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## The relationship between individual characteristics and conflict handling styles – the case of Croatia

### Abstract

The objective of the paper, except determining the dominant conflict handling style in Croatian organizational setting, was to explore individual characteristics affecting the choice of conflict resolution style of Croatian employees. Therefore, the variables of gender, age, level of education achieved, field of work, hierarchical level, marital status and parenthood were included in the study. Compromising conflict handling style was found to be the most frequently used style among Croatian employees overall, as well as the dominant style in all 22 subgroups of respondents. Three out of seven individual characteristics surveyed were found to relate significantly to the conflict handling style used by Croatian employees. Precisely, gender, marital status and parenthood were found to significantly relate to the respondents' usage of accommodating, gender and parenthood were found to relate significantly to the respondents' usage of compromising, and parenthood was found to relate significantly to the respondents' usage of avoiding conflict handling style. Age, education, field of work and hierarchical level were not found to relate with Croatian employees' usage of various conflict handling styles.

**Keywords:** managing conflict, conflict handling styles, contextual parameters and conflict handling styles, Croatia.

**JEL Classification:** M00, M10.

### Introduction

Conflict is a natural, everyday phenomenon in all private and working spheres. It is an unavoidable component of human activity (Brahnam et al., 2005, 204) that may be viewed as a situation in which the concerns of two or more individuals appear to be incompatible (Darling & Fogliasso, 1999, 394), and which tends to occur when individuals or groups perceive that others are preventing them from attaining their goals (Antonioni, 1998, 336). More broadly, conflict is an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities (i.e., individual, group, organization, etc.) (Rahim, 2002, p. 207).

Within organizations conflicts are inevitable, and arise in case of disagreements over workloads, prob-

lems in communication, individual differences in needs, wants, goals, values, opinions, preferences or behaviors, as well as in case of disputes between employees/unions and employers. Explicitly, as human beings interact in organizations, different values and situations create tension (Darling & Walker, 2001, p. 230).

Consequently, the number of researches on the subject of conflict and conflict management is immense. More to it, because in response to growing demands for workplace harmony and productivity effective conflict management is becoming paramount (Chan et al., 2006, p. 289), there are numerous researches regarding relationship between conflict handling styles, and various individual and situational factors, as Table 1 reveals.

Table 1. Researches about the relationship between contextual parameters and conflict handling styles

Contextual parameter	Researches
Gender	Rosenthal & Hautaluoma, 1988; McKenna & Richardson, 1995; Sorenson, Hawkins & Sorenson, 1995; Brewer, Mitchell & Weber, 2002; Pinto & Ferrer, 2002; Cetin & Hacifazlioglu, 2004; Brahnam et al., 2005; Chan et al., 2006; Havenga, 2006
Age	McKenna & Richardson, 1995; Pinto & Ferrer, 2002; Cetin & Hacifazlioglu, 2004; Havenga, 2006
Education	Pinto & Ferrer, 2002
Hierarchical level	Cornille, Pestle & Vanwy, 1999; Brewer, Mitchell & Weber, 2002
Marital status	Pinto & Ferrer, 2002
Experience	Drory & Ritov, 1997; Pinto & Ferrer, 2002; Cetin & Hacifazlioglu, 2004
Profession	McKenna & Richardson, 1995; Cornille, Pestle & Vanwy, 1999; Goodwin, 2002; Hignite, Margavio & Chin, 2002; Cetin & Hacifazlioglu, 2004
Personality	Jones & White, 1985; King & Miles, 1990; Haferkamp, 1991; Earnest & McCaslin, 1994; Sorenson, Hawkins & Sorenson, 1995; Antonioni, 1998; Moberg, 2001
Opponent's power	Rosenthal & Hautaluoma, 1988; Weider-Hatfield & Hatfield, 1995; Drory & Ritov, 1997; Rahim, Antonioni & Psenicka, 2001
Group diversity	Cox, Lobel & McLeod, 1991
Culture/subculture	Lee Agee & Kabasakal, 1993; McKenna, 1995; McKenna & Richardson, 1995; Elsayed-Ekhouly & Buda, 1996; Morris et al., 1998; Kozan, 2002

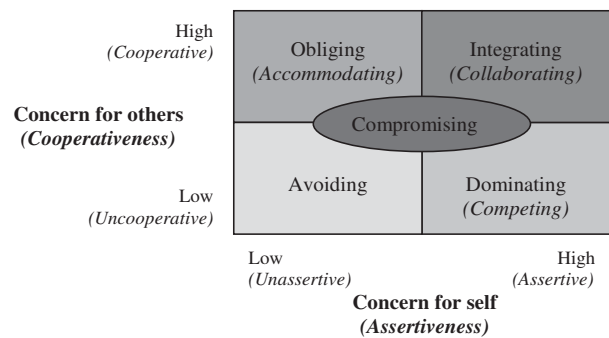
The intent of this study was to investigate the relationship between various individual characteristics of Croatian employees (gender, age, level of education achieved, field of work, hierarchical level, marital status, and parenthood, as main individual characteristics), and their conflict handling behaviors, as subject that to date has not received sufficient attention. Precisely, except literature review of conflict handling styles and their relationship with different individual characteristics, the purpose of this study was to provide answers to the following questions:

- ◆ Which is the most frequently used conflict handling style among Croatian employees, and is it congruent with the prevailing research finding about compromising being the most present conflict resolution style among world population?
- ◆ Do individual characteristics (embodied in individual demographic and work characteristics) determine one's conflict handling style in organizational setting?

