

# INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT – HANDLING STYLES USED IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR ORGANISATIONS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to determine and compare by means of an empirical study whether there exists a significant difference in the handling of interpersonal conflict between two totally different organizations. The study made use of the *Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory – ROC-II* instrument to determine the extent of usage of five conflict handling styles by employees of an agricultural company and a local authority. Results indicated that a significant difference exists in usage of the various handling styles between respondents and their superiors as well as respondents and their peers. The obliging style and integrating styles were used the most and the dominating style was used the least in both organisations. Significant differences were also recorded with regard to sex, age and qualifications and the usage of different conflict handling styles. These results have definite implications for managing conflict in organizations.

## OPSOMMING

Die doelwit van hierdie studie was om d.m.v 'n empiriese studie vas te stel en te vergelyk of daar 'n betekenisvolle verskil is in die hantering van interpersoonlike konflik tussen twee verskillende organisasies. Die studie het gebruik gemaak van die *Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory – ROC II* instrument om vas te stel watter mate die vyf konflikhantering-styl binne 'n landboumaatskappy en 'n plaaslike owerheid, gebruik word. Resultate het gewys dat daar 'n betekenisvolle verskil is in hanteringstyle tussen respondente en hul hoofde sowel as respondente en hul gelykes. Die toegewende- en integreerende styl was die meeste gebruik en die dominerende styl die minste in beide organisasies. Betekenisvolle verskille is ook aangeteken met betrekking tot geslag, ouderdom en kwalifikasies en die gebruik van die verskillende konflikhantering-styl. Hierdie resultate hou noemenswaardige implikasies in vir die bestuur van konflik in organisasies.

The organisational network, is composed of individual parties together with their individual mutual relations. Regarding individual parties (subunits, individuals, groups) the interactional dynamics may manifest differently in different contexts. Furthermore, the task-oriented and socio-emotional relational aspects are combined with relational aspects involving power and the allocation of scarce resources (Mastenbroek, 1993:13). These relational aspects whether in groups or individuals very often result in situations of conflict which can have a negative influence on an effective working environment (McNamara, 2003) or beneficial to groups and organisations (Bodtker & Jameson, 2001). Tjosvold & Chia (1988) recognized that poorly handled conflict tends to reduce productivity and increase labour relations problems. It was also shown by Jehn (1997) that as an individual becomes emotional during conflict he or she loses focus on tasks, becomes less effective resulting in lack of performance. Pelled, Eisenhardt & Xin (1999) concluded that organisational conflict has both functional (positive) outcomes of conflict include; better ideas are produced; people are forced to clarify their ideas; interest and creativity are stimulated; and other people capacities are tested. Studies of Opatow (2000) again stresses aggression as a very important consequence of dysfunctional conflict.

Inadequate or excessive levels of conflict hinder the effectiveness of a group, individual or organisation, resulting in group members to be less stratified, increased absence and turnover rates, and eventually lower in productivity. On the other hand, when conflict is at an optimal level, complacency and apathy should be minimised, motivation should be enhanced through the creation of a challenging and questioning environment with a vitality that makes work interesting (Robbins, Odendaal & Roodt, 2003).

Estimates by Nelson & Quick (2001) reveal that approximately 21 percent of managers' time is spend on managing conflict. It should be noted that a difference exists between the concepts "conflict handling", "conflict resolution" and "conflict management" (Schermerhorn, 1999). For purposes of this article conflict management and conflict handling will be recognized as synonymous. Rahim (1992; 2002) and Thomas & Killman (1974; 1976) who pioneered studies on conflict-handling styles clearly distinguish between conflict resolution on the one side and handling or managing conflict on the other side. Rahim & Bonoma (1979) differentiated the styles of handling conflict on two basic dimensions: concern for self and concern for others. Van de Vliert and Kabanoff (1990) were in general support for these two dimensions. Combination of the two dimensions results in five specific styles of handling (CHS) interpersonal conflict i.e.: Rahim (2002)

- Integrating: Focuses on problem-solving in a collaborative fashion. High concern for self and others.
- Obliging: Involves low concern for self as well as other party. Inaction, withdrawal or ignoring.
- Dominating: High concern for self and low concern for opposing party. Control, competing, zero-sum, win-lose.
- Compromising: Moderate concern for self as well as other party. Give-and-take or sharing.
- Avoiding: Low concern for self as well as other party. Inaction, withdrawal or ignoring.

