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How African American women handle conflict in the workplace: An assessment of the impact of race, gender and class

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HOW AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN HANDLE CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE IMPACT OF RACE, GENDER AND CLASS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impact of race, gender, and class oppression the conflict experiences and conflict-handling styles of African American women in the workplace. Conflict styles are one of the most frequently discussed topics in the literature on conflict resolution. Researchers have developed typologies of conflict styles and have examined how situational, relational, organizational, and personality factors influence the conflict styles of individuals. Few studies, however, have considered the ways in which race/ethnic, gender, and class oppression affect conflict-handling behavior. Some studies have taken an "add-on" approach to understanding the impact of oppression by treating the effects of race, gender, and class as separate variables that can be simply added together. However, these studies fail to deal with the simultaneous effects of oppression that African American women experience daily. Recent theories suggest that African American women are likely to encounter different, perhaps more complex, conflict-inducing experiences than others such as white men and women.

Ten African American women from various socioeconomic backgrounds and professions in Omaha, Nebraska were selected for the study. All of the women were in some form of management in their organizations. They all were college educated, three had Master's degrees and two had Ph.D. degrees. An in-depth interview was conducted with each woman, and thematic analysis was used to summarize their responses.

Eight major themes emerged from the interview data. The themes dealt with a range of issues, which included: 1) use of the five conflict-handling styles; 2) a mistrust of their

White male counterparts; 3) race and gender are inseparable elements in a conflict; 4) dealing with stereotypes in the workplace; 5) White males are treated different than African American women; 6) disrespect for their positions in the corporation; 7) the isolation of the solo status in the workplace; 8) a tradition of resistance to oppressive elements.

The study concludes that the current literature on conflict styles is inadequate for African American women dealing with conflict. Racism, sexism, and classism are oppressive elements that continue to effect the experiences of African American women in the workplace. The study exposes a gap in the present conflict styles literature involving whether, and how, the simultaneous effects of race, gender, and class oppression influence one's conflict-handling styles. It suggests an alterative, interactive approach to studying African American women's conflict experiences. The approach emphasizes oppression, cultural hegemony, and standpoint theories, and offers a foundation for developing a comprehensive oppression conflict resolution theory for African American women.

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Dedicated to

Catherine Ray Jenkins, M.S.,

my loving mother and

Dr. Ollie Mae Ray,

my loving aunt

for their unlimited encouragement and support

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction and Review of Literature

Organizations consist of people with varying attitudes, personalities and motivations that can become a hotbed of conflicting interests or goals. Thus, cooperation and team-building should be two of an organization's most vital elements. Even in the most homogeneous of organizations, however, conflict can debilitate or scar relationships for years and lead to a decline in cooperation and productivity. If one adds to the equation the fact that most modern organizations are becoming ever more heterogeneous in terms of race, gender, and class, issues leading to and resulting in conflict may reach a higher order.

Studies have been conducted in the workplace on the actions White men and women take to resolve a conflict, and the differences in how White men and women handle conflict (Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach, 1994; Offermann & Kearney, 1988). There also have been studies on how to handle cultural differences in international conflicts (Augsburger, 1992; Kozan, 1989). Although there have been studies on how African American men and women handle conflict in intimate relationships (Aldridge, 1984) little has been done to study how people of color, particularly African American women, resolve conflicts in the workplace. This distinction is important for African American women because it has been documented that factors such as cultural background, racism, sexism and institutional discrimination have adversely affected people of color within organizations in terms of being hired, promoted and salary expectations (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990). Cumulatively, these studies provide evidence that factors like these in and of themselves may also affect the nature of conflict and its resolution in the workplace.

As many as 58% of all African American women were gainfully employed in 1987, according to the 1989 U.S. Bureau of Census (Spaights & Whitaker, 1995, p. 283). This percentage suggests that there are many organizations in which African American women are interacting in the workplace. While organizational personnel seek to encourage harmonious work relationships with those members of their team who are African American women, a greater awareness of how African American women handle conflict is needed. Standing at the nexus of race, gender, and class oppression within society and organizations, African American women may encounter different, perhaps more complex, conflict-inducing experiences than others such as White middle-class men and women.

