AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF THE STAGES OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES

M. Afzalur Rahim
Gabriel F. Buntzman
Western Kentucky University
Douglas White
Western Michigan University

This study explored the relationships of the stages of moral development [pre-conventional (i.e., low stage), conventionals (i.e., middle stage), and post-conventionals (i.e., high stage)] to the styles of handling interpersonal conflict [integrating (i.e., problem solving), obliging (i.e., accommodating), dominating (i.e., competing), avoiding, and compromising] in organizations. A field study with a collegiate sample of employed business students (N = 443) shows that the post-conventionals used more integrating and less dominating and avoiding styles than conventionals. The conventionals used more integrating and less dominating and avoiding styles than pre-conventionals. The conventionals used more compromising style than post-conventionals, but post-conventionals used more compromising style than pre-conventionals. There were no differences in obliging style across the three stages of moral development. Implications of the study for management, directions for future research, and limitations were discussed.

Continued academic and practitioner interest in ethical behavior in organizations is evidenced by the ongoing discourse in both practitioner and scholarly oriented publications (e.g., Brown, 1994; Nicholson & Robertson, 1996; Rigg, 1993; Schmidt, 1992). For example, Luthar, DiBattista, and Gautschi (1997) recently explored the issue of ethical climate in organizations while Anderson (1994) questioned whether engineers could remain competitive while simultaneously adhering to ethical engineering standards. The issue is more than academic as a growing body of literature indicates that unethical (and illegal) actions adversely affect measures of profitability. For example, Baucus and Baucus (1997) found lower financial performance to be associated with illegal firm behavior, and it persisted for many years after the conviction of the firms. According to Kotey and Meredith (1997) firms whose leaders have low regard for the values of honesty and truth are

lower performing than firms whose leaders highly value honesty and truth. These values, of course, are associated with ethical standards.

Both Kennedy and Lawton (1993) and Soutar, McNeil, and Molster (1994) cite a growing literature in the field, yet questions remain. How individuals make moral and ethical choices is a central issue in the study of morality and ethics in organizations. A dilemma, of course, is a condition in which there is no one choice which is clearly superior to the others, and a moral or ethical dilemma is one in which all the various alternatives to some degree violate one or more ethical standards. We have used ethics and morals and their derivatives interchangeably for reasons of style, recognizing that the two are closely related but not synonymous terms.

Because of the complexity of the situations decision makers confront as well as the fact that individuals must bring their own sets of values and priorities to bear on decisions, even highly ethical individuals may differ in their judgments, so that it is sometimes difficult to identify a "right" (ethical) choice (Forsyth, 1980; Beauchamp, 1988; Freeman & Gilbert, 1988; Anton, 1990). Perhaps because the moral dilemma is so central to ethical problems, scholars have been highly interested in the manner in which individuals reason through such problems. The process of moral reasoning has been explored in many contexts by scholars such as Kohlberg and Rest (Rest, 1986). More recently, studies have focused on the differences in moral reasoning and ethics in a cross-cultural framework (Abratt, Nel, & Higgs, 1992; Husted, Dozier, McMahon, & Kattan, 1996). Some research has found an association between moral development and moral behavior (French & Albright, 1998).

One area in which moral reasoning has been less thoroughly explored is conflict management. The issue is not simply academic, for it is estimated that up to 75% of managers report conflict related to ethics (Soutar et al., 1994) and the inappropriate application of some conflict management techniques may either exacerbate a conflict that already exists or create one where there had not been one before. Rahim, Garrett, and Buntzman (1992) proposed that positive results for organizations are associated with ethical rather than unethical applications of certain styles of handling conflict. A wealth of anecdotal evidence exists to suggest that, for example, dominating and avoiding approaches to managing conflict can lead to disastrous financial results and even tragic personal loss when the dominance and avoidance are motivated by less than ethical motives. The Challenger shuttle disaster in which engineers had concerns about the low temperature launch but did not press their concerns with senior managers and the Dow-Corning breast implant controversy in which managers at various levels apparently chose to avoid confronting possible problems with silicon implants are only two such cases (Jones, George, & Hill, 1998).