More recent studies have narrowed down or broadened the number of styles to adaptive, forcing, avoiding, abusive (Meyer, 2004), and forcing, confronting, avoiding, compromising, accommodating, problem solving and press controlling (Euwema, Van de Vliert & Bakher, 2003). For purposes of this study the five conflict handling styles of Rahim were used.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Research approach

In order to manage or handle conflict effectively, cognisance should be taken of the role elements such as communication, emotions, culture supremacy aspirations and 'conflict management styles. It can be contended by doing so, it may open opportunities for using generic conflict management strategies in the work environment. One should consider that the amount, intensity and positive or negative impact of conflict at present and in future is a function of the way in which conflict is handled by the individual. Considering organisational changes, affirmative action programmes, scarce resources, management changes and behavioural processes within public and private sector organisations, it is believed that conflict potential may be increasing within these sectors of the South African economy. Conflict between personnel on both horizontal and vertical levels can no longer be ignored or left unattended. In the South African context, limited information is available concerning local authorities and private sector businesses' understanding of conflict and the styles used by parties to manage it.

No studies were found in which the relationship between a profit and non-profit institutions' usage of the different conflict handling styles were explored simultaneously. This study addresses the research question: Assuming that conflict does exist within two totally different organisations, functioning in totally different economic environments, is there a significant difference in conflict management styles being used?

In order to answer this question the objective of this article is to determine and compare by means of an empirical based study whether there is a significant difference in the handling of interpersonal conflict.

### Research Methodology

The measuring instrument used in the study is a conflict-evaluating questionnaire. It consists of a standardized (Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory - ROC II) part and a section designed to measure and test elements not included in the standardized sections of the questionnaire. Rahim & Magner (1995) performed confirmatory factor analysis with five different samples that provide support for the convergent and discriminate validities of the ROC-II and the invariance of the five-factor model across referent roles, that is supervisors (superiors), subordinates and peers, organizational levels, that is, top, middle, lower and non-management (operational).

Pre-testing were conducted amongst colleagues, managers of human resource departments and personnel of both participating organisations and staff members of the Statistical Support Services division of two universities to ensure validity of the research instrument.

### Sample

Data for this study were collected using the survey methodology. Samples were drawn from both a local authority and an agriculture company's top-, and middle management and operational levels.

A stratified random sample of employees from operational (job-level 13) up to the top-level management (job-level 1) were taken in a local authority. This sample represents the total population of all the directorates, genders, ages and races. Of the total population of 386 employees 193 employees were selected randomly of which 143 questionnaires were returned. 72 % (N = 139) were usable questionnaires and can be considered an adequate sample size for statistical analysis (Hair, G.E., & Anderson, R.E., 1995).

The sample taken from job-levels 5 to 16 in the agriculture company also included the executive management above level

16. Similar to the local authority the total population of all departments included persons from all departments, ages, genders and races. The total population of 101 formed the total sample (100%). The number returned was 65 of which 64 (63,4%) could be used. Because a sample can never reflect its population for certain, researchers must determine how much precision they need (Emory & Cooper, 1991). It is believed that both samples can be considered adequate to justify correct statistical analysis for purpose of this study.

The directorates of the Human Resources Departments of both participating were responsible for distribution to, briefing of respondents and recovering of the questionnaires.

### Biographical data

In table 1 gender comparison reveals that 74,6% and 37,5% of the respondents in both organizations were male. Age distribution recorded in three categories ranged between 34,5% - 33,1% and 28,6% - 33,3% which represents an almost equal distribution of respondents. In the case of the local authority a much larger percentage (43,9%) of respondents had some form of tertiary education. Number of years service revealed that 50% of the local authority employees had 11 years or more. In the case of the agriculture company the figure was 54,7%. Only 56,1% of the respondents' in the local authority spoke Afrikaans at home, whilst in the case of the agriculture company the percentage was 90,6%