### 1. Conflict handling styles

The mostly acknowledged and utilized framework of styles of resolving interpersonal conflict is the one developed by Thomas and Kilman (1974) and Rahim and Bonoma (1979), following the work of Blake and

Mounton from 1964, precisely their managerial grid. That framework accounts for five styles of handling conflict: avoiding, competing (dominating), accommodating (obliging), collaborating (integrating), and compromising, determined by two dimensions (Figure 1). Rahim and Bonoma (1979 in Rahim, 1983) labeled those two dimensions “concern for self” and “concern for others”<sup>1</sup>, whereas Thomas and Kilman (1974 in Brahnam et al., 2005) labeled them assertiveness and cooperativeness<sup>2</sup>.



Notes: Compiled using: Rahim (1983, p. 369) and Thomas & Kilman (1974 in Brahnam et al., 2005, p. 199).

**Fig. 1. A two-dimensional model of conflict handling styles**

Characteristics of the five conflict handling styles portrayed in Figure 1 are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Characteristics of conflict handling styles

Style	Characteristics
Avoiding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Low concern for self and low concern for others; unassertive and uncooperative personality</li> <li>▪ Lose-lose outcome (because both parties refrain from communicating their needs, so neither has any needs met)</li> <li>▪ The desire to withdraw from the conflict situation or suppress the conflict</li> <li>▪ Withdrawal behavior, postponement, disengagement from conflict, hiding disagreement, sidestepping</li> <li>▪ The likely outcome is that the conflict remains unresolved</li> <li>▪ Might take the form of diplomatically sidestepping an issue, postponing an issue until a later or better time, or, ostrich-like, simply withdrawing from a threatening situation</li> </ul>
Competing (Dominating)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ High concern for self and low concern for others; assertive and uncooperative personality</li> <li>▪ Win-lose outcome (because one of the parties in conflict is aggressive and attempts to make sure that only their needs are met)</li> <li>▪ Drive to maximize individual gain even at the expense of others (forcing one's viewpoint at the expense of others); a desire to satisfy one's interests, regardless of the impact on the other party to the conflict</li> <li>▪ A power-oriented mode, in which one uses whatever powers seem appropriate to win one's position, including the ability to argue, one's rank, one's economic sanctions, or forcing behavior if necessary</li> <li>▪ Individuals "stand up for their rights", defend a position which they believe is correct, or simply want to win</li> </ul>
Accommodating (Obliging)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Low concern for self and high concern for others; unassertive and cooperative personality</li> <li>▪ Lose-win outcome</li> <li>▪ A self-sacrifice style (sacrifice of self-interests to satisfy the needs of others)</li> <li>▪ Willingness of one party in a conflict to place the opponent's interests above his or her own; attitudes to accommodate and accept opponent's wishes</li> <li>▪ Individuals seek consent and approval, and are eager to be helpful and supportive of others</li> <li>▪ Might take the form of selfless generosity or charity, obeying another person's order when one would prefer not to, or yielding to another's point of view</li> </ul>
Compromising	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Moderate/intermediate concern for both self and others; medium assertive and cooperative personality (midpoint between cooperativeness and assertiveness)</li> <li>▪ Associated with give-and-take or sharing the search for a middle-ground solution</li> <li>▪ No-win/no-lose outcome (a middle ground in solving conflict where both parties would "give something" in order to "take something")</li> <li>▪ Both parties give up something to reach a mutually acceptable solution which prevents them from meeting all of their needs (individuals try to find some expedient, mutually acceptable solution, which partially satisfies both parties)</li> <li>▪ Might mean splitting the difference, exchanging concessions, or seeking a quick middle-ground position</li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> "Concern for self" is the concern for one's own wellbeing and fulfillment of one's own concerns and needs, when individuals are oriented toward satisfying their own needs no matter the consequences for the other party. "Concern for others" is the concern for other people wellbeing and their concerns and needs, when individuals neglect their own concern for satisfying their needs in order to satisfy the needs of the other party.

<sup>2</sup> Assertiveness is behavior intended to satisfy one's own concerns, while cooperativeness is behavior intended to satisfy another's concerns.

Table 2 (cont.). Characteristics of conflict handling styles

Style	Characteristics
Collaborating (Integrating)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ High concern for self and high concern for others; collaboration between parties; assertive and cooperative personality</li> <li>▪ Win-win outcome (interaction with others in a win-win manner)</li> <li>▪ Drive towards constructing solutions to conflict that meet the needs of all parties involved (each party in a conflict desires to satisfy fully the concerns of all parties); attempt to work with the other person to find some solution which fully satisfies the concerns of both persons (digging into an issue to identify the underlying concerns of the two individuals and to find an alternative which meets both sets of concerns)</li> <li>▪ Individuals are open, exchange information, examine differences between parties in order to reach a solution acceptable to both parties, and show openness to each other</li> <li>▪ Might take the form of exploring a disagreement to learn from each other's insights, concluding to resolve some condition which would otherwise have opponents competing for resources, or confronting and trying to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem</li> <li>▪ Interested in preserving longstanding business relationships</li> </ul>

Notes: Developed using: Elsayed-Ekhouly & Buda (1996), Blitman (2002), Goodwin (2002), Rahim (2002), and Aritzeta, Ayestaran & Swailes (2005).

Among the five styles for the resolution of conflict described, literature appears to favor the use of collaborative style and points out that collaborative management strategies generate higher quality decisions than distributive strategies (Thomas, 1977; Filley, 1978; Jones & White, 1985; Bettenhausen, 1991; Lovelace, Shapiro & Weingart, 2001; Brahnam et al., 2005). As Brahnam et al. (2005, p. 200) highlight, since there is typically less emphasis in modern business on competitive negotiation and more on interorganizational relationships, it is not surprising to find that the most valued conflict management strategy in business is collaboration, i.e. the win-win style of managing conflict. Namely, collaborating is the only conflict management style that considers the interests of both parties and focuses on mutual gains, and it is therefore argued that this style produces superior outcomes with more open exchange of information and a higher level of satisfaction through exploring the conflict issues more comprehensively (Van Slyke, 1999 in Goodwin, 2002, p. 383).

