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AUTHOR Schumacher, Bradley K.  
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ABSTRACT

This study investigated subordinates' choice of conflict strategies and communicative adaptability when interacting with their supervisor. In particular, participants were asked to recall their summer work experience while completing the Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI) (Putnam & Wilson, 1982) and the Communicative Adaptability Scale (CAS) (Duran, 1983) in order to find out if those who are more adaptive use different strategies in organizational conflict situations. Subjects were 111 female and 36 male students of an undergraduate communication course at a midwest, four-year university. Participation was anonymous. Results indicated that those who are more communicatively adaptive tend to use nonconfrontational strategies while those who are less adaptive tend to use more control strategies. Findings emphasize the importance of having a large behavioral repertoire of skills available to choose from when needed. (Contains a table of data and 56 references.) (Author/CR)

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Conflict Strategies and Interpersonal Communicative Adaptability:

Is There a Relationship?

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Bradley K. Schumacher  
Kent State University

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Direct Correspondence to: Bradley K. Schumacher  
 School of Communication Studies  
 Kent State University  
 P. O. Box 5190  
 Kent, OH 44242-0001  
 (330) 672-2659  
 E-mail: BSCHUMA1@KENTVM.KENT.EDU

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## Abstract

This study investigated subordinates choice of conflict strategies and communicative adaptability when interacting with their supervisor. In particular, participants were asked to recall their summer work experience while completing the Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI)(Putnam & Wilson, 1982) and the Communicative Adaptability Scale (CAS) (Duran, 1983) in order to find out if those who are more adaptive use different strategies in organizational conflict situations. Results indicated that those who are more communicatively adaptive tend to use nonconfrontation strategies while those who are less adaptive tend to use more control strategies. For example, those who are more socially composed (i.e., at ease or comfortable) tend to use nonconfrontational strategies. Implications of these findings are then discussed.

Conflict may be considered an inevitable and ubiquitous aspect of human communication. Indeed, conflict has been examined within organizations since the mid- to late 60's and early 70's (e.g., Blake & Mouton, 1964; Blake, Shepard, & Mouton, 1964; Burke, 1970; Hawes & Smith, 1973; Pondy, 1967; Renwick, 1977; Seiler, 1963). Within the organizational literature, the most heavily researched area over the past decade or so has been superior-subordinate relations (Allen, Gotcher, & Seibert, 1992). In particular, conflict management styles have received considerable attention. However, most studies involving conflict management styles have focused on the supervisor's choice of conflict management styles (strategies) and the factors influencing this choice. For example, studies have focused on the effect of a supervisor's power (e.g., Kipnis, 1976; Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980), locus of control (e.g., Goodstadt & Hjelle, 1973), self-confidence (e.g., Goodstadt & Kipnis, 1970), gender (e.g., Instone, Major, & Bunker, 1983; Stitt, Schmidt, Price, & Kipnis, 1983), and span of control (e.g., Goodstadt & Kipnis, 1970; Kipnis et al., 1980).

Rather than focusing on the manager or supervisor, this study investigates subordinates choice of conflict strategies and communicative adaptability when interacting with their supervisor. In particular, it explores the two concepts to see if a relationship exists. As previously mentioned, most studies have been concerned with delineating characteristics of the manager as the influential agent (Seibold, Cantrill, & Meyers, 1985). Garko (1992) has suggested that "compliance gaining is not simply a one-way event where agents persuade and targets comply. How targets communicate affects the choices agents will make in selecting persuasive strategies" (p. 290). This may be true of conflict management as well. In other words, it is important to examine superior and subordinate conflict styles because both will have an impact on the choice of strategies chosen.

### Conflict Management Styles

One way of examining conflict styles is to focus on the communicative behaviors of an individual. Frost and Wilmot (1978) have stated "it is through communicative behaviors that conflicts are recognized, expressed, and experienced" (p. 10). Blake and Mouton (1964) were the first researchers to propose conflict management styles within an organization. Their five category scheme included two dimensions (concern for production, concern for people) from which many other instruments measuring conflict stem. In one respect, these instruments differ depending on the chosen management style or definition of conflict. Indeed, there are many definitions of conflict in the literature. For example, Rahim (1986) believes interpersonal conflict "involves incompatibility, disagreement, or difference between two or more persons" (p. 59). This definition emphasizes incompatibility between at least two persons. Hocker and Wilmot (1985) define conflict as "an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards, and interference from the other party in achieving their goals" (p. 23). This definition highlights not only incompatibilities between two or more parties, but also emphasizes the possibility of (a) more than one goal and (b) potential interference. This interference may not only stem from the other party but from people indirectly related to the conflict. Other definitions include the main components and may describe conflict in more detail but, simply stated, interpersonal conflict refers to disputes between at least two organizational members.