Recent research indicates that integrating or problem solving style of handling conflict, when paired with other styles, leads to more effective conflict management. Now, if the application of a particular conflict style can lead to high or low performance, antecedents of the use of styles should be studied with a goal of

strengthening antecedents that lead to high performance and other desired out-comes and minimizing antecedents that lead to low performance and other unde-sired outcomes. And if ethical standards are associated with high performance while lack of ethical standards are associated with low performance, then possible intervening variables through which those ethical standards are expressed surely are worthy of study.

If both higher levels of moral reasoning and more effective conflict manage-ment styles can be learned in formal teaching programs, the approaches may con-stitute a two-pronged strategy to encourage greater moral development and effec-tive conflict management. Therefore, the relationships between the two ought to be studied and the knowledge applied. Thus the purpose of this study was to add to the limited but growing literature with an investigation of the relationship between stages of moral development and styles of handling interpersonal conflict in orga-nizations.

This study used a survey research design to test the relationships of partici-pants' stages of moral development to the use of the styles of handling interper-sonal conflict in organizations. Measures of stages of moral development were taken using Rest's (1986) Defining Issues Test (DIT) and measures of conflict-handling styles were taken using the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory–II (Rahim, 1983). The primary statistical tool used was Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA).

Stages of Moral Development

Moral development concerns the manner in which individuals make judg-ments about right and wrong (Rest, 1986). Kohlberg's (1969) formulation is per-haps the best known of the contemporary theories, and is closely followed by Rest. The theory divides individuals on the basis of their moral development into six stages, two at the pre-conventional level, two at the conventional level, and two at the post-conventional level.

Pre-Conventional Level

At the pre-conventional stages of moral development the concepts of good and bad, right or wrong, are interpreted in terms of pleasure/pain consequences or physical power. Pre-conventionals are restrained from possible wrongdoing by their fear of the consequences. They may be spurred to other action by their expectations of pleasant consequences.

Conventional Level

At the conventional stages of moral development, conformity and meeting social expectations are important. "Good" behavior is behavior that pleases or helps others, and respect for authority and deference are important. For conventional individuals, decisions and actions are judged moral to the extent that they meet these standards.

Post-Conventional Level

Abstractions such as morality, utilitarianism, reciprocity, and justice comprise the ethical framework of individuals at the post-conventional level. Actions are judged according to the extent to which they are consistent with lofty ideals. In contrast to "conventionals," who revere social norms and laws, "post-convention-als" question and oppose norms and laws which seem to violate universal principles such as distributive justice and respect for life.

### Styles of Handling Interpersonal Conflict

A good deal of literature exists on the styles of handling interpersonal conflict (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Follett, 1940; Rahim, 1983, 1992; Rahim & Bonoma, 1979; Rahim & Psenicka, 1984; Psenicka & Rahim, 1989; Thomas, 1976, 1992). Decades ago Follett identified three main ways of dealing with conflict—domination, compromise, and integration—as well as several secondary ways including avoidance and suppression. Later, Blake and Mouton (1964) were the first to present a grid for classifying the modes for handling interpersonal conflicts into five types: forcing, withdrawal, smoothing, compromise, and confrontation. The five modes of handling conflict were classified along two dimensions related to the attitudes of the manager: concern for production and concern for people. Blake and Mouton's classification as reinterpreted and refined by Thomas (1976) considered the intentions of a party (cooperativeness and assertiveness) in classifying the modes of handling conflict into five types.

