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**Battle Within: Role of Cognitive Style in Conflict Resolution Strategies  
of Male College Students**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Much research indicates that gender and cognitive style are highly correlated, with males being more field independent and females more field dependent. Research also indicates a clear difference in how males and females engage in conflicts; yet most conflict resolution programs are not tailored to gender. This study sought to explore whether cognitive style (i.e., field independence and field-dependence) was related to 57 male participants' views of conflicts through the use of hypothetical and actual responses to conflicts. Contrary to predictions, field-dependent males were found to be more competitive in response to conflicts than field-independent males. One explanation is that social expectations of males and the element of honor within masculine identity impact how males interact within a conflict situation. Also examined was the discrepancy between how males said they would respond to a conflict (competitive response) and what they thought was an ideal outcome (compromising response). Results indicate the need for gender specific conflict resolution models that incorporate honor and respect.*

## INTRODUCTION

Many conflict resolution models exist in the field, yet most do not demonstrate any long-term results (Johnson & Johnson, 1995; Webster, 1993; Wilson-Brewer, Cohen, O'Donnell, & Goodman, 1991). One problematic issue that has been identified is that most conflict resolution programs take a "one size fits all" approach while ignoring many of the contextual and unique issues (e.g., gender, culture, age, SES, etc.) that impact social interactions. With regard to gender, Webster (1993) pointed out two issues that are particularly relevant to males and yet, are missing in the research on conflict resolution: 1) Most fights between adolescent boys involve the issue of respect, and 2) the most common technique used (e.g., highlighting vulnerability by emphasizing risk) for educating males about the risk of violence may actually increase aggressive tendencies.

### **Role of Honor/Respect**

Respect, as Eldredge (2001) and Mosequera, Manstead, and Fischer (2002) have argued, is a central issue for males and Eldredge defined this masculine need in terms of the central question that all men have at their core: "Do I have what it takes?" (p. 62). For those males who have not had this question answered by their father, or significant masculine figure in their lives, their deepest fear is "to be exposed, to be found out, to be discovered as an impostor, and not really a man" (Eldredge, p. 45).

Understanding how males perceive and handle conflicts in their lives will assist professionals working with male individuals or groups of males. The desire for competition and the need for validation and respect can motivate males to act in certain ways, often in less than healthy ways. This research sheds light on how males navigate conflictual relationships in their

lives and how males need more guidance on how to meet their needs for validation and relationship while at the same time building healthy relationships.

### **Role of Power and Violence**

One central issue relevant to the design of conflict resolution models is that society often equates power with violence and many males actually become more aggressive when “educated” about their risk of violence (Webster, 1993). That is, if a man is educated about risk, and he fears he does not have what it takes to handle it, he will try to prove to himself that he has what it takes by doing what he thinks men do: engage in aggressive acts. But how does one know what a man does? How and when does one become a man? Whether you understand masculine development through the ideas of Freud (1939) (e.g., sons engage in psychic or actual aggression to usurp their father’s power) or Eldredge (2001) (e.g., sons need to be affirmed by their fathers), one thing is clear; boys need something from their fathers (or significant masculine figure) to become a man and much of their behavior is motivated by this need.

The idea that males need a male role model was explored in the documentary “Raising Cain: Exploring the Inner Lives of America’s Boys” (Kindlon & Thompson, 1998; Thompson, Stern, & Ginsberg, 2006). During this film Geoffrey Canada, President/CEO of Harlem Children’s Zone, discussed how terrified boys are about being found out and how much they are willing to do to avoid being beaten and humiliated, including acting and being aggressive. One reason for this, Canada stated, was that boys do not know which adult to approach or talk to about their fear of humiliation (Thompson, Stern, & Ginsberg, 2006). Boys learn, at quite a young age, to minimize and hide their feelings (Levant, 1995; 2005), which is quite a feat given they are born more emotionally expressive and socially oriented than girls (Weinberg, Tronick, Cohn, & Olson, 1999). Similarly, Pollack (1998) has pointed out that boys struggle with the

contradicting messages that they should share their vulnerable feelings but that they should also hide their need for dependency and act strong. This contradiction produces much confusion and shame. In order to survive in such a shaming environment, males learn to hide their vulnerabilities and act tough (Krugman, 1995) and society encourages them to do so.

While using physical power to deal with conflict was often successful in the past, acting tough in today's complex and uncertain world is not as effective (Butovskaya, Timentschik & Burkova, 2007; Garbarino, 1999). It is extremely difficult in our postmodern world to determine how to resolve conflicts simply or quickly given the many and varied stakeholders involved in any one conflict. To address most conflicts, individuals must be comfortable with complexity, tension, and ambiguity (Gergen, 1992; Kegan, 1994) and this entails much more sophisticated resolution strategies than physical threat or force. For example, Dugas, Schwartz, and Francis (2004) found that those who demonstrated an intolerance of uncertainty often exhibited higher levels of worry and were more likely to make threatening interpretations in those situations.