**TABLE 1**  
**RESPONDENT' BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS**

	Local Authority		Agricultural Organisation		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
	139	64.5	64	35.5	203	100
<b>GENDER</b>						
Male	103	74.6	24	37.5	127	62.6
Female	35	25.4	40	62.5	75	37.4
Total	139	100	64	100	203	100
<b>AGE (RECODED)</b>						
- 35 36	48	34.5	18	28.6	66	32.7
- 45	45	33.4	24	38.0	69	34.2
46 +	46	33.1	21	33.3	67	33.1
Total	139	100	63	100	202	100
<b>HIGHEST QUALIFICATION (RECODED)</b>						
Grade 12 or lower	78	56.1	50	78.1	128	63.1
Diploma or certificate	39	28.1	5	7.8	44	21.6
Undergraduate or higher degree	22	15.8	9	14.1	31	15.3
Total	139	100	64	100	203	100
<b>HOME LANGUAGE (RECODED)</b>						
Afrikaans	78	56.1	58	90.6	136	67.0
English	34	24.5	4	6.2	38	18.7
Other	27	19.4	2	3.2	29	14.3
Total	139	100	64	100	203	100
<b>TENURE (RECODED)</b>						
1 - 4 years	21	15.2	18	28.1	39	19.3
5 - 10 years	48	34.8	17	26.6	65	32.2
11 + years	69	50.0	29	45.3	98	48.5
Total	138	100	64	100	202	100

### Statistical analysis

The SPSS-programme was used to carry out the statistical analysis. Results were described and compared using means, standard deviations, skewness and kurtosis. The main measures of central tendency used were the mean and median. Table 2 indicates the skewness and kurtosis values for the subordinate -

superior CHS (conflict-handling styles) as well as respondent – peer CHS. The values are all very acceptable because in the case of skewness all statistics are equal or within the range of +3 to -3 and with the kurtosis +7 to -7.

**TABLE 2**  
**DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS REGARDING CONFLICT-HANDLING**  
**STYLES FOR BOTH ORGANISATIONS IN TOTAL**

Variable	Sub-ordinate/Superior				Sub-ordinate/Peer			
	Mean	Median	Skew.	Kurt.	Mean	Median	Skew.	Kurt.
Q-1	1.92	2.00	1.552	2.171	1.74	2.00	1.595	3.782
Q-2	2.07	2.00	1.139	0.578	2.25	2.00	0.935	0.331
Q-3	2.74	2.00	0.434	-1.166	2.87	2.50	0.100	-1.309
Q-4	1.84	2.00	1.383	1.935	1.87	2.00	1.608	3.791
Q-5	1.73	1.00	1.777	3.214	1.76	2.00	1.074	2.080
Q-6	2.82	2.00	0.201	-1.349	2.87	2.00	0.180	-1.273
Q-7	2.07	2.00	1.196	1.193	2.14	2.00	1.247	1.406
Q-8	3.37	4.00	-0.457	-1.004	3.54	4.00	-0.546	-0.877
Q-9	4.04	4.00	-1.095	0.464	3.75	4.00	-0.961	0.151
Q-10	2.13	2.00	1.074	0.769	2.45	2.00	0.856	0.171
Q-11	2.57	2.00	0.604	-0.719	3.05	3.00	0.018	-0.956
Q-12	1.79	2.00	1.658	2.445	1.83	2.00	1.541	3.340
Q-13	2.49	2.00	0.683	-0.491	2.70	2.00	0.445	-0.696
Q-14	2.27	2.00	1.011	0.700	2.21	2.00	1.182	1.296
Q-28	1.78	2.00	1.654	3.387	1.76	2.00	1.345	3.084
Q-15	2.09	2.00	1.222	1.075	1.93	2.00	0.299	-1.148
Q-16	2.65	2.00	0.329	-1.176	2.80	2.00	0.195	1.180
Q-17	2.59	2.00	0.339	-1.228	2.79	2.00	0.087	-1.353
Q-18	2.96	3.00	0.108	-1.301	3.06	3.00	0.331	0.962
Q-19	2.42	2.00	0.828	-0.023	2.74	2.00	0.740	-0.479
Q-20	2.56	2.00	0.598	-0.723	2.48	2.00	0.777	-0.335
Q-21	2.48	2.00	0.576	-0.706	2.40	2.00	1.072	1.121
Q-22	1.90	2.00	1.419	2.234	1.92	2.00	1.518	3.828
Q-23	1.92	2.00	1.438	2.288	1.91	2.00	0.748	-0.203
Q-24	2.02	2.00	1.293	1.457	2.48	2.00	-0.715	-0.392
Q-25	3.68	4.00	-0.820	-0.233	3.61	4.00	0.247	-1.163
Q-26	2.96	3.00	0.100	-1.300	2.87	2.00	0.435	-0.963
Q-27	2.68	2.00	0.423	-1.049	2.69	2.00	1.654	4.345

## RELIABILITY

The reliability of the questionnaire's applicable sections was determined by means of Cronbach-Alpha coefficient. According to Anastasi (1976) a desirable reliability coefficient would fall in the range of 0,80 to 0,90. Nunnally & Bernstein (1994) use 0,70 as a directive, whilst Bartholomew, Antonia & Marcia (2000) argue that between 0,80 and 0,60 is acceptable.