Rahim and Bonoma (1979) differentiated the styles of handling interpersonal conflict along two basic dimensions: concern for self and concern for others. The first dimension explains the degree (high or low) to which a person attempts to satisfy his or her own concerns. The second dimension explains the degree (high or low) to which a person wants to satisfy the concerns of others. These dimensions portray the motivational orientations of a given individual during conflict. Studies by Ruble and Thomas (1976) and Van de Vliert and Kabanoff (1990) support these dimensions. Combination of the two dimensions results in five specific styles of handling interpersonal conflict, such as integrating, obliging, dominating, and avoiding, and compromising (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979). Numerous studies in the U.S. and other countries have established the construct validity of these styles of handling interpersonal conflict in organizational and social contexts (Rahim & Magner, 1995; Ting-Toomey et al., 1991; Lee, 1990).

Pruitt (1983) suggested and provided some empirical evidence from laboratory studies that there are four styles of handling conflict: yielding (obliging), problem solving (integrating), inaction (avoiding), and contending (dominating). These styles were based on the dual-concern model suggested by scholars discussed before. His model does not recognize compromising as a distinct style. Pruitt (1983) and Pruitt and Carnevale (1992) provided evidence that problem solving (integrating) style is the best for managing conflict.

The present study uses the conceptualization and operationalization of the five styles of handling conflict by Rahim (1983) and Rahim and Bonoma (1979). The styles are shown in Figure 1 (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979, p. 1327).

Figure 1

**A Two-Dimensional Model of the Styles
Of Handling Interpersonal Conflict**
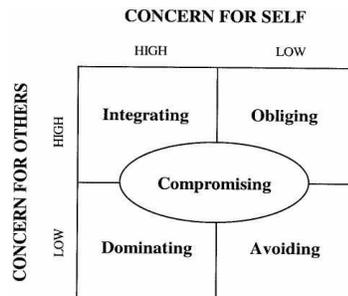
Integrating

This style involves high concern for self as well as the other party involved in conflict. It is concerned with collaboration between parties (i.e., openness, exchange of information, and examination of differences) to reach a solution acceptable to both parties.

Obliging

This style involves low concern for self and high concern for the other party involved in conflict. An obliging person attempts to play down the differences and emphasizes commonalties to satisfy the concerns of the other party.

Dominating

This style involves high concern for self and low concern for the other party involved in conflict. It has been identified with a win–lose orientation or with forcing behavior to win one's position.

Avoiding

This is associated with low concern for self as well as for the other party involved in conflict. It has been associated with withdrawal, passing-the-buck, sidestepping, or "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" tactics.

Compromising

This style involves moderate concern for self as well as the other party involved in conflict. It is associated with give-and-take or sharing whereby both parties give up something to make a mutually acceptable decision.

Although under-researched, both common sense and a growing body of research suggest that ethics and conflict management are important and related elements in the effective management of organizations. Rahim et al. (1992) argued that there is an ethical component to one's choice of a particular style of handling conflict as explained below. A set of hypotheses is developed based on our analysis of the theoretical relationship between moral development and interpersonal conflict handling styles.

Moral Development and Styles of Handling Conflict

Rahim et al. (1992) proposed that each of the above five styles of handling conflict may be ethically appropriate depending upon certain situational character-istics. Four of the five may be ethically inappropriate under certain conditions and only the integrating style is thought to be appropriate in all circumstances in which a win–win solution is at least a possibility. Although each conflict-handling style may be ethically appropriate in some circumstances (Rahim et al., 1992), each requires a different approach to the conflict.

According to Graham (1998), integration is always superior to compromise in managing disputes. A compromise by definition fails to give either party all that it wanted—thus it is inferior to an integrative (win–win) solution. In a study of communication, French and Albright (1998), following Habermas (1990), hypoth-esized a positive relationship between moral development and discursive (integrating) communication. They reasoned that persons at higher stages of moral development are more interested in upholding principles than in merely winning for themselves at another's expense. The integrating style "treats all participants with maximum respect" (Rahim et al., 1992) and seeks to accommodate all points of view without compromising. Although individuals at the post-conventional (principled) level of moral development (Stages 5 and 6) may prefer another style of conflict handling under certain circumstances, it is expected that they will more frequently use the integrating style than participants at lower stages of moral development since such persons will have in mind principles such as equity and distributive justice as well as their own best interests. As an example of integrating, Graham (1998) cites an instance from her experience in retailing. She wanted to list a product line more prominently in a store's directory. Her superior refused because store policy required that departments be listed alphabetically. Graham hit