### **Conflict**

Similarly, having a simple view of conflict as a negative and harmful event that we should avoid is not an effective strategy given the inevitability of conflict (McHenry, 2000; Peterson, 1989). It is interesting to note that after the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the United States increased its military spending (spending 40% of the world total) and moved from a deterrence approach to a more pre-emptive strike approach (use of physical force) for handling security threats (Smith, 2003).

An example of a deterrence approach can be seen on an individual level in an adolescent who protects himself by making others fear his potential power (e.g., the mask or the front). In contrast, a pre-emptive strike approach can be seen in the adolescent who has had his "powerful"

image challenged or broken by having his vulnerabilities exposed. In this latter example, males often view themselves as having only two choices: a) become submissive to the new “powerful” person and admit that his former reputation was just a facade; or b) demonstrate the power that he was originally trying to portray (e.g., strike them hard before they strike you again and strike others so they don’t follow suit and strike you too). Note that this latter approach is defined by a demonstration of strength whereas the former is defined by perceived threat.

Closer to home, there has been a visible increase in overt violent behavior in the past decades (e.g., school shootings, gang violence, and terrorist bombings) with more attention toward intervention (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; French, Pidada, Denoma, McDonald & Lawton, 2005). The interventions that have been put into place (e.g., school suspensions, military action, heightened security, arrests) reflect a particular view of conflict, namely that conflict is harmful and should be “eliminated” or “reduced” through physical action. In addition, it reflects a more stop-gap approach rather than working toward understanding why violence is on the upswing.

### **Conflict Resolution Programs**

Unfortunately, conflict resolution programs are missing some of the central issues within conflicts for males. As long as the question of whether males “have what it takes” is left out of conflict resolution models, males are likely to meet that need by acting in ways they think men are supposed to act. In contrast, many current models of conflict resolution emphasize mutual understanding and empathy at their core but are failing to address the more central issue for males – mutual respect.

Males also need education in a wider variety of responses to complex conflicts, as opposed to simply avoiding or fighting (deWied, Branje, & Meeus, 2006; Garrard & Lipsey, 2007). As Webster states, “No curriculum can alter the root causes of often deadly battles over

respect, but students may benefit from being taught ways of handling perceived put-downs or insults nonviolently without losing face” (1993, p. 138). Men in particular need to examine the way they approach a conflict because, in general, in our society men are socialized to react more physically to conflicts (Bar-Tal, Haperin, & deRivera, 2007; Lopez & Emmer, 2002) and this simple strategy is simply not successful in most conflicts (Koepke & Harkins, 2009). A more successful strategy might be to assess the situation by being sensitive to the surroundings and react accordingly, a characteristic of the cognitive style of field-dependence.

Similarly, Rosenberg (1995) suggests the need to split the types of violence into separate categories and create interventions that are specific to each problem. He highlights the need to make interventions developmentally and contextually appropriate, and problem specific (1995). In addition, this research suggests that intervention might also be gender specific. Due to our perception of what the most destructive outcome of a conflict might be, most intervention programs address physical violence (most typically seen in males) with little intervention directed at relational violence (most typically seen in females), even though relational violence is often seen as “more hateful and long-lasting” (Creedon, Ray & Harkins, 2009; Farrell, 1998; Thayer, Updegraff, & Delgado, 2008). However, all conflicts, violent or otherwise, are relational and conflict resolution programs need to address the relational violence that often occurs between males in the form of shaming behavior.

Zamel (2004) found that shame, anger, and feelings of distress all lead to hypermasculine responses in male adolescents. Furthermore, Berkowitz (1994) discussed the theory that any negative affect (as long as it was intense enough) could trigger the internal anger-aggression network. For example, participants who were able to control their aggressive tendencies identified their feelings and/or were able to empathize with the person that they felt was

antagonizing them, while those who were not able to do this (by experimenter manipulation) expressed their aggressive feelings through aggressive behavior (shocking another participant) (Berkowitz, 1994). When males do not have a sense of their masculine identity and are in distress (e.g., conflict), the likelihood is that they will over-exhibit behaviors that they view as stereotypically masculine (e.g., aggression, competition).

It is clear that conflicts are influenced by many factors. If we could identify influential factors in the development of certain responses to conflicts, we would have a greater ability to predict how one might handle a conflict, as well as understand how to teach individuals how to develop effective resolution strategies. One such influential factor is an individual's cognitive style, which has often been linked to one's level of rationality. In our western individualistic-oriented society, logic and reason are valued over emotion and relationship. A cognitive style of independence is assumed to be more advantageous due to its logical/rational qualities. But is it? And more importantly for this research, does a field independent thinking style lead to more effective conflict resolutions during conflicts? This question drives this research to focus on the influential factor of cognitive style.

### **Cognitive Style**

In reference to how individual's view and handle conflicts, researchers have examined the relationship between conflict and various internal factors including personality (Bell & Blakeney, 1997; Kaushal & Kwantes, 2006; Tamir & Nadler, 2007; ), motivational needs (Utle, Richardson, & Pilkington, 1989), Machiavellianism (Jones & Melcher, 1982), and locus of control (Alexander, 2003). Internal individual differences have an important influence on how conflicts are handled. Much of the psychological research examining how people view their

worlds and their interactions within it have used the cognitive style construct of field dependence-independence (FDI).