There are several factors that may contribute to the development of conflict situations in the workplace. For example, the prejudices and resentments of organization members, may be based on any number of combinations of race, gender, class, and limited access to positions of decision-making and power. Any combination of these factors may affect the way African American women experience and deal with conflicts that arise in the workplace.

The oppression of African American women throughout history has led to their under representation in the work force today (Kilbourne, England, & Beron, 1994), because of a racial caste system (Turner, Singleton, & Musick, 1984) and a phallocentric orientation in American society. In terms of race, African American women have a notorious history of being treated as second-class citizens, the "last hired, first fired." In terms of gender, African American women and women, in general, have been considered less valuable than their male workplace counterparts. With double strikes against their race and gender in terms of enduring in the work force, many African American women also exist below or at the

poverty level. This forces them to exist in limited levels of economic success. As stated above, 58% of African American women were "gainfully" employed in 1987. However, only 9.3% of those women held professional, technical, managerial or administrative positions (Spaights & Whitaker, 1995, p. 284).

According to White (1990), African American women have not been in their corporate positions long enough and in sufficient numbers to gain the attention and confidence of senior management. Senior management may view African American women as incapable of supervising large numbers of people. A large proportion of those people are men, who resent being supervised by African American women or having these women above them in the corporate hierarchy (White, 1990, p. 182). As a result, African American women may not have access to the kinds of training, mentoring, networking and respect afforded other employees, supervisors and managers (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990), namely White middle-class males. Some studies have found that gender and race effect occupational segregation, promotions, earnings, and status (Greenhaus, Parasuraman, & Wormley, 1990; Xu & Leffler, 1992). Consequently, African American women may have fewer resources to draw from when dealing with conflict at work. Therefore, they may face particularly difficult conflicts embedded in a context of racism, sexism and classism.

This research has several objectives. First, a review of the current conflict literature as it pertains to the styles, strategies and the contextual effects of conflict will be discussed, along with a brief overview of the five commonly accepted styles of conflict management, which are Collaborator, Compromiser, Accommodator, Controller and Avoider (Blake & Mouton, 1964, 1978, 1985; Lawyer & Katz, 1985; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974, 1977, 1978).

Although current conflict literature addresses the individual effects of race, gender and class on conflict in the workplace, it fails to address the simultaneous impact of these variables on employees in the workplace. Therefore, the five-style conflict management model may be inadequate for African American women dealing with conflict in the workplace and this study investigates this possibility. Second, it will develop and test the validity of a critique of the research literature on conflict styles. Third, it examines the process and outcome of conflict between African American women supervisors and managers (the terms will be used interchangeably) and their subordinates or superiors in the workplace.

African American women were selected for this study because little research has been done on them as a group in relation to conflict in the workplace. Ten African American women from various socioeconomic backgrounds and professions were interviewed. Through the descriptions of African American women's experiences with conflict in the workplace, this study examines how the oppressive factors of racism, sexism and classism effect the process and outcome of conflict.

Nature of Conflict

To understand conflict in the workplace and how it affects differentially African American female workers, a clear definition of "conflict" will be established. Conflict is "an expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in achieving their goals," according to Hocker and Wilmot (1995, p. 21). An essential characteristic of conflict is that it is a mutual activity. The parties engage in a struggle and interfere with each other because they are interdependent.

Conflict is often seen as negative. However, conflict can be either disruptive and destructive, or it can be creative and constructive, depending on how one handles it. Conflict can decrease group cohesion and trust, which leads to less effective organizational performance, or it can bring opportunity and growth to individuals, groups, and organizations (Lawyer & Katz, 1985).

When people have different points of view and express them, disagreement and conflict are inevitable (Augsburger, 1992). To complicate matters, as different cultural groups interact, different sources of racial conflict may come into play. African American women, because of their culture and subsequent life experiences, may be viewed differently than members of the majority culture and that could lead to conflict. For example, the very presence of African American women can cause conflict because White employees may experience problems with Black coworkers as a function of Whites' negative views of affirmative action (Waters, Jr., 1992). African American women may be viewed as having a double status of being a woman and a minority thereby receiving preferential treatment because of this status. It is in cases such as this that African American women need to understand the oppressive undertones that may exist in the conflict and be equipped with the tools to manage it effectively.

