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Conflict Management Styles in Croatian Enterprises – The Relationship between Individual Characteristics and Conflict Handling Styles

SVEUČILIŠTE U
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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 to the conflict handling style used by Croatian employees. Precisely, gender, marital status and parenthood were found to relate significantly with the respondents' usage of accommodating, gender and parenthood were found to relate significantly with the respondents' usage of compromising, and parenthood was found to relate significantly with 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 diverse conflict handling styles.

Keywords
managing conflict, conflict handling styles, contextual parameters and conflict handling styles, Croatia

JEL classification
M00, M10

Sažetak

Osim određivanja dominantnog stila upravljanja sukobima hrvatskih zaposlenika, cilj istraživanja bio je odrediti povezanost između karakteristika pojedinaca i njihovog stila upravljanja sukobima. Iz tog je razloga istraživana povezanost između varijabli spol, dob, obrazovna razina, područje rada, hijerarhijska razina, bračni status te roditeljstvo i upotrebe pojedinih stilova upravljanja sukobima.

Ukupno, a tako i za sve 22 podgrupe ispitanika, kompromis se pokazao kao stil koji zaposlenici u hrvatskim organizacijama najviše koriste. Tri od ukupno sedam karakteristika pojedinaca pokazale su se povezanima s njihovim stilom upravljanja sukobima. Točnije, spol, bračni status i roditeljstvo su značajno povezani s korištenjem prilagođavanja kao stila upravljanja sukobima, spol i roditeljstvo su značajno povezani s korištenjem kompromisa kao stila upravljanja sukobima, a roditeljstvo se pokazalo značajnim za korištenje izbjegavanja kao stila upravljanja sukobima. Dob, obrazovna razina, područje rada i hijerarhijska razina nisu se pokazale značajnima za stil upravljanja sukobima koji koriste hrvatski zaposlenici.

Ključne riječi
upravljanje sukobima, stilovi upravljanja sukobima, situacijske varijable i stilovi upravljanja sukobima, Hrvatska

JEL klasifikacija
M00, M10

1. 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, 207).

Within organizations conflicts are inevitable, and arise in case of disagreements over workloads, problems 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, differing values and situations create tension (Darling & Walker, 2001, 230).

Consequently, number of researches on the subject of conflict and conflict management is immense.[1] More to it, because in response to growing demands for workplace harmony and productivity effective conflict management is becoming paramount (Chan et al., 2006, 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 et al., 1995; Brewer et al., 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 et al., 1999; Brewer et al., 2002
Marital status	Pinto & Ferrer, 2002
Experience	Drory & Ritov, 1997; Pinto & Ferrer, 2002; Cetin & Hacifazlioglu, 2004
Profession	McKenna & Richardson, 1995; Cornille et al., 1999; Goodwin, 2002; Hignite et al., 2002; Cetin & Hacifazlioglu, 2004
Personality	Jones & White, 1985; King & Miles, 1990; Haferkamp, 1991; Earnest & McCaslin, 1994; Sorenson et al., 1995; Antonioni, 1998; Moberg, 2001
Moral development	Rahim et al., 1999
Team role preference	Aritzeta et al., 2005
Individual outcomes	Weider-Hatfield & Hatfield, 1995; Friedman et al., 2000; Rahim et al., 2001
Opponent's power	Rosenthal & Hautaluoma, 1988; Weider-Hatfield & Hatfield, 1995; Drory & Ritov, 1997; Rahim et al., 2001
Importance of the conflict	Rosenthal & Hautaluoma, 1988
Group diversity	Cox et al., 1991
Culture/subculture	Lee Agee & Kabasakal, 1993; McKenna, 1995; McKenna & Richardson, 1995; Elsayed-Ekhouly & Buda, 1996; Morris et al., 1998; Kozan, 2002
Company size	Havenga, 2006