Cognitive style or thinking style was initially defined by Witkin and Goodenough in 1977 as a product of developmental differentiation of the self. That is, the way in which we psychologically distinguish ourselves from our environments (e.g., field-dependent vs. field-independent) has a significant impact on how we interact within our environments. Witkin and Goodenough (1977) pioneered the study of cognitive style (FDI) and established the idea that field-dependent individuals rely more on social cues and elements in their environment (external factors), are more interested in people, employ social referents when faced with ambiguous situations, and are more emotionally open and expressive. While field-independent individuals rely more on internal cues, are more individualistic, and value principles more than social relationships (Witkin & Goodenough, 1977). Can our understanding of cognitive style (FDI) help predict whether field-independent or field-dependent males prefer conflict resolution models of cooperation?

Another study by Dreyer (1991) examined how FDI impacts close, intimate relationships. Through studying intact relationships (marriages and courtships), Dreyer differentiated the impact of cognitive style on various relationships (1991). While previous research has suggested that field-dependent individuals are more interpersonally and emotionally sensitive (Witkin & Goodenough, 1977), Dreyer (1991) suggests that the type of relationship and the FDI match/mismatch of the people in the relationship (Oltman, Goodenough, Witkin, Freedman, & Friedman, 1975) have a significant impact on how the individual's field-dependence or independence is experienced. According to Dreyer (1991), Witkin and Goodenough's (1977) description of field-dependent individuals is only valid when considering short-term

relationships. In long-term, intimate relationships, it may be more difficult to interact with field-dependent individuals due to their “greater interpersonal dependency” (Dreyer, 1991, p. 311).

Furthermore, Oltman et al. (1975) highlight the impact of match/mismatch of FDI on how individuals within a relationship view each other. Oltman and colleagues (1975) suggested that matched field-dependent individuals would have more positive feelings toward each other due to the common emphasis on interpersonal issues, and the same would hold true for matched field-independent individuals due to their impersonal and abstract interests in their environment. According to Dreyer (1991), this conclusion would most likely be a result of long-term relationships as opposed to short-term interactions. Yet, short-term interactions hold valuable information on how we interact with those with whom we are not intimately connected. This research examined how being matched or mismatched on cognitive style impacted conflict resolution strategies.

Sabatelli, Dreyer, and Buck (1983) expanded on Oltman et al.’s (1975) claims by examining gender differences and FDI match/mismatch within marriage relationships. Sabatelli et al. (1983) indicated that field-independent husbands had more complaints about their marriage if they were married to field-dependent wives, while wives who were mismatched in their relationship (regardless of which person was field-dependent) had fewer complaints. Therefore suggesting that there exist gender differences in how individuals view, and value, the characteristics of individuals who are of the same and opposing cognitive styles. This study sought to explore the impact of cognitive style on conflict resolution strategies by bringing together male dyads that were matched/mismatched on cognitive style and mismatched on views of a current social-political conflict.

## **Gender Differences in Cognitive Style**

Numerous studies over the years have been conducted on gender differences in cognitive style. Overall, gender differences have been found in that adolescent and adult women tend to exhibit more field dependence and men more field independence (Carretero, 1982; Demick & Harkins, 1997; Hansson, Ryden, & Johnsson, 1983; Khan, 1987; Panek, 1985; Witkin, 1965; Witkin, Dyk, Faterson, Goodenough, & Karp, 1962; Witkin, Goodenough, & Karp, 1967; Witkin et al., 1954). However, perhaps more interesting are the findings on preschool children and aging populations. Research on preschoolers suggests that the opposite trend appears where girls exhibit more field independence than boys (Britain & Small, 1969; Chynn, Garrod, DeVos, & Demick, 1991). Further review on similar studies supports the idea that boys make a shift to being more field independent than girls by the time they reach adolescence (Demick, 1991; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974). Still other studies suggest that the shift continues into old age where the gender differences in field dependence-independence seem to disappear (Demick & Wapner, 1991; Panek, 1985; Takigami, 1975). Such findings suggest that an individual's cognitive style has a significant social component, while other findings highlight an educational component. If cognitive style differs among men and women and impacts how individuals handle conflicts (Oltman et al., 1975), then conflict resolution strategies may need to be gender specific. Gender specific conflict resolution models would focus on the unique issues of males as resolutions are addressed. Toward this end, the present study only examined male participants.

## **New View of Conflict**

More recent models of conflict resolution view conflicts not as combative, but as opportunities to foster moral development and perspective taking (DeVries & Zan, 1995). While traditional views of conflict resolution often strive to accomplish a goal at the end of the

interaction (which inadvertently creates a win/lose situation often resulting in a less than positive outcome), newer models suggest working toward an expectation of mutual success at the end of a conflict (i.e., win/win outcome) to sustain and promote growth in the relationship.

