ANALYZING THE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES OF PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYEES IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to investigate the conflict resolution styles used by public sector employees. To this end, the article reports findings from an analysis of the conflict resolution styles of teachers and nurses working in the public sector of Ghana. A total sample of 331 public sector employees including 189 public school teachers and 142 nurses of public hospitals was investigated. Rahim’s Organisational Conflict Inventory -ROCI-II) was used to collect data from the sample which was analysed using regression statistical method. Results showed that the most preferred conflict resolution style by teachers was ‘Avoiding’ followed by integrating/collaborating, whereas ‘Compromising’ was the least preferred style. For nurses, the most preferred style was ‘Avoiding’ followed by ‘Obliging/Accommodation’, whereas the compromising style was the least preferred. Teachers significantly differed from nurses in the utilization of Dominating and Compromising conflict resolution styles. Teachers utilized these two styles more often than the nurses. Recommendations and implications are discussed.

1. Introduction

Conflicts are an everyday phenomenon in organisations. They are not possible to avoid but can be managed to get the best out of it. Conflict may arise whenever two or more individuals interact, regardless of their position in the organisation (Darling & Walker, 2001) and occurs whenever one party presents an opposing interaction that interferes with the aims or goals of another party (Almost, 2005). Within the organisation are different people from different backgrounds who interact, have different feelings, interests and thoughts, and therefore conflict is likely to arise.

According to Song, Dyer, and Thieme (2006) conflict management in organisations in recent past has become very critical because it is a multidimensional construct with both detrimental and beneficial effects (Almost, 2006). Managers spend 40% to 90% of their time dealing with conflict of one form or another (Roberts, 2006). Conflict is good because it stimulates innovative thinking when properly managed. However, unresolved or unmanaged workplace conflict can be dysfunctional and may be seen in the form of frustration, disappointment and poor performance, lost hours of management and employees, hampering creativity and productivity, souring of relationships and high employee turnover (George, Miroga & Omweri, 2013). However, if managed effectively, conflict can be a positive force in organisations (Rahim, 2002; Song, et al., 2006). The key to management of conflict comes with the understanding of what conflict is, its effect and the strategies available to handle them.

Relational and task conflict have a negative effect on network member satisfaction (Bradford, Stringfellow & Weitz 2003) and therefore need to be managed. Teachers and nurses interact and relate a lot with colleagues and many other people in the course of performing their tasks and therefore conflict is bound to arise. The adoption of appropriate strategies in managing conflict in the workplace has become a significant part of managers' responsibilities because of the impact it has on the growth, development and performance of the organisation. Poorly managed workplace conflict can demoralise staff, increase turnover, damage relationship with valued referral sources among others (Sotile, 1999).
There has been several strike actions and agitation by nurses and teachers in the past few years and some publications (the 20th March 2013 edition of the Ghanaian Chronicle, published that concerned teachers have declared an indefinite strike action; On the Ghana web on the 23rd August, 2013 it was posted that nurses in Korle-Bu teaching hospital have threatened to embark on strike; The African Report on 16th May, 2014 also reported that graduate teachers have embarked on a nationwide strike) and these create a perception of an increase in threats to go on strike by two important service providers – teachers and nurses. If conflict is not managed it results in dissatisfaction of the employees’ job but with the adoption of appropriate strategies in its management much can be derived from it.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the conflict management styles of public sector employees in an African country with the intent of furthering the knowledge related to conflict management styles in the two professions guided by the game theory. The game theory is a tool for analysing decision making, when an individual decides and when a group or team does. Thus it is argued that teachers and nurses make choices or decide on which style to adopt under which condition and which conflict management style is more likely to be used by each. The study looks at the extent to which Rahim’s (1983, 2002) styles of managing conflict applies in the Ghanaian context. The results of the study will extend the understanding of conflict management styles adopted by teachers and nurses in the Ghanaian environment.

This study thus sought to find out the conflict management strategies adopted in the management of conflict among teachers and nurses in the Tema Metropolis of Ghana and to identify if there are any variations in behaviour between these two categories of employees so far as conflict management styles is concerned. This paper is structured in main parts. The first deals with the introduction to the paper, the second being an explanation of key concepts which is followed by methodology for the study. The fourth deals with the presentation of data and lastly discussion.