However, although it may seem that collaboration is the superior style and thus the most appropriate in all circumstances, there may be situations in which it is not in the best of interest of either party to use that style (Rahim, 1992 in Antonioni, 1998). To be precise, no single style of conflict handling is always appropriate. In any given situation a particular mode of handling conflict may be more suitable than others. In other words, context seems to play an integral part in conflict management, which indicates that the choice of conflict style or strategy should be situationally dependent (King & Miles, 1990). Therefore, many scholars suggest a situational/contingency approach to handling conflicts, which argues that the appropriateness of using a particular style depends on the conflict situation (Thomas, 1977; Derr, 1978; Phillips & Cheston, 1979; Jones & White, 1985; Knapp, Putnam & Davis, 1988; King & Miles, 1990; Lee Agee & Kabasakal, 1993; McKenna & Richardson, 1995; Drory & Ritov, 1997; Bell & Forde, 1999; Goodwin, 2002; Rahim, 2002; Delerue, 2005).

Still, the situational approach fails to acknowledge that some individuals may not be flexible enough to use

whichever style is best for a particular situation (Antonioni, 1998, p. 336). Moreover, although every individual is capable of using all five conflict-handling modes (McKenna and Richardson, 1995), individuals use some modes better than others, and, therefore, tend to rely upon those modes more heavily than others, whether because of temperament or practice (Friedman et al., 2000; Blitman, 2002). However, nobody can be characterized as having a single, inflexible style of dealing with conflict, although some people will be more inclined than others to use certain modes (McKenna & Richardson, 1995, p. 59). Furthermore, researches have found that the styles themselves are not mutually exclusive. Namely, while people may adopt a particular style as the dominant one in a given situation, they may also use aspects of the other styles according to the circumstances and nature of the conflict (Goodwin, 2002, p. 384).

Overall, the conflict behaviors of individuals are a combination of their personal characteristics and the requirements of the circumstances within which they find themselves (McKenna & Richardson, 1995). One's choices may be a function of the specific situation and one's basic orientation or behavioral disposition towards conflict (Kozan, 2002, p. 95).

## 2. Research questions and hypotheses

As already stated, the study addressed two research questions:

*RQ 1: Which conflict handling style is used predominantly by Croatian employees to resolve disputes that occur in organizational setting?, and*

*RQ 2: Are conflict handling styles used by Croatian employees to resolve disputes in organizational setting related to their demographic and work characteristics, precisely their gender, age, educational level, field of work, hierarchical level, marital status, or parenthood?*

In order to answer those questions, seven hypotheses, based on the prevailing research findings in each area, were proposed. Hypotheses of the research and rationale for their formulation are depicted in Table 3.

Table 3. Hypotheses and rationale for their formulation

Hypothesis	Rationale
H1: The most used conflict handling style among Croatian employees is compromising style.	Although all five conflict handling styles are used within organizations, researches give evidence that the most frequently used conflict handling style among world population is compromising (Kabanoff, 1989; McKenna & Richardson, 1995; Volkema & Bergmann, 1995; Hignite, Margavio & Chin., 2002; Pinto & Ferrer, 2002), as people tend to seek other people approval and tend to compromise toward the group mean <sup>1</sup> .
H2: There is a significant difference between women and men conflict handling styles.	Results from empirical studies show that men and women tend to endorse conflict handling strategies that complement gender role expectations <sup>2</sup> : in handling conflict, women, unlike men, favor accommodating strategies, whereas men, unlike women, prefer to be more confrontational, aggressive, and competitive (Brahnam et al., 2005, p. 200). In more simple words, following the gender role perspective, competitive behavior appears consistent with a masculine gender role, while accommodating behavior appears consistent with a feminine gender role. Evidence suggests as well that men are more avoiding in their style of conflict handling than are women (Brahnam et al., 2005), which accords precisely with gender role expectations, as men are expected to remain "cool" and "in control" (Haferkamp, 1991, p. 237), and are found to experience anxiety in social settings which may make them more likely than women to avoid conflict (Brahnam et al., 2005, p. 201) <sup>3</sup> .
H3: There is a significant difference between various age groups conflict handling styles.	Researches reveal that younger people tend to make more use of the dominating conflict handling style (Havenga, 2006), while older generations prefer compromising (Pinto & Ferrer, 2002), and use more collaborating (Cetin & Hacifazlioglu, 2004).
H4: There is a significant difference between conflict handling styles of individuals depending on their level of education achieved.	Research results show that the higher the educational level, the greater the preference for competing conflict handling mode (Pinto & Ferrer, 2002).
H5: There is a significant difference between conflict handling styles of individuals depending on their field of work.	Earlier studies have found that the dominant conflict handling style varies depending on the profession (Cornille, Pestle & Vanwy, 1999; Goodwin, 2002; Hignite, Margavio & Chin, 2002; Cetin & Hacifazlioglu, 2004).
H6: There is a significant difference between different hierarchical levels conflict handling styles.	Studies acknowledge that preferences for conflict styles differ across hierarchical levels. Upper organizational status individuals are found to be higher on the competitive (Putnam and Poole, 1987 in Drory & Ritov, 1997; Watson, 1994 in Brewer, Mitchell & Weber, 2002) and collaborating style (Brewer, Mitchell & Weber, 2002), while lower status individuals prefer and report greater use of avoiding, accommodating and compromising (Putnam and Poole, 1987 in Drory & Ritov, 1997; Brewer, Mitchell & Weber, 2002).
H7: There is a significant difference between conflict handling styles of individuals depending on their family status.	Although the relationship between marital status and conflict handling style was not found to be significant (Pinto & Ferrer, 2002), common sense implies that married people and those with children are forced and therefore used to utilize more cooperative conflict handling styles.