As McHenry (2000) states, without exposure to conflict, one cannot learn to manage relationships and function successfully in society. Conflict also seems to be related to higher levels of reasoning skills. For example, Peterson (1989) revealed that, “formal operational reasoning was associated with intense and emotional debates and concrete-operational reasoning with milder conflict resolution strategies ranging from calm discussion to outright avoidance” (p. 67). Peterson’s (1989) findings suggest that individuals who actively engage in conflicts have the potential to develop higher levels of operational reasoning.

Conflict is not only potentially very positive and useful in development, but it is considered necessary for moral development, identity, personal growth, interpersonal insight, and increased social status (Johnson & Johnson, 1997; McHenry, 2000; Peterson, 1987-1989). Furthermore, adolescents who employed arguments to resolve family disagreements were found to show more advanced cognitive development, higher identity scores, and more identity exploration (Cooper, Grotevant, & Condon, 1983; Peterson, Peterson, & Skevington, 1986). In children, field-independence and formal operational reasoning were found in students who scored high on mathematics, concepts, and problem-solving tests (Roberge & Flexer, 1983). The cognitive task of engaging in conflict resolution challenges individuals to think in terms bigger than themselves, to imagine creative possibilities, and to think more abstractly (e.g., formal operations). So while the complexity of conflict resolution is obvious, the specific factors that influence it are still being explored. This research focuses on how cognitive style relates to how male college students resolve conflicts.

## **Method of Study**

This research was guided by the following hypotheses: (a) conflict resolution strategy to hypothetical and actual conflicts would differ based on cognitive style (i.e., field-independence is related to a more competitive strategy and field-dependence to a more cooperative strategy); (b) field-dependence is related to a larger discrepancy between hypothetical and actual responses to conflicts; (c) being matched or mismatched on cognitive style is related to responses to actual conflicts; and (d) the language used by participants differs based on cognitive style. Qualitative analysis was conducted on the written and spoken responses to hypothetical and actual conflicts.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of 57 ethnically diverse males (who were either undergraduate college students or recent graduates) who were primarily recruited from undergraduate psychology courses at a university in the Northeast United States. Participants were compensated with a complimentary movie pass for their involvement. The mean age of participants was 20.46 years ( $SD = 2.84$ ). Most participants (66.7%) identified themselves as Caucasian, 1.8% as African American, 8.8% as Hispanic, 14% as Asian, and 8.8% as other. Fourteen percent of the participants were the first one in their family to attend college and 19.3% identified themselves as immigrants.

### **Measures**

The *Rod and Frame Test* (RFT) (Witkin & Asch, 1948) was administered as the first part of an index to assess the cognitive style of field dependence-independence. Participants were placed in an adjustable chair in a completely darkened room. Participants viewed a luminous rod within a tilted square frame. Participants were asked to try to adjust the rod to the vertical axis of

space using visual and gravitational cues. Measure was the number of degrees of deviation from the true vertical axis over twelve trials. Reliabilities for the RFT have been reported at .89 or greater for odd-even reliability (Gardner, Jackson, & Messick, 1960; Witkin et al., 1954) and .84 or greater for test-retest reliability (Adevai & McGough, 1968; Bauman, 1951).

The *Group Embedded Figures Test* (GEFT) (Witkin, Oltman, Raskin, & Karp, 1971) was administered as the second part of the index to assess the cognitive style of field dependence-independence. Participants were asked to view complex designs and then to disembed simple geometric shapes from within those designs on a pencil and paper task. Measure was the number of incorrect trials out of eighteen designs. Reliabilities for the GEFT have been reported at .90 (Linton, 1952) for odd-even reliability and between .92 (one week interval) and .89 (three year interval) for test-retest reliability (Bauman, 1951). Scores from the RFT and the GEFT were standardized and combined into a differential index based on median split to establish the cognitive styles of field-dependence and field-independence.

Hypothetical responses to conflict were assessed by having participants read a hypothetical vignette and answer how they think they would respond in the given situation, what they would hope for in the interaction, and what their ideal outcome would be. Responses were coded into 5 categories of conflict resolution behaviors (Accommodating, Avoiding, Competing, Compromising, and Problem Solving; Adapted from Thomas, 1976) as well as a category for responses that do not fit into these categories (Not Codeable). Measure was the predominant conflict resolution strategy that the participant used (Accommodating, Avoiding, Competing, Compromising, or Problem Solving). Coding reliability on pilot data was established with a total of three coders at 81% reliability. Discrepancies were discussed until 100% agreement was attained on the responses.