upon the idea of relabelling the line with a word beginning with the letter "A." Her superior agreed and the directory was revised to their joint satisfaction. Of course we do not know Graham's stage of moral development but would expect it to be higher than lower stage. This is based on our first hypothesis, which is concerned with moral development and the use of integrating style.

> *Hypothesis 1:* Greater use of the integrating style is associated with higher levels of moral development.

While the obliging style may be appropriate under some circumstances, its use is inappropriate if the result is a decision which goes against the interests of the person or organization (Rahim et al., 1992). Like integrating style, obliging style treats the other parties involved in conflict with maximum respect, but this could be to the detriment of oneself or the organization. Nevertheless, it is expected that the obliging style will be more frequently preferred by participants at the post-conventional level compared to the other stages of moral development, although perhaps not as marked a difference will be found as for the integrating style. Therefore our next hypothesis is the following.

> *Hypothesis 2:* Greater use of the obliging style is associated with higher levels of moral development.

Since the dominating style is characterized by an individual's high concern for self and low concern for the other party, its use is generally unethical because it ignores the needs of others. While ignoring the needs of others and looking only to one's own needs is *not necessarily* unethical (for example if all are operating on the basis of self-interest and have comparable power) it is more likely to be unethical. But when the power relationship is asymmetrical, a more powerful party may impose its will regardless of what is right (Kennedy & Lawton, 1993). Regardless of the power balance, it has been argued that dominating-style behaviors such as intimidation, the use of power or force are associated with persons at lower stages of moral development (Habermas, 1990). Dominating may resolve a matter sooner rather than later but is more likely to be a one-sided, shortsighted, and short-lived solution. As may be inferred from the arguments of Rahim et al. (1992), higher moral reasoners should prefer fairness (justice) over expediency except in relatively dire circumstances. In general, it is expected that participants at higher stages of moral development would prefer the dominating style less frequently than participants at lower stages of moral development because it creates winners and losers, sometimes unnecessarily.

> *Hypothesis 3:* Greater use of the dominating style is inversely associated with higher levels of moral development.

Data from a national sample indicate that managers use avoiding style less frequently than others (Rahim, 1983). Since the avoiding style, which is characterized by low concern for self and for others, solves no problems and only serves to frustrate at least one party, it is ethically defensible only if other matters have greater moral importance at that time (Rahim et al., 1992). In theory the avoiding

style would not be frequently preferred by those high in moral development because it serves to prolong an unsatisfactory situation, exacting a penalty on at least one of the disputants. While an individual operating at the pre-conventional level might be willing to adopt this strategy, an individual operating at the post-conventional level presumably would not, unless there were no good alternative. It is expected that the avoiding style would be most frequently preferred by those at the lowest stages of moral development.

Hypothesis 4: Greater use of the avoiding style is inversely associated with higher levels of moral development.

Compromising style, which is characterized by moderate concern for self and for others, is sometimes ethically appropriate. For example, one who is right but happens to be the weaker party to a conflict may have little choice (Kennedy & Lawton, 1993; Rahim et al., 1992). Ideally, disputants would eschew compromise in favor of integration (Graham, 1998). However, an integrative solution cannot always be found. It is expected that compromising style would be most frequently preferred by those at the higher stages of moral development, whereas those at lower stages show less concern for others and therefore are less concerned about satisfying them through a compromise.

Hypothesis 5: Greater use of the compromising style is positively associated with higher levels of moral development.