Putnam and Wilson (1981) developed the Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI) based on the assumption that "the decision to use a particular conflict strategy is largely governed by situational rather than personality constraints" (p. 633). It may be true that some people actually seek out conflict because of their predisposition but many conflicts arise

and develop through the communication conflict situation. Since most researchers have embraced the idea that communication is an interactive process, it seems that communication scholars should examine both interactants' conflict and adaptive strategies to see how they affect one another.

Putnam and Wilson (1981) employ three modes of conflict (nonconfrontation, solution-orientation, control). The OCCI should be recognized for a couple of its strengths. First, it has shown to have high internal consistencies and "its reliabilities are as good as those for other conflict instruments and, in fact, are better than most" (Downs, 1994, p. 244). Second, it focuses on communicative behaviors in situations rather than using a more trait-like approach to measuring style. The OCCI could be improved in the areas of its construct and predictive validity. Other than that, the OCCI is an important and useful instrument when studying conflict behavior choices.

Rahim (1983) uses a reconceptualization similar to that of Blake and Mouton's (1964) dimensions of conflict management styles. Rahim's styles are based on two dimensions (concern for self, concern for others) which produce five styles for handling interpersonal conflict: integrating, obliging, compromising, dominating, and avoiding. The objective for Rahim's (1983) study was to develop independent scales to measure the five styles of conflict and to provide evidence of their reliability and validity. The empirical validity of the scales were tested against measures of role status and sex. In tests with 1,219 subjects, the ROCI-II demonstrated satisfactory test-retest and internal consistency reliability, and good empirical validity. Results indicated that respondents were more obliging with their bosses and integrating and compromising with their subordinates and peers. In addition, females were more integrating, avoiding, and compromising and less obliging than males. Rahim's scale is beneficial and

applicable to basic research, teaching, and diagnosing styles of handling conflict among members of an organization because of its multiple reference points (boss, subordinate, peer). One negative critique of Rahim's (1983) study is that one of the styles (integrating) showed a marginal but significant positive correlation with social desirability (SD) which may become a serious problem in the measurement of conflict styles.

A study by Weider-Hatfield (1988) assessed the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II) in terms of its validity, reliability, and applications in research and training. Weider-Hatfield argues even though some research provides empirical support for the five factors, other research suggests that the instrument might be assessing three (not five) factors (dominating, integrating, avoiding). For example, Eschelmann (1982), one of Rahim's master's students, factor analyzed the responses of 210 college students to the ROCI-II and found that only three factors (integrating, dominating, avoiding) had eigenvalues greater than 1.0. In addition, Young's (1985) factor analysis of the ROCI-II found that a three factor solution composed of integrating (integrating and comprising items), distributive (dominating items), and passive-indirect (avoiding and obliging items) provided clearer loadings and higher scale reliabilities.

Conrad (1983) examined some constructs that have been identified as correlates of supervisors choices of conflict-management strategies. Two constructs were chosen as the focal point of the study: (a) supervisors' perceptions of subordinates' job performance, and (b) the multiple dimensions of perceived power relationships. Supervisors perceptions of subordinates job performance was expected to be positively related to the use of participatory modes of conflict management. Conrad expected that the perceptions of the power relationship existing between superiors and subordinates would also be related to the choices of strategies. The results

support only one inference: that low levels of self-perceived supervisory skill predict instances in which supervisors typically opt for autocratic modes of conflict management. In other words, the results support previous research suggesting that an individual's level of self-confidence (and self-perceived skill) is related to his or her choice of mode of managing conflict. Conrad's (1983) results are interesting and helpful but other factors such as supervisor's perceptions of the subordinate's personality, and gender and gender combinations are important as well (Monroe, Borzi, & DiSalvo, 1989; Turner, & Henzl, 1987).