Each participant was also videotaped in an actual conflict with another participant. Participants were told that they were going to be observed discussing an issue on which they disagreed with the other participant. Each participant was asked on the demographic questionnaire to indicate on a 10-point scale (1 indicating a response of *absolutely not* and 10 indicating a response of *absolutely*) whether or not they think the United States should use military force to resolve conflicts overseas. Each participant was then matched up with another participant who endorsed the contrary position (i.e., at least 3 point difference on a ten point scale, as well as being on the opposite side of the issue [1 to 5 and 6 to 10]) and they were videotaped discussing the issue. Responses were coded into 5 categories based on the focus of their statements (Self, Other, Both, Basic Agreement, and Not Codeable). Measures were the dominant and second most dominant codes that the participant used. Coding reliability on the actual conflict responses was established with three coders at 85% reliability. Discrepancies were discussed until 100% agreement was attained on the responses.

At the end of the observation, participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with their interaction, answer questions about the conflict situation they were just in, answer questions about related conflicts with significant others, and then went over a debriefing statement with the researcher.

## **Procedure**

All participants completed the following measures during the first session, which lasted one hour: Rod and Frame Test, Group Embedded Figures Test, Demographic questionnaire, and Hypothetical Conflict Vignette. Thirty-eight participants were then matched with another participant for the second session. Participants were matched based on disagreement on the question (i.e., opposite sides of the issue; 1 to 5 vs. 6 to 10, and at least 3 numbers apart) and

either a match or mismatch on cognitive style (i.e., matched field-independent dyad, matched field-dependent dyad, or mismatched field-independent/dependent dyad). During the second session, participants were videotaped for up to 30 minutes discussing the issue with the other participant and a post-questionnaire was given at the end. For the discussion, each dyad was placed in an observation lab and told that they were matched up because they had disagreed enough on the issue to indicate that there were some differences in opinion between them (each participant was reminded of their rating). They were then told that they would be videotaped and would have up to 30 minutes to discuss the issue in any way they chose. They were both given the option to end the conversation at any time, for any reason.

### **Data Analysis**

All analyses relating to cognitive style began with a determination as to whether or not group FDI scores were consistent with available normative data. A median split was conducted to allow for difference testing. Chi-Square tests were conducted to assess whether the following variables vary in relation to cognitive style: hypothetical conflict resolution strategy (Hypothetical Conflict Vignette), actual conflict resolution strategy (Videotaped discussion with other participant), preferred style of negotiating conflicts (Hypothetical Conflict Vignette), and discrepancy between stated strategy and actual strategy (Hypothetical Conflict compared to Actual Conflict). Qualitative analyses were conducted using Binomial Distributions to explore the content of the written and spoken responses to the hypothetical and actual conflicts.

## **RESULTS**

It was expected that participants would readily exhibit a preferred style of interaction within a conflict that was reflective of cognitive style. However, from the data we found that this was only partially true. Overall for the hypothetical conflicts, the data showed a significant

difference in the responses to the conflict ( $X^2 = 14.09, p = .003$ ) with more competitive responses and fewer accommodating responses than expected. While specifically it was expected that participants with a field-dependent cognitive style would exhibit more cooperative strategies, the data revealed that field-dependent participants showed significantly more competitive responses and fewer than expected accommodating responses ( $X^2 = 14.00, p = .003$ ). Concerning individuals with a field-independent cognitive style, it was expected that they would express more competitive and less cooperative strategies for the hypothetical conflict. While the data showed that field-independent participants did use competitive strategies more than any others, this difference was not statistically significant ( $X^2 = 3.41, p = .332$ ).

This result was also found when the responses to the actual conflict were analyzed. Again, the overall finding indicated a significant difference for how participants responded in the actual conflict ( $X^2 = 15.39, p = .0001$ ), and again this result was due to the field-dependent participants who were found to make significantly more self statements than any other type ( $X^2 = 14.00, p = .001$ ), as opposed to making statements that focused on the other person as predicted. Also as was found earlier, while field-independent participants made more self statements than other types of statements, this difference was not statistically significant ( $X^2 = 3.90, p = .143$ ).

Given field-dependent individuals' tendency to use external cues to inform their reactions, it was expected that there would be a greater discrepancy between their hypothetical response to conflict (no external cues involved) and their actual responses to conflict (external cues present). This prediction was also not supported by the data as field-dependent participants responded with more competitive responses to the hypothetical conflict (statements focused on the self or the goals of the self) and with more self statements in the actual conflict (statements

focused on the self). No discrepancy could be found for the field-independent participants due to the non-significant results for both hypothetical and actual responses.

It was also expected that cognitive style would have an influence on the participants' preferred style of resolving conflicts. Specifically, field-dependent individuals were expected to prefer a more cooperative style of conflict resolution while field-independent individuals were expected to prefer a more competitive style of conflict resolution. In fact, when asked what they hoped for in a hypothetical interaction, the data revealed that field-dependent participants reported that they hoped for compromising outcomes ( $X^2 = 10.0, p = .019$ ) whereas field-independent participants reported that they hoped for a variety of outcomes. In terms of an ideal outcome, field-dependent and field-independent participants both indicated that a compromising strategy was ideal ( $X^2 = 56.6, p < .001$ ).

