that the type of conflict can contribute to group failure or success (Amason, 1996; Tjosvold, Law & Sun, 2006), the ability to resolve conflicts and the preferences of conflict handling styles becomes very important. In this respect, researchers start to investigate certain variables, which are important for the individuals to handle conflict effectively at any level within the organization.

Ethical aspects of conflict handling styles have been less thoroughly explored by both practitioners and academicians. Rahim, Garrett and Buntzman (1992) indicated that some positive results for organizations are associated with ethical rather than unethical applications of certain styles of conflict handling. For instance Rahim et al. (1992) suggested that dominating and avoiding styles in conflict handling can lead to some financial and/ or personal loss and thus are less motivated by ethical motives. Therefore, ethical decision making might have some important implications for both organizations and the employees while handling conflict. Scholars argue different situational and individual factors that might influence the ethical decision making. Within the organizational literature, several models of ethical decision making have been developed.

These models (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Jones, 1991; Trevino, 1986) identify key factors that have the greatest effect on individuals' ethical decision making process. For instance, Ferrell and Gresham (1985) states that individual factors including knowledge, values, attitudes and intentions interact with organizational factors and thus affect the individual ethical decision making. Hunt and Vitell (1986) identify the individual's moral philosophy or ethical ideology as the key factor in explaining the differences between ethical behaviors of individuals. Moreover, Vitell (2003) focuses on the possible impacts of some personal characteristics like consciousness, materialism, Machiavellianism, age and gender on the ethical judgments of individuals. However, according to Trevino (1986) and Jones (1991), moral development levels of individuals have more effect on ethical decision making than any other individual or situational factors.

Current research stems from the viewpoint of Trevino (1986) who emphasizes the importance of moral development levels on ethical decision making, and investigates the ethical aspects of conflict by focusing on the relation between moral development levels and conflict handling styles. Specifically, this study addresses Kohlberg's (1969) theory of moral development levels as a way of understanding and explaining the preference of individuals' conflict handling styles with their peers. The sample includes the academicians, working in three different universities of Turkey, who are in prime position to influence young minds through their modeling in many ways including conflict handling styles. Besides their membership of being specialist in a certain field, in their teaching duty; public, parents, future employers expect academicians to educate qualified individuals with strong ethical values that places public good ahead of all other interests especially self-interest when they face with conflicting situations. Thus, this paper distinguishes itself from the previous studies regarding the type of sample (highly educated academicians) as well as cultural characteristics of the Turkish society as collectivistic culture (Hofstede, 1980).

In other words, current thinking regarding the relation between moral development levels and conflict handling styles may not generalize employees from societies that have cultural and economic characteristics differ significantly from those commonly found in Western societies. Moreover, moral development and conflict handling studies have predominantly involved individuals from Western countries. Since culture and values have an inevitable impact upon attitudes and behaviors of individuals (Hofstede, 1980), this paper aims to fill the gap in the relevant literature regarding moral development and conflict literature. The remainder of this paper is organized as follows: In the following section, a theoretical background about conflict, conflict handling styles and brief review of the literature about relationship between the moral development levels and conflict are provided. Then in the light of previous findings hypotheses are developed. The next section describes the sample data, procedure and empirical methodology. Our main findings and explanations are presented in Results section. Finally we make concluding remarks in discussion.

1.1. Conflict handling styles

Conflict is defined as the condition in which people's concerns appear to be incompatible (Thomas, 1976). Interpersonal conflict tend to occur when there is a struggle or between people with opposing needs and ideas, beliefs and goals. Therefore satisfying one's needs or interest are important as satisfying own needs (Antonioni, 1998). The initial perspective dominated the conflict literature asserts that conflict is dysfunctional and it represents a breakdown in organizational systems (Robbins & Judge, 2007). In contrast, more current view of conflict demonstrates that conflict can be functional if it is managed properly (Rahim, 2001; Rahim, Magner & Shapiro, 2000). When conflict in organizations is managed properly, it could contribute to an organization's adaptive and innovative capabilities (Callanan, Benzing & Perri, 2006), can increase to organizational effectiveness (Sergiovanni, 1987) and might improve decision making quality within the organization (Amason, 1996).