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

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[1] Researches in that field spread from those about ways of measuring interpersonal conflict in organizations (Rahim, 1983; Knapp et al., 1988; Womack, 1988; Van de Vliert & Kabanoff, 1990), intragroup conflict and effects of conflict in groups and teams (Jehn, 1995; Amason, 1996; Porter & Lilly, 1996; Jehn et al., 1997; Jehn et al., 1999; Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Chen & Tjosvold, 2002), relationship between cognitive/affective conflict and organizational outcomes (Amason, 1996; Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1991; Jehn, 1995; Jehn, 1997; Friedman et al., 2000; DeChurch & Marks, 2001; Edmondson & McLain Smith, 2006), role of emotions in conflict formation and its transformation (Bodtker & Jameson, 2001), quantity of conflict depending on the group diversity (Murnighan & Conlon, 1991; Pelled, 1996; Pelled et al., 1999; Lovelace et al., 2001), to those about conflicts in family firms (Davis & Harveston, 2001; Havenga, 2006), conflicts in project teams (Hill, 1977; Porter & Lilly, 1996), conflicts in inter-firm relationships (Hirschman, 2001; Delerue, 2005), or third party role in conflict resolution (Lewicki & Sheppard, 1985; Lewicki et al., 1992; Kozan & Ilter, 1994).

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level, marital status, and parenthood, as main individual characteristics), and their conflict handling behaviors, as subject that to date has received little if any attention. Precisely, except literature review of conflict handling styles and their relationship with different individual characteristics, the purpose of this study was to give 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?

2.   THE IMPORTANCE OF MANAGING CONFLICT

In the 1930s and 1940s, conflict was viewed as an undesirable phenomenon. However, that *traditional viewpoint*[2] of conflict gave way to the *behavioral viewpoint*[3] of the 1960s in which conflict was seen as an inevitable fact of organizational life to be recognized and addressed (Jones & White, 1985, 152-153), and to the contemporary *interactionist viewpoint*, in which conflict is viewed as potentially useful to energize a company, point out problems and unify a group (Banner, 1995, 31). Conflict is today not considered to be a bad thing anymore[4]. Opposite to the "conflict avoidance" perspective of traditionalists, the "conflict management" perspective of interactionists recognizes that while conflict does have associated costs, it can also bring great benefits. Properly managed, it can be a creative force for the business and the individual, because if we regard differences of opinion as valuable sources of cross-fertilization, they begin to enrich our experience (Bagshaw, 1998, 206). In other words, conflict presents exciting possibilities about the future (if managed in a positive, constructive fashion[5]), because difficult situations and relationships are said to be the ones that make people grow.

Channeling conflict in a positive or negative way may affect the nature of the conflict whether beneficial or destructive (Cetin & Hacifazlioglu, 2004, 325)[6]. If not managed properly, conflicts can result

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[2] Classical organization theorists believed that conflict produced inefficiency and was therefore undesirable, detrimental to the organization and should be eliminated or at least minimized to the extent possible (Cetin & Hacifazlioglu, 2004, 325). For many, and for long, conflict had negative connotations, and was something that invokes negative feelings, frustration and stress, jeopardizes personal relationships, reduces group cohesiveness, decreases job satisfaction and morale, hinders productivity and effectiveness, and leads to destruction.

[3] Behavioral theorists see conflict as a "given," more to it, they agree that there could not be a conflict-free state in human experience, and therefore their best expectation is to be able to "resolve" or "reduce" conflict through the use of variety of strategies (Banner, 1995).

[4] Unfortunately, still plenty of today's managers and employees view conflict as negative and something to be avoided at all costs or immediately resolved (Jehn, 1997; Darling & Fogliasso, 1999).

[5] Constructive conflict management means that the protagonists benefit from dealing with the incompatible activities in that they develop a quality solution and strengthen their relationship more than they incur costs (Chen & Tjosvold, 2002, 558). Therefore, enterprises have increasingly moved from efforts to eliminate conflict to effectively managing conflict, acknowledging that conflict is simply an expected (and sometimes even desirable) byproduct of organizational processes (Hignite et al., 2002, 316).