Regarding individual characteristics selected to be assessed in the survey, as the foremost individual characteristics, it is important to emphasize that while the role of some individual characteristics in conflict management choices (such as gender or age) is more commonly explored, other individual characteristics embodied in this research (such as marital status or parenthood) are not so common subjects of exploration, as Table 1 reveals.

<sup>1</sup> Still, among the ample of researches it is not rare to find those that give evidence that competitive behavior (Derr, 1978; Bettenhausen & Mumighan, 1991) or collaborating conflict management style (Cosier & Ruble, 1981; Earnest & Caslin, 1994; Goodwin, 2002) is the most frequently used one.

<sup>2</sup> Findings about gender behavior in work settings upon which gender role expectations are extracted are, for example, that: (1) men are generally thought to develop masculine characteristics, which include independence, self-confidence, ambition, aggressiveness, dominance, assertiveness, adventurousness, competitiveness, while women are thought to develop feminine characteristics such as emotionality, sensitivity, tenderness, kindness, and cooperativeness (Pološki, 1999, p. 18); (2) women prefer collaborative work style (they see work as part of a whole, and discuss and review with colleagues), while men pursue predominantly independent work style (they see work as a separate piece, and complete work without the "help" of others) (Hahn & Litwin, 1995, p. 192); (3) women enter into a negotiation process with the win/win attitude (because they want everybody to win at the end), while men use win/lose approach (they are primarily interested in their own triumph) (Pološki, 1999, p. 31); (4) approach to negotiation as a collaborative effort with long-term implications is characteristic of women (Greenhalgh in Helgesen, 1995, p. 247); and (5) more aggressiveness is found in male behavior (Bell & Forde, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> However, not all contemporary findings are consistent. For instance, researchers found women more avoiding (Brewer, Mitchell & Weber, 2002; McKenna & Richardson, 1995; Chan et al., 2006), men having a significantly higher accommodating score (Sorenson, Hawkins & Sorenson, 1995), men to use the compromising style more than women (McKenna &

### 3. Methodology

The PCHS (Preferred Conflict-Handling Style) instrument (developed by Robbins, 2006), a questionnaire designed to measure self-reports about inclinations to use the five styles of conflict resolution (avoiding, competing, accommodating, collaborating, and compromising), was used in the study<sup>4</sup>. The five styles of handling interpersonal conflict were measured with 20 items (statements). Participants were asked to indicate the extent of their agreement with those statements by circling a number on a five-point Likert-type ordinal scale ranging from 1 (practically never) to 5 (very often). The preferred conflict handling style was the predominant isolated style, the one that received the highest score out of the five conflict handling styles. However, there were respondents which had the same highest score for two conflict handling styles (which was labeled the "mixed" conflict style preference), and those which had the same highest score for three or more conflict handling styles (which was la-

Richardson, 1995), as well as no clear gender differences to conflict resolution (Sorenson, Hawkins & Sorenson, 1995; Pinto & Ferrer, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> The data regarding conflict handling styles were self-reported, as in the majority of researches relating to conflict handling style (see, for example, Rahim, 1983; Earnest & McCaslin, 1994; Volkema & Bergmann, 1995; Weider-Hatfield & Hatfield, 1995; Elsayed-Ekhouly & Buda, 1996; Cornille, Pestle & Vanwy, 1999; Friedman et al., 2000; Brewer, Mitchell & Weber, 2002; Goodwin, 2002; Hignite, Margavio & Chin, 2002; Pinto & Ferrer, 2002; Cetin & Hacifazlioglu, 2004; Aritzeta, Ayestaran & Swailes, 2005; Brahnam et al., 2005; Chan et al., 2006; Havenga, 2006).

beled the “situational” conflict style preference)<sup>1</sup>. Due to displaying more than one isolated style as the main ones, those respondents (21.6% of them) were eliminated from few analyses (those where their scores could bring incoherence and/or misinterpretation).

In addition to the conflict handling style instrument, study participants were asked to respond to a number of items related to their demographic and work charac-

teristics (gender, age, level of education achieved, field of work, hierarchical level, marital status, and parenthood).

116 Croatian employees selected randomly completed the PCHS instrument anonymously<sup>2</sup>. They provided both their responses to PCHS instrument, and answered demographic and work related questions. Table 4 depicts their profile.

Table 4. Profile of respondents

Variable	Structure (%)
Gender	Male (37.1%), female (62.9%)
Age	Up to 30 years old (26.7%), 31-40 years old (21.6%), 41-50 years old (19.3%), more than 50 years old (22.4%)
Education	Primary school degree (0.9%), secondary degree (32.8%), college degree (21.5%), university degree (39.6%), graduate degree (master's/doctorate) (5.2%)
Field of work	R&D (19.0%), core activities (procurement, production, sales) (25.9%), backup activities (finance, accounting, marketing, human resource management) (28.4%), other (26.7%)
Hierarchical level	Non-managerial employees (45.7%), low level managers (17.2%), middle managers (13.8%), top managers (2.6%), other (20.7%)
Marital status	Married (54.5%), single (35.3%), divorced (8.6%), widow/er (2.6%)
Parenthood	Children (40.5%), no children (59.5%)

Except descriptive statistics, in order to assess the relationship between respondents’ characteristics and their conflict handling styles, as well as to determine the significant findings related to different variables, chi-square tests ( $\chi^2$ ), one-way ANOVA analysis (F tests), independent samples t-tests, and Pearson correlation coefficients were used. Calculations were conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

**4. Research results**

Research results are presented in two sections, according to two research questions addressed in the article. Firstly, the prevailing conflict handling style among Croatian employees is elaborated. After that, the relationship between a range of individual characteristics and the preferred conflict handling style is enlightened.