As things stand, this theorizing about the relationship between moral development and conflict styles has very little to do with concern for self. According to the five hypotheses taken together, people at higher stages of moral development generally use styles which are characterized by moderate or high concern for the other parties involved in conflict (i.e., compromising, obliging, and integrating styles), while people at lower stages of moral development generally use styles which involve low concern for other parties involved in conflict (i.e., dominating and avoiding styles).

Method

The study described here involved the administration of two well known instruments approximately two weeks apart in an attempt to control for common method variance. We first administered the Defining Issues Test (DIT) followed by the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory–II (ROCI–II), Forms A, B, and C.

Sample

The sample consisted of 443 employed undergraduate business administration majors enrolled in junior and senior level management courses at a southern university in the US. About 48% of the participants were female. The mean reported age for the female and male participants were 23.76 and 23.43, respectively. The participants received extra credit for participating in the study. Participants were not told what hypotheses were being investigated but were told that

there were no right or wrong responses to the questionnaire items, only opinions. (They were debriefed later.)

Measurement

Stages of Moral Development. Rest's (1986) Defining Issues Test (DIT) was used to assess moral development. Since the Kohlberg instrument has limitations which make it difficult to administer and interpret, Rest devised the now widely used measure. The instrument has excellent psychometric properties including high validity and reliabilities in the .80s. The DIT scores have shown expected relationships with measures of cognitive variables and behaviors. For example DIT correlates inversely with compliance with group norms and the propensity to cheat; it correlates positively with participants' going to the aid of someone in need, and preference for inductive reasoning rather than corporal punishment as a disciplinary technique with children. Furthermore, lower stage participants prefer a power-based approach to discipline. Higher DIT scores also correlate with positive attitudes toward others; and non-delinquent juveniles scored higher on the DIT than anti-social pre-delinquent participants matched by such factors as age, intelligence, and race. The instrument has been used in a great many published studies with populations ranging from children to adults in all walks of life (Rest, 1986). There is also some evidence of observed moral behaviors correlating with Kohlberg's measure, on which the DIT is of course based (French & Albright, 1998).

The instrument uses six scenarios which are read by participants who then answer a series of questions which are computer scored to yield a single p–score measure of moral development. Scores can theoretically range from 0 to 95. An example of a scenario which is used in the Rest (1993) instrument is as follows:

> **Heinz and the Drug.** In Europe a woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost to make. He paid $200 for the radium but charged $2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about $1,000, which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying, and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later, but the druggist said, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So Heinz got desperate and began to think about breaking into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife. (Appendix, p. 3)

The scenario is followed by twelve questions such as: Is Heinz willing to risk getting shot as a burglar or going to jail for the chance that the drug might help? The subject is asked to determine the four most important statements from among twelve statements and rank them from one to four. Since each statement represents

a particular stage of moral reasoning, this determination is used to compute a p–score for the subject.

According to Rest, all participants fall into three basic categories of moral development: pre-conventional (p–score up to 27), conventional (p–score 28–41), and post-conventional (42 and up). Post-conventional is the highest level, and persons at this level demonstrate p–scores in the forties and above. The distribution of scores in samples may be expected to vary from one to the other—scores for business students are often lower than those of some other student populations (Rest & Narvaez, 1994). Consistent with the practice in other studies using the DIT, we trichotomized our sample; our cuts were based on the distribution of scores in our sample.

Styles of Handling Conflict. The styles of handling interpersonal Conflict were measured with Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory–II (ROCI–II) (Rahim, 1983). The ROCI–II has been widely used since its development and has been continually found to provide a reliable and valid measure of the styles of handling interpersonal conflict (White, 1995). Typical scale reliabilities (retest and Cronbach a) are in the .70s and .80s. Rahim and Magner (1995) used LISREL 7 in five samples to provide domestic and cross-cultural evidence for the convergent and discriminant validities and factor invariance of the five subscales of the instrument. It has three forms: Form A for how one handles conflict with superiors, Form B for how one handles conflict with subordinates, and Form C for how one handles conflict with peers. Each respondent was asked to complete the three forms, but some of them could not be used due to incomplete information. Four hundred and forty-three employed students completed 1,156 forms (Form A = 389, Form B = 379, Form C = 388).