[6] There are many types of conflicts. Firstly, conflicts can be constructive (functional, beneficial) or destructive (dysfunctional). *Constructive conflicts* are beneficial for organizations (they boost organizational effectiveness) and therefore welcomed, while *destructive conflicts* diminish organizational effectiveness and are therefore not desirable. However, attempts to stimulate constructive conflict often inadvertently trigger destructive conflict (Amason, 1996). Secondly, conflicts, depending on whether participants in a conflict situation are individuals, groups, organizations or nations, could be classified into intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, intergroup, interorganizational, and intercultural conflict. *Intrapersonal conflict* can arise from a division between one's values and one's behaviors, *interpersonal conflict* results from goal incompatibility between two parties, *intragroup conflict* occurs when there are disagreements between group members, *intergroup conflict* arises when two or more groups in an organization setting have incompatible goals, *interorganizational conflict* exists by the design of the free enterprise system, and *intercultural conflict* takes place when there are disagreements between cultures or countries. Thirdly, conflicts can be cognitive (task, substance, structural) or affective (relationship, interpersonal, social, emotional). *Cognitive conflict* occurs when parties argue over alternatives related to a task, in other words when there are differences in opinion relating to work or business decisions. *Affective conflict* results over interpersonal disagreements not directly related to the task, meaning that it pertains to personality differences and interpersonal tensions. As Jehn (1995, 258) appealingly defined when she talked about task and relationship conflict within groups, relationship conflict exists when there are interpersonal incompatibilities among group members, which typically include tension, animosity, and annoyance among members within a group, whereas task conflict exists when there are disagreements among group members about the content of the tasks being performed, including differences in viewpoints, ideas, and opinions. Interesting about those two types of conflict is that although there are clear theoretical and empirical distinctions

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in bad feelings, high turnover and costly litigation (Hirschman, 2001, 59), and are said to be one of the most difficult challenges organizational members face (Phillips & Cheston, 1979) and one of the most frustrating and uncomfortable experiences for managers (Earnest & McCaslin, 1994). At the most serious levels conflicts can bring teams, departments and sometimes whole organizations to a virtual standstill (Fritchie & Leary, 1998, 1).

Quite the opposite, when conflict is recognized, acknowledged and managed in proper manner, personal and organizational benefits accrue (Darling & Fogliasso, 1999, 383). Conflicts affect work and organizational productivity, and nurture both people and businesses. Particularly, conflicts in organizational settings enhance decision quality, improve individual/group/team satisfaction and individual/group/team outcomes (creativity, problem solving, performance, effectiveness), increase productivity and organizational effectiveness, result in more innovation, and can be an engine of change (Jehn, 1995; Amason, 1996; Darling & Walker, 2001; DeChurch & Marks, 2001; Chen & Tjosvold, 2002; Cetin & Hacifazlioglu, 2004; Chan et al., 2006).

Finally, even successful management these days depends heavily on an ability to handle conflict effectively, as Mintzberg (1975) observed over 30 years ago, when he said that every manager must spend a good part of his time responding to high-pressure disturbances and called that managerial role *the disturbance handler*, and McShulskis (1996) reaffirmed with his finding that executives spend 18 percent of their time resolving employee personality clashes, while ten years before the time spent on employee mediation was half that amount. Thus, the foremost managerial task nowadays became to create a climate where conflict is managed and not avoided (Bagshaw, 1998), and to permit conflict to serve a productive function (Phillips & Cheston, 1979). In other words, contemporary managers are called upon to resolve differences in priorities and preferences, and use conflict in a way that benefits their organizations (Friedman et al., 2000).

However, although the ability to resolve conflicts is considered an important skill for managers, managers are no longer the only ones who need to hone their conflict resolution skills. The popularity of teamwork, increased market competition, globalization, resource shortages, more rapid business pace, changes in technology, job insecurity, frequent restructuring processes, mergers, acquisitions, strategic alliances, and other contemporary business issues, made efficient conflict management skills essential at all organizational instances. In order for individuals to function effectively at any level within organizations, conflict management skills (skills of dealing with conflict with peers, superiors, subordinates, clients, or other parties) become important prerequisites (Brewer et al., 2002; Havenga, 2006). Therefore, employers are increasingly emphasizing the ability of their employees to manage or resolve conflict as a key ingredient of future success for both the individual and the firm (Hignite et al., 2002, 315).

3.   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:[7] 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",[8] whereas Thomas and Kilman (1974 in Brahnam et al., 2005) labeled them assertiveness and cooperativeness.[9]

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between them, each type of conflict tends to accompany the other (Pelled et al., 1999, 23). For instance, cognitive conflicts may be taken personally by group members and generate affective conflict, and affective conflict may prompt group members to criticize each other's ideas, thereby fostering cognitive conflict (Pelled et al., 1999, 23). However, cognitive conflict should be encouraged, while, in the same time, affective conflict should be discouraged (Amason, 1996, 141).

[7] Conflict handling style refers to specific behavioral patterns that one prefers to employ when addressing conflict situation (Moberg, 2001, 47).

[8] "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.