Conflict Management: Styles and Strategies

Conflict management is "the process of becoming aware of a conflict, diagnosing its nature, and employing an appropriate style to diffuse the emotional energy involved and enable the disputing parties to understand and resolve their differences" (Lawyer & Katz, 1985, p. 95). Employees' perceptions influence what happens during conflicts and what

effects conflicts have on organizations. Besides perceiving conflicts in different ways,

employees also differ in their perceptions of how conflicts ought to be managed. The

orientation or style that a person takes to manage a particular conflict should (and usually

does) change as a conflict progresses, because the parties obtain more information about the

other person, their own goals, and their own priorities (Conrad, 1994, p. 345).

Conflict Styles

Conflict styles are viewed as the overall patterned responses or clusters of behavior

that people use in conflict situations (Hocker & Wilmot, 1995). That is, a conflict style is an

individual's general approach used to handle a conflict. A model of five conflict-handling

behavior styles has received wide support in the conflict literature. The scheme developed

by Thomas and Kilmann (1974) is a modification of Blake and Mouton's (1964) Managerial

Grid model. This model uses a two-dimensional model of behavior: (a) assertiveness,

defined as behavior intended to satisfy one's own concerns; and (b) cooperativeness, defined

as behavior intended to satisfy others' concerns. The dimensions combine to produce five

conflict styles.

While terminology for the five styles varies among researchers (Weeks, 1992), the

most common labels, derived from the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (1977),

are: collaborating (highly assertive and cooperative); compromising (intermediate in both

assertiveness and cooperativeness); accommodating (unassertive and cooperative),

competing (assertive and uncooperative), and avoiding (unassertive and uncooperative).

Lawyer and Katz (1985, p. 98) describe the five styles as follows:

1. **Collaborator**: The collaborator's approach to conflict is to manage it
    by maintaining interpersonal relationships and ensuring that both

parties to the conflict achieve their personal goals.

2. **Compromiser**: The compromiser's approach to conflict is to assume that a win/win solution is not possible and to adopt a negotiating stance that involves a little bit of winning and a little bit of losing with respect to both the goals and the relationships of the involved parties, with persuasion and manipulation dominating the style.

3. **Accommodator**: The accommodator's approach to conflict involves maintaining the interpersonal relationship at all cost, with little or no concern for one's personal goals.

4. **Controller**: The controller's approach to conflict is to take the necessary steps to ensure that his or her personal goals are met, whatever the cost to the relationship. Conflict is viewed as a competitive win or lose proposition, with winning somehow equated with status and competence.

5. **Avoider**: The avoider's approach to conflict is to view it as something to be shunned at all cost. A central theme of this style is hopelessness, which results in a high degree of frustration for all parties involved. Personal goals are usually not met, nor is the interpersonal relationship maintained.

The basic points to remember about the styles of conflict are:
1. People develop their styles for reasons that make sense to them.
2. No one style is better than another in every situation.
3. People change their styles to adapt to the demands of new situations (Lawyer & Katz, 1985, p. 98).

Some researchers have questioned the five-style approach to conflict management behavior by reporting studies that produce fewer or greater numbers of interpersonal conflict styles. However, the typologies that include fewer categories (e.g., Sillars, Coletti, Parry & Rogers, 1982) can collapse together into two or more of the five styles, and typologies that include more categories (e.g., van de Vliert, 1990) can generally collapse together into the five styles. Within each style there are certain strategies used to accomplish the goal of the style. Next, a definition of conflict strategies will be discussed and how they interact within the style to accomplish the overall goal.

Conflict Strategies

A conflict strategy refers to an operational plan to achieve a conflict goal. It is a set of ideas that provides a framework for, and links together, more limited behavior that constitutes tactics (Bisno, 1988). A strategy may thus be said to integrate a consideration regarding *what* to do about a problem with a concern regarding *why* to go about doing it (Brager & Holloway, 1978). Strategies and tactics are individual moves people make to carry out their general conflict handling style (Hocker & Wilmot, 1995).