Content analyses were conducted on the written and spoken responses to the hypothetical and actual conflicts to determine how the language used differed between field-independent and dependent participants. Field-independent participants were found to use significantly more words in the categories titled "Understand" (e.g., "Once this was established we were able to see how each other *reasoned* their opinion and were then able to *understand* it.") ( $p = .014$ ) and "Justice" (e.g., "I just think like, with um, with I mean exactly what you said, with being the greatest power of the countries, with being the greatest power comes great *responsibility*, you know.") ( $p = .046$ ). Field-dependent participants in turn used significantly more words in the category titled "Negative Emotions" (e.g., "I would get *mad* because he's not giving me a chance.") ( $p = .006$ ) and indicated a strong trend in the category titled "Honor" ( $p = .08$ ) (e.g., "Ideal would be that we would both *respect* each other's opinion even though they are different.").

## DISCUSSION

It is clear that cognitive style influences how males handle conflicts and the results of this research support the need for gender specific conflict resolution models. The issue of how men handle conflicts is complex and as it was examined it turned out to be more complex than the stereotypes have led us to believe. It is too simplistic to say that males are competitive and only think about winning. While this research found that males (both field-dependent and field-independent) use competitive strategies more than any other type, the findings also suggest that being field-dependent is related to being more competitive. In a hypothetical conflict, field-dependent males reported that they would act in a competitive fashion more often than any other way.

Previous research (Laursen, Finkelstein, & Betts, 2001) has found that there is often a discrepancy between how individuals say they would respond to conflicts and how they actually respond. However, the field-dependent males were also more focused on their own perspective in the actual conflict situation, suggesting that field-dependent males not only say they would be competitive but actually are more competitive. This finding was contrary to what was predicted. For example, Dreyer (1991) found that within long-term relationships, a field-dependent individual was more likely to change his or her opinion (be influenced by the other) when in the presence of a field-independent individual. This was not supported in this research. In fact, this research found that when matched with a field-independent participant in a conflict situation, field-dependent individuals were more likely to respond with self statements (as opposed to making statements of basic agreement, that focused on the other person or on both people).

At first glance the original theory that, within a conflict situation, male field-dependent participants would be more influenced by the environment, particularly within the room, seems

to be inaccurate based on the fact that they used more competitive responses. The “field” was originally thought to be the immediate environment (i.e., the room, interaction, or other person), however another interpretation is that the “field” to which these males were dependent was the larger social environment (e.g., gender role, social expectations, stereotypes, the boy code, culture of honor).

In support of this interpretation, content analyses revealed that field-dependent males used more language focused on honor. Honor is connected to competition. It can be seen in the drive to win simply for bragging rights, the pep talks given to teams before they confront a competitor, or the consolation of holding your head high because you gave it all you had.

The discussion of honor and respect sheds some light on why men react to conflicts in the way they do. Nisbett, Cohen and others have examined the effects of a culture of honor, or honor norms, on the prevalence of violent acts (Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, & Schwartz, 1996; Nisbett, 1993; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). Vandello, Cohen, and Ransom (2008) found that masculine subcultures, or more specifically the culture of honor, are particularly influential on males. Honor is an essential piece of masculinity in much the same way that conflict is an important piece of relationships. On a larger scale, Spitzer found that cultures that have large disparities in social rankings and economic status, as well as cultures that “exhibit a relatively high level of political integration and absolute power is exercised by a single ruler (i.e. prince, emperor, chief, king, sheikh) or venerated elite” were found to use the most severe punishments in response to crime (1975, p. 625). Such cultures put a high value on position, status, and honor.

These findings can be applied to the interactions of governments when we look at Spitzer’s (1975) findings along with Bronfenbrenner’s (1977, 1979) bioecological systems theory which suggest that a culture’s response to a conflict strongly influences how an individual

within that culture handles conflicts, interpersonally and otherwise. If the power exercised by those in power is done so out of a threat to honor, those within the culture would likely respond in kind. Therefore an understanding of how a group of people, or a government, handles conflicts can help explain why individuals within that system react to conflicts the way they do, and vice versa. This research can be used to begin to understand international conflict resolution in terms of honor, respect, and competition.

Even within the United States, certain geographical areas, such as the southern states, and particular groups, such as gangs and prison populations, are more likely to encourage a culture of honor in which there are specific expectations for how a man is to handle a confrontation involving an attack on his reputation or honor. These expectations encourage physical violence as opposed to cooperative problem solving or walking away from a conflict. Cohen and Nisbett (1994) found that males within a culture of honor were more accepting of violent responses to situations where a man's honor was being attacked. Such a finding emphasizes how important it is to examine how individuals, and in particular males, respond to conflict based on how they view conflict.

As stated earlier, Eldredge's (2001) theory on the central question within all males (i.e., Do I have what it takes?) helps us understand further the connection between honor and respect and the ways in which males react to conflict situations. Once again, for most men their deepest fear is "to be exposed, to be found out, to be discovered as an impostor, and not really a man" (Eldredge, 2001, p. 45). Honor and respect from others is a statement of validation that one has what it takes and a lack of honor and respect is a statement to the contrary. Therefore, if the need for validation is driving the competitive response to win respect, new, nondestructive ways of

gaining validation through respect need to be taught, encouraged, and integrated into conflict resolution models.