[9] Assertiveness is behavior intended to satisfy one's own concerns, while cooperativeness is behavior intended to satisfy another's concerns.

Figure 1
A two-dimensional model of conflict handling styles
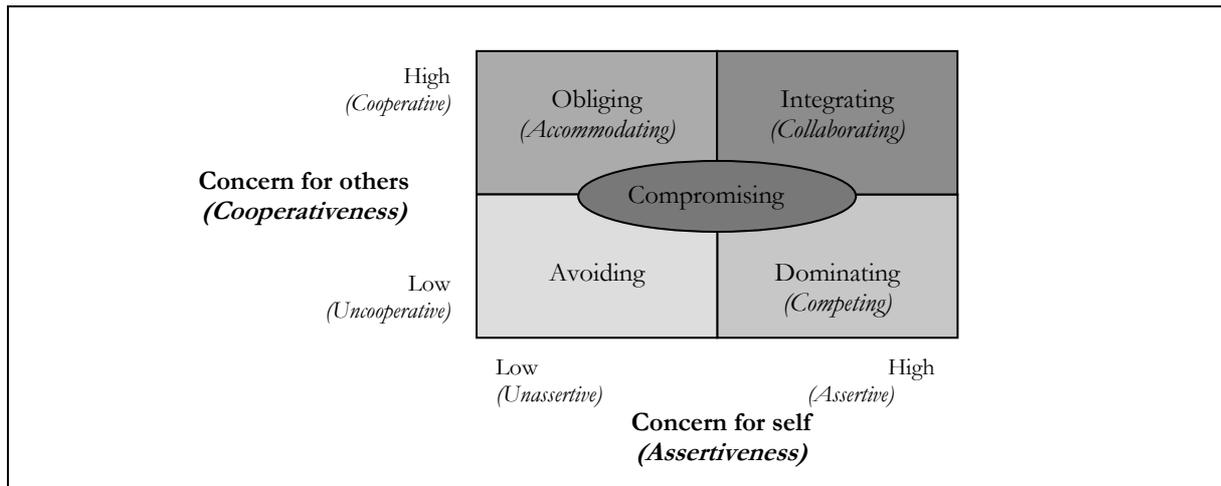
Compiled using: Rahim (1983, 369) and Thomas & Kilman (1974 in Brahnam et al. (2005, 199))

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	▪ Low concern for self and low concern for others; unassertive and uncooperative personality ▪ Lose-lose outcome (because both parties refrain from communicating their needs, so neither has any needs met) ▪ The desire to withdraw from the conflict situation or suppress the conflict ▪ Withdrawal behavior, postponement, disengagement from conflict, hiding disagreement, sidestepping ▪ The likely outcome is that the conflict remains unresolved ▪ 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
Competing (Dominating)	▪ High concern for self and low concern for others; assertive and uncooperative personality ▪ Win-lose outcome (because one of the parties in conflict is aggressive and attempts to make sure that only their needs are met) ▪ 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 ▪ 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 ▪ Individuals "stand up for their rights," defend a position which they believe is correct, or simply want to win
Accommodating (Obliging)	▪ Low concern for self and high concern for others; unassertive and cooperative personality ▪ Lose-win outcome ▪ A self-sacrifice style (sacrifice of self-interests to satisfy the needs of others) ▪ 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 ▪ Individuals seek consent and approval, and are eager to be helpful and supportive of others ▪ 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
Compromising	▪ Moderate/intermediate concern for both self and others; medium assertive and cooperative personality (midpoint between cooperativeness and assertiveness) ▪ Associated with give-and-take or sharing the search for a middle-ground solution ▪ No-win/no-lose outcome (a middle ground in solving conflict where both parties would "give something" in order to "take something") ▪ 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) ▪ Might mean splitting the difference, exchanging concessions, or seeking a quick middle-ground position

Collaborating (Integrating)	- High concern for self and high concern for others; collaboration between parties; assertive and cooperative personality - Win-win outcome (interaction with others in a win-win manner) - 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) - 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 - 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 - Interested in preserving longstanding business relationships

Developed using: Elsayed-Ekhouly & Buda (1996), Blitman (2002),
Goodwin (2002), Rahim (2002), and Aritzeta et al. (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 et al., 2001; Brahnam et al., 2005). As Brahnam et al. (2005, 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, 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).[10] 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 et al., 1988; King & Miles, 1990; Lee Agee & Kabasakal, 1993; McKenna & Richardson, 1995; Drory & Ritov, 1997; Bell & Forde, 1999; Goodwin, 2002; Rahim, 2002; Delerue, 2005).

