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Managing conflict at work: comparison between younger and older managerial employees

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aimed to examine younger and older employees' use of five conflict strategies to handle an actual conflict incident with other employees. With reference to the socioemotional selectivity theory, this study tests whether older employees, as compared with younger employees, would use more avoiding to handle conflicts with supervisors but less dominating to handle conflicts with subordinates. Moreover, this study investigates whether the interaction effect between role of the conflict partner and age would be explained by goal interdependence. Furthermore, it also tests whether the negative effect of avoiding on interpersonal relations and job satisfaction would be moderated by age.

Design/methodology/approach – The three hypotheses were tested in a sample of 280 Chinese managerial and executive employees aged between 22 and 66 years. Participants were asked to recall their behavioral responses to an actual conflict incident with other employees.

Findings – Results showed that relative to younger employees, older employees utilized more avoiding to deal with conflicts with supervisors and less dominating with subordinates. Such age differences in avoiding and dominating strategies were found to be explained by cooperative and independent goals held by the participants in the conflict incident. In addition, the negative effect of avoiding on interpersonal relations was only shown among younger employees but not among older employees.

Originality/value – This finding suggests that the use of passive strategies is not always harmful to working adults, largely depending on the age of the users.

Keywords Older workers, Avoiding, Conflict strategies, Dominating

Paper type Research paper

Conflict is almost unavoidable in human interactions. Unlike other life domains, we have little direct control over which partners to interact with in the workplace (Davis *et al.*, 2009). With a growing number of older employees in the workforce, negative stereotypes

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Authors' Note: Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory (Form C): Used with permission from the © Center for Advanced Studies in Management. Further use or reproduction of the instrument without written permission is prohibited.



about older workers (Hedge *et al.*, 2006; Posthuma and Campion, 2009) may hinder an effective resolution when conflict arises. Therefore, it is crucial to employers and senior management to find out whether older employees handle workplace conflict in similar ways as their younger counterparts to enhance team effectiveness and work relationships.

Socioemotional selectivity theory (SST) posits that older adults emphasize emotionally meaningful goals to a greater extent than do younger adults (Carstensen, 2006; Fung and Carstensen, 2004). The emphasis on emotional goals and interpersonal closeness may motivate older employees to handle workplace conflicts differently. Previous research has demonstrated age differences in behavioral responses to interpersonal tensions (Birditt *et al.*, 2005; Blanchard-Fields *et al.*, 2004; Charles *et al.*, 2009; Yeung *et al.*, 2012) and conflicts at work (Davis *et al.*, 2009). In general, compared with younger adults, older adults utilize more passive strategies (such as avoiding) and fewer destructive strategies (such as dominating) to manage the conflict. However, these studies did not take into consideration of the role of the conflict partner, which may also influence one's selection of conflict strategies (Nguyen and Yang, 2012; Rahim, 1986). With reference to the age-related changes in goal orientation, it is speculated that compared with younger working adults, older employees would use more avoiding to handle conflicts with supervisors but less dominating with subordinates. Moreover, with reference to the theory of cooperation and competition (Deutsch, 1990; Tjosvold, 1998), this study investigates whether the interaction effect between role of the conflict partner and age would be explained by goal interdependence. Furthermore, this study also tests whether the negative effect of avoiding on interpersonal relations and job satisfaction would be moderated by age.

Conflict strategies at work

Conflict occurs when there is a disagreement between two or more parties (Rubin *et al.*, 1994), or when an individual perceives incompatible needs, goals, desires or ideas with another person (De Dreu and Gelfand, 2008; Deutsch, 1990). The present study focuses on interpersonal conflict at work, specifically conflict with supervisors, peers or subordinates. The following review focuses mainly on conflict strategies in the workplace, plus findings obtained from research on aging to support the speculated effect of age on conflict strategies.

In the literature on conflict management, individuals' responses to interpersonal conflicts can be categorized into five types by the degree of attempts to satisfy one's personal concern and attempts to satisfy the concern of other parties (Blake and Mouton, 1964; Rahim, 1983): integrating, avoiding, dominating, obliging and compromising. Integrating is adopted when the person has a strong concern of both self and others, such as problem solving, exchange of information and open discussion to reach an effective solution. Avoiding is demonstrated when the person has a weak concern about both self and other's outcomes, such as withdrawal or sidestepping situations. Dominating is observed when a person attempts to satisfy his/her own concern, such as the use of forcing behaviors to win his/her position. Obliging is shown when the person attempts to satisfy concern of the other party, such as playing down the differences between parties, accommodating and yielding. Compromising is demonstrated when the person has an intermediate level of concerns for self and others to reach a mutually acceptable agreement (Rahim, 2011; Thomas, 1990).

The selection of conflict strategies varies by role of the conflict partner. In [Rahim's \(1986\)](#) study measuring conflict styles of 1,219 managers, employees were more likely to apply obliging to handle conflict with superiors and compromising with peers. When resolving conflict with subordinates, they tended to use integrating as primary styles and avoiding as backup styles. [Lee's \(1990\)](#) experimental study also showed that Korean managers tended to use compromising with peers; however, they adopted avoiding with superiors and dominating with subordinates. [Drory and Ritov \(1997\)](#) assessed the choice of conflict management styles toward a hypothetical interpersonal conflict in an organization. They demonstrated that employees working in Israel tended to use more obliging but fewer integrating and dominating strategies when the conflict partner was perceived as having greater power. [Nguyen and Yang \(2012\)](#) measured conflict management strategies of Chinese employees in a hypothetical conflict at work. When respondents played a role as supervisor, they used more direct and asserting strategies to resolve the conflict with their subordinate. When they played a role as subordinate, they were more likely to handle the conflict with the supervisor by utilizing indirect and harmony-preserving strategies (e.g. avoiding the conflict situation or pretending to obey the command of supervisor but secretly pursue their own goal). Both direct and indirect conflict strategies were used to handle conflict with peers.