According to Thomas (1976), conflict management is the purposeful intervention of managers to stimulate and encourage beneficial or helpful conflict and to resolve, suppress, or prevent harmful conflict. (Thomas, 1976). The acceptance of functional aspects of conflict has led researchers to examine the conflict handling strategies and various conflict management dimensionalizations (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Follet, 1940; Rahim, 1983; Rahim & Bonoma, 1979; Thomas, 1976). Follet (1940) indicated the 3 main ways of dealing with conflict as domination, compromise and integration. Blake and Mouton (1964) were the first to conceive a grid for classifying the styles for handling conflict: forcing, withdrawing, smoothing, compromising, and confrontation. They classified these five conflict handling styles along two dimensions: concern for production and concern for people. Blake and Mouton's (1964) conceptualization was later expounded and differentiated by a number of researchers (Rahim, 1983; Rahim & Bonoma, 1979) on two dimensions: concern for self and concern for others. The first dimension measures the degree (high or low) to which a person attempts to satisfy his/her own concerns. The other dimension explains the degree (high or low) to which a person wants to satisfy the concerns of others.

A combination of the two dimensions results in five specific conflict handling styles (Rahim, 1983): *Integrating* indicates high concern for self and others and focused on collaboration, openness and exchange of information to reach a solution acceptable to both parties. *Obliging* involves low concern for self and high concern for others. The person using the obliging style attempts to resolve conflict by playing down the differences, focusing on similarities in order to satisfy the concerns of other party. *Dominating* is characterized by high concern for self and low concern for the other party. This style creates win-lose situation. *Avoiding* involves low concern for self and others; and this style is associated with withdrawal, setting aside, and ignoring the issues. *Compromising* reflects moderate concern for self as well as for the other party which focusing on give-and- take position or sharing whereby parties give up something to make a mutually satisfied decision.

1.2. Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory and Conflict handling

Piaget (1932) assumed that skills involved in ethical decision making can be developed over time depending on interaction and collaboration with others. Kohlberg (1976) extended the Piaget's work and created the moral development model in which a person progresses through six hierarchical stages of moral reasoning from childhood to adulthood. Kohlberg (1976) argues that moral judgment is characterized depending upon how a person reasons and structures. He offers a model of three moral development levels, each level containing two stages and each representing a progressive shift in moral development. First, in the pre-conventional level (Stage 1 and 2), the individual moves from egocentric solutions to moral conflicts. In this stage, individuals see the value of human life only as a means to their own needs and display an obedience and punishment orientation. At pre-conventional stage, moral reasoning is based on the maximization of self gain and minimization of personal loss (Monga, 2007) and the motive could be towards achieving one's long-term self-interest (Wimbush, 1999).

Within the conventional level (Stages 3 and 4), the individual shifts to solutions concerned with maintaining social order and conformity. At the conventional stage, individuals see the value of human life through the empathy and affection of family members. Individual's behavior is determined by what pleases them and they avoid from disapproval of others. What is morally right or wrong depends on the expectations of others in this stage (Monga, 2007). The individual in the post-conventional level (Stage 5 and 6), which represents the highest level of moral development, progresses to solutions that offers relativistic values and ethical principles. At this stage, people follow their self-chosen ethical principles and consider the welfare of everyone. Castleberry and French (1993) explained that not all decisions will be made using the highest stage of reasoning attained by the individual. Individual may well utilize reasoning from several of the stages while making a judgment. However, Rest (1986) suggests that individuals tend to rely on one of the stages as their primary reasoning model. Consequently, it can be suggested that if individuals have different levels of moral reasoning capabilities, they are likely to take different actions on the basis of their decisions. Habermas (1990) suggested that an individual's level of moral development affect the type of communication which an individual typically uses in conflict handling.

Similarly French and Albright (1998) assumed a positive relationship between moral development level and integrating in communication. Rahim, Buntzman and White (1999) investigated the relationships of stages of moral development to the styles of conflict handling. Results obtained from the sample of employed undergraduate business students revealed that post-conventionals used more integrating and less dominating and avoiding styles than conventionals. Additionally, conventionals used more integrating and less dominating and avoiding styles than pre-conventionals. Similar to Rahim et al.'s (1999) findings, the descriptive results of Harper (2004) indicated that participants' conflict handling style preferences differed based on their moral development level. The individuals who have higher moral development level have a more tendency to use integrating style as they focus on what is good for conflicting parties and what is good for the entire population.

It is suggested that individuals at higher stages of moral development levels do not focus primarily on simply winning the argument; instead these individuals attempt to find a new way of approaching and solving the conflict. Finding a new position that is acceptable to both parties and upholding the principles is more important. Integration as a conflict handling style, allows for a perspective that is characterized by high concern for self and high concern for others and this style seeks to hold all points of view without compromising (Rahim et al., 1992). However, an integrative solution could not always be attained and compromising style constitutes the mild version of integrating (Pruitt, 1983; Rahim, 1983). Compromising is characterized by moderate concern for self and for others and entails a process where each side presents high initial demands but gradually concedes towards an accepted solution (Rubin, 1994).