2. Conflict and conflict management styles: Towards a definition
Conflict is endemic in social life and whenever there is a difference of opinion there are chances of conflict (Pathak, 2010). Conflict generally is seen as a struggle or misunderstanding between people who have opposing views, beliefs, values and perception about issues and situations. It is a process that begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect something that the first party cares about (Robbins, 1998). Conflict according to Ramani and Zhimin (2010) arises when two or more values, perspectives and opinions are contradictory and have not been associated or agreed about yet.

Conflict exists in organisations (Ongori, 2009) and arises when one or more persons try to ensure their preferred outcome is achieved to the exclusion of the other individuals’ preferred outcome. Conflict is a process in which one party perceives that its interests are being opposed or negatively affected by another party (Wall & Callister, 1995; McShane & Von-Glinow, 2000) and can occur between individuals, groups, organisations and even nations (Rahim, 1983).

There exist several antecedent conditions of conflict and some of the common antecedents of conflicts in organisations that exist in the literature include incompatible personalities or value systems; role ambiguities; competition for limited resources; overworking of employees; unreasonable or unclear policies/rules; complex organisational structure and increased tasks (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2004). Nelson and Quick (2001) on their part categorised the sources of conflict into two: structural and personal factors. They explained structural factors to refer to the kind of conflict that develop from within the organisation and originate from the manner in which work is organised. In the case of personal factors, they stated that these emerge as a result of individual differences among employees.
Conflict management is the process of limiting the negative aspects of conflict while increasing the positive aspects of conflict. The aim of conflict management is to enhance learning and group outcomes, including effectiveness or performance in organizational setting (Rahim, 2002). It involves acquiring the needed skills related to conflict resolution, communication skills and the establishment of a structure for the management of conflict. Conflict management minimizes the negative outcomes of conflict and promotes the positive outcomes of conflict with the goal of improving learning in an organization. (Rahim, 2002, p. 208).

Bodtker and Jameson (2001) stated that for a conflict to take place, these three elements must be presence. Furthermore they opine that to resolve a conflict one must identify and deal with all these elements, otherwise the attempt of managing the conflict will be unsuccessful. They outlined the following three steps to follow when managing conflicts:

1. Identify the conflict elements, emotions, behaviours and contradictions.
2. Transformation – Changing the orientation of the conflict and making the different parties aware of the elements.
3. Solution – Changing the elements allows transformation of the conflict direction, which leads to the solution becoming apparent.

2.1 Typologies of conflict management styles
The success of the organisation depends on its ability to recognise conflict as well as the way to manage the conflict. It entails the integration of all factors which can contribute to the resolution of the conflict. Managers use one of many different styles when attempting to deal with conflict (Graham, 2009) and need to understand and apply these conflict management styles/techniques in order to form strong relationship with subordinates (Huan & Yazdanifard, 2012).

Various models of conflict management have been developed and according to Graham (2009) employees fit into five different modes when faced with conflict in a workplace which include dominating, compromising, integrating, avoiding and obliging. For successful management of conflict one style may be more appropriate than another depending on the person, situation and the people involved. This has been emphasised by Ghaffar, Zaman and Naz (2012) who indicated that the best conflict style should be adopted according to the demand of the situation. However, each individual has a dominant style and as a result while a manager may use different conflict management styles in a certain situation, a dominant style is the style most often used by that individual (Alzawahreh & Khasawneh, 2011).

For the purpose of this study, Rahim’s (1983, 2002) styles of managing conflict was chosen and this includes integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding and compromising.
Integrating Style
Integrating conflict management style depicts high concern for self as well as others and focuses on solving the problem in a collaborative manner. There is great exchange of information and attempt is made to identify and examine differences to arrive at an effective solution acceptable to all parties involved in the conflict. This may be the reason why people who are more integrating create an environment with less conflict (Friedman, et al., 2000). When using the integrating (problem solving) style, parties in the conflict confront the issues and supportively identify the problem, come up with alternative solutions and choose the most suitable one (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2004). They indicated that even though this style is suitable in addressing complex issues related to misunderstanding, it is not suitable when dealing with issues rooted in opposing value systems. The main advantage is that there is a long lasting impact of outcomes since the fundamental problems are identified and addressed. The weakness however is about the amount of time used. More time is consumed to arrive at a solution as compared with other styles. The integrating style is used when resources can be expanded. For example, resources can be increased to accommodate each party’s request. But in the context of Africa and Ghana that are developing countries, resources are very limited and could not be expanded. Under these conditions, the integrating style may not be appropriate. Therefore, the following hypothesis is anticipate:

Hypothesis 1. Participants would not favour the integrating style of conflict resolution compared to other styles.