Riggs (1983) identified the general dimensions of communication conflict strategies developed in the research, and then selected two dimensions that seem particularly relevant to conflict interaction: activeness and flexibility. Riggs argued to analyze conflict actions, dimensions representing relevant functions of communicative acts are needed. A figure is presented with the dimensions of activeness and flexibility including much of the same modes as Blake and Mouton's (1964) grid (i.e., accommodation, collaboration, compromise, avoidance, aggression). Results indicated that a variety of tactics yielded high intercoder agreement levels on the two dimensions of flexibility and activeness which suggest that these dimensions can be effective in mapping tactics of interaction structure. However, one critique is that only one-third of the tactics assessed achieved intercoder agreement levels of .70 or greater. It has become customary to reach higher intercoder agreement levels.

Since conflict has been conceptualized as a sequence of several encounters rather than a single episode (Hawes & Smith, 1973; Pondy, 1967), it is important to examine what happens during conflict interaction to identify possible changes in conflict handling modes. Indeed, Knapp, Putnam, and Davis (1988) have argued for using a "systems perspective" when



examining conflict because it shifts the focus "to the relationship rather than the individual as the locus for behavior" (p. 417).

A study by Garko (1992) emphasizes the fact that both interactants involved in the conflict determine what styles will be used. He examined managers choices of compliance-gaining strategies when seeking to influence subordinates who communicate in attractive and unattractive styles. Garko conceptualized attraction in terms of "the way a person communicates, that is, his or her communicator style" (p. 291). Results indicated that managers were more likely to invoke the strategies of assertiveness, coalition, higher authority, and sanctions with a subordinate who communicates in an unattractive rather than an attractive style. Results also showed that managers were equally likely to use reason and bargaining to gain compliance from a subordinate with an attractive or unattractive style of communication. Lastly, results indicated that managers were more likely to use the strategy of friendliness with a subordinate who communicates in an attractive rather than an unattractive style.

Previous research has attempted to identify which conflict styles are most effective. For example, Burke (1970) and others (e.g., Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967) have reported that supervisors who use confrontation and forcing styles tend to be more effective managers than supervisors who use other conflict styles. Along the same lines, supervisors who use forcing and avoiding styles were viewed as least effective in managing conflict (Burke, 1970). In other words, those supervisors who confront conflicts directly are seen as being more effective than those who avoid conflicts.

Communication conflict surfaces in dyadic relationships, between and among organizational groups and members, and even spans across continents. Whenever people communicate there will always be a chance for conflict. Ross and DeWine (1988) sum it up

nicely by stating "conflict, in turn, is manifested and managed through communicative behavior" (p. 389). As the research cited above suggests, the strategies of both the superior and subordinate need to be studied to understand the relational aspect of conflict more fully. These strategies may depend on a variety of factors. For example, Hocker and Wilmot (1985) found that people in conflict situations typically hold multiple rather than single goals that vary in content and relationship, and in short- and long-term needs. Furthermore, these goals can serve not only to predict behavior but they can change as the conflict develops (Hawes & Smith, 1973; Wilson & Putnam, 1986). Therefore, if the goals of each person involved in the conflict change the conflict styles may change as well. If the conflict styles change, an examination of one's adaptability in the interaction may prove to be beneficial. In other words, examining one's communicative adaptability in conflict situations may reveal a relationship between a particular conflict strategy and the way in which one communicatively adapts. Following this line of reasoning, one may argue for moving away from trait-based theories as causes of conflict. Since some research has found that the breakdown of communication between superior and subordinate is one of the primary sources of conflict (Phillips & Cheston, 1979; Renwick, 1975), a closer examination of communicative adaptability may suggest some ways to reduce or resolve the conflict.