Therefore it can be expected that individuals at higher stages of moral development are more likely to engage conflict handling styles of integration and compromising. Similarly, obliging style might also be appropriate and ethical under some conditions. It involves low concern for self and high concern for others. Thus, it can be expected that this style might be frequently used by individuals at higher stages of moral development.

2. Methodology

2.1. Purpose of the study

Even though conflict management and conflict handling styles have been the subject of previous research, little research has been conducted regarding the conflict handling style based on the levels of moral development. Therefore, this study was designed to determine the effects of moral development levels in predicting the preference of conflict handling styles of academicians with their peers in Turkey. In the present study, an effort was made to determine whether knowledge about conflict management style and moral development levels of academicians provide insight into how they understand and manage conflict. Such an examination is valuable since the important role of the academic profession is to provide morally highly qualified, knowledgeable graduates, who could be the future leaders of the organizations, to maintain the integrity in the business life. Specifically, the hypotheses of the study are as follows;

H1: Higher levels of moral development stages will be positively related to engaging in conflict handling styles of integrating, compromising and obliging, Such as individuals at stages 5 and 6 (post-conventionals) will more frequently use integrating, compromising, and obliging than the individuals at lower stages.

H2: Lower levels of moral development stages will be positively related to engaging in conflict handling styles of dominating and avoiding. Such as, individuals at lower levels at stages 1 and 2 (pre-conventionals) will more frequently use dominating and avoiding styles than the individuals at higher stages.

2.2. Participants and procedure

The participants consisted of stratified sample of 151 academicians working in three universities of Turkey. The questionnaires were distributed to department staffs through the deanships. Of the 225 distributed questionnaires, 151 were returned, yielding a response rate of 67.1%. The mean age of the participants was 34.2 (SD=7.1), 47% of whom were women with a work experience of 9.29 (SD=7.4).

2.3. Measures

The measurement instrument includes the following three parts.

Rahim's Organizational Conflict Inventory: Rahim's Organizational Conflict Inventory ROCI-2 Form C was used to measure conflict handling styles of the participants with their peers in this study. ROCI-2 Form C, containing 28 items, measures five independent conflict management dimensions that represent styles of handling interpersonal conflict with peers which are measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree"(1) to "strongly disagree"(5). The five styles of resolving conflict are: avoiding (6 items), compromising (4 items), integrating (7 items), dominating (5 items) and obliging (6 items). Responses were then reverse coded, calculated for each dimension, with higher scores indicating greater use of particular conflict handling style. Forward-translation and backward-translation of the instrument was conducted by two independent bilingual individuals who have previous psychology training. Some scholars previously reported adequate test-retest and internal consistency coefficients for ROC II inventory (Rahim, 1983; Weider-Hatfield, 1988, Brewer, Mitchell and Weber, 2002).

Stages of Moral Development: The Defining Issues Test (DIT) was used to determine the academician's level of moral development. This widely used DIT test is developed by Rest (1979) to measure moral judgment based on Kohlberg's (1976) six stages of moral reasoning. The instrument has adequate psychometric properties including high validity and reliabilities ranging from .70 to .80 (Rest, 1986). The test uses six moral dilemmas and demonstrates how individuals at different stages of moral development perceive moral dilemmas differently. However the current study uses the shorter 3-dilemma version of DIT. Short version of DIT includes Heinz, Escaped Prisoner, and the Newspaper scenarios which have the highest correlation of any three-story set with the six-story version (Rest, 1986). For the purpose of this study, moral development levels were categorized as being "low", "medium" or "high" as ascertained by predetermined cutoff points from participants' DIT scores (Rest, 1986). These levels were based on participants' P-scores (principled morality) that ranged from 0 to 95. P-scores are calculated by summing the amount of times that Stage 5 and 6 items are chosen as the first, second, third, or fourth important consideration, and weighting these ranks with points of 4, 3, 2, and 1, respectively. Scores ranging from 0 to 27 are considered as low moral development scores, scores between 27- 41 are considered as moderate (conventional) moral development scores and scores ranging from 41 and higher are high moral development scores.

Some demographic variables including age, gender, position, university affiliation, position, tenure etc were inquired in the last section.