Obliging/Accommodating/Smoothing Style
The adoption of the Obligation (Smoothing) style results in the individual neglecting his/her own concerns and interest to enable him/her to satisfy the needs or concerns of the other party. This style focuses on playing down interests and focusing on commonalities (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2004) to satisfy the concerns of the other parties in conflict. Gross and Guerrero (2000) stated that the obliging style is generally perceived as neutral. Robbins and Judge (2009) describing it as accommodating style explained that here one party in the conflict desires to appease the other. This style, Kreitner and Kinicki (2004) indicated, is appropriate to use when one is likely to get something in return ultimately. The advantage of the adoption of this style is that it encourages cooperation but the disadvantage is that it does not deal with the causal problems.
Cultural beliefs could impact the choice of conflict resolution styles. The African culture is collectivistic in which people prefer harmony and sense of community. Another factor that may favour the accommodation style is the belief in cosmic justice. Africans are superstitious and believe that one can curse another by relying to witchcraft and black magic. Therefore, people may prefer to appease the other party for fear of ‘superstitious’ retribution. The following is therefore anticipated.

**Hypothesis 2:** Respondents would prefer the accommodating style of conflict resolution.

**Dominating Style**

When one party in conflict shows a high concern for self and a low concern for others when dealing with a conflict situation then the individual has adopted the dominating style (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2004). This is what Robbins and Judge (2009) describe as competing style. The individual’s interest is on himself or herself regardless of the impact it will have on the other person(s) involved. This style according to Kreitner and Kinicki (2004) relies on formal authority to enforce compliance. The dominating style is more effective when used along with integrative style (Gross & Guerrerro, 2000) and the most appropriate time to use it is when a solution to a problem is unpopular but needs to be implemented (Kreitner & Kinikii, 2004). According to Rahim (2002) the dominating style is a way of ignoring the needs and expectations of the other party in the conflict and pursuing one’s own interest using forceful tactics. Friedman, Tidd, Currall, and Tsai (2000) stated that people who are more dominating create an environment with more conflict and also results in resentment (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2004). Thus the focus is not on building relationship. Females generally are seen to value relationship and these two professions are dominated by females and therefore are not likely to prefer the dominating style. We therefore anticipate the following:

**Hypothesis 3.** Respondents would not prefer the dominating style of conflict resolution.

**Avoiding Style**

Individuals who use the avoidance conflict management style generally have a low concern for themselves and others. With this style, one party passively withdraws from the problem or actively suppresses the issue (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2004: Robbins & Judge, 2009). In this, neither of the parties involved is able to address the conflict but rather individuals simply pretend the conflict does not exist and hope it will ‘die a natural death’. Avoiding a conflict neither effectively resolve the conflict nor eliminate it, ultimately, the conflict will have to be tackled. Gross and Guerrero (2000) however, indicated that the avoiding conflict management style is often perceived as being an effective method to manage conflict. It is appropriate when dealing with issues that are trivial and inappropriate for difficult and worsening issues (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2004). It is also preferable when the potential dysfunctional effect of dealing with the conflict outweighs the benefits of the resolution of the conflict. Kreitner and Kinicki (2004) added that the main advantage is that one is able to buy time in ambiguous situations but the weakness is that it just provides a temporary fix to the issue without tackling the root cause. Majority of Ghanaians are believed to cherish relationship due to the extended family system. They are likely to avoid having any disagreement with others rather than being confrontational.

**Hypothesis 4.** Respondents would be more likely to prefer the avoidance style of conflict resolution compared to the dominating and integrating styles but not the compromising style.