### Communicative Adaptability

Communicative adaptability, communication competence, interpersonal competence, and communication responsiveness have been used to essentially describe an individual's ability to adapt to particular situations in order to achieve one's goal(s). A variety of definitions exist in the literature describing the above mentioned constructs. For example, Rubin (1990) has defined what she calls communication literacy as the "ability to enact all possible behaviors a person needs in order to respond appropriately to communication tasks at hand" (p. 94). Wiemann

(1977) suggested three schools of thought that have influenced communication competence, one being the self-presentation approach. This revolves around the idea that an individual is “an actor who must play various roles to various audiences” (p. 196). In other words, the entire world is a stage, and the people are merely players in Wiemann’s self-presentation approach. Both Rubin (1990) and Wiemann (1977) emphasize the importance of a communicator’s ability to be flexible in various situations and contexts.

Spitzberg and Cupach’s (1984) definition of communication competence also emphasizes the idea of flexibility. They define communication competence as “an individual’s ability to adapt effectively to the surrounding environment over time to achieve goals” (p. 35). Later, Spitzberg and Cupach (1989) identify and define interpersonal competence as “. . . the ability of a person to interact effectively with other people” (p. 61). They note that labels such as “social competence” and “interpersonal competence” are used interchangeably. Furthermore, they contend that adaptability is the most frequently cited dimension associated with a socially competent person. Indeed, “communicative adaptability was constructed as a conceptualization of social communication competence” (Duran, 1992, p. 253). Spitzberg and Cupach (1989) stated that:

behavioral flexibility entails possessing and utilizing a diverse behavioral repertoire, avoiding overly stylized behavior patterns, and effectively adjusting to changes in the surrounding context . . . Flexibility implies matching one’s responses to one’s goals as well as tailoring responses to the constraints and exigencies of the particular situation. In essence, flexibility involves the adaptation of actions to the physical, social, and relational context. (p. 22)

Therefore, adaptability is an important characteristic of effective communication.

According to Duran (1983), communicative adaptability is “the ability to perceive socio-interpersonal relationships and adapt one’s interaction goals and behaviors accordingly” (p. 320). After reviewing the seven broad approaches to studying competence (fundamental competence, social competence, social skills, linguistic competence, communicative competence, relational competence), Duran (1992) believes that communicative adaptability “incorporates assumptions from both the fundamental and social competence approaches” (p. 254).

As Spitzberg and Cupach (1989) have suggested, the main ingredients of adaptability are the possession of a diverse behavioral repertoire and the ability to adapt to the physical, social, and relational context. Duran (1983) developed the Communicative Adaptability Scale (CAS) that taps six dimensions which enable an individual to adapt to various situations. The first dimension of the CAS is social experience which “measures an individual’s desire and experience with communication in novel social contexts” (Duran, 1992, p. 255). Duran explains that over time these experiences make up a person’s social communication repertoire. The second dimension is social composure which measures how calm and relaxed a person is in social situations. Third, the dimension of social confirmation acknowledges and maintains the other’s projected social image. The fourth dimension of the CAS is appropriate disclosure which “measures an individual’s sensitivity to the cues of the other which indicate how intimately one should disclose” (Duran, 1992, p. 256). In other words, appropriate disclosure is adapting one’s disclosures appropriately to the intimacy level of the interaction. Fifth, the dimension of articulation was developed to measure an individual’s ability to use appropriate syntax and grammar in order to express one’s ideas clearly. The sixth dimension of the CAS is wit which measures not only how humorous a person is, but also the use of humor to diffuse social tension.

Research has examined communicative adaptability in relation to other variables. For example, studies have been conducted examining the relationship of communicative adaptability to communication anxiety related outcomes: shyness, communication apprehension, and loneliness. In particular, the dimensions of social experience and social confirmation accounted for twenty-five percent of the variance in loneliness ( $p < .01$ ) (Zakahi & Duran, 1982). In another study by Zakahi and Duran (1985), social experience was the primary predictor of loneliness. Zakahi and Duran (1984) also found that physically attractive people were viewed as more communicatively adaptive.

Communicative adaptability is also related to shyness. According to findings from Cheek and Buss (1981), those who were not shy reported being more competent than those who were shy. Furthermore, Duran and Kelly (1989) reported that shy and not shy participants differed on the dimensions of social experience, social composure, and articulation. Social composure and social experience were also related to communication apprehension (Duran, 1983).

Communicator style has also been shown to be related to communicative adaptability. For example, Duran and Zakahi (1984) found that social composure and social experience were related to a relaxed, dominant style, and social confirmation was related to a friendly, animated style.