Putman and Wilson (1982) conclude that strategy choices are clustered into (a) non-confrontation (avoiding, withdrawing and indirectness); (b) solution-oriented choices (behavior aimed at finding a solution, and integrating needs of both parties); and © control (arguing, or taking control of the interaction). These choices can be associated with the five conflict styles identified by Thomas-Kilmann (1977). Non-confrontation strategies fit within the avoider and accommodator styles. These include direct denial, evasive remarks or noncommittal statements (e.g., "maybe someday, we will be able to . . . "), giving up or giving in, and expressions of desire for harmony or disengagement; for example, "I couldn't care less" (Hocker & Wilmot, 1995).

Solution-oriented strategies are associated with the collaborator and compromising styles. These include descriptive statements, supportive remarks or acceptance of responsibility, (e.g., "I think we both played a part in this disagreement."), and suggesting a trade off or appeal to fairness, (e.g., "you got to pick the movie last time. We should pick something that I want to see this time"). Control strategies fit the controller style. These strategies include personal criticism, rejection, and hostile jokes or threats, (e.g., "Do it my

way or else . . . ") (Hocker & Wilmot, 1995).

Different authors have presented models that identify a variety of conflict styles and strategies. Putman and Wilson (1982) argue that one's decision to use a particular style is largely governed by situational rather than personality constraints. Whatever styles and strategies used, the basic question is whether those choices lead to the effective management of the conflict in a particular context. Literature on conflict styles, strategies and tactics often uses the terms interchangeably, which leads to some overlap and confusion in the meaning of these terms.

Contextual Effects on Conflict Styles

In order for the conflict to be properly diagnosed and resolved, it must be studied within the context that it occurs. Viewing conflict management in terms of individual conflict "styles" is misleading because people change styles depending on the situation, importance of the disputing parties' relationship or the effectiveness of a particular style. While an individual may have a preferred conflict style, it is not an individual characteristic of that person. Three contextual effects of situational, relational and organizational will be reviewed in this section. Also, the factors of the gender, race/ethnicity, class and the patriarchal structure of the organization will be considered.

Situational Effects

Some researchers believe the type of situation affects one's choice of conflict style (Hocker & Wilmot, 1995; Witteman, 1992). A problem with viewing conflict behavior as sets of "styles" is that it gives the impression of situational consistency. Most of the instruments used to measure conflict styles ask the respondent to answer questions "in

general terms." Of course, for many people, "in general" does not capture the changes they experience from situation to situation. For example, many people will be competitive at work but avoid conflict at home. Similarly, many will avoid conflict at work but will be collaborative at home (Lawyer & Katz, 1985). Compliance-gaining research generally has found that actors prefer prosocial communication, and do so relatively independently of situational factors (Conrad, 1991, p. 148). However, people adapt to different conflict situations, with a preferred choice in one context and another preferred style in another context. To give a person a single label, such as a "compromiser," is a gross oversimplification (Hocker & Wilmot, 1995, p. 100). Some situational variables that influence conflict include the following:

- ♦ Nature of the conflict (degree of interdependence, perception of scarce reward, and perception of power).
- ♦ One's success with the style in similar situations.
- ♦ Situational constraints such as the setting. Some actions are not appropriate in some settings, although they may be preferred by the conflict participant (Hocker & Wilmot, 1995, p. 100).

As noted above, one's choice is not just a result of some personality quirk. It reflects an assessment of the entire conflict. Situational variables are not the only consideration for measuring conflict. Other factors such as the relationship and the organizational culture should be considered.

Relational and Instrumental Goals

Another problem with the attempt to measure individual conflict styles is that it ignores the relational and instrumental dynamics in a conflict. The type of relationship between disputants affects the choice of a particular conflict-handling style. Also, the importance of achieving one's personal goals in a conflict affects the choice of a particular

conflict-handling style. Some people in conflict try to maintain a relationship in which everyone's needs are met, while others put their own needs first (Hocker & Wilmot, 1995; Pruitt & Carnevale, 1993).

A person's conflict management style is determined by the amount of concern he or she has for the relationship and for the personal goals of the parties involved, as described in the two-dimensional model of conflict (Lawyer & Katz, 1985). Thus, the impact of conflict may be different depending on the relational type. Most people use different techniques for resolving conflicts with different people. For example, one may not be able to talk to a boss the way that one talks to friends or family members.