**4.1. Dominant conflict handling style among Croatian employees.** As expected, the prevailing conflict handling style among Croatian employees is compromising. Collected data reveal that compromising is the most frequently used approach to conflict resolution

among respondents, with 38% of them reporting it as their dominant conflict handling style (Figure 2).

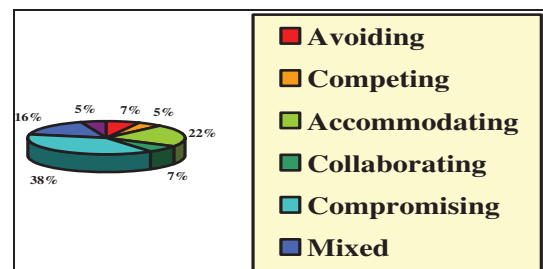


Fig. 2. Dominant conflict handling style among Croatian employees

Figure 2 reveals further that many Croatian employees use accommodating as a principal conflict resolution strategy (22% of them), that the small portion of them predominantly uses collaborating (7%) or avoiding conflict handling style (7%), and that the smallest portion uses competing as a predominant conflict resolution strategy (5%). More to it, 16% of respondents principally use two conflict handling styles (have “mixed” conflict handling style), and 5% of them use evenly three or more conflict handling styles (have “situational” conflict handling style).

In order to find whether compromising is certainly the dominant conflict handling style among Croatian employees, we looked at the major conflict handling style of different subgroups of respondents. As Table 5 reveals, compromising is the most frequently used conflict resolution strategy in absolutely all respondents’ subgroups. Precisely, the percentage of respondents in each subgroup with compromising as a predominant conflict handling style spreads from 30.0 to 66.7 per-

<sup>1</sup> As already apostrophized, it is not rare to find people who use combinations of styles rather than use them independently when handling conflict situations (Munduate et al., 1999).

<sup>2</sup> The size of the sample is acceptable, as researchers in the field often draw their conclusions using similar sample sizes. Cosier & Ruble (1981) surveyed 100 male upper level undergraduate business majors, Jones & White (1985) had 114 MBA students in their sample, Lewicki & Sheppard (1985) examined 100 managers in their research project, King & Miles (1990) surveyed 118 undergraduate junior and senior business majors in their research, Earnest & McCaslin (1994) observed 66 individuals in their survey, Friedman et al. (2000) surveyed 82 members of a clinical medical department, Brewer, Mitchell & Weber (2002) had 118 employees in their sample, Goodwin (2002) had 72 respondents in her study, Aritzeta, Ayestaran & Swailes (2005) had 108 final year undergraduate students in their sample, and Havenga (2006) observed 56 owners/managers of small business in his survey.

cent. Additionally, the table exhibits that the second most used conflict handling style among Croatian employees is accommodating, except for older employees and those with graduate degree,

which secondarily use collaborating as a way of conflict resolution, and for four subgroups which, after compromising, showed the greatest inclination toward the mixed conflict handling style.

Table 5. Dominant conflict handling style of respondents' subgroups

Individual characteristic	Subgroups	Dominant conflict handling style		Second most frequently used conflict handling style	
		Type	% of respondents	Type	% of respondents
Gender	male	Compromising	30.2	Accommodating	23.3
	female	Compromising	42.5	Accommodating	20.5
Age	up to 30 years old	Compromising	32.3	Accommodating	25.8
	31-40 years old	Compromising	44.0	Accommodating	24.0
	41-50 years old	Compromising	35.3	Mixed	26.5
	more than 50 years old	Compromising	42.3	Collaborating	19.2
Education	secondary degree	Compromising	36.8	Mixed	28.9
	college degree	Compromising	40.0	Accommodating	24.0
	university degree	Compromising	39.1	Accommodating	23.9
	graduate degree	Compromising	33.3	Collaborating	33.3
Field of work	R&D	Compromising	36.4	Mixed	22.7
	core activities	Compromising	43.3	Accommodating	23.3
	backup activities	Compromising	37.9	Accommodating	20.7
	other	Compromising	34.3	Accommodating	22.9
Hierarchical level	non-managerial	Compromising	47.2	Mixed	18.9
	low level managers	Compromising	30.0	Accommodating	25.0
	middle managers	Compromising	43.8	Accommodating	25.0
	top managers	Compromising	66.7	Accommodating	33.3
Marital status	married	Compromising	43.5	Accommodating	21.0
	single	Compromising	31.7	Accommodating	24.4
Parenthood	children	Compromising	34.0	Accommodating	25.5
	no children	Compromising	40.6	Accommodating	18.8

Altogether, the first hypothesis of this research, the one about compromising being the dominant conflict handling style among Croatian employees, could be accepted, as both Figure 2 and Table 5 display.

**4.2. Relationship between individual characteristics and conflict handling style.** As mentioned before, the relationship between six individual characteristics (gender, age, level of education achieved, field of work, hierarchical level, marital status, and parenthood), and styles of handling conflict was explored.

Unexpectedly, there was no significant relationship found between any of surveyed individual characteristics and respondents' predominant style of handling conflict when chi-square tests were conducted. Therefore, further analyses dealt with each conflict handling style separately, and not solely with the predominant conflict handling style, as was expected when the research framework was set up at the beginning of the study.

When looking at differences in conflict handling styles conditioned by respondents' gender, we

come to the conclusion that men and women significantly differ in their inclination and usage of accommodating and compromising conflict handling styles, as Table 6 exhibits.