Duran and Zakahi (1988) also examined the relationship of communicative adaptability and communication satisfaction to roommate satisfaction (i.e., a desire to keep or change their roommate) and found that social composure, social experience, and articulation influenced roommate satisfaction. Social experience, social confirmation, and appropriate disclosure were also main contributors in communication satisfaction in interpersonal interaction (Duran & Zakahi, 1987). In particular, this study examined the relationship between communication

satisfaction and self-reported and other-reported CAS. Self-reports of communicative adaptability accounted for 9% of the variance in communication satisfaction, with appropriate disclosure, social confirmation, and social experience as significant contributors ( $p < .01$ ). Other-reported CAS accounted for 57% of the variance in communication satisfaction ( $p < .01$ ) with social confirmation as the primary predictor.

Duran and Kelly (1985) examined the relationship of cognitive complexity to communicative adaptability and found a significant difference between high and low cognitively complex persons on the social experience and wit dimensions. They also found sex differences on the CAS dimensions of social experience and appropriate disclosure. In particular, females had more social experiences and greater concern for appropriate disclosure.

The last variable that has been investigated in relation to communicative adaptability is gender orientation (Bem Sex-Role Inventory). Wheelless and Duran (1982) found that androgynous individuals demonstrated the highest level of competence, followed by feminine, masculine, and undifferentiated individuals.

As the literature indicates, many variables have been found to be related to communicative adaptability. However, the most important aspects of adaptability that appear in the literature include flexibility, a diverse behavioral repertoire, and the ability to adapt to various situations in such a manner as to achieve one's goals (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1989).

#### Rationale

Rubin (1990) noted that 50% of college students could not adequately describe a viewpoint that differed from his/her own and, thus, there is a need for improved communication skills. One way to improve communication is to adapt to the situation and/or other person involved in the interaction. As the literature on conflict management styles and communicative

adaptability has shown, there is a need for improving communication so one may attain one's goals in terms of conflict resolution and communicative adaptability. In particular, one's communicative adaptability may influence the conflict strategies chosen to resolve a conflict or achieve one's goals. Though communicative adaptability, as measured through CAS, is viewed as a trait construct, it may prove useful to view it as more of a state-like construct. In other words, people may have the ability to choose from their behavioral repertoire the skills needed to achieve their immediate goal(s), they may only exhibit these skills in situations that are salient to them. However, if it is not important to them they may not exhibit the typical skills that researchers are identifying.

As Simons (1974) asserts, communication "is the means by which conflicts get socially defined, the instrument through which influence is exercised" (p. 3). If one is more adaptive and flexible to a particular conflict situation, one has a better chance of resolving the conflict and/or achieving one's goals. If people in conflict situations do hold multiple rather than single goals, as Hocker and Wilmot (1985) found, then those who are more adaptive will be more likely to achieve those goals by adapting to the physical, relational, and social context. Therefore, the more flexible one is the more goals can be achieved. Given this reasoning the following research question and hypothesis are posited:

RQ: Is there a relationship between communicative adaptability and organizational communication conflict strategies?

H: Subordinates using solution-oriented strategies will be more communicatively adaptive, in general, than subordinates using a nonconfrontation or control strategy.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

Participants were 111 female and 36 male students of an undergraduate communication course at a midwest, four-year university. Respondents voluntarily agreed to participate in the study as one way of satisfying a course research requirement.

Participants volunteered for this study approximately four weeks into the semester by signing up to appear at a designated place and time. Upon appearance, participants were provided with a pencil, scantron, and questionnaire. The questionnaire included one item asking them to indicate gender, the Communicative Adaptability Scale (CAS) of 30 items (Duran, 1983), and the Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI) of 30 items (Putnam & Wilson, 1982). Before completing the questionnaire, participants were given brief instructions on how to complete the instruments and were asked to read the consent form. This consent form informed participants that participation was completely anonymous and that withdrawal from the study was permissible at any time without fear of penalty. Of the 147 total observations, 18 were missing some item-response data for the CAS (Duran, 1983) and/or the OCCI (Putnam & Wilson, 1982) so the mean of the sample for these items was substituted.