Findings of the past studies suggest that the selection of conflict strategies is affected by role of the conflict partner; however, no consistent pattern of relationship has emerged. On the one hand, such differences could be due to cultural variations in conflict management; for instance, Asians were more likely to use avoiding or compromising to manage conflict, whereas Americans prefer direct confrontation or dominating ([Friedman *et al.*, 2006](#); [Ting-Toomey *et al.*, 1991](#); [Leung and Chan, 1999](#); [Ma, 2007](#); [Oetzel, 1998](#)). On the other hand, prior research on aging has consistently shown age differences in responses to interpersonal tensions ([Birditt and Fingerman, 2005](#); [Birditt *et al.*, 2005](#); [Blanchard-Fields *et al.*, 2004](#); [Fingerman *et al.*, 2008](#)), so it is also plausible that such mixed findings could be due to the age range across samples. For instance, respondents in [Rahim's \(1986\)](#) study are older and more experienced than those in [Nguyen and Yang's \(2012\)](#) research, as the average organizational experience of these two samples was above 17 years and 9 years, respectively, which might have influenced their selection of conflict strategies.

Given that past research on workplace conflict was largely conducted in samples of younger employees or with a narrow age range ([Chen and Tjosvold, 2007](#); [Chow and Ding, 2002](#); [DeChurch *et al.*, 2007](#); [Martin and Bergmann, 1996](#); [Rahim *et al.*, 2001](#); [Yuan, 2010](#)), it remains unclear whether younger and older workers would manage workplace conflict with supervisors, peers and subordinates differently. The findings of [Davis *et al.*'s \(2009\)](#) study indeed provide some preliminary support to such speculation. In particular, based on the ratings of coworkers of the target participants, their study revealed that in comparison to younger workers, older workers were more likely to be rated as displaying more passive avoidant responses to workplace conflict, such as yielding, delaying responses or adapting. Moreover, the participants who aged 55 years and above were perceived as exhibiting fewer active destructive behaviors, such as arguing vigorously and expressing anger, than their younger counterparts. However, younger and older workers did not differ in the use of active constructive strategies, such as perspective taking and creating solution, when dealing with subordinates, but older workers used these strategies to a greater extent when dealing with peers and

supervisors. On the one hand, these findings suggest that employees of different age groups vary in their ways to handle workplace conflicts. On the other hand, they also imply that the use of various conflict strategies toward supervisors, peers or subordinates can be influenced by age of the users.

Nevertheless, Davis *et al.*'s (2009) study solely relied on the ratings of coworkers to assess the use of conflict strategies between younger and older workers, which may be biased by the age-related stereotypes of the raters. This study therefore aims to investigate the effect of age on handling real-life conflicts with supervisors, peers or subordinates from the perspective of the persons who use the strategies. In light of the findings of Lee (1990) and Nguyen and Yang (2012), it is expected that compared with younger employees, older employees would use more avoiding to handle conflict with supervisors but less dominating with subordinates (*HI*). These predictions are consistent with the proposition of SST: in face of negative events, the use of passive strategies such as avoidance and behavioral disengagement helps older adults to regulate their emotions, whereas the employment of direct confrontation can only help the persons to tackle the problem but cannot reduce the negative emotions (Blanchard-Fields *et al.*, 2004; Yeung *et al.*, 2012). Thus, older workers are more likely to use avoiding and less dominating to manage workplace conflict than younger workers. For the other three conflict strategies, it is expected that both age groups would use them to a similar extent when handling conflict with other employees.

A great deal of attention has been paid toward workplace conflict in the West (see Poitras, 2010 for a meta-analysis), with limited research in Chinese populations. Past cross-cultural studies on conflict management suggest that Chinese employees, regardless of age, are more likely to adopt non-confrontational strategies (such as avoiding or compromising) than their Western counterparts (Bazerman *et al.*, 2000; Tang and Kirkbride, 1986). The Chinese sample, therefore, provides an ideal context to test the first hypothesis (i.e. whether the use of conflict strategies varies by age and role of the conflict partner). The effect of age on avoiding, if found, would be quite robust because such an effect is shown in a sample of working adults with greater preferences for non-confrontational conflict approaches.

Goal interdependence

The theory of cooperation and competition (Deutsch, 1990; Tjosvold, 1998) stresses that one's goal orientation in a conflict situation influences how he/she interacts with the conflict partner and the choice of conflict strategies. Three types of goal interdependence are identified, including cooperative, competitive and independent goals (Deutsch, 1994; Tjosvold, 1998; Tjosvold *et al.*, 1983). Most of conflict situations are regarded as a mixture of these three goal orientations, which influences one's strategy selection to resolve the conflict (Janssen and van de Vliert, 1996; Tjosvold, 1998). Individuals with cooperative goals believe their goals are positively linked to that of the conflict partner. Others' goal attainment helps them to achieve their own goals. As a result, they are more likely to adopt constructive strategies to handle the conflict, such as integrating and compromising. Individuals with competitive goals perceive their goals are negatively related to that of the conflict party. Others' goal attainment makes them less likely to achieve their own goals. Therefore, they tend to use destructive strategies such as dominating to manage the conflict incident. Independent goal occurs when individuals perceive their goals are unrelated to that of the conflict partner. Others' goal attainment

does not affect their own goal attainment. Consequently, they may use more passive strategies to deal with the conflict situation, for example, by avoiding discussion of the conflict issue with coworkers.

According to the theory of cooperation and competition, variations in conflict responses can be attributed to the type of goal interdependence that people hold in a conflict situation. With reference to the proposition of SST, older adults' emphasis of emotional goals and interpersonal closeness (Carstensen, 2006) may motivate them to be more cooperative but less competitive and independent with their conflict partners, which, in turn, affects their ways to handle the conflict incident. To explore the underlying mechanism of the age by role of conflict partner interaction effects on avoiding and dominating as proposed in *H1*, it is expected that such interaction effects would be mediated by the three types of goal interdependence (*H2*). In particular, it is anticipated that the age-related increase in avoiding with supervisors and the age-related decrease in dominating with subordinates, if found, would be explained by a higher cooperative goal and lower independent and competitive goals.