Minimizing Common Method Variance. In order to minimize the possibility of common method variance, two weeks were allowed to elapse between the collection of data on the DIT and ROCI–II. The students also responded to these two instruments in different contexts and for different apparent purposes, making it unlikely that they would think of them as connected.

Analysis

A Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) was computed with referent role (Superior = 1, Peer = 2, Subordinate = 3), chronological age, and gender (Male = 1, Female = 0) as covariates; the three stages of moral development (pre-conventionals, conventionals, and post-conventionals) as the independent variable; and the five styles of handling conflict as dependent variables. This procedure would determine whether the stages of moral development can be used to predict the use of the five styles for handling conflict after controlling the effects of the three extraneous variables. We also compared the five styles of handling conflict among the three stages of moral development with three Multiple Discriminant Analysis (MDA), one for each of the Forms A, B, and C, and Scheffé test.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Cronbach as for the five styles of handling conflict, which ranged between .67 and .83, were satisfactory.

The results show that the multivariate test with Pillais criterion was significant [F (15, 3444) = 16.27, $p < .001$]. This indicated that there were significant relationships of the covariates and independent variables to dependent variables. The F–ratios in Table 1 show that the stages of moral development had significant effects on integrating, dominating, avoiding, and compromising styles, but not on obliging style.

Table 1
MANCOVA With Referent Role, Age, and Gender as Covariates,
Stages of Moral Development as Independent Variable, and
Fives Styles of Handling Conflict as Dependent Variables

Source	INT	OBL	DOM	AVO	COM
Covariates (b)					
Referent Role	.08**	–.33***	.11***	–.14***	.12***
Age	.02	–.08**	–.09**	–.07**	–.06*
Gender	.05	–.002	–.08**	.03	.13***
Main Effect (*F*–ratio)					
Moral	16.15***	.11	3.16*	3.73*	11.41***

Note: INT = Integrating, OBL = Obliging, DOM = Dominating, AVO = Avoiding, COM = Compromising; Referent Role: Superior = 1, Peer = 2, Subordinate = 3; Gender: Male = 1, Female = 0. The *DF*s were 1, 1145 and 2, 1145 for the covariates and main effect, respectively. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The MDAs showed similar results, i.e., four of the five conflict styles (integrating, dominating, avoiding, and compromising) could significantly discriminate among the three stages of moral development. For each of the three Forms, A ($n = 389$), B ($n = 379$, and C ($n = 388$), integrating and compromising styles were associated with higher stages of moral development, and dominating and avoiding styles were associated with lower stages of moral development. The hit ratios for these analyses were 42%, 47%, and 44% for Forms A, B, and C, respectively.

Table 2 shows the number of respondents in each stage of moral development, Cronbach a for each style, and adjusted means for the five styles of handling conflict classified by the three stages of moral development.

The comparison of the five styles across the three stages with Scheffé test provided full support for Hypotheses 1, 3, and 4, partial support for Hypothesis 5, but no support Hypothesis 2.

Table 2
Cronbach a, Number of Participants, and Adjusted Means of
Conflict Styles Classified by Stages of Moral Development

Stages	n	IN $\alpha = .83$	OB $\alpha = .75$	DO $\alpha = .79$	AV $\alpha = .81$	CO $\alpha = .67$
Pre-Conventionals	269	4.07[a]	3.54[a]	3.29[c]	3.18[c]	3.75[a]
Conventionals	132	4.22[b]	3.56[a]	3.21[b]	3.09[b]	3.90[c]
Post-Conventionals	42	4.24[c]	3.54[a]	3.13[a]	3.02[a]	3.82[b]

Note: IN = Integrating, OB = Obliging, DO = Dominating, AV = Avoiding, CO = Compromising. The ROCI–II uses a 5–point Likert scale to measure each style. The score for each style is computed by averaging responses to its items. A higher score indicates a greater use of a conflict style. Four hundred thirty-three students completed 1,156 forms (Form A = 389, Form B = 379, Form C = 388). Means with different subscripts are significantly different at $p < .05$.