Table 6. Differences between conflict handling styles relating to gender (one-way ANOVA)

Conflict handling style	n	F-ratio	Significance	Level of sign.
Avoiding	115	0.881	0.350	
Competing	115	0.564	0.454	
Accommodating	115	<b>5.411</b>	<b>0.022</b>	<b>0.05</b>
Collaborating	115	0.475	0.492	
Compromising	115	<b>5.784</b>	<b>0.018</b>	<b>0.05</b>

Independent samples t-tests proved the same, in other words, that women and men differ significantly in their practice of using accommodating and compromising conflict handling styles (accommodating ->  $t = -2.326$ , sig. = 0.022, level of sig. = 0.05; compromising ->  $t = -2.405$ , sig. = 0.018, level of sig. = 0.05), both in favor of women respondents (Figure 3).

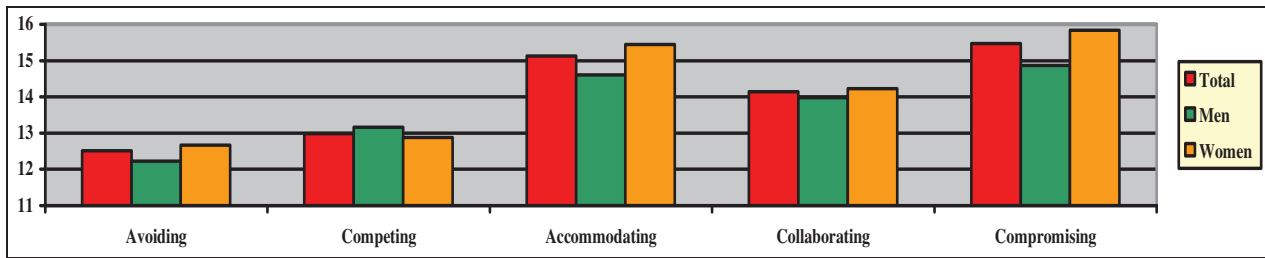


Fig. 3. Conflict handling style scores according to gender

Additionally, Figure 3 exhibits that women have higher avoiding and collaborating scores, but lower competing scores, although those scores are not significantly different between the two subgroups.

All obtained results are fairly congruent with earlier studies about the relationship between gender and conflict handling styles. Namely, studies conducted worldwide showed that women are less competitive, and more accommodating and collaborating (Rosenthal and Hautaluoma, 1988; Brahnam et al., 2005; Havenga, 2006), and that men are less cooperative, and more competing (Halpern & McLean Parks, 1996; Brewer et. al., 2002; Cetin & Hacifazlioglu, 2004; Brahnam et al., 2005; Chan et al., 2006).

Altogether, regarding the second hypothesis of this research, there are arguments for its acceptance, since two out of five conflict handling styles are found to be more associated with women than men.

The second individual characteristic surveyed was age. As already mentioned, chi-square test revealed no significant difference between the predominant conflict handling style and respondent's age. More to it, neither one-way ANOVA, which explored differences in respondents' usage of five conflict handling styles depending on their age, revealed any significant differences. However, when looking at Table 7, it can be observed that the average score for avoiding and competing grows with age, that the oldest respondents are highest in accommodating and compromising, and that collaborating somehow declines with age.

Table 7. Conflict handling style scores according to age

Conflict handling style \ Age of respondents	Avoiding	Competing	Accommodating	Collaborating	Compromising
up to 30 years old	11.77	12.52	14.65	13.71	15.06
31 to 40 years old	12.64	12.76	15.32	14.36	15.68
41 to 50 years old	12.71	13.26	15.26	14.32	15.50
more than 50 years old	13.00	13.38	15.35	14.19	15.73

When comparing obtained results with those of studies conducted worldwide (see Table 5), it is obvious that they do not match. Younger employees are not found to use competing conflict handling style more than older ones. As well, results do not reveal that the usage of collaborating and compromising conflict strategies grows with age, in other words that collaboration and compromising are preferred by older generations.

Overall, not only that there is no argument for the acceptance of the third hypothesis of this research (there is a significant difference between various age groups conflict handling styles), but it is evident that results differ considerably from those obtained worldwide.

The level of education achieved was the third individual characteristic observed. Among five conflict handling styles, only competing was found to be significantly related to the level of education achieved (Table 8).

Table 8. Differences between conflict handling styles relating to the level of education (one-way ANOVA)

Conflict handling style	n	F-ratio	Significance	Level of sign.
Avoiding	115	1.250	0.294	
Competing	115	3.606	0.008	0.01
Accommodating	115	0.222	0.926	
Collaborating	115	0.991	0.416	
Compromising	115	0.247	0.911	

However, further analysis (calculation of Pearson correlation coefficient between competing as a conflict handling style and level of education) gave no evidence that someone's affinity towards competing is related to his/her level of education achieved ( $r = -0.048$ , sig. = 0.607).

Nevertheless, interesting finding is that employees with the graduate degree have on average the highest score for accommodating, and the lowest score for competing (Figure 4), although earlier researches revealed that the higher the educational level, the greater the preference for competing conflict handling mode (see Table 5). Surprisingly, the competing score declines with respondents' level of education.



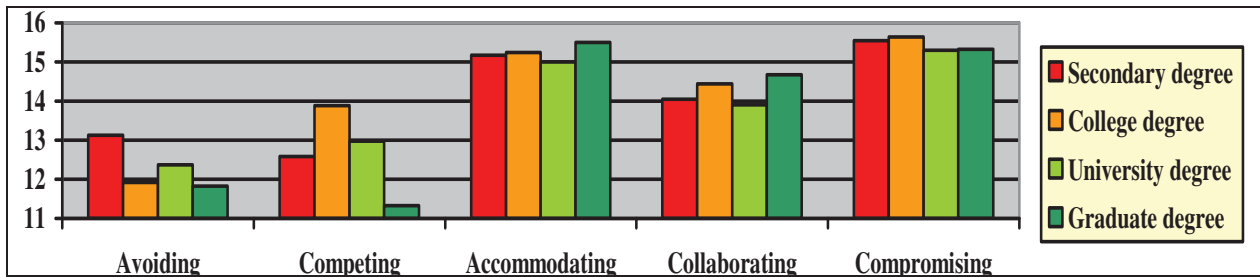


Fig. 4. Conflict handling style scores according to the level of education achieved

Concerning the fourth hypothesis of this research, there is no argument for its acceptance, since there were no significant differences or relationships found between the educational level and conflict handling style expressed.

