Conflict behaviors and their relationship to popularity. (Statistical Data Included)

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This study examined conflict behaviors (self, other) among 127 Turkish college students. Differences in five conflict behaviors (forcing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating) were then explored in relation to popularity and unpopularity. Results indicated that the students engaged in more avoiding and compromising behaviors, while perceiving more forcing behavior in others. Further, the unpopular group was found to engage in more compromising behavior, and perceived more forcing behavior in others, as compared with the popular group. Constructive and destructive conflict strategies, and their implications for popularity, are discussed.


Conflict is an inescapable feature of every human relationship and can lead to constructive as well as destructive outcomes (Deutsch, 1994). Conflict, when managed constructively, is a necessary and positive condition for the development and growth of children and adolescents, since it may help them move into deeper, more meaningful relationships with others (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). When managed destructively, however, there are numerous negative outcomes, such as detachment from school and lower grades (Berndt & Keefe, 1992), lower self-concept (Mild, 1990), undermined self-esteem and self-confidence (Opotow, 1991), and low agreeableness (Graziano, Jensen-Campbell, & Hair, 1996). These negative outcomes may lead to social isolation, loss of status among peers, and psychological maladjustment (Johnson & Johnson, 1996).

Conflict as a relationship variable has generally been defined as a state of incompatible behaviors (Deutsch, 1994). Two dimensions pertinent to conflict management--concern for self and concern for other, each of which can range from low to high--have been articulated by many theorists (Blake & Mouton, 1964; Deutsch, 1994; Johnson & Johnson, 1987; Thomas, 1976). Based on these dimensions, five conflict behaviors have been identified: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating (Thomas, 1976; Johnson & Johnson, 1987). Competing is associated with high concern for self and low concern for other; collaborating with high concern for self and other; compromising with intermediate concern for self and other; avoiding with low concern for self and other; and accommodating with low concern for self and high concern for other (Deutsch, 1994). Competing forces one's viewpoint at the expense of others'; collaborating seeks effective problem-solving activities, so that all parties can achieve a mutually satisfying conclusion to the dispute; compromising searches for a middle-ground solution; avoiding involves withdrawal from conflict situations; and accommodating entails sacrificing one's own needs for the sake of another (Thomas, 1976). The constructive and destructive courses of conflict largely depend on which of these conflict behaviors is used.
Although conflict behaviors have been extensively studied from different vantage points, two issues are the focus of the present study. One is to examine the individual's self-reported conflict behaviors along with the opponent's behaviors as perceived by the individual. The other issue is to understand the role of the individual's sociometric status in the perception of these behaviors in self and other.

Conflict scholars (Deutsch, 1994; Thomas, 1976) have emphasized that, during conflict, each party's behavior is a reaction to the other's behavior. Stated differently, a party's behavior may change along with his/her perception of the other's behavior. In an early study, Thomas and Walton (1971) found that managers reported using tactics similar to those they saw the other party using. Cooperation tended to be compatible with cooperation, competition was inclined to be compatible with competition, and each was liable to be incompatible with the other. On the other hand, Thomas and Pondy (1977) have drawn attention to attributions, which play a crucial mediating role in shaping each party's reactions to the other's behaviors. They found that individuals tend to see themselves as cooperative but others as competitive.

Issues related to compatibility and incompatibility of conflict behaviors have received less attention in the literature on adolescent conflict. However, understanding the compatibility or incompatibility of conflict behaviors is important, since an individual's choice of conflict behavior will affect whether a conflict will take a constructive or destructive course. Examination of the characteristics of constructive and destructive conflicts (Deutsch, 1994; Thomas, 1976) has suggested that constructive conflict is characterized by perceived similarity in beliefs and attitudes, openness in communication, and trust and friendliness. Destructive conflict, on the other hand, is characterized by a lack of awareness of similarities in beliefs and attitudes, poor communication, the use of coercive tactics, decreased trust, and increased hostility between parties. Theory (Berscheid & Walster, 1978; Deutsch, 1994; Johnson & Johnson, 1994) and research (Steinberg & Soriano, 1984) have suggested that similarities in beliefs, attitudes, and values are usually conducive to reduced conflict, whereas discrepancies in beliefs, attitudes, and values seem to lead to increased conflict. In addition, Thomas (1976) discussed the role of likes and dislikes in the escalation! de-escalation of dyadic conflict.