The appropriateness/inappropriateness of conflict handling styles depending on situations is enlightened in table 3.

Table 3
The appropriateness/inappropriateness of conflict handling styles depending on situations

Conflict style	Situations where appropriate	Situations where inappropriate
Integrating	- Issues are complex - Synthesis of ideas is needed to come up with better solutions - Commitment is needed from other parties for successful implementation - Time is available for problem solving - One party alone cannot solve the problem - Resources possessed by different parties are needed to solve their common problems	- Task or problem is simple - Immediate decision is required - Other parties are unconcerned about outcome - Other parties do not have problem-solving skills

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[10] More to it, the process of conflict handling is often lengthy and dynamic, and therefore the entire conflict may go through several phases of negotiations, during which the parties may change their conflict management styles (Drory and Ritov, 1997, 151).

Obliging	▪ You believe that you may be wrong ▪ Issue is more important to the other party ▪ You are willing to give up something in exchange for something from the other party in the future ▪ You are dealing from a position of weakness ▪ Preserving relationship is important	▪ Issue is important to you ▪ You believe that you are right ▪ The other party is wrong or unethical
Dominating	▪ Issue is trivial ▪ Speedy decision is needed ▪ Unpopular course of action is implemented ▪ Necessary to overcome assertive subordinates ▪ Unfavorable decision by the other party may be costly to you ▪ Subordinates lack expertise to make technical decisions ▪ Issue is important to you	▪ Issue is complex ▪ Issue is not important to you ▪ Both parties are equally powerful ▪ Decision does not have to be made quickly ▪ Subordinates possess high degree of competence
Avoiding	▪ Issue is trivial ▪ Potential dysfunctional effect of confronting the other party outweighs benefits of resolution ▪ Cooling off period is needed	▪ Issue is important to you ▪ It is your responsibility to make decision ▪ Parties are unwilling to defer; issue must be resolved ▪ Prompt attention is needed
Compromising	▪ Goals of parties are mutually exclusive ▪ Parties are equally powerful ▪ Consensus cannot be reached ▪ Integrating or dominating style is not successful ▪ Temporary solution to a complex problem is needed	▪ One party is more powerful ▪ Problem is complex enough needing problem-solving approach

Source: Rahim (2002, 219)

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, 336). Moreover, although every individual is capable of using all five conflict-handling modes (McKenna and Richarson, 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, 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, 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, 95).

4. 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 posed. Hypotheses of the research and rationale for their formulation are depicted in table 4.

Table 4
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 et al., 2002; Pinto & Ferrer, 2002), as people tend to seek other people approval and tend to compromise toward the group mean.[11]
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:[12] 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, 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, 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, 201).[13]
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 filed of work.	Earlier studies have found that the dominant conflict handling style varies depending on the profession (Cornille et al., 1999; Goodwin, 2002; Hignite et al., 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 et al., 2002) and collaborating style (Brewer et al., 2002), while lower status individuals prefer and report greater use of avoiding, accommodating and compromising (Putnam and Poole, 1987 in Drory & Ritov, 1997; Brewer et al., 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

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

[12] 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, adventurism, competitiveness, while women are thought to develop feminine characteristics such as emotionality, sensitivity, tenderness, kindness, and cooperativeness (Pološki, 1999, 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, 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, 31); (4) approach to negotiation as a collaborative effort with long-term implications is characteristic of women (Greenhalgh in Helgesen, 1995, 247); and (5) more aggressiveness is found in male behavior (Bell & Forde, 1999).

[13] However, not all contemporary findings are consistent. For instance, researchers found women more avoiding (Brewer et al., 2002; McKenna & Richardson, 1995; Chan et al., 2006), men having a significantly higher accommodating score (Sorenson et al., 1995), men to use the compromising style more than women (McKenna & Richardson, 1995), as well as no clear gender differences to conflict resolution (Sorenson et al., 1995; Pinto & Ferrer, 2002).

characteristics embodied in this research (such as marital status or parenthood) are not so common subjects of exploration, as table 1 reveals.