Organizational Effects

Organizational context also affects one's choice of conflict style. In organizational contexts, research has shown one's choice of conflict-handling behavior to be mediated by a number of factors including: (a) the amount of conflict, (b) the organizational structure, (c) individual or personal concerns, (d) the relationship between conflicting parties, (e) the topic and source of the disagreement, and (f) the reciprocity of cooperative and noncooperative behavior (Berryman-Fink & Brunner, 1987, p. 39).

In the workplace, the amount of conflict to which a person is exposed can range in severity from short-term disagreements over work assignments to long-term disputes over issues such as wages, benefits and hours (Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach, 1994, p. 267). It can be surmised that short-term conflicts would be less threatening to the individual or organization than long-term disputes. It has been shown that employees' conflict styles change according to the hierarchy in workplace relationships. Employees high in the organizational hierarchy

avoid conflicts less than people lower in the hierarchy (Conrad, 1994, p. 345). When in a peer-related conflict, employees prefer non-confrontation styles, but they will choose forceful communication to manage conflict with subordinates. Supervisors tend to use a competitive style more often than the other styles with their subordinates and adopt nonassertive styles (accommodation and avoidance) with their supervisors. Where African American women are concerned in organizations, their choice of conflict handling styles is not only influenced by their positions in the corporate hierarchy of management versus non-management, but by the patriarchal hierarchy itself.

Patriarchal hierarchy structure. Many organizations in the United States operate in the traditional style of management. Traditional organizations attempt to control their employees' actions through rules, norms and systems of rewards and punishment. These organizations are reflective of the larger patriarchal American society.

Patriarchy is a system of power relations that creates and bolsters male supremacy, and "denotes the historical depth of White women and other non-White male groups' exploitation and oppression" (Sylvester, 1992, p. 35). The power relations of male supremacy seem timeless and in the order of things when, in fact, they were socially constructed forms of colonialism. As with most accepted ideologies and practices once in place, a patriarchy is self-sustaining. Those who push for change in the structures and practices of power soon find that powerful men are the ones who decide how challenges to people like themselves will be handled. Historically, people in these positions have tried to ignore White women and non-dominant groups or to accommodate them in incremental ways to not seriously disrupt the existing hierarchy of power (Sylvester, 1992, p. 35). Workplace

conflicts may also be affected by this perspective. Dominant group members may discount the conflicts of the non-dominant group members as unimportant or silence their complaints with threats of a cut in pay, or job loss (Spaights & Whitaker, 1995).

Sex, Race/Ethnicity, and Class Effects

Sex differences in conflict. It is not clear whether the sex of the conflicting parties affects the choice of the conflict style. First, some researchers have found that females exhibit passive or compromising styles more often (Shockley-Zalabak & Morely, 1984) and that males prefer forceful styles (Berryman-Fink & Brunner, 1987). Numerous theoretical orientations also have been used to predict sex differences in interpersonal conflict management behavior. Specifically, research on expectancy theory, bargaining and communicator styles lead to the prediction that women will be more cooperative and men more competitive in conflict situations. According to the expectancy theory, men are expected to use verbally aggressive, persuasive message strategies, while women are expected to avoid such strategies. Bargaining theory suggests that men focus on maximizing their own goals, while women emphasize equitable relationship outcomes in bargaining situations (Berryman-Fink & Brunner, 1987, p. 38).

However, Hocker & Wilmot (1995) state that most studies find no sex-related differences in conflict styles (Grace & Harris, 1990; Shockley-Zalabak, 1981; Sternberg & Soriano, 1984). A number of studies also produce conflicting results regarding sex differences in conflict styles. Although theoretical differences between the ways men and women handle conflict have not been found consistently in research, it has been shown consistently that people make different choices of conflict handling behavior at work

depending on whether their supervisor is male or female (Hocker & Wilmot, 1995). Researchers in the workplace have found that both male and female subordinates were less likely to withdraw from a conflict with a woman supervisor and less likely to use a confronting style in conflicts with a male supervisor (Berryman-Fink & Brunner 1987, p. 39). Other studies have found complex relationships among subordinate's sex, supervisor's sex, supervisor's self-confidence, commitment to job, and orientations to conflict (Conrad, 1994; Zammuto, London & Rowland, 1979). In dealing with the idea of gender and conflict, it is not just the conflict-handling styles that must be considered. The life experiences of each man and woman also directly affect or act as sources of conflict.