### Instruments

The instruments included the Communicative Adaptability Scale (CAS) (Duran, 1983) and the Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI) (Putnam & Wilson, 1982). The CAS is a self-report 30-item instrument containing six dimensions (social composure, social experience, social confirmation, appropriate disclosure, articulation, wit) which are designed to measure a person's "ability to perceive socio-interpersonal relationships and adapt one's interaction goals and behaviors accordingly" (Duran, 1983, p. 320). Respondents used a 5-point



Likert-type scale that ranged from always true of me (5) to never true of me (1) for each of the 30 items (five items for each dimension). Duran (1992) reported the following Cronbach alphas for the six dimensions as follows: social composure, .82; social experience, .80; social confirmation, .84; appropriate disclosure, .76; articulation, .80; and wit, .74. Zakahi and Duran (1984) reported an overall alpha of .79 while Cupach and Spitzberg (1983) reported an overall scale alpha of .81. The overall Cronbach alpha reliability of the CAS in this study was .93 while the alphas for the six dimensions were as follows: social composure, .87; social experience, .91; social confirmation, .94; appropriate disclosure, .78; articulation, .88; and wit, .73.

The second instrument included in the questionnaire was the Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI) (Putnam & Wilson, 1982). Form B of the OCCI contains 30 items consisting of three subscales: nonconfrontation strategies (12 items), solution-oriented strategies (11 items), and control strategies (7 items). A modified version of Form B was used in this study. The original Form B is a 7-point Likert-type scale containing 30 items in which the respondent indicates how often they use a particular strategy (nonconfrontation, solution-oriented, control). The Form B used in this study is a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranges from very often (1) to very seldom (5) for each of the 30 items. Wilson and Waltman (1988) reported alpha coefficients ranging from .70 to .93 for the subscales with most coefficients above .80. A study by Chua and Gudykunst (1987) suggests that the control subscale often has the lowest internal consistency levels. The overall Cronbach alpha reliability of the OCCI in this study was .54 while the alphas for the subscales were as follows: nonconfrontation, .81; solution-oriented, .75; and control, .73. Perhaps the overall reliability of the instrument was sacrificed because a modified version was used (i.e., changing from a 7-point to a 5-point scale). Similar to Chua and Gudykunst (1987), the control subscale had the lowest internal consistency.

### Statistical Analysis

Canonical correlations of the dimensions of the CAS (social composure, social experience, social confirmation, appropriate disclosure, articulation, wit) with the subscales of the OCCI (nonconfrontation, solution-oriented, control) were used to test the research question in this study. Canonical correlation is a technique for analyzing the relationship between two sets of variables. It creates a linear composite of “predictor” variables (CAS dimensions) and a linear composite of “criterion” variables (OCCI subscales) and correlates those two composites in a manner consistent with Pearson product-moment correlations.

The hypothesis in this study was first tested using  $t$ -tests between participants scoring high on (a) the nonconfrontation and solution-oriented subscales of the OCCI, (b) the solution-oriented and control subscales of the OCCI, and (c) the nonconfrontation and control strategies. This was done to check for significant mean differences among the subscales of the OCCI. Then, to see if subordinates using the three different strategies of the OCCI differed in their respective communicative adaptability scores, Pearson product-moment correlations between (a) the nonconfrontation subscale of OCCI and total score on CAS, (b) the solution-oriented subscale of OCCI and total score on CAS, and (c) the control subscale of OCCI and total score on CAS were also used to test the hypothesis in this study.

### Results

The descriptive data obtained from the sample used in this study resulted in a mean CAS total score of 101.63 ( $SD = 18.09$ ) with a range of 54 to 146. The mean OCCI total score was 89.19 ( $SD = 7.36$ ) with a range from 74 to 115. The means and standard deviations for the different dimensions of the CAS and the strategies of the OCCI are reported in Table 1.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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### Research Question

A canonical correlation was computed to test the research question in this study. The canonical correlation ( $R_c = .39$ ) between a composite of the CAS dimensions and a composite of the OCCI subscales was significant [Wilks'  $F(18, 390) = 1.65, p = .0451$ ] accounting for 15.21% of the shared variance between the composites. Social composure loaded moderately on the predictor composite ( $r = .62$ ), wit loaded moderately ( $r = .53$ ), and social confirmation loaded at a low level ( $r = -.30$ ). Nonconfrontation loaded highly on the criterion composite ( $r = .86$ ) and control loaded moderately ( $r = -.73$ ). Because of the low loading of social confirmation on its composite, univariate analyses may have been more appropriate than canonical correlations.