Outcomes of conflict strategies

The use of conflict strategies has been demonstrated to be predictive of individual and organizational outcomes. In general, integrating is associated with an effective management of conflict, whereas dominating and avoiding are related to ineffective conflict resolution (Gross and Guerrero, 2000; Janssen and van de Vliert, 1996; Rahim, 2011). For instance, clinical employees who used avoiding or dominating styles felt more stressful and reported a higher level of relationship conflict, and a reverse pattern was found for those with integrating style (Friedman *et al.*, 2000). DeChurch *et al.*'s (2007) experimental study also showed that the use of competing strategies produced greater levels of task and relationship conflicts and lowered satisfaction with the conflict outcomes. Moreover, health-care employees experienced greater psychological strain and exhaustion when they handled interpersonal conflicts passively, such as engaging in avoidance and yielding behaviors (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2009). Romer *et al.* (2012) further revealed that when leaders of insurance companies displayed more forcing and avoiding behaviors in task conflict, a higher level of conflict stress was observed among their subordinates. In sum, the use of avoiding and dominating strategies is associated with a wide range of negative work-related outcomes, such as reduced job satisfaction (De Dreu and Weingart, 2003; De Dreu *et al.*, 2004), lower job performance (Rahim *et al.*, 2001; Shih and Susanto, 2010) and poorer psychosocial well-being (Aranda and Lincoln, 2011; De Dreu *et al.*, 2004).

Even though past research has demonstrated the negative consequences of avoiding strategy on work-related outcomes and psychological well-being, older adults' use of passive strategies is indeed consistent with their developmental goal orientation that emphasizes on emotional goals and interpersonal closeness (Carstensen, 2006; Blanchard-Fields *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, greater use of passive strategies should contribute positively to their well-being, or at least has less harmful effect. Yeung and Fung (2012) have tested a similar idea in the relationship between passive emotion regulatory strategy and work-related outcomes. In the Western literature, the use of suppression as an emotion regulatory strategy is often associated with more negative emotions but fewer positive emotions (Gross, 1998; Gross and John, 2003). However, Yeung and Fung's study demonstrated that when older insurance employees displayed

a high level of emotional suppression at work, higher sales productivity and fewer negative emotions were observed. This finding reveals a beneficial effect of using passive strategies among older adults. It is therefore anticipated that the negative effect of avoiding strategy would only be shown in younger employees but not in older employees. To our best knowledge, such an idea has never been tested before. The third hypothesis of the present study thus tests whether the negative effect of avoiding on interpersonal relations and job satisfaction would be moderated by age (*H3*). Interpersonal relations and job satisfaction were selected as outcome variables because past studies revealed that behavioral responses to interpersonal conflict influence one's relationship quality (Birditt *et al.*, 2009; Friedman *et al.*, 2000, 2006) and well-being at work (Aryee *et al.*, 1999; Chan *et al.*, 2008; De Dreu *et al.*, 2004).

The present study

Empirical studies in the aging literature have demonstrated that older adults actively shape their behaviors to match their developmental goals. With a growing number of older employees in the labor force, it is essential to understand their ways to handle workplace conflict to promote an effective communication in organizations and to achieve high quality of work outcomes. Although SST and theory of cooperation and competition have received much empirical support in the aging and organizational psychology literatures, respectively, the few prior studies examining age differences in conflict strategies in the workplace (Davis *et al.*, 2009; Rahim, 1986) did not systematically integrate the two theoretical frameworks to make predictions. This study aims at filling this gap by examining age variations in conflict strategies with other employees and assessing the mediating role of goal interdependence. To address the problem of low generalizability of hypothetical conflict scenarios, which have been commonly used in prior research (Chan and Goto, 2003; Friedman *et al.*, 2006; Nguyen and Yang, 2012), this study would measure the use of conflict strategies in an actual conflict incident at work. It also investigated the moderating effect of age on the relationship between avoiding and interpersonal relations and job satisfaction.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 280 Chinese managerial and executive employees aged between 22 and 66 years ($M = 42.03$, $SD = 9.918$). Among them, 53.9 per cent were female and 66.1 per cent were married. About 44 per cent of participants had a bachelor degree, 31 per cent had a master or doctoral degree and the remaining had secondary school education. The average tenure in the current organization was 11.466 years ($SD = 10.355$) and 79 per cent worked in the private sector.

Procedure

Ethical approval of the study was first obtained from the affiliated university of the first author. Invitation letters with a detailed description of the study objectives were sent to human resources department of public and private organizations to obtain permission to collect data from their managerial and executive employees. Twenty-four organizations agreed to join this study. The questionnaire package was distributed to the target participants through internal mail. Participation was totally voluntary, and informed consent was obtained by asking the participant to read and sign the consent form on the first page of the survey package. The interested employees completed the

questionnaire by themselves, and then returned it in a post-by-pay envelope to the researchers. Confidentiality was ensured. A supermarket cash voucher worth HKD100 (~US\$13) was given to each participant in appreciation of his/her participation.

Measures

All measurement scales were first translated into Chinese by a bilingual translator and then back-translated into English by another translator. Discrepancies were resolved between the translators and the first author.