The fourth individual characteristic surveyed, namely its relationship with conflict handling styles, was the **field of work**. One-way ANOVA revealed that the field of work does not relate to the conflict handling styles used by respondents. Additionally, results do not support the common finding that the predominant conflict handling style varies depending on the profession (see Table 5). Therefore, the fifth hypothesis of this research, about the significant difference between conflict handling styles of individuals depending on their field of work, could not be accepted.

The **hierarchical level** was neither found to be significant for the respondent's predominant conflict handling style or in relation with his/her usage of five conflict resolution strategies. Still, although one-way ANOVA did not reveal any significant relationship between individuals' usage of five conflict handling styles and their position in the hierarchy, average scores imply that climbing on the hierarchical ladder is associated with the greater inclination towards competing as a conflict resolution style (Figure 5). However, results do not support the rest of previous findings concerning the relationship between the conflict handling style and hierarchical level (see Table 5), as upper status individuals were not found to be higher on collaborating style, and lower status individuals were not found to be higher on avoiding, accommodating or compromising.

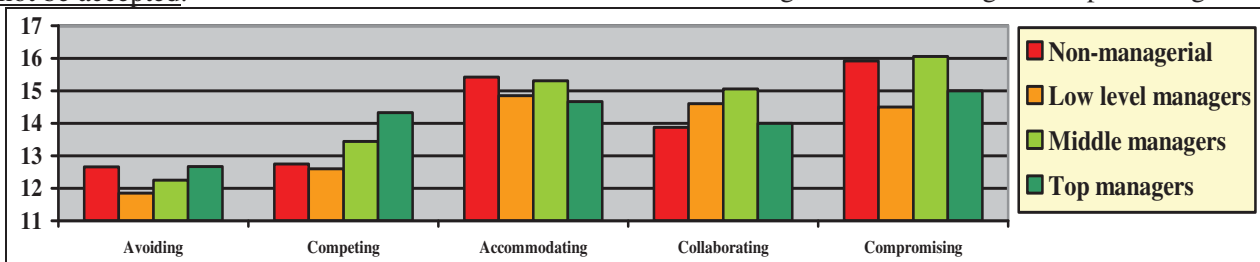


Fig. 5. Conflict handling style scores according to the hierarchical level

Regarding the sixth hypothesis of this research, the conclusion is once more that there is no argument for its acceptance, since there was no statistical evidence that the position in the hierarchy could be associated with whichever conflict handling style.

Finally, when looking at differences in conflict handling styles relating to the **marital status** or **parenthood** of respondents, there are some significant findings, as Table 9 reveals.

As Table 9 depicts, and Figure 6 illustrates, married employees significantly more frequently use accommodating conflict handling style as a predominant one. At the same time, employees without children significantly less frequently use that style. Moreover, their usage of avoiding and compromising conflict handling styles is of a significantly lesser extent compared to the behavior of their colleagues with children.

Table 9. Differences between conflict handling styles relating to the marital status and parenthood (one-way ANOVA)

Individual characteristic	Conflict handling style	n	F-ratio	Significance	Level of sign.
Marital status	Avoiding	115	1.865	0.140	
	Competing	115	1.250	0.295	
	Accommodating	115	<b>3.925</b>	<b>0.010</b>	<b>0.05</b>
	Collaborating	115	0.627	0.599	
	Compromising	115	1.409	0.244	
Parenthood	Avoiding	115	<b>7.819</b>	<b>0.006</b>	<b>0.01</b>
	Competing	115	0.470	0.494	
	Accommodating	115	<b>7.689</b>	<b>0.006</b>	<b>0.01</b>
	Collaborating	115	0.864	0.355	
	Compromising	115	<b>7.478</b>	<b>0.007</b>	<b>0.01</b>

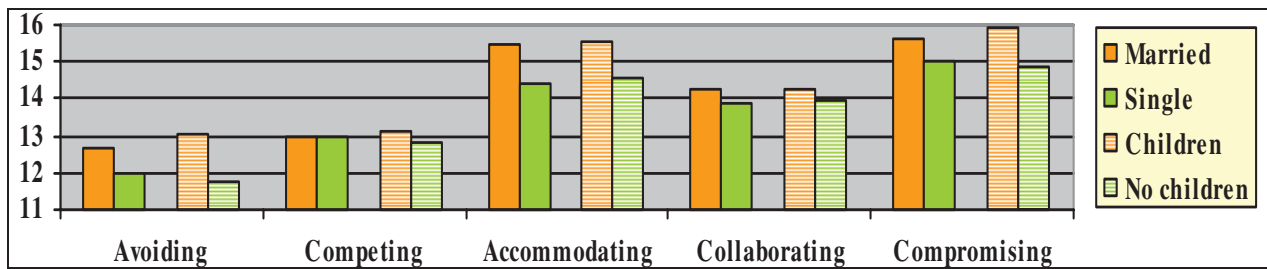


Fig. 6. Conflict handling style scores according to the marital status and parenthood

In order to verify the relationships between family status and conflict handling style, independent samples t-tests were conducted. Test results supported previously stated, since the significant difference between marital status and usage of accommodating conflict handling style was found ( $t = -2.747$ ,  $sig. = 0.007$ , level of  $sig. = 0.01$ ), as well as a significant difference between parenthood and avoiding ( $t = -2.796$ ,  $sig. = 0.006$ , level of  $sig. = 0.01$ ), accommodating ( $t = -2.773$ ,  $sig. = 0.006$ , level of  $sig. = 0.01$ ) and compromising style ( $t = -2.735$ ,  $sig. = 0.007$ , level of  $sig. = 0.01$ ).