### Hypothesis

T-tests and Pearson product-moment correlations were run to test the hypothesis in this study. The first t-test between the nonconfrontation and solution-oriented subscales of the OCCI produced a significant mean difference between participants using the two strategies [ $t(146) = 15.04, p = .0001$ ]. The second t-test between the solution-oriented and control subscales of the OCCI produced a significant mean difference between participants using the two strategies [ $t(146) = 7.22, p = .0001$ ]. The third t-test between the nonconfrontation and control subscales of the OCCI produced a significant mean difference between participants using the two strategies [ $t(146) = 20.14, p = .0001$ ].

The Pearson product-moment correlations between each of the OCCI subscales (nonconfrontation, solution-oriented, control) and the total score on CAS were not significant.

The correlation between participants total score on CAS and their score on the nonconfrontation subscale was  $r = .11$ ,  $p = .17$ . The correlation between participants total score on CAS and their score on the solution-oriented subscale was  $r = -.12$ ,  $p = .16$ . The correlation between participants total score on CAS and their score on the control subscale was  $r = -.03$ ,  $p = .69$ . Therefore, no further analysis was made.

### Discussion

This study represented an effort to link communicative adaptability to organizational communication conflict strategies. More specifically, it examined the conflict strategies used by subordinates in relation to their use of communicative adaptability dimensions of the CAS. The present investigation proposed a research question and an hypothesis.

The results of the canonical correlation between a composite of the CAS dimensions and a composite of the OCCI subscales was significant which suggests that a relationship exists between communicative adaptability and organizational communication conflict strategies. In particular, the CAS dimensions of social composure and wit loaded moderately on the predictor composite of the nonconfrontation and control strategies of the OCCI. Examination of the Pearson product-moment correlations indicated that social composure and nonconfrontation are significantly correlated ( $r = .26$ ,  $p = .0016$ ). In other words, if a subordinate is feeling calm and relaxed then he/she will want to avoid disagreements or approach conflict indirectly. By using appropriate verbal and nonverbal cues, the adaptive behavior in this case may be “taking the conflict in stride” and avoiding the conflict by smoothing it over. Indeed, the nonconfrontation strategy in the OCCI is actually a combination of what Blake and Mouton (1964) would call “avoiding” and “smoothing.”

Furthermore, results indicated that those who are more communicatively adaptive tend to use nonconfrontation strategies while those who are less adaptive tend to use more control strategies. This adds credence to the literature which suggests those who have a larger repertoire of behavioral skills to choose from are considered to be more communicatively adaptive (Spitzberg & Cupach, 1983). Those who have a limited repertoire may tend to use control strategies because they feel they have no other choice. On the other hand, the subordinates in this study may use more nonconfrontation strategies because it would be more socially appropriate than engaging in a power struggle with their superior. As the R<sub>c</sub> indicated, the subordinate may even attempt to use humor in order to reduce or diffuse the conflict. This finding appears consistent with the way in which Putnam and Wilson (1983) operationalize the nonconfrontation strategy. They stated that any type of strategy that tends to avoid, downplay, or use indirect means may be considered nonconfrontation. Indeed, the use of humor may be seen as an indirect way of handling conflict. However, future research using more participants and further analysis may reveal that other relationships exist between communicative adaptability and organizational communication conflict strategies.

The t-tests used to test the hypothesis in this study present interesting results. When comparing the means of the nonconfrontation and solution-oriented strategies of the OCCI, a significant mean difference was observed. A significant mean difference was also observed when comparing the means of the solution-oriented and control strategies of the OCCI. Furthermore, a significant mean difference was observed when comparing nonconfrontation and control strategies. However, the Pearson product-moment correlations between each of the subscales of the OCCI and the total score on CAS were not significant. This presents a very interesting finding. What would be causing this? Upon further consideration, it was noted that each of the

subscales of the OCCI had a different number of items and, thus, their mean subscores would be different. This could be what is causing the *t*-tests to produce significant results. In the future, researchers should use the same number of items for each of these subscales to avoid obtaining misleading results.