Personal conflict incident at work. To assess one's responses to workplace conflict, participants were asked to recall a real-life conflict incident, with other employees. They were instructed to write a few sentences to describe a conflict incident that they had experienced with other employees in the past six months. They were also asked to report gender and role of the conflict partner (1 = supervisor, 2 = peer and 3 = subordinate), and their perceived severity of the conflict (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *extremely*). The variable, role of the conflict partners, was transformed to two dummy variables (D1 = supervisor and D2 = peer), with subordinate as the comparison group. Among the sample, 87 of respondents reported a conflict incident with their supervisor, 88 with peer and 105 with subordinate. Based on the description by the participants, causes of the conflict incident were categorized into six groups by referencing to prior research on workplace conflicts (Jehn, 1995; Pearson *et al.*, 2002; Tjosvold and Chia, 1989): different viewpoints and opinions about the task being performed (23.7 per cent), interpersonal incompatibilities (20.1 per cent), quality of work (23.4 per cent), work scheduling (15.5 per cent), rigid rules and procedures (11.2 per cent) and insufficient resources (6.1 per cent). Younger and older employees did not differ in their report of a conflict incident with supervisors, peers or subordinates $\{X^2(2) = 1.462, ns\}$, sex of the conflict partner $\{X^2(2) = 2.367, ns\}$ and the nature of the conflict incident $\{X^2(5) = 2.795, ns\}$.

Conflict strategies. Participants' behavioral responses to handle the conflict incident with other employees were assessed by Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II, Form C; Rahim, 1983). This scale consists of 28 items to assess five conflict strategies with colleagues, including avoiding (six items; "I attempt to avoid being put on the spot and try to keep my conflict with the conflict partner to myself"), dominating (five items; "I use my influence to get my ideas accepted"), integrating (seven items; "I try to integrate my ideas with those of the conflict partner to come up with a solution acceptable to us"), compromising (four items; "I try to find a middle course to resolve an impasse") and obliging (six items; "I generally try to satisfy the needs of the conflict partner"). This scale has been shown to have high internal consistency and test-retest reliability (DeChurch *et al.*, 2007; Rahim, 1983). Permission to use this instrument was obtained from the Center for Advanced Studies in Management. Participants rated these items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*, with higher scores indicating greater use of the conflict strategy. The Cronbach's alphas (α) of the five conflict strategies were 0.700, 0.820, 0.862, 0.606 and 0.915. Because the internal consistency of compromising was not satisfactory ($\alpha < 0.70$), therefore it was excluded from the following statistical analyses.

Goal interdependence. Tjosvold *et al.*'s (1983) measure of goal interdependence was adapted to assess participants' motives to resolve the conflict incident. This scale consists of 19 items to measure the linkage of goals between the respondent and conflict partner, with 7 items assessing cooperative goal (e.g. "I learn a lot from working together

with the conflict partner”), 7 items for competitive goal (e.g. “The conflict partner seems to get in the way of my growth and development”) and 5 items for independent goal (e.g. “The conflict partner and I work separately”). Participants rated these items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The alphas of the three goal interdependence were 0.888, 0.852, and 0.819.

Interpersonal relations. The positive relations with others subscale of Ryff's (1989) psychological well-being scale was used to measure participants' interpersonal relations in the present study. The Chinese version of this study has been validated among Hong Kong Chinese by Cheng and Chan (2005). This subscale consists of 4 items, for example, “I often feel lonely because I have few close friends with whom to share my concerns”. Participants rated these items on a five-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), with higher scores denoting a warm and trusting relationship with others. The internal reliability was high, with $\alpha = 0.734$.

Job satisfaction. Kunin's (1955) single-item faces scale was used to measure the participants' overall job satisfaction. Unlike other measures of job satisfaction that consisted of mainly cognitive components of job attitudes, this faces scale measure assesses both cognitive and affective components in job satisfaction (Brief, 1998; Fisher, 2000). Previous studies have demonstrated the predictive validity of this single-item scale by showing its significant correlations with other job measures such as job performance (Yeung and Fung, 2012; Yeung *et al.*, 2015) and state affect at work (Fisher, 2000). Participants were asked to choose one of the seven faces that could best describe how they felt about their job in general. Higher scores indicate a higher level of job satisfaction.

Demographic variables including age, gender, education, marital status and organizational tenure were also recorded.

Results

Use of conflict strategies across age and conflict partner

Correlation analyses were computed to show the relationships among major variables (Table I). To test the first hypothesis, MANCOVA was conducted to examine whether the use of the four conflict strategies would be varied by age and role of the conflict partner, with gender and organizational tenure of the respondent and perceived severity of the conflict incident as covariates. Age was measured as a continuous variable in this study. To assess the effect of age on conflict strategies across conflict partners in MANCOVA, the continuous variable of age was recoded into a categorical variable by dividing the sample two age groups, younger employees (40 years and below) and older employees (41 years and above). This categorization of older and younger employees has been used in the Age Discrimination in Employment Act and also past research on age and work behaviors (Ng and Feldman, 2008; Yeung and Fung, 2009, 2012).

Table II presents means and standard deviations of the four conflict strategies toward conflict partners between younger and older employees. Results of MANCOVA revealed that the age by role of the conflict partner interaction effect was significant, $F(8, 536) = 2.249$, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.936$, $p = 0.023$, $\eta^2 = 0.032$. Subsequent univariate analyses showed that the age by role of the conflict partner interaction effect was significant on avoiding $\{F(2, 271) = 3.236, p = 0.041, \eta^2 = 0.023\}$ and dominating $\{F(2, 271) = 3.189, p = 0.043, \eta^2 = 0.023\}$, but was not significant for integrating $\{F(2, 271) = 1.240, ns\}$ or obliging $\{F(2, 271) = 0.057, ns\}$. Relative to the conflict with subordinates,