**TABLE 3**  
**RELIABILITY ANALYSIS**

Variable	Cronbach's Alpha coefficient	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO)	Bartlett's Significance
S			
U			
P Sub_1D Integrating	0,84	0,85	< ,001
E Sub_2D Avoiding	0,81	0,80	< ,001
R Sub_3D Dominating	0,66	0,72	< ,001
I Sub_4D Obliging	0,82	0,84	< ,001
O Sub_5D Compromising	0,58	0,62	< ,001
R			
P Sub_1E Integrating	0,90	0,82	< ,001
E Sub_2E Avoiding	0,82	0,79	< ,001
E Sub_3E Dominating	0,71	0,74	< ,001
R Sub_4E Obliging	0,80	0,81	< ,001
S Sub_5E Compromising	0,66	0,70	< ,001

The reliability of ten constructs as shown in table 3 measured by the Cronbach-Alpha was also confirmed by means of the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett test of sphericity. The overall average of the Cronbach-Alpha is 0,76

which clearly falls within the range of directives. The KMO-measure for adequacy was 0,77 indicating that the sample was adequate and the Bartlett test of sphericity yielded a statistical approximate chi-square ( $p < 0.001$ ), which also indicated the probability that the correlation matrix had significant correlation amongst the variables.

## RESULTS

### Results on the CHS respondents toward superiors

In the first part of the study it was determined which different CHS were predominantly used between the respondent and his superior in relation to the background variables. In order to achieve this objective it had to be determined whether a significant statistical difference was present regarding each variable by means of independent sample tests and variance analysis (ANOVA), i.e. whether  $p < 0,05$  which would confirm the presence of a significant statistical difference (Howell, 1995). By comparing the different CHS against the different variables the following analysis of results can be made (refer table 4 and table 5).

**TABLE 4**  
**SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE (P – VALUE)**  
**REGARDING DIFFERENT BACKGROUND VARIABLES**

Variables	Gender	Age		Qualification		Language		Years service			
		La	Ac	La	Ac	La	Ac	La	Ac		
CHS											
Integrating	S	0.783	0.169	0.276	0.150	0.783	0.730	0.683	-	0.631	0.211
	P	0.832	0.913	0.570	0.315	0.399	0.256	0.495	-	0.028	0.424
Avoiding	S	0.005	0.627	0.948	0.654	0.120	0.263	0.420	-	0.303	0.571
	P	0.068	0.119	0.996	0.500	0.046	0.230	0.978	-	0.250	0.244
Dominating	S	0.780	0.498	0.340	0.567	0.246	0.237	0.005	-	0.918	0.185
	P	0.638	0.696	0.424	0.050	0.306	0.127	0.317	-	0.943	0.260
Obliging	S	0.567	0.309	0.175	0.024	0.004	0.480	0.000	-	0.408	0.019
	P	0.420	0.292	0.046	0.381	0.040	0.417	0.003	-	0.070	0.778
Compromise	S	0.806	0.766	0.049	0.091	0.598	0.258	0.570	-	0.048	0.080
	P	0.886	0.341	0.740	0.641	0.806	0.301	0.113	-	0.069	0.144

CHS = conflict-handling styles

La = local authority

Ac = agricultural company

S = respondent/superior

P = respondent/peer

**TABLE 5**  
**DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICAL MEAN ON HANDLING STYLES**  
**ACCORDING TO DIFFERENT BACKGROUND VARIABLES**

Variables	Gender	Age		Qualification		Language		Years service	
		La	Ac	La	Ac	La	Ac	La	Ac
Age	- 35					3.5800*	1.6825 o	2.4402 o	
	36 – 45					3.3130*	2.0952 o	2.2557 o	
	46 +					2.9778*	2.1087 o	2.0698 o	
						(2.5155)*			
Gender	Male		2.883 o						
	Female		2.358 o						
Lang.	Other			3.0772 o			2.7542 o		
	Afr.			3.4560 o			(2.8879)*		
							2.1491 o		
							(2.4865) *		
Years Service	1-4	2.1429*						1.7604 o	2.4737 o
	5-10	1.7690*						1.8426 o	2.3085 o
	10+	1.7824*						2.1839 o	2.1791 o
Highest Qualif.	Gr 12	2.7230*							
	Dip +	2.8289*							
	Degree +	3.2857*						2.2018 o	
								2.5586 *	
								2.6272 o	
								3.0476 *	

Ac = Agricultural company

La = Legal authority

\* = ?

o = ?