Based on these findings, understanding the role of interpersonal attraction (via similarity/dissimilarity) in conflict behaviors may be promising. Boardman and Horowitz (1994) identified attraction as a factor that may influence conflict outcome. However, little is known about whether various conflict behaviors are associated with attraction in the realm of interpersonal relationships.

The proposition that "people tend to like those who have similar attitudes and dislike those who hold dissimilar ones" seems to be widely accepted in the attraction literature (Byrne, 1971). Based on this proposition, it can further be assumed that the more a person likes someone, the more eagerly he/she will associate with that person. Such a preference may affect his/her sociometric choices, which are regarded as one of the most common ways of measuring attraction (Berscheid & Walster, 1978). If the conflict is accepted as the critical incident in the establishment and maintenance of an interpersonal relationship,
then individuals' self-reported conflict behaviors as well as how they perceive those behaviors in others may be related to being chosen as an attractive person by others. Besides, the tendency to see themselves as cooperative while viewing others as competitive may also change as a result of individuals' social standing within the group.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine differences between conflict behaviors (self, other) in Turkish college students. Differences in these behaviors were then explored in relation to popularity.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 127 students (78 females, 49 males) enrolled in three classes at Middle East Technical University in Ankara, Turkey, volunteered to participate in the study. The mean age of the students was 20.5, with a standard deviation of 1.51.

Instrumentation

A two-page questionnaire was developed for this study. On the first page, students were asked to name five classmates they like to be with and five classmates that they do not like to be with. In calculating the sociometric scores of each student, the following procedure was used. Each positive nomination a student received was scored: +5 for first, +4 for second, +3 for third, +2 for fourth, and +1 for fifth. Negative nominations were scored in reverse. A sociometric score for each student was calculated by summing the positive and negative nominations separately, and then subtracting the total negative score from the total positive score. These scores were transformed into z scores and the students who had popularity scores below -1 were classified as unpopular, and those who had popularity scores above +1 were classified as popular. Students who had scores near 0 were excluded from the analysis (n = 22).

On the second page, the names of the students in the class were listed. At the top of the page, the five conflict behaviors were noted separately for self and other (competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating). In the instruction section, the definitions of these conflict behaviors (Thomas, 1976) were provided. These behaviors have been described as representing basic modes of interaction in many conflict situations (e.g., Baron, 1985; Tezer, 1996, 1999). Students were asked to indicate which one of the five best describes the conflict behaviors of self and other for each student in the class list. Scores were calculated for the five conflict behaviors for each student by dividing the number of times each behavior was indicated by the total number of opponents. The possible score for each behavior ranged from 0 to 1.

Procedure
The questionnaire was administered to the students in the classroom setting. The purpose of the study was explained, and students were asked to answer the questions individually. Anonymity was guaranteed.

Statistical Analyses

Nonparametric statistical techniques were used because of the ordinal data. Analysis of variance (Friedman test) was carried out to explore the differences in each set of five conflict behaviors.

Because of the possible relatedness of the two sets of conflict behaviors (both were assessed by the same participant), Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-rank tests were employed when comparing the differences between the means of each conflict behavior.

Before establishing the popular and unpopular groups, the sociometric scores of the students in the three different classes were tested using ANOVA in order to determine the comparability of scores. The differences between popular and unpopular groups for each conflict behavior were then calculated using the Mann-Whitney U test.

SPSS/PC+ (Norusis, 1991) was used to analyze the data.