3. Results

Prior to analysis, the data was screened for normality, linearity and homogeneity of variance assumptions. Initially, in order to identify the underlying subdimensions of conflict handling style questionnaire, the item scores were subjected to Principal Component Analysis (PCA) followed by Varimax Rotation. For factorability of the items, the *Bartlett’s test of sphericity* was significant and the *Keiser-Meyer-Olkin* measure of sampling adequacy was .76. The factor subscales were derived by assigning to each subscale all items loading .40 or higher. Exploratory factor analysis of the ROCII-Form C (conflict with peers) results confirmed the existence of the anticipated 5 subscales with similar items with the criteria of eigen value greater than 1.00, which altogether accounted for 73.71 % of the total variance. However, “Item 15” was found to highly load under the *integrating factor* in contrast to its original version loading on compromising factor. Moreover, “Item 11” was excluded from the analysis since it had loadings of higher than .40 on more than one factor. Final factor loadings, percentages of the variances of the subscales for ROCII- Form C (Conflict Handling Style with Peers) are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Factor loadings for the items of ROC II-FORM C

Items	Factor 1 Dominating	Factor 2 Integrating	Factor 3 Obliging	Factor 4 Avoiding	Factor 5 Compromising
CF 9	.755				
CF 25	.710				
CF 8	.651				
CF 18	.636				
CF 21	.524				
CF 1		.755			
CF 5		.745			
*CF 15		.745			
CF 28		.703			
CF 22		.665			
CF 23		.608			
CF 4		.595			
CF 12		.562			
CF 10			.646		
CF 24			.619		
*CF 11			.549	.427	
CF 19			.590		
CF 2			.541		
CF 13			.475		
CF 16				.762	
CF 26				.748	
CF 17				.632	
CF 3				.588	
CF 6				.570	
CF27				.522	
CF 7					.754
CF 14					.747
CF 20					.501

In the second step internal reliability coefficients, means, standard deviations, and correlations among the study variables are depicted in Table 2. As can be seen in Table 2, Cronbach Alpha(α)’s for the five styles of handling conflict ranged from .71 to .89.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics, Cronbach Alpha values and intercorrelations among study variables.

Variable	Reliability(α)	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Avoiding	.89	3.06	.71	1.00						
2. Compromising	.78	3.88	.61	.160*	1.00					
3. Integrating	.85	4.01	.52	-.022	.668**	1.00				
4. Dominating	.80	3.28	.65	-.115	.049	-.015	1.00			
5. Obliging	.71	3.00	.58	.551**	.195*	.028	-.026	1.00		
6.Total Moral Development Score	.74	32.54	6	.022	.054	.077	-.128	.063	1.00	
7. Gender				.269**	.204**	.173*	-.162*	.260**	.003	1.00

* p<.05, ** p<.001

Zero-order correlations showed that gender was significantly correlated with five conflict handling styles. Therefore, before testing the hypothesized relationships, One-way ANOVA was conducted to investigate the gender differences in the preferences of conflict handling styles with peers. Statistically significant differing handling styles in conflict with peers in terms of gender were found as Dominating [$F(1,150)=3,99$ $p<.05$], Avoiding [$F(1,150)=11,59$ $p<.01$], Compromising [$F(1,150)=6,48$ $p<.01$], Integrating [$F(1,150)= 4,58$ $p<.05$] and Obliging styles [$F(1,150)= 10.80$, $p<.01$]. That is to say, men ($X=3.38$) prefer to use dominating style more than women ($X=3.17$) however women prefer to use integrating, obliging, avoiding and compromising styles more than men in handling conflict with their peers.

MANCOVA was conducted to determine the effect of cognitive moral development on conflict handling styles. Three stages of moral development (pre-conventionals, conventionals and post-conventionals) were taken as independent variables, five styles of handling conflict were taken as dependent variables and gender was taken as a control variable in MANCOVA. Box-M test was not found significant (Box M=46.25, $p=.065$), which assures the homogeneity of variance assumption is satisfied. With the usage of Wilk's criterion, MANCOVA results revealed a significant main effect only for gender as a covariate $F(1,145) = 2.77$, $p<.01$ with a weak effect size of $\eta^2 = .09$. However no significant main effect for moral development stages and no interaction terms of gender by moral development are reported on the conflict handling styles (See Table 3).

Table 3. MANCOVA with Gender as covariate, Moral development stages as IVs and Conflict handling styles as DV's

	Avoiding	Compromising	Integrating	Dominating	Obliging
Covariate(F-ratio)					
Gender	4.54*	4.10*	4.48*	3.67*	3.39
Main effect (F-ratio)					
Moral development	.026	.492	.570	1.128	.699
Moral x Gender	1.658	.269	.605	.453	1.855