Regarding 'gender' a statistical difference was found  $p = 0,005$  within the variable *avoiding* for the local authority. By looking at the group statistics of recordings it shows that after the avoiding CHS was indicated as the only style where a statistical difference was found, it can be stated that the female respondents ( $M = 2,3578$ ) tended to apply this handling-style when in conflict with their superiors more than the male respondents ( $M = 2,8883$ ). No meaningful statistical difference were recorded for the agricultural company.

Comparing the different CHS against the background variable "age" the following results were obtained. A meaningful significant statistical difference was found ( $p = 0,049$ ) within the variable *compromising* for the local authority. Respondents younger than 35 years had an average mean of 2,4402, whilst 36 - 45 years had a mean of 2,2557 and those older than 45 years a mean of 2,0698. This illustrates that the older the respondents are, the more positive they are to use *compromising* as a CHS in comparison with the other four CHS's. In the case of the agricultural company the statistical difference was ( $p = 0,024$ ) regarding the variable *obliging*. Consulting the descriptive statistics in table 5 it shows that the younger respondents (<35 years) tended to be more *obliging* than the groupings 36 - 45 years and 46 + years ( $M = 1,6852$ ,  $M = 2,0952$  and  $2,1087$  respectively).

The highest qualification as a background variable in local authority indicated a  $p = 0,004$ , thus verifying that *obliging* is the only handling style where a difference in the frequency with which this style is used, can be found. A grade qualification equal to or less than grade 12 had an  $M = 2,2018$ . Respondents in possession of a diploma/certificate  $M = 2,6272$  and a degree or higher had an  $M = 2,7937$ . No meaningful statistical difference could be found in any of the variables with regard to the agriculture company.

Comparing the different CHS's against the background "home-language" presented the following results for the local

authority.  $p = 0,0005$  within the variable *dominating* verified it as a CHS with a significant difference in the degree to which this style is used. Secondly a significant statistical difference was found within the variable *obliging* ( $p = 0,0000$ ). The  $M = 3,0772$  (English + African language) and  $M = 3,4560$  (Afrikaans) showed less dominance by the latter group and being more *obliging*  $M = 2,1491$ . The low number of respondents in the agricultural company resulted in a non-statistical analysis.

A significant statistical difference ( $p = 0,048$ ) and ( $p = 0,019$ ) was found, within the variable *compromising* and *obliging* for the background variable, "years in service" for both the local authority and the agricultural company. For the grouping 1-4 years, 5-10 years, and more than 10 years for the local authority the means were  $M = 2,4737$ ,  $M = 2,3085$  and  $M = 2,1791$ . In the case of the agricultural company the means recorded were  $M = 1,7604$ ,  $M = 1,8426$  and  $M = 2,1839$ .

**Results on CHS respondent to peers**

After determining which CHS was used to a greater extent than the others in a conflict-situation between the respondent and his supervisor, it was decided to establish handling-styles when conflict occurred between respondent and peer.

The background variable "different genders" showed that no meaningful statistical differences could be found in both participating organisations. Exploring the background variable "different age groups" a statistical difference ( $p = 0,046$ ) was found within the variable *obliging* for the local authority. Means recorded here were < 35 years ( $M = 2,8007$ ), 35-45 years ( $M = 2,5706$ ) and 45 + years ( $M = 2,5155$ ). The agricultural company had a statistical difference ( $p = 0,050$ ) within the variable *dominating* for different age groups. Means for the age groups were <35 years ( $M = 3,5800$ ), 36-45 years ( $M = 3,3130$ ) and 45+ years ( $M = 2,9778$ ).