**Compromising Style**

Compromising involves flexibility and negotiation (Robbins & Judge, 2009). It is described as a give and take situation where parties are concerned for both self and other (Kreitner & Kinicki, 2004). Under this condition each party in conflict offers something and therefore sharing occurs (Robbins & Judge, 2009) to help arrive at a mutually acceptable decision. It
may mean exchanging concessions or seeking a middle ground implying none of the parties in conflict is completely satisfied. Bradford et al. (2004) stated that in compromise style, parties seek solutions to a conflict situation by typically ‘splitting the difference’ and ‘meeting the partners halfway’. Rahim (2000) also stated that the use of this style leads to failure in identifying real, complex problems. This style can be adopted when the goals of the conflicting parties are mutually exclusive or when the parties involved have equal powers and have reached a deadlock. Too much reliance on this style may be dysfunctional. Alzawahreh and Khasawneh (2011) in a study on conflict management strategies adopted by Jordanian managers found that compromising is the second most common strategy adopted in managing conflict in organisations. Due to the collectivist nature of the African culture, Ghanaians are likely to place high value on harmony and getting along with others and therefore will prefer the compromise style. It is therefore hypothesise that

**Hypothesis 5.** Respondents would prefer the compromising style of conflict resolution compared to the integrating, dominating, and avoidance styles.

### 3. Method

**Sample**

The population for the study was nurses and professional teachers from the public hospitals and schools in the Tema metropolis of Ghana respectively. This category of workers was selected because they serve a lot of people and have tremendous influence on the lives of the people they serve both now and the future. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the public hospitals and schools and a multi-stage sampling technique was used to select the respondents. Nurses in three public hospitals in the Greater Accra region were selected for the study. This number was selected based on proximity and convenience. Eleven (11) public senior high schools were selected using the Ghana Education Service register of programmes for public senior high schools’ categorisation for 2014 document. In both locations, simple random sampling technique was used to select three hundred and thirty one (331) respondents for the study.

**Instruments**

Conflict management styles were measured using Rahim Organisational Conflict Inventory - ROCI-II - (Rahim, 1983). The instrument is a 28-item survey instrument that measures five conflict resolution styles as follow: avoiding (six items: 3,6,16,17,26,27), dominating (five items: 8,9,18,21,25), integrating (seven items:1,4,5,12,22,23,28), obliging (six items:2,10,11,13,19,24), and compromising (four items:7,14,15,20). The five conflict management styles reflect different combinations of “concern for self” and “concern for others” (Rahim, 1983). Employees were required to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement made on a 5-point Likert-type scale. A high score indicated a tendency to use the conflict resolution style and a low score a tendency not to use it.

**Procedure**

Questionnaires were distributed by the researchers with the help of three national service persons to respondents and given two weeks to fill. These were collected on the agreed days. However, some respondents were not able to complete it within the stipulated time and therefore an additional time was given and the filled questionnaire was collected later.
4. Results
Data gathered was analysed with SPSS (Version 16). Descriptive and inferential statistical methods were utilised to analyse the findings of the study in relation to the stated objectives which were to (1) investigate the causes of conflict among teachers and nurses (2) identify strategies adopted in the management of conflict.

Demographic characteristics of the Sample
Results revealed a predominant representation of female participants in the study. The females were 182 made up of 72 teachers and 110 nurses and together constituted 55% of the sample. Their male counterparts were 149 made up of 117 teachers and 32 nurses. Sixty three percent (63%) of the respondents were married while 33% were unmarried. A breakdown of the married was 130 teachers and 79 nurses. Those who were not married were 109 made up of 54 teachers and 55 nurses. There were 2 and 3 teachers who were widowed and separated respectively and 9 nurses who were divorced.

Teachers reported mean age of 39.90 years with a standard deviation of 10.63. These teachers have been working for approximately 14.67 years with a standard deviation of 10.02. Nurses also reported mean age of 32.92 years with a standard deviation of 8.88. They have worked as nurses for a mean number of years of 17.28 with a standard deviation of 8.07. Teachers occupied varied positions/ranks including low and high positions such as classroom teacher and assistant director. The positions of nurses also ranged from Ward Assistant to deputy director of nursing.

Table 1: Combination of the two samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding</td>
<td>15.40</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominating</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrating/collaboration</td>
<td>12.77</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.38*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obliging/accommodation</td>
<td>14.93</td>
<td>3.15</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.39*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromising</td>
<td>9.37</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>......</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* P≤ .01

Table 2:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Theoretical Total</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Nurses</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td>15.60</td>
<td>15.12</td>
<td>15.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominating</td>
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<td>16.93*</td>
<td>15.77*</td>
<td>16.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrating/collaboration</td>
<td>17.50</td>
<td>12.90</td>
<td>12.64*</td>
<td>12.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obliging/accommodation</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td>14.81</td>
<td>15.13</td>
<td>14.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromising</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>9.64</td>
<td>9.37</td>
<td>9.37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conflict Management Strategies