Cohen and his colleagues (1996) found that males from a culture of honor displayed multiple changes to an insult including physiological changes (increased levels of cortisol and testosterone levels), emotional changes, cognitive changes (cognitively primed for future aggression) and behavioral changes (actual aggressive or domineering behaviors). Also of interest was their finding that these changes only occurred when the situation involved a question of honor, was emotionally involving, or when the person's masculine status and reputation were affected as a result (Cohen, Nisbett, Bowdle, & Schwartz, 1996). Simply stated, "male individuals are socialized to act in certain ways within specific contexts" (Lopez & Emmer, 2002, p. 28) and honor (e.g., feeling respected, saving face) is central to conflict resolution. Unfortunately, honor is very rarely part of conflict resolution approaches yet it is clear that honor has a large impact on males, and particularly, field-dependent males.

Our culture (the macrosystem) holds certain values or expectations for men which effects the interactions men have with those in their interpersonal worlds (the microsystem) (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979), the most central being the idea of honor. Pollack (1998) states that early on, boys are influenced by the "Boy Code" which influences them to protect their honor and prevent shame through disconnection and violence. Honor and respect are essential elements of masculinity, specifically the idea of honor that involves status, precedence, and reputation (Vandello & Cohen, 2003). Vandello and Cohen explain that while honor norms apply to both men and women, they do so differently (2003). In particular, "where the code dictates precedence and toughness for males, norms for females stress modesty, shame, and the avoidance of behaviors that might threaten the good name of the family (e.g., adultery or sexual

immodesty)” (Vandello & Cohen, 2003, p. 998). This can be seen as early as toddlerhood when researchers have found that mothers engage in more prideful behaviors with their toddler sons while encouraging more shameful behaviors in their daughters (Mascolo, Harkins, & Harakal, 2000).

Given the theory that field-dependent individuals rely on information from the field to make decisions (Witkin & Goodenough, 1977), the setting of a conflict along with the larger social environment (or the social expectations of what a male should do in a conflict situation) seem to be the source of information from which field-dependent participants are most influenced. Therefore in the context of a conflict, males who have a field-dependent cognitive style might be more influenced by social expectations, such as a culture of honor whereas a cognitive style of field-independence suggests a reliance on rationality and internal cues and principles to make decisions. This was supported by the finding that field-independent males used more language focused on Understanding and Justice. Although field-independent males also exhibited more competitive responses than other types of responses to conflict, they seem to be less influenced by the social environment.

These results suggest that field-independent males have more of an ability to respond to situations based on an internal idea of what is expected of them. With the use of more words focused on Understanding and Justice, field-independent males rely more on logic and previously established standards of fairness. Field-dependent males, on the other hand, used more language focused on Honor, which is territorial, and on Negative Emotions, which are the emotions that are socially acceptable given the masculine stereotype. From this one might extrapolate that perhaps field-independent males have an internal sense of honor, hence needing less validation from the social environment, whereas field-dependent males might manipulate

honor contextually. In other words, field-dependent males act more competitively to prove to themselves that they have what it takes and to attempt to elicit honor and respect from their social environment.

Another interesting finding for both field-dependent and field-independent participants was that both groups tended to use more competitive responses to the hypothetical conflict while at the same time thought that an ideal outcome was a compromising outcome. (e.g., Hypothetical Response: “Entertain his ideas and lead him on to make a fool of himself, by drawing comparisons to other areas.” vs. Ideal Response: “The ideal outcome would be us engaging in open conversation about the subject, understanding each others views and respecting our difference in opinion.”) This suggests that while males desire an outcome that is more cooperative, their responses to conflicts are often more competitive. Therefore, there is a discrepancy between what they do in a conflict and a desired outcome. That is, what they think should happen is not connected to how they respond. While further exploration into this discrepancy needs to take place, it seems clear that education and training is needed to bridge this gap and should be targeted at men to give them the skills and practice to do what they ideally think should happen instead of blindly hoping for an outcome with no clear way to accomplish it. As stated earlier, Gergen (1992) points out that our postmodern world demands that we become more complex. Therefore there exists a clear need to educate males on a variety of responses to conflicts. Rousseau (1983) emphasized that people are intrinsically good and that education systems should take a moral focus. This research found that most participants (both field-dependent and field-independent) thought that a cooperative outcome was ideal even though their responses were mostly competitive. Therefore, it is not a question of their morality per se, but a question of how their actions, or abilities, are connected to their morality.

## **Implications**

Understanding how males perceive and handle conflicts in their lives will assist professionals working with male individuals or groups of males. The desire for competition and the need for validation and respect can motivate males to act in certain ways, often times less than healthy ways. This research sheds light on how males navigate conflictual relationships in their lives and how males need more guidance on how to meet their needs for validation and relationship while at the same time building healthy relationships.