When considering highest qualification as a background variable statistical significant differences within the variable *avoiding* ( $p$

M-values	Loc. Auth.	Agric. Co
Integrating	1,948753	1,847798
Avoiding	2,753086	2,604872
Dominating	3,292424	3,655556
Obliging	2,41658	1,924572
Compromising	2,257463	2,201613

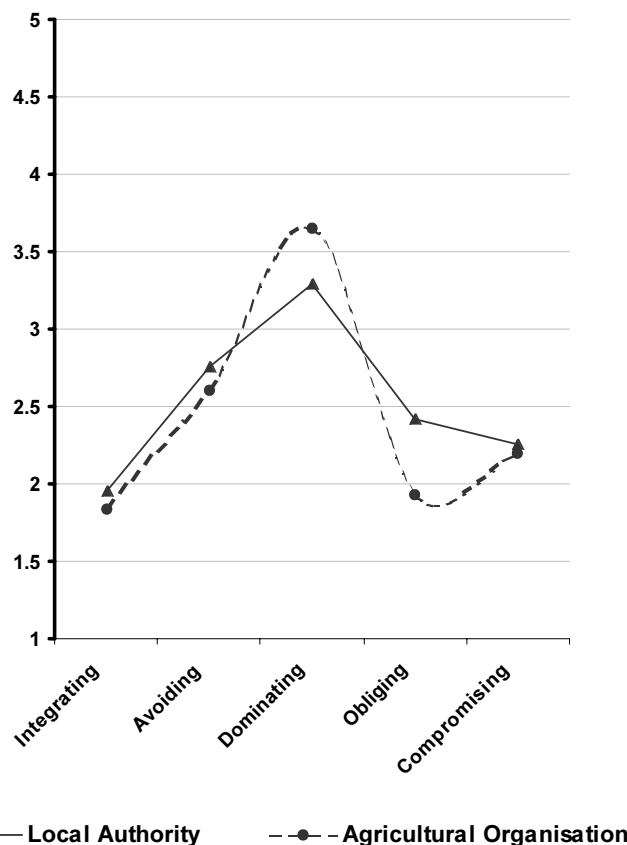


Figure 1: Comparative analysis of respondent conflict with superior in both organisations

M-values	Loc. Auth.	Agric. Co
Integrating	1,825994	1,728673
Avoiding	2,890836	2,717742
Dominating	3,253333	3,387652
Obliging	2,662879	2,486772
Compromising	2,217803	2,139344

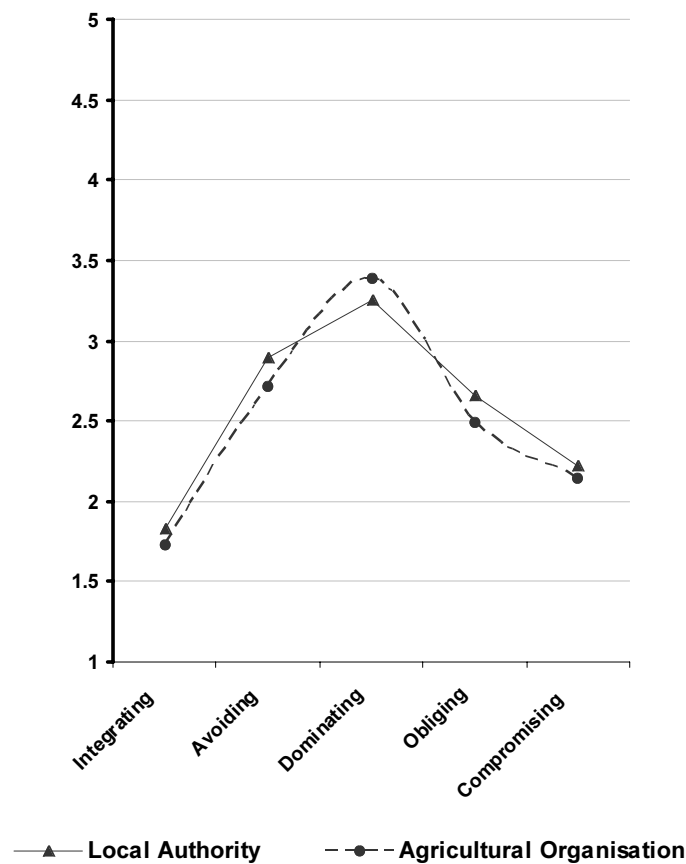


Figure 2: Comparative analysis of conflict with peer in both organisations

= 0,046) and *obliging* ( $p = 0,040$ ). These two CHS when compared to the background variable revealed a difference with which it is used by respondents of a local authority. Means according to highest qualification grouping were  $M = 2,7230$ ,  $M = 2,8289$  and  $M = 3,2857$  for *avoiding* and  $M = 2,5586$ ,  $M = 2,653$  and  $M = 3,0476$  for *obliging* respectively. In the agricultural company no meaningful statistical difference could be found.