5. 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.[14] 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 numerical 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 labeled the "situational" conflict style preference).[15] 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 characteristics (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.[16] They provided both their responses to PCHS instrument, and answered demographic and work related questions. Table 5 depicts their profile.

Table 5
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 calculations (mean values, standard deviations, crosstabulations), in order to assess the relationship between respondents' characteristics and their conflict handling styles, as

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[14] 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; Jones & White, 1985; King & Miles, 1990; Van de Vliert & Kabanoff, 1990; Earnest & McCaslin, 1994; McKenna & Richardson, 1995; Sorenson et al., 1995; Volkema & Bergmann, 1995; Weider-Hatfield & Hatfield, 1995; Elsayed-Ekhouly & Buda, 1996; Cornille et al., 1999; Friedman et al., 2000; Lovelace et al., 2001; Moberg, 2001; Brewer et al., 2002; Goodwin, 2002; Hignite et al., 2002; Pinto & Ferrer, 2002; Cetin & Hacifazlioglu, 2004; Aritzeta et al., 2005; Brahnam et al., 2005; Chan et al., 2006; Havenga, 2006).

[15] 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).

[16] 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 et al. (2002) had 118 employees in their sample, Goodwin (2002) had 72 respondents in her study, Aritzeta et al. (2005) had 108 final year undergraduate students in their sample, and Havenga (2006) observed 56 owners/managers of small business in his survey.

well as to determine the significant findings related to different variables, chi-square tests (χ^2), one-way ANOVA analysis (F tests), independent samples t-tests, and Pearson correlation coefficients were utilized. Calculations and tests were conducted using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

6. RESEARCH RESULTS

Research results are presented in two sections, according to the 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.

6.1. 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).

Figure 2
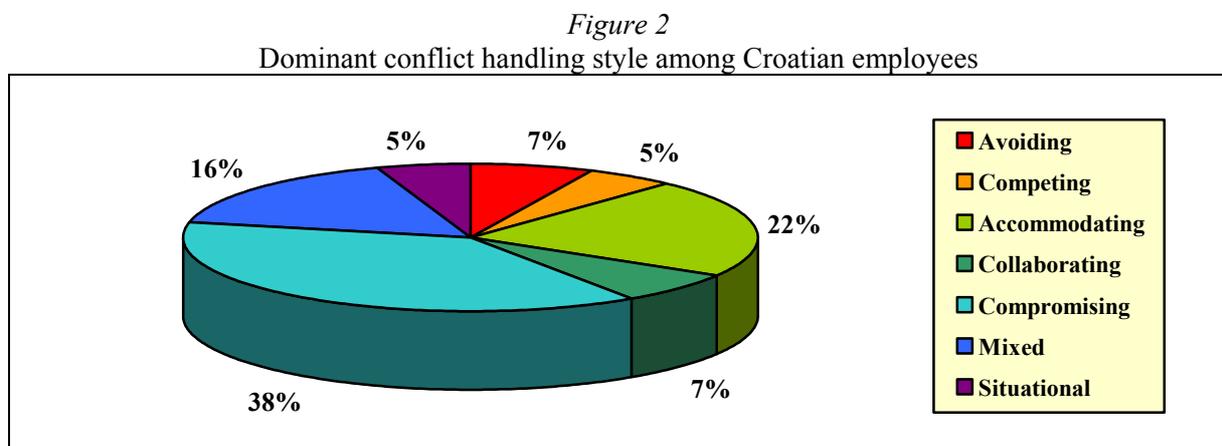Dominant conflict handling style among Croatian employees

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 6 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 percent. Additionally, 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 6
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 6 display.

6.2. 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 7 exhibits.

Table 7
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	**5.411**	**0.022**	**0.05**
Collaborating	115	0.475	0.492	
Compromising	115	**5.784**	**0.018**	**0.05**

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).