Table I.
Correlation analyses
among major
variables

Major variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Age	–										
Gender	-0.200***	–									
Seriousness of the conflict	0.206***	-0.155**	–								
Avoiding	0.019	0.038	-0.011	–							
Dominating	0.016	-0.007	-0.009	-0.029	–						
Integrating	0.097	-0.091	-0.055	-0.145*	0.214***	–					
Obliging	-0.081	0.036	-0.154**	0.332***	-0.238***	0.121*	–				
Independent goal	-0.013	-0.008	-0.018	0.020	0.194***	0.375***	0.061	–			
Cooperative goal	0.046	-0.022	-0.009	0.032	0.088	0.291***	0.096	0.548***	–		
Competitive goal	-0.013	0.009	0.052	0.228***	0.121*	-0.151*	0.056	-0.017	-0.277***	–	
Interpersonal relationship	0.093	0.004	-0.098	-0.226**	0.141*	0.237***	-0.061	0.063	-0.054	-0.018	–
Job satisfaction	0.097	-0.050	-0.034	-0.197***	0.112	0.216***	-0.065	0.086	0.024	-0.032	0.301***

Notes: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p \leq 0.001$

Conflict partner	Younger employees		Older employees	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<i>Avoiding</i>				
Supervisor	3.119	0.689	3.433	0.747
Peer	3.081	0.711	3.119	0.450
Subordinate	3.157	0.603	3.031	0.598
<i>Dominating</i>				
Supervisor	3.031	0.730	3.129	0.728
Peer	3.195	0.697	3.404	0.727
Subordinate	3.517	0.615	3.212	0.767
<i>Integrating</i>				
Supervisor	3.571	0.725	3.670	0.603
Peer	3.755	0.719	3.720	0.678
Subordinate	3.599	0.707	3.870	0.484
<i>Obliging</i>				
Supervisor	3.159	0.855	3.167	0.930
Peer	2.586	0.847	2.626	0.753
Subordinate	2.514	0.790	2.478	0.705

Table II.
Use of conflict
strategies across age
groups and conflict
partners

older employees were more likely to utilize avoiding with their supervisors than were their younger counterparts. When dealing with subordinates, older employees utilized less dominating than younger employees. Figure 1 illustrates the use of avoiding and dominating strategies across age groups and conflict partners. Moreover, the main effect of role of the conflict partner was also observed in obliging $\{F(2, 271) = 18.785, p < 0.001, \eta^2 = 0.122\}$ and dominating $\{F(2, 271) = 3.712, p = 0.026, \eta^2 = 0.027\}$. In particular, employees, regardless of age, were more likely to use obliging to resolve the conflict with supervisors than with peers and subordinates, whereas they tended to utilize dominating strategies to handle the conflict with subordinates than with



Figure 1.
Use of conflict
strategies across age
groups and conflict
partners

Notes: (a) Use of avoiding strategy; (b) use of dominating strategy

supervisors. Main effect of age group was not found in the four conflict strategies. Gender and organizational tenure did not have any significant effect on the use of the five conflict strategies, while the main effect of the perceived severity of the conflict incident was only significant on obliging ($B = -0.146$, $SE = 0.044$, $p = 0.001$).

The mediating effect of goal interdependence

H2 was tested by a moderated mediation analysis, in particular, the interaction effect between role of the conflict partner (the independent variable) and age (the moderator) on each conflict strategy (the dependent variable) would be mediated by goal interdependence (the mediator) (Preacher *et al.*, 2007). Hayes's (2012) SPSS macro of moderated mediation analysis was used to test the mediating effect of three goal orientations on the relationship among role of conflict partner, age and the conflict strategy (avoiding and dominating). Based on the suggestion of Hayes and Preacher (2014), two sets of moderated mediation analysis were conducted for each conflict strategy, each with one dummy variable of role of the conflict partner as the independent variable and the other dummy variable as the covariate in the model. The three goal orientations were inputted to the model as mediators. Age was entered to the analysis as a continuous variable. All predictors were centered on the mean of the respective variable. Tables III and IV summarize the results of moderated mediation analyses on avoiding and dominating, respectively. The upper part of the tables shows that the main effects of role of the conflict partner and age and their interaction effect on each goal orientation. Results showed that both role of the conflict partner and age significantly predicted independent and cooperative goals but not competitive goal. In particular, older employees were more likely to hold a cooperative goal orientation and less likely to have an independent goal than were younger employees in the conflict situation. When the conflict partner was supervisor or peer, the level of independent goal orientation was higher, whereas a reverse pattern was observed for cooperative goal orientation. The interaction effect on each goal orientation was not significant.

The middle part of the tables presents the main effects of role of the conflict partner, age and three goal orientations and the interaction effect of role of the conflict partner and age on conflict strategies. Results demonstrated that role of the conflict partner as supervisor and independent and competitive goals were predictive of both avoiding and dominating strategies. Cooperative goal was predictive of the use of dominating but not avoiding strategies. The interaction effect between role of the conflict partner as supervisor and age on avoiding ($B = 0.019$, $SE = 0.008$, $p < 0.05$) remained significant even after controlling for the three goal orientations. In particular, the conditional direct effect of role of the conflict partner as supervisor on avoiding was significantly stronger at 1 standard deviation (SD) above the mean of age ($B = 0.380$, $SE = 0.123$, $p < 0.01$) and the mean ($B = 0.192$, $SE = 0.093$, $p < 0.05$) than 1 SD below the mean ($B = 0.005$, $SE = 0.122$, *ns*). However, the interaction effect between role of the conflict partner and age on dominating was not significant.