In this country, boys in particular are significantly affected by growing up without a positive male role model. Clinical interventions need to take the form of one-on-one relationships as well as larger social programs targeted at teaching young males nonviolent ways of dealing with conflicts, modeling successful resolutions of conflicts, and showing young males that all men have vulnerabilities and that they can successfully manage those vulnerabilities without hiding them.

The relationship between the young male and the older male mentor is invaluable in the development of a secure masculine identity. Positive male role models are sorely needed for today's youth. Not only does the positive male role model show a young male the variety of behaviors that real life men exhibit, they can also show young males different ways of dealing with conflicts as well as demonstrate that nonviolent reactions to conflicts can be more effective. The relationship between the young male and the positive mentor also validates the young male. Being shown that they are worth the mentor's time and attention builds self worth in the young male and instills an internal sense of value and honor.

This research also suggests that a conflict resolution model that emphasizes honor and respect is needed for men. Both field-independent and field-dependent males were found to be

competitive and both talked of honor and respect (although field-dependent males did this significantly more). Therefore since men are influenced by the need for honor and respect, and since conflicts often highlight that need, then conflict resolution strategies need to be developed that maintain an individual's honor while extending honor and respect to the other. The numerous conflict resolution models in existence today do not specifically address this issue or the issue of how to incorporate competition to conflict resolution. Models of conflict resolution need to not only focus on mutual understanding and empathy at their core but they most certainly need to address competition, honor, and respect, especially when dealing with males. In order to create win/win outcomes, males need a model that includes an emphasis on mutual respect and honor.

Based on the anecdotal results from some of the participants' written responses, there seems to be a connection between perceived respect and satisfaction with an interpersonal interaction. For example, many participants, both field-independent and field-dependent, who expressed satisfaction with the interaction made comments such as, "...we both respected each others opinions," "...since I wasn't in his shoes I felt differently and I think he respected my views," and "The other participant was very respectful towards my opinion, and we both heard each other's views equally." Such statements suggest the need to recognize and use the elements of honor and respect in conflict resolution models. The current research proposes a new model for conflict resolution that is particularly designed for males that includes the following: 1) calmly address the other; 2) acknowledge the presence of the competitive nature and offer respect to the other; 3) state your side/case (one at a time); 4) offer concessions and resolutions that support your statement of respect and the competitive goals of the other; 5) agree on a resolution; and 6) close with offering respect to the other. In addition, given the dynamics of

power that are always present in conflicts between males, the role of a mediator may be invaluable in encouraging the administration of the above model by eliminating the power dynamic of who goes first in offering concessions and respect to the other and by encouraging transparency during the process.

### **Limitations**

Due to the restrictions of a laboratory setting, it was expected that the conflict resolution strategy of blatant avoidance (i.e., walking away) would not be used, while the strategy of subtle avoidance (i.e., ignoring the conflict) was a possibility. While the laboratory setting provides more control in analyses, it limits the generalizability of the findings outside of a controlled setting. The data on the actual interactions between the participants seems to suggest what field-independent and dependent males do when being observed. With the short amount of time available, the artificial setting, and the fact that they were being observed, the data suggest that this is what males do in the initial stages of a conflict. One might view this as posturing or sizing up the other person.

Previous research has looked at interactions within intimate or long-term relationships (Dreyer, 1991; Oltman, Goodenough, Witkin, Freedman, & Friedman, 1975) which are significantly different contexts than the short-term relationship created within this study. Therefore the findings are limited to more short-term relationships. The above previous research also looked at men and women. The present study's findings are also limited to male interactions with other males. Therefore little can be said about cross gender interactions within a conflict based on cognitive style. Finally, while the idea of honor and respect were discussed at length in terms of written and spoken responses to the conflict scenarios, the topic of the conflicts were

not ones that threatened the participants' honor. Therefore, the findings have little to say about how males react to conflicts that directly challenge their masculine identity and honor.

Future research needs to examine how male participants respond to conflicts when using a conflict resolution model that incorporates respect and honor. This research would be particularly helpful if it examined how men handle conflicts outside of a controlled laboratory setting. Also, more attention needs to be paid to the question of whether a sense of honor or need for respect directly effect a competitive response in males. Such research could also directly assess how conflicts that challenge one's honor, or are perceived as disrespectful, impact the competitive response.

Further research is needed to explore the direct effects of the "fields" to which field-dependent males were dependent on in the larger social environment (e.g., gender role, social expectations, stereotypes, the boy code, culture of honor). In particular, more needs to be learned about how males are socialized to act in specific ways within certain social contexts.

Research is sorely needed on the role of cognitive style and conflict resolution across cultures. For example, do field-dependent and field-independent individuals from collectivist cultures behave the same as those from individualistic cultures?

There is also a need to develop more conflict resolution education programs that focus on men, the culture of honor, and competition. Conflict resolution programs that try to eliminate competition might not resonate with men. Therefore, incorporating competition into a productive view of conflict resolution may invite men into a cooperative process that still validates them as a masculine individual in our culture.

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