Although earlier researches did not reveal any relationship between family status (embodied in marital status and parenthood) and conflict handling styles, this research gives arguments for the acceptance of the seventh hypothesis, about family status being significant for someone's conflict resolution preferences.

### 5. Discussion

Presented results enable answering two research questions set at the beginning of this survey:

The most frequently used conflict handling style among Croatian employees is without doubt compromising (see Figure 2 and Table 7). This finding corresponds with earlier findings about compromising being the most frequently used conflict resolution style in world population (see Table 5). Reasons for such a finding, both in Croatia and worldwide, are evident from the psychological perspective. Generally, people seek other people approval, tend to have good or at least tolerable interpersonal relations with their co-workers, and disfavor having enemies in their working environment. Therefore, compromising, as a strategy that looks for mutually acceptable solutions, is clearly the answer, since it brings medium benefits to both sides, meaning that it does not harm anyone particularly. Moreover, conflict does not remain unsolved as when avoiding, there are no apparent winners at the expense of others as with dominating, and one side does not have to sacrifice its interests as when accommodating. Of course, compromising obviously does not result in such benefits as collaborating conflict resolution strategy does.

Concerning the relationship between seven individual characteristics explored and conflict handling

styles of Croatian employees, the study showed that gender, marital status and parenthood do relate to the practice of using particular conflict handling style, while age, educational level, field of work and hierarchical level do not relate to it. Precisely, findings were the following:

- 1) Female employees use significantly more accommodating and compromising conflict handling styles than men, while there are no significant differences between men and women in using avoiding, competing and collaborating conflict resolution strategies. The reason for women being more accommodating and compromising is presumably their inborn higher concern for others, which is said to be a consequence of their inherited and historical role of those who look after others and take care of them.
- 2) Married people express significantly higher usage of accommodating conflict handling style than unmarried. This could have been assumed as, in order to live happily in matrimony, people often have to discard their interests, and place their spouses' interests above their own.
- 3) People who have children express significantly higher usage of avoiding, accommodating and compromising conflict handling style than those who do not have children. Those styles of resolving conflict are characterized by low or moderate concern for self, exactly how people, especially those with younger children, have to think and behave.
- 4) There is no significant difference between conflict handling styles of Croatian employees because of the age group they belong to, their educational level, field of work, or position in the hierarchy.

### 6. Limitations and future research

Three foremost limitations of this research, which should be therefore dealt with in future studies, could be identified. Firstly, the study used self-report data to examine the preference of conflict strategy, meaning that actual behavior was not directly observed. However, differences between an individual's preference for a particular type of conflict handling mode and the actual conflict handling

mode used could exist. Therefore, behavioral measures (such as direct observations), peer assessment and related methods should be added in future studies in order to assess the actual conflict handling style, and hinder the drawbacks of self-reporting assessment. Secondly, the study was cross-sectional in nature and does not examine whether individuals' conflict handling styles adapt over time, neither whether conflict strategies used address different situations. Hence, a longitudinal survey, with the intention of determining whether a conflict handling style used is a consequence of time flow, aging, experience or other situational variables, should be conducted. Thirdly, when instruments are designed to assess "general tendencies" in managing interpersonal conflicts, then items invite responses rooted in social norms, as may be the case in this research.

Concerning future studies, they should explore additional contextual variables that may relate to conflict handling styles. As such, more comprehensive demographic and work measures, such as individual goals, personality, work experience, profession, organizational commitment or cultural background, should be collected. In addition, future studies should examine other situational determinants of conflict handling styles, such as organizational structure, communication channels, corporate culture, opponent's demographic characteristics and power, heterogeneity of the work force, importance of the topic, desirable organizational outcomes, time pressure to resolve the dispute, expectations of future relations between disputants, etc.

## Conclusion

Except for determining the dominant conflict handling style among Croatian employees, which proved to be compromising just as in studies conducted worldwide, the aim of this study was to examine the relationship between conflict handling styles and individual characteristics (gender, age, level of education achieved, field of work, hierarchical level, marital status and parenthood). It was

predicted that all individual characteristics surveyed relate to employees' conflict handling styles, however, the study revealed that only three out of seven individual characteristics surveyed are associated with the conflict handling styles used by Croatian employees.

Gender, marital status and parenthood were found to relate significantly to the respondents' usage of accommodating conflict handling style, gender and parenthood were found to relate significantly to the respondents' usage of compromising style, and parenthood was found to relate significantly to the respondents' usage of avoiding style. At the same time, age, educational level, field of work and hierarchical level were not found to relate significantly to Croatian employees' usage of diverse conflict handling styles.

Nevertheless, the examination of relationship between different individual characteristics and conflict handling styles could be valuable for improving workplace relations and productivity. Namely, there are practical implications for understanding how individuals, depending on their demographic and work characteristics, handle conflicts. A better understanding of the contribution of individual differences to conflict management has implications for managing human resources in organizational contexts, especially for their recruitment and selection, training and development, as well as motivating and rewarding. Moreover, findings of this research could aid practitioners in fitting together the individual differences of their employees with conflict management styles they use, as well as to anticipate conflict handling behavior of their employees depending on their gender, age, educational level, field of work, hierarchical level or family status. Finally, this research induces that both academics and practitioners should give more attention to identifying potentially positive effects on organizational behavior and effectiveness deriving from behavioral differences associated with diverse workforce.

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