Workplace disputes experienced by women workers are different from those encountered by men. Women are treated differently by the gatekeepers of dispute resolution forums within firms, and such experiences could result in different outcomes for women and men in employment. For example, many women have primary responsibility for children, homes, and aging parents (Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach, 1994).

Unless management sponsored dispute forums can respond to these unique constraints on women, they may be more likely than men to experience workplace disputes over leaves, absenteeism, and scheduling (Gwartney-Gibbs & Lach, 1994). Most researchers, who study women and gender issues use middle-class White women (Smith & Steward, 1983; Waters, Jr., 1992). These types of studies do not recognize or account for the culture and/or class differences of African American women and how these variables will affect conflict.

Race, ethnicity and culture in conflict. The race and ethnicity of the other party in

comparison to one's own race and ethnicity affects conflict styles. Hocker and Wilmot

(1995, p. 16) state that many studies have been conducted on international conflict and

culture. The United States, in general, is a low-context culture. A low-context culture is

more opportunistic and individualistic than group-oriented. It is prone to emphasize rules of

procedures and laws for governing a person's interpersonal behavior. A person from a low-

context culture is supposed to say what he or she means, with disagreements being resolved

through the use of power (competition) or working things out together (collaboration). This

approach to resolving differences and communicating, generally, relies on assertiveness,

relatively equal power, and freedom from fear of reprisal. Since these attributes among

disputing parties are seldom equally present, the American culture reward's actions that fit

with the low-context ideal. However, for some people in the American culture, this ideal is

not realistic and may be impossible to obtain.

In contrast to low-context cultures, Hocker and Wilmot (1995, p. 16) state that less

individualistic, collective cultures have been termed high-context cultures. In high-context

cultures, discrepancies abound between what is meant and what is actually said.

Disagreements are resolved through avoidance or accommodation, resulting in considerable

attention being given to face-saving. In high-context cultures, nuances of communication

take on major importance, along with expected ways of behaving and working out problems.

People are not confronted assertively or directly; to do so is considered rude and arrogant. In

high-context cultures, members rely heavily on inferred meaning. While in low-context

cultures, members strive for an understanding of the literal meaning (Borisoff & Victor 1989,

p. 141). For example, cultures differ in their valuing of avoidance. Hocker and Wilmot

(1985, p. 104) refer to Barnlund (1989) who notes that Japanese people avoid conflict in order to preserve congeniality and consensus. They avoid conflict because of sensitivity to others' feelings.

Although there have been studies done on racial and cultural conflict, there are fewer studies on what conflict styles are employed between Blacks and Whites during conflicts. This may be largely because cultural differences between Blacks and Whites in the United States are largely ignored. Blacks and Whites assume they are operating according to identical speech and cultural conventions--conventions the socially dominant White group has established as the standard (Azibo, 1992; Kochman, 1981). This assumption, besides adding to the disruptive capacity of cultural differences, speaks to the general public's failure to recognize that Black norms and conventions differ from those of Whites (Kochman, 1981).

If the differences are evident on an international level, it would stand to reason that there would be some differences in the subcultures that comprise the United States. In most research conducted on African Americans, only African American males are studied and the results are generally applied to the entire race (Waters, Jr., 1992). For African American women, it is one more area of their experiences neglected in research.

Class differences in conflict. The social class an individual is a member of may affect the choice of conflict style. Social class means a group of people who have similar lifestyles and privileges and are similarly situated in terms of access to societal rewards such as power, prestige, wealth, and personal development opportunities (Nielson, 1990). There are two primary social models: the status attainment and the class conflict models. In the

status attainment model, class sorts out positions in society along a continuum of economic success and social prestige. In the class conflict model, class divides society into two or more groups each of which has vested class interests and contends for control of society (Collins, 1991).

Different groups or social classes are always competing for control over resources. Once control is gained, efforts to retain the power and status that accompany control come into play. According to Nielson (1990), the group in power will set up and support institutional arrangements (law, social practices, and beliefs) to retain its power.

In an organizational context, there is often conflict between employers, managers and lower rank employees. This is the main domain of class conflict in society and the main basis of class conflict in general. This conflict is most visible in the form of strikes (competitiveness, control), absenteeism (avoidance) and labor turnovers (Argyle, 1994). Although there are many studies on class conflict, little is known about conflict-handling behavior from a style's perspective.