1. Table 2 shows that the mean for integrating style was higher for post-conventionals than conventionals and the mean for the latter group was higher than for pre-conventionals. The results provide full support for Hypothesis 1, which states that participants in higher stages of moral development will use more integrating style than those at lower stages of moral development.

2. Table 2 shows that obliging style did not differ across the three stages of moral development. Therefore, the results found no support for Hypothesis 2.

3. Table 2 shows that the means for dominating style differed across the three stages. The pre-conventionals had the highest mean, followed by conventionals and post-conventionals. This provided full support for Hypothesis 3, which suggests that greater use of the dominating style is inversely associated with higher levels of moral development.

4. Table 2 shows that the mean for avoiding style for pre-conventionals was greater than for conventionals, and the mean for the conventionals was higher than for post-conventionals. This provided full support for Hypothesis 4, which indicates that the avoiding style is inversely associated with higher levels of moral development.

5. Table 2 shows that conventionals use more compromising style than the post-conventionals, and post-conventionals use more compromising style than pre-

conventionals. This provided partial support for Hypothesis 5, which suggests that greater use of the compromising style is positively associated with higher levels of moral development.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationships between moral development and styles of handling conflict. While some theoretical research provides the basis for our hypotheses, one empirical study in particular appeared to contradict our findings. The French and Albright (1998) study failed to find an association between the DIT and actual communications patterns. However, the study used a relatively small sample of 30 dyads and relied on coders to interpret communications as either discursive (integrative), strategic (dominating), or ordinary. The study also relied upon simple frequency analysis of sequences of communications in reaching its conclusion. Frequency analysis is not particularly powerful compared to, say, analysis of variance. Thus their lack of significant results may be an artifact of the study.

In contrast to the non-significant results of French and Albright's work, Tsui (1996) found that accountants who function at a higher level of moral reasoning were less likely to accede to clients' improper requests in an audit. In other words, moral development and obliging behaviors appear to be inversely correlated. This is contrary to our hypothesis and findings. There is, however, an important distinction. In the Tsui study, the accountants were asked to commit an unethical act. It is understandable that in that context moral development and obliging behavior were negatively correlated.

To briefly recapitulate our findings, the relationships of the stages of moral development to the styles of handling conflict with superior, subordinates, and peers were as follows:

1. The highest stage of moral development is associated with the use of integrating style of handling interpersonal conflict.

2. A moderate stage of moral development is associated with the use of compromising style of handling interpersonal conflict.

3. A low stage of moral development is associated with the use of dominating and avoiding styles of handling interpersonal conflict.

Implications for Management

Our findings have important implications for understanding and managing interpersonal conflict in organizations inasmuch as moral development and use of the styles of handling conflict are significantly associated.

Since conflict in organizations is inevitable, it is critical that it be handled as effectively as possible. The integrating style is widely considered to be the generally most effective approach to conflict management, and according to this study it is associated with higher levels of moral development. For that reason alone, the results of this study should be of interest to professional managers and theoreti-

cians alike. Should we try to select persons at higher stages of moral development, or provide moral training those already in our organizations in the hope that the integrating style will be more frequently used?

With subordinates especially, who have less position power than their bosses, and all of the concern today about accommodating the needs of a diverse work force, avoiding sexual harassment and finding optimal solutions to organizational problems through teamwork, it would seem very important to minimize the use of dominating and avoiding approaches to conflict management. To the extent that persons at lower stages of moral development are prone to use the dominating style and some of them are in positions of power over others, employees and managers in organizations have every reason to be concerned about the types of moral reasoning used at work.