Figure 3
Conflict handling style scores according to gender
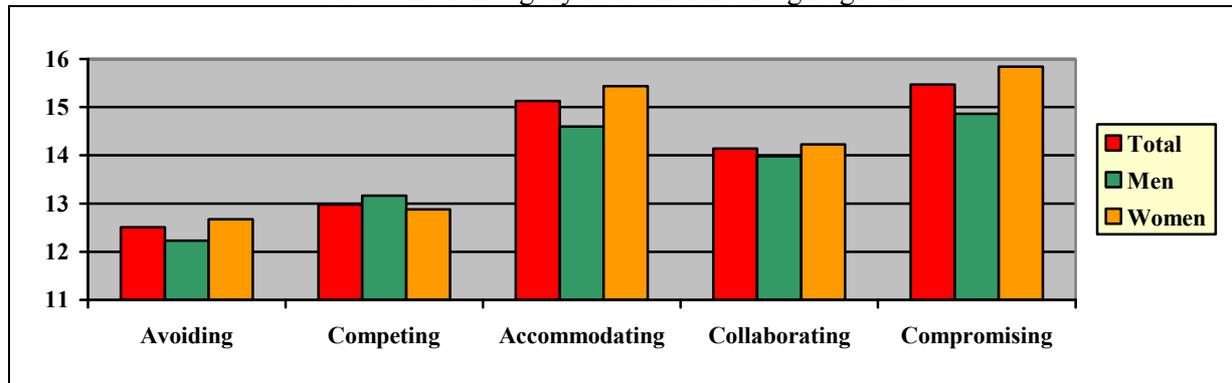
Additionally, figure 3 exhibits that women have higher avoiding and collaborating scores, but lower competing scores than men, although those scores are not significantly different for the two subgroups.

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 <u>the second hypothesis</u> of this research, <u>there are arguments for its acceptance</u>, since two out of five conflict handling styles are found to be more associated with women then 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 8, 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 8
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 4), 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 <u>no argument for the acceptance</u> of <u>the third hypothesis</u> of this research that (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 9).

Table 9
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 4). Surprisingly, the competing score declines with respondents' level of education.

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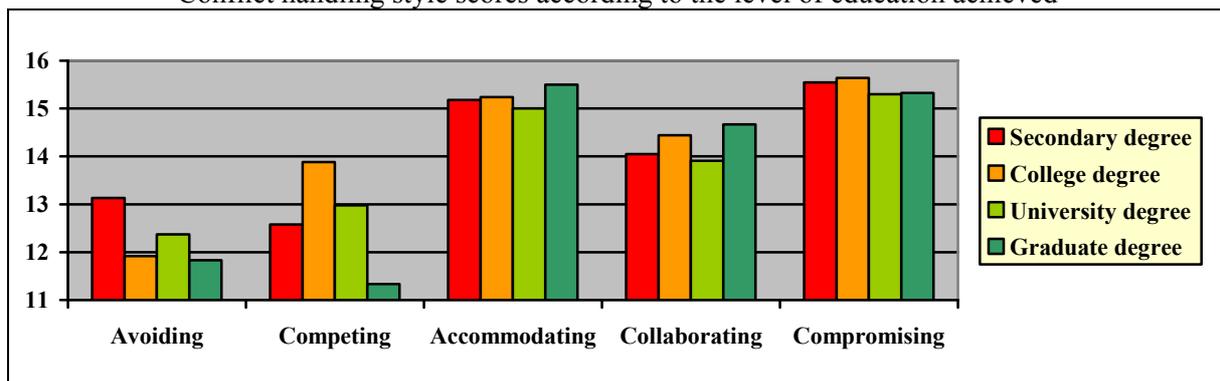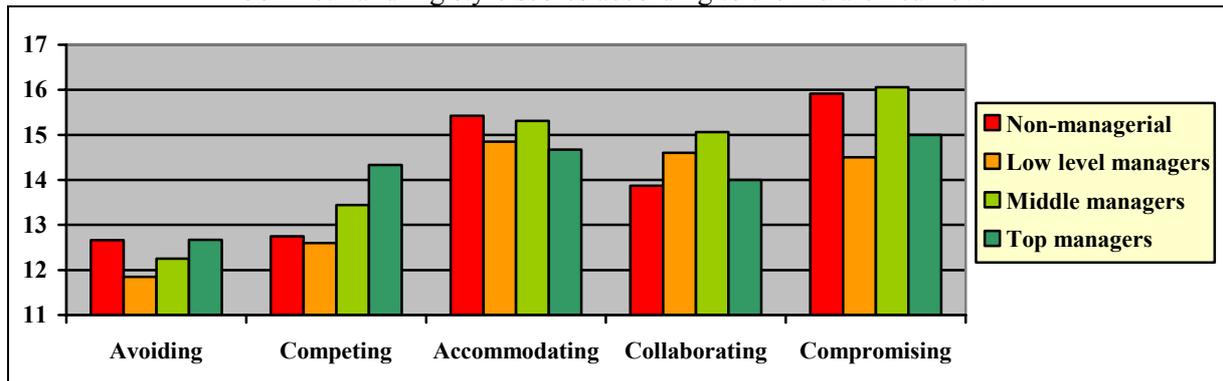

Concerning the fourth hypothesis of this research, there is no argument for its acceptance, since there were no significant differences or relationships found between the educational level and conflict handling style expressed.