Different strategies were adopted by teachers and nurses in resolving conflict. Results obtained on this are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Multivariate Analysis of Utilization of Conflict Management Strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>15.60</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td>1/330</td>
<td>1.126</td>
<td>.289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nurses</td>
<td>15.12</td>
<td>4.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dominating</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>16.93</td>
<td>4.25</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nurses</td>
<td>15.77</td>
<td>3.84</td>
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<tr>
<td>Integrating/collaboration</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>12.90</td>
<td>4.14</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nurses</td>
<td>12.64</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obliging/accommodation</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>14.81</td>
<td>3.47</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nurses</td>
<td>15.13</td>
<td>2.72</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compromising</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>9.64</td>
<td>2.55</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nurses</td>
<td>9.37</td>
<td>2.24</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

†Wilks’ Lambda = 346.60, p<.000, Eta = .982

Results showed that being a teacher or a nurse has a significant influence on the utilisation of the various conflict management strategies [Wilks' Lambda, F = 346.60, p < .000]. Teacher/Nurse status controls 98.2% changes in the utilisation of conflict management strategies.

There was not much difference in their utilisation of conflict management strategies such as Avoiding [F(1,330) = 1.126, p = n.s], Integrating [F(1,330) = .362, p = n.s] and Obliging [F(1,330) = .842, p = n.s]. Teachers significantly differed from nurses in the utilization of Dominating [F(1,330) = 6.557, p < .05] and Compromising [F(1,330) = 5.388, p < .05]. The teachers utilized these two strategies more than the nurses.

With the adoption of integrating style in the management of conflict by both teachers and nurses they are likely to be satisfied since according to results from a study by Chan et al. (2007) it was found that the use of integrated conflict style by managers significantly affected subordinates job satisfaction.

5. Discussion

The study revealed that teachers and nurses experience conflict as they perform their assigned task. Results from the study indicate that the most preferred conflict management strategies adopted by teachers were avoiding followed by integrating and for the nurses the preferred styles were avoiding and obliging with compromising being the least preferred. There was not much difference in the utilisation of avoiding as a conflict management strategy between the categories of respondents.
Results in Table 2 further showed that teachers and nurses use all the five types of strategies available in managing conflict but the preference order of usage differed. This outcome is similar to one found by Al-Hiamdan, Shukri, and Anthony (2011), who after a study found that nurse managers use all five conflict management styles but with varied preferences. Another related to teachers was by Ghaffar, Zaman and Naz (2012), who indicated that even though conflict styles vary, most principals and teachers used all and suggested that they should adopt the best style at any given time. Findings revealed the most preferred styles for teachers was dominating and the least is integrating. The finding contradicts results from a study by Doc, Baser and Kaya (2010) in Izmir who indicated that principals/headmasters used collaboration style and avoidance styles and again that dominating style is least effective. Results from the study showed that teachers’ second preferred style is avoiding which contradicts results of a study by Ghaffar, Zaman and Naz (2012) in District Charsadda who indicated that teachers never follow the avoiding approach for managing conflict.

Nurses also utilised Dominating with integrating being the least used. This finding contradicts results of a study conducted by Cavanagh (1991) who conducted a study in who indicated that Avoidance is the most commonly used conflict management strategy by nurses. Results confirm findings by Al-Hiamdan, Shukri, and Anthony (2011) who in a study found that integrating style was the first conflict management style preferred by nurses. Again a difference in the outcome of these studies is that whereas avoiding was identified to be the third preferred style in managing conflict, the study by Al-Hiamdan, Shukri, and Anthony (2011) in Oman found it to be the least preferred style. Again while findings from this study indicate that the fourth preferred conflict management style was compromising, results from a study by Iglesias et al. (2012) showed that the most common style used by nurses to resolve workplace conflict was compromising. Finding from the research also contradicts outcome of study by Iglesias and Vallejo (2012) among Spanish nurses found that collaboration/integrating was the least preferred style. Most of the outcomes of the research contradicts results of other researches carried out in other cultural context. It may be concluded therefore that the culture within which employees work may impact on the conflict management style they adopt.

6. Direction for Future Research
Similar studies should be conducted on a large scale in Ghana to include all types of organisations (e.g., service, banking, and manufacturing). Also, demographic variables should be studied to determine if there exist difference in conflict management styles between males and females and also between the young and old.

7. References