Since there is some research to indicate that (1) moral judgment may be developed through educational interventions (Penn & Collier, 1985; Rest & Thomas, 1986), and (2) behaviors are at least modestly correlated with moral judgment (French & Albright, 1998; Rest & Thomas, 1986), interventions to develop the moral judgment in individuals with lower moral development may be warranted. Training in conflict management techniques which emphasize the usefulness of the integrating style as compared with other styles could even help individuals at the higher stages of moral development to use this style more frequently. Since the integrating style is a win–win approach, outcomes should be more satisfactory for both the organization and individuals after such training (Graham, 1998). Trevino and Victor (1992) suggest that the establishment of strong role norms and appropriate reward systems can help to influence appropriate in-role behavior.

Directions for Future Research

We believe that this stream of research should be extended to the field to assess the generalizability of these results. This study focused on the locus of conflict style and moral development rather than the specific issues conflict was about (market share, budgets, and so on). The manner in which moral development and conflict over specific issues are related to performance should be investigated.

Furthermore, our results suggest a hierarchy of preferred conflict style based on stages of moral development. Beyond the relationships that we hypothesized, it may be appropriate to investigate a linear relationship of stage of moral development and preferred conflict-handling style.

Field experiments will be particularly useful in assessing the effectiveness of moral development training on conflict styles. These experiments would be also useful in assessing the impact of conflict management and/or moral development interventions on individual and organizational effectiveness.

Limitations

The results of the MANCOVA and Scheffé tests were statistically significant, but one may argue that the large sample influenced the results. The three multiple

discriminant analyses, each computed with about one-third of the total sample, showed consistently the same results.

The nature of participants may limit the generalizability of our findings, but others argue for the value of studies with collegiate samples in many situations (Locke, 1986). According to Elm and Nichols (1993) younger and less experienced managers reasoned at higher levels than older, more experienced managers. On the other hand, Rest (1986) reports a positive association between age and moral development. Finally, the DIT does not specifically address moral reasoning in business situations, and it is possible that in a business context the relationship we found might not hold. However, Porcello and Long (1994) reported that supervisors and managers would use the same conflict-handling styles for both ethical and interpersonal conflicts. Clearly, caution in generalizing to other situations is called for. We believe that this study is a useful extension of previous research.

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Biographical Note

M. Afzalur Rahim
212 Grise Hall
Department Mnagement and Information Systems
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, KY 42101
Phone/Fax: 270–745–2499/782–2061
Email: mgt2000@aol.com

Dr. Rahim is a Professor of Management at Western Kentucky University. He is the Founding Editor of the *International Journal of Organizational Analysis* and *International Journal of Conflict Management*. He is the founder of the International Association for Conflict Management and International Conference on Advances in Management. Dr. Rahim is

the author/co-author of 17 books and 135 articles, book chapters, case studies, and research instruments. His articles have been published in *Academy of Management Journal, Human Relations, International Executive, International Journal of Organizational Analysis, Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Business Ethics, Journal of Health and Human Services Administration, Journal of Management, Journal of Small Business Management, Journal of Social Psychology, Management International Review, Multivariate Behavioral Research,* and *Perceptual and Motor Skills.* His current research interests are in the areas of emotional intelligence, organizational learning, conflict management, organizational justice, and leader power.

Gabriel F. Buntzman (Ph.D., University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) is an Associate Professor of Management at Western Kentucky University. Some of his research on ethics and conflict were published in the journals, such as *Journal Business Ethics* and the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Dr. Buntzman's perspective on organiztional conflict and ethics is shaped in part by his years as a consultant and director of entrepreneurial organizations doing business with Proctor and Gamble, the New York City Economic Development Corporation, and the Springfield (MA) Redevelopment Authority.

Doug White is Assistant Professor of Information Systems at the University of Northern Colorado. He has previously has been employed by the Federal Reserve System and Oak Ridge National Laboratory. His research interests include international information systems, the year 2000 problem, discrete event simulation, and user behavior. He has published in *Simulation and Gaming, Journal of Social Behavior and Personality,* and *IEEE Simulation Digest.*

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