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 4). 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 remainder of previous findings concerning the relationship between the conflict handling style and hierarchical level (see table 4), 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.

Figure 5
Conflict handling style scores according to the hierarchical level

Regarding <u>the sixth hypothesis</u> of this research, the conclusion is once more that there is <u>no argument for its acceptance</u>, 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 10 reveals.

Table 10
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	**3.925**	**0.010**	**0.05**
	Collaborating	115	0.627	0.599	
	Compromising	115	1.409	0.244	
Parenthood	Avoiding	115	**7.819**	**0.006**	**0.01**
	Competing	115	0.470	0.494	
	Accommodating	115	**7.689**	**0.006**	**0.01**
	Collaborating	115	0.864	0.355	
	Compromising	115	**7.478**	**0.007**	**0.01**

As table 10 depicts, and figure 6 illustrates, married employees significantly more frequently use accommodating conflict handling style as a predominant one. In 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 comparing to the behavior of their colleagues with children.

Figure 6
Conflict handling style scores according to the marital status and parenthood
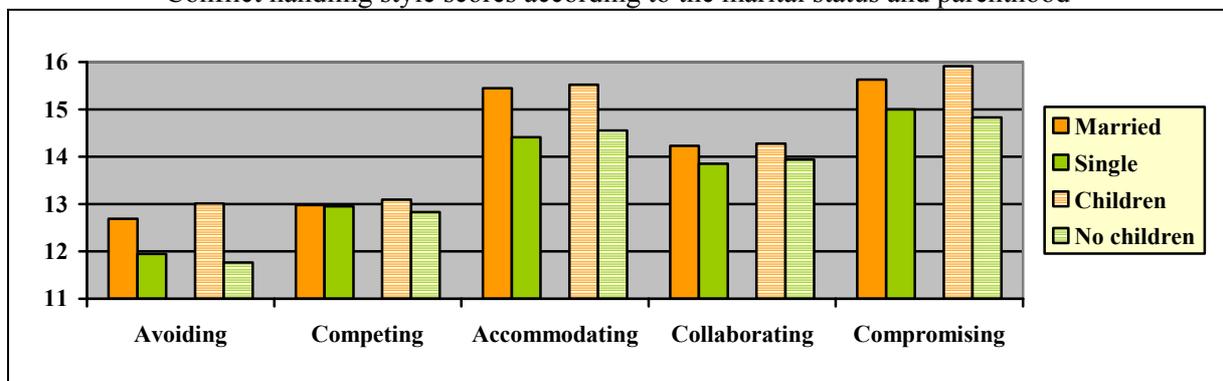
In order to verify the relationships between family status and conflict handling style, independent samples t-tests were conducted. Test results supported previously stated, since the significant difference between marital status and usage of accommodating conflict handling style was found (t = -2.747, 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.

7. DISCUSSION

Presented results enable answering two research questions placed at the beginning of this survey. Firstly, the dominant conflict handling style among Croatian employees was detected, and then the relationship between demographic and work characteristics of an individual and his/her conflict handling style was explored.

The most frequently used conflict handling style among Croatian employees is without doubt compromising (see figure 2 and table 6). This finding corresponds with earlier findings about compromising being the most frequently used conflict resolution style among world population (see table 4).

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 coworkers, 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. More to it, 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, 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 people who do not have them. 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.

Altogether, gender, marital status and parenthood do relate with the practice of using particular conflict handling style, while age, educational level, field of work and hierarchical level do not relate with it.

8. 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.

9. CONCLUSION

Except from 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 surveyed individual characteristics 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 with the respondents' usage of accommodating conflict handling style, gender and parenthood were found to relate significantly with the respondents' usage of compromising style, and parenthood was found to relate significantly with the respondents' usage of avoiding style. In the same time, age, educational level, field of work and hierarchical level were not found to relate significantly with 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. More to it, 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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