FINDINGS

Means and standard deviations of the five conflict behaviors (self, other) are presented in Table 1. The means of the five conflict behaviors (self) ranged from 0.0 (SD = 0.16) for collaborating to 0.3 (SD = 0.39) for avoiding. For the conflict behaviors perceived in others, the lowest means were 0.0 for both accommodating (SD = 0.13) and collaborating (SD = 0.12), whereas the highest mean was 0.3 for forcing (SD = 0.39). ANOVA revealed that these two sets of behaviors were significantly different, [chi square](4) = 25.81, p = .000, for self, and [chi square](4) = 35.01, p = .000, for other. Results of the Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-rank test indicated significant differences between means (self and other) for forcing (Z = -4.26, p = .000), avoiding (Z = -2.24, p = .025), and compromising (Z = -2.34, p = .019). No significant differences were found for accommodating and collaborating. These results indicate that students engaged in less forcing but more...
avoiding and compromising behaviors as compared to the same behaviors perceived in others.

No significant difference was found among the three classes in terms of students' sociometric scores, F(2, 102) = 0.86, p = .43. Based on this finding, the sociometric scores of all students were combined and then transformed into z scores.

Means and standard deviations of the five conflict behaviors (self, other) for the popular and unpopular groups are presented in Table 2. The results of the Mann-Whitney U test, comparing the popular and unpopular groups on each of the conflict behaviors (self, other), revealed significant differences in compromising behavior for self (Z = 2.50, p = .01) and forcing behavior for other (Z = 2.95, p = .00). These results indicate that, in conflict situations, unpopular students engaged in more compromising behavior but perceived more forcing behavior in others than did popular students.

DISCUSSION

For the total sample, it was found that students' indication of conflict behaviors for themselves and others varied significantly within each set of behaviors. They engaged in avoiding behavior more frequently and collaborating less frequently. As for the behaviors students perceived in others, forcing was most frequent and accommodating and collaborating least frequent.

The frequent use of avoiding and forcing behaviors found in the present study is consistent with previous research. Peterson and Peterson (1990) found that, in conflict situations, both students and teachers either avoided conflict or confronted the other person. Avoidance was used twice as often as confrontation. The results of other studies have generally suggested that students of all ages resolve conflicts by avoiding, forcing, or accommodating, and, to a lesser extent, by compromising (see Laursen & Collins, 1994, for a review).

In the present study, the comparisons made between the two sets of conflict behaviors (self; other) indicated that students perceived significantly more forcing behavior in others than they did in themselves. On the other hand, they engaged in more avoiding and compromising than they perceived in others. These findings are supported by both theory (Deutsch, 1994; Thomas, 1976) and research (Thomas & Pondy, 1977), which have indicated that, in conflict situations, individuals perceive more destructive strategies in others.

Comparison of the popular and unpopular groups supported this trend. The unpopular group engaged in more compromising behavior, while perceiving more forcing behavior in others. These differences are noteworthy, particularly when the characteristics of these two behaviors are considered. Compromising means searching for a middle-ground solution, whereas forcing is characterized by the use of coercive tactics. Compromising indicates that one gives a little and expects the other to do the same. On the other hand, forcing behavior is an attempt to reach personal goals without taking the other person's
concerns into account. Considering the reciprocal nature of conflict behaviors (Deutsch, 1994), it might further be argued that the perception of forcing behavior in others is an indicator of destructive conflicts in the unpopular group. Although conclusions about the relationship between destructive conflict strategies and popularity should be made with caution, the findings here seem to indicate that in the unpopular group, either lack of constructive conflict resolution skills or being unpopular increases the perception of destructive strategies. However, the impact of destructive conflict resolution strategies on long-term functioning is clear in the literature. For example, Berndt and Keefe (1992) indicated that increases in conflict between friends predict detachment from school.