With regard to "home-language" for the local authority a difference of ( $p = 0,003$ ) within *obliging* was found. The mean for the Afrikaans group was  $M = 2,8879$  and other languages as a group,  $M = 2,4865$ . The low number of agricultural company respondents resulted in a non-analysis.

A meaningful significant statistical difference ( $p = 0.028$ ) within the variable *integrating*, for the local authority, thus verifying that this is the only CHS in which a difference in frequency with which this style is used, can be found. Respondents working for 1-4 years had an  $M=2.1429$ , 5-10 years,  $M = 1.7690$  and 11+ years,  $M = 1.7824$ . No meaningful statistical difference could be found in the variables for the agricultural company.

## DISCUSSION

When comparing the difference in the CHS as used by respondents toward superiors for both organisations it can be seen in figure 1 that all styles had a variation in frequency and each one is used when compared to the different sections. The style that differed the most after comparing the different sections within the local authority, was the *obliging* CHS. In the agricultural company it was used to a much lesser extent ( $M = 2,31358$ ) than was the case in the local authority ( $M = 1,92457$ ).

The *integrating* style which had an  $M = 1,8411$  in the agricultural company and  $M = 1,9487$  in the local authority was used to the greatest extent. The *dominating* style was used the least in both organisations.

With regard to CHS between respondents and peers (figure 2) all styles had a variation in terms of frequency. Here also the *integrating* style was recorded as being used to the largest extent in both organisations with means of 1,8259 and 1,72867. The *dominating* style, as in the case of subordinate-superior was also used least in conflict situations in both organisations.

Conclusions that can also be drawn from the study are that in the local authority female respondents tend to use *avoiding* style more with their superiors. Older employees also tend to be more *compromising* than younger ones. Using this style involves give-and-take whereby both parties give up something to make a mutually acceptable decision (Rahim, 2002). In the agricultural company it was found that the younger employees were prone to make more use of the *obliging* style in a conflict situation with their superiors. However, when involved in conflict with their peers it was the opposite. Here younger persons were less *obliging* than the older employees. Older respondents tended to be more *dominating* toward their peers in the agricultural organisation. This was not the case in the local authority. It should be remembered that *dominating*, sometimes also referred to as *forcing* (Euwema, Van de Vliert & Bakker, 2003), considered to be the least effective CHS stimulates and escalates conflict, hinders conflict resolution, increase frustration and may result in more aggression and increase in future conflict (Meyer, 2004). Van de Vliert, Euwema & Huismans (1995) believe that the *dominating* style was less effective when used by supervisors (superiors) with their subordinates.

Qualifications also seem to play a definitive role in usage of specific conflict-handling styles. The higher the respondents were qualified and intellectually more advanced the less they were *obliging* toward their superiors in the local authority. This was not the case in the agricultural company. Where peers were in conflict statistical differences also revealed that respondents with higher qualifications also became less *obliging* in conflict situations in the local authority. In the agricultural company there was no difference recorded.

Considering the years of service it seemed that there was some form of correlation with age in the local authority. Respondents with long years of service and age were more *compromising* and *obliging* with their superiors. *Compromising* has an intermediate concern for self and others (Rahim, 2002) with respondents endeavouring to find a middle ground in a conflict situation between themselves and their superiors. Older respondents of the local authority were also more *obliging* toward peers in conflict-situations. In both cases, respondent to superior and respondent to peer it was recorded that Afrikaans-speaking respondents made more use of *obliging* CHS in conflict situations.

## CONCLUSION

As an initial exploration in the field of comparison of conflict-handling styles between a private and public sector organisation it is believed that the main objective of this study, namely to determine whether there exists a significant difference in the handling of interpersonal conflict, was achieved.

Limitations to the study were in the first instance, that the two participating organisations differ in the sense that the public sector-organization has already complied to a large extent with transformation and affirmative action programmes and the agricultural company not. The distribution of race, culture and language groups were not even. Limiting the study to only two institutions means that the findings can not be generalized. Due to the relative complexity of the questionnaire and the ability of all employees to complete it, the survey had to be restricted to job-levels that eliminated the lower ranks of the workforce. Studying the lower job-levels may prove different conflict handling styles being used by them in interpersonal conflict situations.

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