The lower part of the tables shows the conditional indirect effects of role of the conflict partner on DV through goal interdependence across age. Results showed that there was a significant indirect effect of role of the conflict partner on avoiding through independent goal across age groups. For dominating, there was a significant indirect effect of role of the conflict partner through independent and cooperative goals across

Predictors	Conflict partner = Supervisor			Conflict partner = Peer		
	B	SE	t	B	SE	t
<i>DV: Independent goal</i>						
Constant	-0.293***	0.078	-3.774	-0.283***	0.077	-3.662
Role of conflict partner (RCP)	0.428***	0.116	3.705	0.502***	0.114	4.400
Age	-0.012*	0.006	-2.027	-0.019**	0.006	-3.269
RCP × Age	-0.003	0.010	-0.314	0.019†	0.010	1.847
Covariate: other dummy of RCP	0.506***	0.115	4.403	0.413***	0.115	3.586
<i>DV: Cooperative goal</i>						
Constant	0.214***	0.062	3.442	0.214***	0.062	3.445
RCP	-0.288**	0.092	-3.116	-0.402***	0.092	-4.374
Age	0.015**	0.005	3.244	0.015**	0.005	3.188
RCP × Age	-0.003	0.008	-0.392	-0.003	0.008	-0.323
Covariate: other dummy of RCP	-0.400***	0.092	-4.348	-0.285**	0.093	-3.071
<i>DV: Competitive goal</i>						
Constant	0.033	0.061	0.547	0.032	0.061	0.527
RCP	-0.086	0.090	-0.957	-0.003	0.090	-0.034
Age	-0.002	0.005	-0.321	-0.001	0.005	-0.137
RCP × Age	0.010	0.008	1.256	0.007	0.008	0.915
Covariate: other dummy of RCP	-0.009	0.090	-0.096	-0.096	0.091	-1.060
<i>DV: Avoiding</i>						
Constant	3.094***	0.063	49.321	3.084***	0.063	48.736
RCP	0.192*	0.09	2.062	0.005	0.095	0.051
Independent goal	0.135*	0.055	2.455	0.128*	0.056	2.286
Cooperative goal	0.097	0.065	1.502	0.092	0.065	1.415
Competitive goal	0.173**	0.065	2.649	0.187**	0.066	2.843
Age	-0.004	0.005	-0.874	0.002	0.005	0.461
RCP × Age	0.019*	0.008	2.360	-0.001	0.008	-0.065
Covariate: other dummy of RCP	-0.009	0.094	-0.099	0.190*	0.094	2.009

(continued)

Table III.
Results of moderated
mediation analysis
on avoiding

Table III.

Predictors	Conflict partner = Supervisor			Conflict partner = Peer		
	B	SE	t	B	SE	t
<i>Conditional direct effect of RCP on Avoiding at values of age</i>						
-1 SD	0.005	0.122	0.041	0.010	0.123	0.081
Mean	0.192*	0.093	2.061	0.005	0.095	0.051
+1 SD	0.380**	0.123	3.078	-0.000	0.125	-0.003
<i>Conditional indirect effect of RCP on Avoiding (through goal interdependence) at values of age</i>						
	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LL 95%CI	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LL 95%CI
<i>Independent goal</i>			Boot UL 95%CI			Boot UL 95%CI
-1 SD	0.062	0.035	0.010	0.040	0.029	0.001
Mean	0.058	0.031	0.011	0.064	0.035	0.006
+1 SD	0.054	0.034	0.008	0.088	0.048	0.006
<i>Cooperative goal</i>						
-1 SD	-0.025	0.022	-0.090	-0.035	0.028	-0.107
Mean	-0.028	0.023	-0.084	-0.037	0.028	-0.097
+1 SD	-0.031	0.027	-0.104	-0.040	0.030	-0.110
<i>Competitive goal</i>						
-1 SD	-0.032	0.027	-0.111	-0.014	0.028	-0.084
Mean	-0.015	0.017	-0.062	-0.001	0.019	-0.040
+1 SD	0.002	0.020	-0.036	0.013	0.024	-0.028

Notes: Bootstrap sample size = 5,000; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; CI = confidence interval; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; and † $p < 0.07$

Predictors	Conflict partner = Supervisor			Conflict partner = Peer		
	B	SE	t	B	SE	t
<i>DV: Independent goal</i>						
Constant	-0.293***	0.078	-3.774	-0.283***	0.077	-3.662
Role of conflict partner (RCP)	0.428***	0.116	3.705	0.502***	0.114	4.400
Age	-0.012*	0.006	-2.027	-0.019**	0.006	-3.269
RCP × Age	-0.003	0.010	-0.314	0.019†	0.010	1.847
Covariate: other dummy of RCP	0.506***	0.115	4.403	0.413***	0.115	3.586
<i>DV: Cooperative goal</i>						
Constant	0.214***	0.062	3.442	0.214***	0.062	3.445
RCP	-0.288**	0.092	-3.116	-0.402***	0.092	-4.374
Age	0.015**	0.005	3.244	0.015**	0.005	3.188
RCP × Age	-0.003	0.008	-0.392	-0.003	0.009	-0.323
Covariate: other dummy of RCP	-0.400***	0.092	-4.348	-0.285**	0.093	-3.071
<i>DV: Competitive goal</i>						
Constant	0.033	0.061	0.547	0.032	0.061	0.527
RCP	-0.086	0.090	-0.957	-0.003	0.090	-0.034
Age	-0.002	0.005	-0.321	-0.001	0.005	-0.137
RCP × Age	0.010	0.008	1.256	0.007	0.008	0.915
Covariate: Other dummy of RCP	-0.009	0.090	-0.096	-0.096	0.091	-1.060
<i>DV: Dominating</i>						
Constant	3.302***	0.070	47.300	3.300***	0.070	47.329
RCP	-0.211*	0.104	-2.033	0.030	0.104	0.289
Independent goal	0.225***	0.061	3.660	0.216***	0.062	3.513
Cooperative goal	0.361***	0.072	5.033	0.358***	0.072	4.989
Competitive goal	0.181*	0.073	2.491	0.186*	0.072	2.569
Age	-0.005	0.005	-0.943	-0.005	0.005	-0.887
RCP × Age	0.008	0.009	0.898	0.007	0.009	0.783
Covariate: other dummy of RCP	0.023	0.105	0.222	-0.217*	0.104	-2.085

(continued)

Table IV.
Results of moderated
mediation analysis
on dominating

Table IV.