* $p<.05$

Since mean differences among moral development stages were detected for conflict handling styles through descriptive statistics, Univariate analysis of covariance on each conflict styles was conducted as supplementary follow-up tests to the MANCOVA. Using the Bonferonni method, each ANCOVA was tested at the .01 level. The ANCOVA results revealed that dominating style $F(2,145)=3.51$, $p<.01$ with $\eta^2 = .08$ and obliging style $F(2,145)=3.51$, $p<.01$ $\eta^2 = .05$ differ on three stages of moral development (See Table 4).The post-hoc pairwise comparisons indicate that the mean for dominating style($x=3.47$) was greater than for conventionals ($x=3.16$); providing partial support for the hypothesis suggesting the relation between the greater use of dominating style with lower stages of moral development. Additionally, the mean for obliging style was greater for conventionals ($x=3.10$) than pre-conventionals ($x=2.88$); partially supporting the suggestion of the association between the greater use of the obliging style with higher levels of moral development.

Table 4. Means and standard deviations for moral development stages depending on conflict handling styles

	N	Avoiding	Compromising	Integrating	Dominating	Obliging
		$F(2,145)=.979$	$F(2,145)=.247$	$F(2,145)=.519$	$F(2,145)=3.51^*$	$F(2,145)=2.75^*$
Moral development	151					
Pre-conventionals	47	2.99	3.83	3.97	3.47 ^b	2.88 ^a
Conventionals	85	3.14	3.89	4.01	3.16 ^a	3.10 ^b
Post-Conventionals	19	2.96	3.93	4.12	3.34	2.90

Note: Means with different subscripts are significantly different at .01

4. Discussion

This paper attempted to elucidate the moral development levels that might play a role in the preferences of conflict handling styles. Specifically, it was aimed to investigate to what extent conflict handling styles of participants differ depending on their level of moral development. To our knowledge, the relationship between those two variables has not been investigated in non-Western countries, where cultural value dimensions that might have an affect on conflict handling styles are different.

The findings provide support for a partial portion of the hypotheses. Although MANCOVA results did not reveal a significant main effect for the levels of moral development on conflict handling preferences, supplementary univariate analysis reported the plausible effects of moral development levels on dominating and obliging styles. This finding indicated that individuals at higher stages of moral development have tendency to use obliging style in conflict handling with their peers. Since Rahim et al. (1999: 160) defined obliging style as “treating the other parties involved in conflict with maximum respect”, this finding seems reasonable. Additionally, cultural values may support why individuals at higher levels of moral development use obliging style. Turkey is relatively collectivistic culture (Hofstede 1980) where compliance among the co-workers is highly valued. Therefore, sacrificing one’s own needs and demands on behalf of other parties might be expected. Thus future study may investigate the impact of cultural values on the relationship between moral development and conflict handling.

The other finding also supports the Rahim et al. (1999) and Harper’s (2004) study result which considers the association between lower levels of moral development and dominating style. As dominating style involves high concern for self and low concern for others, it is generally accepted as unethical because of ignoring the other parties’ needs. This finding is in the predicted direction, given that, the lower levels of moral development is characterized by decisions based on the individual’s special concern for his/her self-interest without taking into consideration the impact of his/her actions on others (Wimbush, 1999).

Contrary to the findings of Rahim et al. (1999), this paper failed to find a significant association between the use of integrating and compromising style with higher and moderate levels of moral development. Some possible explanations may account for this result. First, there may be some other individual factors (Ford & Richardson, 1994) such as personal attributes, beliefs and values and locus of control that may override ethical decision making. Second, several theoretical models argue the importance of general environmental, organizational and situation specific factors. For instance Wimbush (1999) points out those higher morally developed individuals are more apt to focus on whether or not they fit in to ethical climate of the organization. Individuals at higher levels of moral development may be expected to consider the appropriate conflict handling styles with the situational influences. Therefore future research may investigate the effect of situational factors especially in collectivistic cultures like Turkey.

The ethical resolution of conflicting situations is critical for organizations. Accordingly, an examination of the argument submitted in this paper may provide valuable information given that some positive results for organizations are associated with ethical rather than unethical applications of certain styles of conflict handling. However, this study is not without limitations. First, all the data were collected through one survey package. Therefore, it may be prone to common method error variance. Second, further studies should be replicated with the long version of DIT with six scenarios. Third, the nature of the participants (highly educated) may limit the generalizability of the study. As most of them seem to be at the conventional level of moral reasoning, future research is warranted to investigate the issues further. Additionally, it might be useful to replicate in different organizational settings, including different positions, and professions with a more heterogeneous sample. This would increase the power and the extent to which the results could be generalized. It is also possible to determine the relationship between individual’s moral development levels and the conflict handling styles with their superiors and peers. This examination may help to ascertain the effect of moral development levels in predicting the preference of conflict handling style in the light of the authority position of the other party.

5. References

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