<u>Summary</u>

Several conflict styles have been presented in this paper. While the five-style conflict management model described above has some merit, it is misleading and unrealistic to view the conflict styles as individual personality traits. Previously, Blake and Mouton developed Managerial Grid styles based on "assumptions for using power to link people into production" (1964, p. 12). Although factors that determine one's preferred grid style include the organization's values, individual values, the situation, personality, and chance (p. 13), individual assumptions about why people work and how they can best be motivated influence

choice of style (p. 4). According to Blake and Mouton (1964) managers tend to prefer to use one style, although they may resort to backup styles when under stress or when the preferred style appears ineffective (p. 14). Similarly, Thomas and Kilmann (1978), argue that the styles of conflict-handling behavior are strongly influenced by both personality and situation factors, and individuals can shift styles across situations (Womack, 1988, p. 323). However, previous theorists have not acknowledged that styles of conflict-handling behavior are also strongly influenced by the oppression inherent in the patriarchal structure of organizations and the American society at large. It is this race, gender, and class oppression that may most profoundly affect the way African American women handle conflict in the workplace.

Although the criticisms discussed in the next section have implications for the conflicts of other women of color, Latinas (e.g., Chicanas, Puerto Ricans), Native Americans, and Asian Americans (e.g., Japanese, Chinese, Fillipinas, and Vietnamese), this paper deals with African American women, in particular. I will elaborate on these criticisms in the next section. The critique provides a basis for understanding the experiences of African American women in the workplace and the uniqueness of their experiences with conflict.

Criticisms of the Styles Model for Studying African American Women's Conflicts

The five-style conflict management model does not recognize that people in a society occupy different social positions or standpoints based on their race, gender and socioeconomic class. Their particular social position affects the way they perceive and handle conflict and well as how they are perceived and treated. Specifically, it does not provide an adequate framework for understanding how African American women experience and deal with conflict. This limitation of the five-style model produces four specific

criticisms of the conflict styles literature. For each criticism, a discussion of how it applies to African American women will be offered.

World View

First, the five-style conflict management model does not accommodate multiple world views. World view is the way in which an individual sees the world around him or herself. Each individual sees and treats the rest of the world in the light of his or her own social, cultural, and economic backgrounds, according to Levin (1981). Unconscious reactions to gender, age, race, nationality, personal ambition, status and moral codes influence world view. In social interactions, individuals must coordinate these multiple worlds and create connections between them.

Augsburger (1992) states that conflict is a crisis that forces individuals to recognize explicitly that they live in multiple realities (world views) and must negotiate a common reality. People bring to each situation differing, frequently contrasting stories and must create together a single shared-story with a role for each. Conflict provides an in-depth view of a culture's social construction of reality. Augsburger argues that people live simultaneously in multiple frames of reference and multiple realities. Augsburger quotes Lederach (1988, p. 77), "Conflict situations are those unique episodes when we explicitly recognize that we exist in multiple realities and negotiate the creation of a common meaning." It is out of those multiple realities or world views that individuals and groups develop and maintain their unique cultures.

Azibo (1992, p. 20) quotes Noble's (1982) definition of culture as "patterns for interpreting reality that give people a general design for living, and consists of surface (e.g.,

folkways, language, behavior, beliefs, values) and deep structures, (e.g., world view and ideology)." From culture to culture, each has developed its unique patterns of managing differences and resolving disputes. Each constructs its repertoire of conflict behavior, hierarchy of values, and code of laws (Augsburger, 1992). Continuity and congruence with their cultural history connect persons and groups to their own particular combination of symbols, norms and values.

The five-style conflict management model reflects a patriarchal world view and marginalizes the Afrocentric world view. As a patriarchal theoretical model, it uses White male supremacy ideologies as a standard for all other cultures, including the African American culture, to emulate. Many African American researchers use the terms "Eurocentrism" and "White supremacy" interchangeably, however, they are different. Why? Because every culture has been patriarchal in some form and one cannot deny the anti-patriarchal movements in . . . Europe (West, 1993, p. 20). By the same token, it is important not to degrade non-African things, to make all African things look good. That would be imitating the worst of European civilization. For this paper, I will be using Eurocentrism to refer to the White male patriarchal system in the United States.