Predictors	B	Conflict partner = Supervisor		Conflict partner = Peer			
		B	t	B	t		
<i>Conditional direct effect of RCP on Dominating at values of age</i>							
-1 SD	-0.290*	0.135	-2.145	-0.039	0.136	-0.285	
Mean	-0.211*	0.104	-2.033	0.030	0.104	0.289	
+1 SD	-0.132	0.137	-0.959	0.099	0.137	0.721	
<i>Conditional indirect effect of RCP on Dominating (through goal interdependence) at values of age</i>							
	Effect	Boot SE	Boot LL 95%CI	Boot UL 95%CI	Boot SE	Boot LL 95%CI	Boot UL 95%CI
<i>Independent goal</i>							
-1 SD	0.103	0.048	0.032	0.226	0.068	0.043	0.180
Mean	0.096	0.044	0.031	0.203	0.109	0.045	0.214
+1 SD	0.089	0.052	0.017	0.224	0.149	0.060	0.285
<i>Cooperative goal</i>							
-1 SD	-0.093	0.048	-0.206	-0.016	-0.34	0.058	-0.043
Mean	-0.104	0.039	-0.195	-0.040	-0.144	0.045	-0.070
+1 SD	-0.116	0.052	-0.238	-0.032	-0.153	0.053	-0.070
<i>Competitive goal</i>							
-1 SD	-0.034	0.028	-0.114	0.004	-0.014	0.029	0.033
Mean	-0.016	0.018	-0.064	0.010	-0.001	0.019	0.041
+1 SD	0.003	0.021	-0.037	0.050	0.013	0.025	0.080

Notes: Bootstrap sample size = 5,000; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit; CI = confidence interval; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; and † $p < 0.07$

age groups. These results suggest that the age by role of the conflict partner interaction effect on avoiding was partly mediated by independent goal, whereas such an interaction effect on dominating were fully mediated by independent and cooperative goals.

The moderating effect of age on avoiding and interpersonal relations and job satisfaction

Hayes's (2012) SPSS macro of moderation analysis was used to test the third hypothesis on the moderating effect of age on the relationships between avoiding and interpersonal relations and job satisfaction. Gender of participants and integrating strategy were inputted as covariates because of their significant correlation with age and outcome variables. Results showed that the moderating effect of age on avoiding and interpersonal relations was significant ($B = 0.013$, $SE = 0.007$, $p = 0.05$). In particular, the negative effect of avoiding on interpersonal relations was only significant for workers at the mean and 1 SD below the mean of age ($B = -0.224$, $SE = 0.065$ and $B = 0.352$, $SE = 0.092$, respectively, $p < 0.001$) but not those at 1 SD above the mean ($B = 0.096$, $SE = 0.092$, ns), implying that the negative effect of avoiding was only shown among younger employees but not among older employees. However, this beneficial effect was not found on job satisfaction ($B = -0.001$, $SE = 0.011$, ns). Additional analyses showed that age did not moderate the effects of other three conflict strategies on interpersonal relations nor job satisfaction.

Discussion

The present study integrates two theoretical frameworks, namely, SST (Carstensen, 2006) and theory of cooperation and competition (Deutsch, 1990; Tjosvold, 1998), to examine the underlying mechanism of the age by role of conflict partner interaction effect on the use of conflict strategies. Consistent with prior literature on age-related changes in behavioral responses to everyday problems and interpersonal tensions (Birditt *et al.*, 2005; Blanchard-Fields *et al.*, 2004; Fingerman *et al.*, 2008), the present study also demonstrates the age-related increase in the use of passive strategies and the age-related reduction in destructive strategies when handling conflict with other employees. Specifically, older employees used more avoiding when dealing with supervisors and less dominating when dealing with subordinates than did younger employees. Results of this study also reveal that such age differences in avoiding and dominating strategies can be explained by goal interdependence in the conflict incident. Furthermore, in support of our prediction, the negative effect of avoiding on interpersonal relations is only shown among younger employees but not among older employees. These findings advance the current literature by showing that the effect of conflict strategies on work-related outcomes is not universal, largely depending on the age of the users. Specifically, when older adults select the type of conflict strategies that is congruent with their developmental goals, the negative consequences of passive strategies on psychosocial well-being, which are commonly found in younger population, would be weakened or eliminated.

Age and conflict strategies at work

The majority of past studies on workplace conflict were conducted in samples of younger workers or with a narrow age range (Chen and Tjosvold, 2007; Chow and Ding, 2002; Rahim *et al.*, 2001). The present study advances the literature by examining the use

of conflict strategies in a sample of Chinese working adults with a wider age range (22 and 66 years). By recalling an actual conflict incident at work, age differences in handling conflict with supervisors, peers or subordinates were assessed. Results showed that older employees used avoiding to a greater extent than did younger employees when the conflict partner was supervisor, whereas they employed less dominating when the conflict target was subordinate. These patterns of conflict strategies are consistent with past research among Asian samples (Lee, 1990; Nguyen and Yang, 2012), in which Asian employees utilized more dominating when dealing the conflict with subordinates and used more indirect and harmony-preserving strategies like avoiding to resolve the conflict with supervisors. However, the present study reveals that the effect of role of the conflict partner on conflict strategies would further be moderated by age of the participants. Fingerman *et al.* (2008) also found older and younger adults displayed different behavioral responses toward social partners of different ages. Similarly, the current study reveals that younger and older employees vary in their use of conflict strategies when dealing with employees of different statuses, even after taken into consideration of their working experiences in the organization. Specifically, with age, there is an increased use of passive strategies such as avoiding with supervisors and a decreased use of active destructive strategies such as dominating with subordinates. Despite the significant interaction effects, the mean age differences in avoiding and dominating strategies are not large. However, Chinese working adults in general tend to utilize non-confrontational conflict approaches than their Western counterparts (Tang and Kirkbride, 1986) in face of interpersonal conflicts. The significant variations in these two conflict strategies between younger and older employees found in the present study indeed suggest that the effect of age on conflict management is quite robust, even in a sample of cultural norms of indirect strategies.