In a story-based study (Tezer, 1999), forcing was evaluated as the least preferred conflict behavior in potential friends, and those who engaged in compromising were rated as most successful both in accomplishing goals and in establishing interpersonal relationships. The findings of the present study seem to suggest that in the unpopular group, although compromising might be considered as an attempt to establish a relationship, the perception of forcing behavior in others might jeopardize the potential for establishing friendships. In both groups, however, students need training in conflict resolution skills, since perceiving constructive behaviors only in themselves can lead to continuing conflict in their relationships.

| Table 2 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Means and Standard Deviations of Conflict Behaviors (Self, Other) and the Results of Mann-Whitney U Tests Comparing Popular and Unpopular Groups |
| Conflict Behaviors | Unpopular (n = 37) | Popular (n = 68) |
| | M | SD | M | SD | Z | p |
| Forcing | 0.1 | 0.32 | 0.1 | 0.23 | 0.61 | ns |
| Avoiding | 0.3 | 0.39 | 0.3 | 0.40 | 0.00 | ns |
| Self Accommodating | 0.1 | 0.21 | 0.1 | 0.19 | 0.58 | ns |
| Compromising | 0.3 | 0.38 | 0.2 | 0.31 | 2.50 | .01 |
| Collaborating | 0.1 | 0.15 | 0.0 | 0.18 | 0.33 | ns |
| Other Forcing | 0.5 | 0.40 | 0.3 | 0.38 | 2.95 | .00 |
| Avoiding | 0.2 | 0.30 | 0.2 | 0.36 | 0.48 | ns |
| Accommodating | 0.0 | 0.03 | 0.1 | 0.17 | 1.68 | ns |
| Compromising | 0.1 | 0.28 | 0.1 | 0.31 | 0.42 | ns |
| Collaborating | 0.1 | 0.20 | 0.0 | 0.09 | 0.13 | ns |

In sum, understanding the nature of constructive and destructive conflict resolution strategies and their relationship to popularity is important for educators, counselors, and other mental health professionals. The ability to manage conflicts constructively is an essential aspect of psychosocial health and adjustment (Hinde, 1979). Johnson and Norem-Hebeisen (1977) noted that destructive conflict leads to social isolation which is associated with behavioral maladjustment. Deutsch (1992) and Zhang (1994) indicated that students who improved their ability to manage conflicts experienced increased social support, which led to an increase in self-esteem and a decrease in anxiety and depression, as well as more frequent feelings of well-being. Findings of the present study
seem to provide indirect support for these studies by revealing the relationship between conflict behaviors and popularity.

This study had a few limitations. Since it involved university students, the findings may be generalizable only to this population. Further, the self-report data may not reflect students' and classmates' actual behavior. In addition, sociometric groupings were limited to popular and unpopular students because of the small number who received scores near 0 (the neglected group). Future studies need to investigate the pattern of behavior in mutually rejected, neglected, and popular groups, as well as any role gender may play.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations of Conflict Behaviors (Self, Other) and the Results of Wilcoxon Matched-Pairs Signed-Rank Test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict Behaviors</th>
<th>Self (N = 127)</th>
<th>Other (N =127)</th>
<th>Z</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forcing</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accommodating</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromising</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborating</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.0</td>
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</table>

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Conflict Behaviors (Self, Other) and the Results of Mann-Whitney U Tests Comparing Popular and Unpopular Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conflict Behaviors</th>
<th>Unpopular (n = 37)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborating</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.0</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.40</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.38</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Avoiding              0.2     0.30      0.2       0.36      0.48
Accommodating         0.0     0.03      0.1       0.17      1.68
Compromising          0.1     0.28      0.1       0.31      0.42
Collaborating         0.1     0.20      0.0       0.09      0.13

Conflict Behaviors  p
Self
Forcing               ns
Avoiding              ns
Accommodating         ns
Compromising          .01
Collaborating         ns
Other
Forcing               .00
Avoiding              ns
Accommodating         ns
Compromising          ns
Collaborating         ns

REFERENCES


Thomas, K. W., & Walton, R. E. (1971). Conflict handling behavior in interdepartment relations (Research Paper No. 38). Division of Research, Graduate School of Management, UCLA.


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