Since the participants used in this study were undergraduates, they may not have had much experience dealing with conflict in organizations. However, the justification for selecting college students coincides with Claire's (1996) reason for examining the colloquialism "a real job." She selected college students because "the notion that educational systems (e.g., universities) have been thought of as outside the real world yet are a place where individuals are prepared for life in the real world" (p. 254). In other words, any job they hold while in school may not be thought of as a real job by others outside of the academic realm but, to college students, it is the closest thing to a real job they can have while they are completing their education. Furthermore, they see their current job as a means for gaining money, experience, and a reputation for being a good employee. Even though, their behavioral repertoire, which Spitzberg and Cupach (1989) believe is an essential component of flexibility, may be somewhat limited. This would affect the adaptations one would make to the physical, social, and relational context. In other words, they may not be as communicatively adaptive as another sample who has been in the work force for a longer period of time. Future research should attempt to gather data from another sample of participants who have been out in the work force for a longer period of time and, therefore, have probably had more experience in handling organizational conflict.

Since the literature has shown that people in conflict situations typically hold multiple goals that vary in content and relationship, and in short- and long-term needs (e.g., Hocker & Wilmot, 1985), this author believed that subordinates using a more collaborative and

compromising conflict strategy (solution-oriented) would be more communicatively adaptive than those using a nonconfrontation or control strategy for several reasons. First, the individual using the solution-oriented strategy would be more willing than an individual using an avoiding (i.e., nonconfrontation) strategy to get involved in organizational conflict. Furthermore, Burke (1970) and others (e.g., Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967) report that people who use avoiding strategies are the least effective managers. Second, an individual using a solution-oriented strategy, rather than a control strategy, will be more open-minded and able to compromise. Indeed, supervisors using confrontation (i.e., forcing, solution-oriented) styles are more effective managers (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1970). Third, the individual using a solution-oriented strategy will keep in mind the goals of each interactant and try to achieve these goals all while trying to resolve the conflict.

Sex differences in conflict styles (e.g., Rahim, 1983) and communicative adaptability (e.g., Duran & Kelly, 1985) have been investigated in the literature. However, future research may want to examine the differences and similarities based on gender to see if females are more adaptive than males during conflict interactions.

As the results indicated in this study, a goal of an individual may be to appear calm and relaxed during conflict, thereby avoiding or downplaying the conflict. Another conflict strategy available to communicatively adaptive participants was humor. This finding emphasizes the importance of having a large behavioral repertoire of skills available to choose from when needed. Indeed, most of the competence literature discusses the importance of one's ability to recognize and utilize those skills from one's repertoire that will "work" in certain situations. The goals of the interactants involved in organizational communication conflict may influence the choices they make regarding their adaptive and conflict strategies. After all, as Hawes and Smith

(1973) and others (e.g., Wilson & Putnam, 1986) have noted, these goals can serve not only to predict behavior but they can change as the conflict develops. Therefore, if the goals of each person involved in the conflict change the conflict styles may change as well. If the conflict styles change, an examination of one's adaptability in the interaction may prove to be beneficial.



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Table 1

Means and standard deviations of the Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument, Communicative Adaptability Scale, and their respective dimensions.

| Measure and Dimensions                                 | Mean   | Standard Deviation |
|--|--------|--------------------|
| Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument Total | 89.19  | 7.36               |
| Nonconfrontation                                       | 38.61  | 6.62               |
| Solution-oriented                                      | 27.16  | 5.04               |
| Compromise   | 12.70  | 2.82               |
| Collaboration  | 14.46  | 3.19               |
| Control  | 23.41  | 4.28               |
| Communicative Adaptability Scale Total                 | 101.63 | 18.09              |
| Social Composure                                       | 16.85  | 4.11               |
| Social Confirmation                                    | 18.14  | 5.15               |
| Social Experience                                      | 17.63  | 4.93               |
| Appropriate Disclosure                                 | 16.61  | 3.34               |
| Articulation   | 17.47  | 4.49               |
| Wit  | 14.93  | 3.73               |

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