Younger and older employees displayed a similar pattern of using the constructive strategies, i.e. integrating, to handle conflict with supervisors, peers or subordinates. Inconsistent with the past studies (Davis *et al.*, 2009), this study did not find an age-related increase in the use of obliging at work. Such discrepancy may be due to the use of observer ratings in Davis *et al.*'s study to assess employees' responses to workplace conflict. Future studies should examine the age by role of the conflict partner interaction effect by using both subjective and objective measures of behavioral responses to workplace conflict.

The role of goal interdependence in workplace conflict

According to the theory of cooperation and competition (Deutsch, 1990; Tjosvold, 1998), the selection of conflict strategies is determined by one's goal orientation in a conflict situation. Cooperative goals are associated with greater use of constructive strategies, whereas competitive and independent goals are correlated with destructive and passive strategies, respectively (Alper *et al.*, 1998; Tjosvold, 1998). The present study tested the mediating role of the three types of goal interdependence, including cooperative, competitive and independent goals, in avoiding and dominating strategies between age groups and role of the conflict partner. With reference to the proposition of SST (Carstensen, 2006), we expected that older employees, who focus on emotional goals and interpersonal closeness, hold a more cooperative but less competitive and independent goal in the face of a conflict with other employees than do younger employees. Results support our prediction; in particular, older employees held a more cooperative but less

independent goal than younger employees in an interpersonal conflict at work. These age differences in goal interdependence were shown to explain for the age by role of the conflict partner interaction effect on avoiding and dominating. Specifically, the age by role of the conflict partner interaction effect on dominating was mediated by cooperative and independent goals, whereas the age by role of the conflict partner interaction effect on avoiding was partially explained by independent goals. These findings are in alignment of the prediction of SST that emphasis of emotional goals and interpersonal closeness motivates older employees to be more cooperative and interdependent with their conflict partners, which, in turn, influences their selection of avoiding and dominating strategies to handle the conflict at work.

Effect of avoiding among older employees

Past studies have consistently shown that avoidance is an ineffective conflict management strategy and is often associated with negative consequences such as poor relationship quality, lower job satisfaction, psychological strain or escalatory conflict outcomes (e.g. Birditt *et al.*, 2009; DeChurch *et al.*, 2007; Dijkstra *et al.*, 2009). However, the use of passive strategies by older adults is indeed congruent with their developmental goals that focus on emotional closeness. It was expected that the negative consequences of avoiding were only prevalent among younger employees because they focused on knowledge acquisition and development of social relationships, while the negative effect may not be found among older employees. The current study therefore tested this prediction to investigate whether the negative effect of avoiding on interpersonal relations and job satisfaction would be moderated by age. Results partially support our prediction. In particular, the negative effect of avoiding on interpersonal relations was only shown among younger employees but not among older employees, suggesting that the use of avoiding by older adults does not harm their interpersonal relations. In support of the findings of past studies (Yeung and Fung, 2012; Yeung *et al.*, 2015), this study provides further evidence to the prediction of SST that positive psychosocial outcomes would be observed when an individual's behaviors are congruent with their developmental goals. This finding also offers insights to the general assumption of an age-invariant effect of conflict strategies on work-related outcomes. Future research should therefore take age into account when examining responses to workplace conflict.

Yet, the moderating effect of age was not found in the relationship between avoiding and job satisfaction. This suggests that greater use of avoiding strategies is associated with lower job satisfaction for both younger and older employees; however, they do not exert any negative impact on interpersonal relations of older employees. Given that past research have consistently found that job satisfaction strongly correlates with work-related outcomes and psychological well-being (Fisher, 2003; Judge *et al.*, 2001), future studies should examine the long-term association between job satisfaction and interpersonal relations to better understand well-being of older employees at work.

Limitations and future directions

When interpreting results reported above, a few limitations should be considered. First, this project was conducted among managerial and executive employees, whose conflict management might be different from that of junior-level employees. Past studies have demonstrated that one's selection of conflict strategies might be affected by the

perceived power of the conflict partner (Drory and Ritov, 1997); thus, the result pattern found in this study might not generalize to junior-grade workers such as clerical or blue-collar workers. Second, this study relied on self-reported ratings to assess conflict strategies, without ratings from the conflict partner or other employees. Future studies should adopt both subjective and objective assessments of conflict responses to minimize the potential errors in recalling the conflict incident and the use of conflict strategies. Third, age of the conflict partner was not recorded in the present study. Fingerman *et al.* (2008) have shown that the use of conflict strategies varied with the age of social partners, suggesting the possibility of intergenerational differences in conflict management. Future studies should investigate the phenomenon in both intergenerational and intragenerational dyads to fully understand conflict management across adulthood. Fourth, in addition to the effects of age and role of the conflict partner, other forces at work would also influence one's selection of conflict strategies, such as the organizational culture to manage conflict (Leung and Chan, 1999), intergroup dynamics (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) and perceived future interaction opportunities with the conflict partner (Fingerman *et al.*, 2008). Future studies should include these factors to have a more comprehensive assessment of the effect of age on conflict management. Fifth, in view of the mandatory retirement age in Hong Kong (that is 60 and 65 years for public and private sectors, respectively), it is an open question whether pre-retirees' goal orientation is different from that of employees aged between 40 and 59 years. Further studies should compare conflict styles and goal orientations as well as their effects among employees in different life stages.

To conclude, this project advances our understanding of conflict management in a sample of employees of a wider age range. Even though Chinese adults, regardless of age, show a greater preference for non-confrontational conflict strategies, the current study demonstrates that older employees utilize more avoiding with supervisors and less dominating with subordinates than their younger counterparts. The age by role of the conflict partner interaction effect on avoiding and dominating could be accounted for by independent and cooperative goals. In addition, the negative effect of avoiding on interpersonal relations was only shown in younger employees but not older employees, suggesting that the use of this strategy is not always harmful, largely depending on age of the users.

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