The central tenet of the Eurocentric social theory is White or European supremacy and domination. A characteristic behavior of White males is to judgmentally compare different people to them, using themselves as a standard (Azibo, 1992; Kochman, 1981). For example, White men, who control corporate boards of directors, typically use prototypes of the ideal chief executive officer that are more like the White male than other prototypes. This ethnocentric bias presents a practical problem for African researchers who are studying

Africans, but who are subject to Eurocentric hegemony: it is expected and often required that

African American data be compared to European American data, which it is further expected

will be used as the standard data or reference point data (Azibo, 1992).

Research in African American studies suggests that an Afrocentric world view exist

which is distinct from and in many ways opposed to the Eurocentric world view (Collins;

1991; Myers, 1988). Afrocentrism often relies on biological notions of "race." "Afrocentric

scholarship suggests that "Blackness" and Afrocentricity reflect longstanding belief systems

of resistance. . . . in the face of different institutional arrangements of White domination

"(Collin, 1991, p. 27). The continuation of an Afrocentric world view has been fundamental

to African Americans' resistance to racial oppression. In other words, being Black

encompasses both experiencing White domination and individual/group valuation of an

independent, longstanding Afrocentric consciousness (Collin, 1991, p. 27) and unique world

view.

Since the five-style model is derived from a patriarchal world view, it does not

acknowledge how other ethnic cultures view or may be affected by conflict, therefore,

making it difficult for people to agree on what the relevant issues are in a conflict. For

example, European Americans become upset with African Americans, when African

Americans bring race in as an issue in a conflict. Because racial issues are not a part of the

European American world view in the same way that they are for African Americans,

European Americans do not see race as relevant. Therefore, the selection and use of the

conflict styles may be inadequate for African American women because they fail to address

various world views.

Stereotypes and Solo Status in the Workplace

Stereotypes. The second criticism of the five-style model is it does not account for the stereotyping African American women face in the workplace, which may affect the conflict situation. A stereotype is a symbol placed on an individual of the way he or she is expected to act based on a preconceived notion of the person's ethnic background. Historically, the vast majority of African American women were brought to the United States to work as slaves. This initial condition shaped all subsequent perceptions and relationships of these women within African American families and communities, with employers, and among themselves (Collins, 1991).

African American women's oppression has been structured along several interdependent dimensions. Two of those dimensions are: (a) the exploitation of Black women's labor; and (b) the controlling negative images of the Black woman. First, the exploitation of Black women's labors--"the iron pots and kettles" symbolizing Black women's longstanding "ghettoization" in service occupations--represent the economic dimension of oppression, according to Collins (1991, p. 6). Second, the controlling images of Black women that originated during the slave era attest to the ideological dimension of Black women's oppression (Collins, 1991, p. 7). Ideology represents the process by which certain assumed qualities are attached to Black women and how those qualities are used to justify oppression.

White society deliberately cast the hard-work and self-sacrifice of African American women in a negative light. From the mammies, Jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemima on pancake mix boxes, . . . and ever-present welfare mothers of

contemporary popular culture, the nexus of negative stereotypical images applied to African American women has been fundamental to Black women's oppression (Collins, 1991, p. 7). In more recent years the labeling of Black women as matriarchs emerged as yet another attempt by the patriarchal power structure to cast the positive contributions of Black women in a negative light. All the negative stereotypes used to characterize Black women were anti-women.

Another dominant image of African American women, which exemplifies the two dimensions of labor and stereotypes, are African American women as beasts of burden (Collins, 1989). Her physical image has been maligned. "She has suffered the worst kind of economic exploitation. For employment sake, she was forced to serve as the White woman's maid and wet nurse for White offspring, while her own children were more often than not starving and neglected" (Beale, 1970, p. 92). Until recently, the only types of employment African American women could aspire to were domestics (Beale, 1970) and factory workers (Spaights & Whitaker, 1995). As sexist ideology has been accepted by African American people, these negative myths and stereotypes have effectively transcended class and race boundaries and affected the way African American women were perceived by members of their own race and the way they perceived themselves (Hooks, 1981).

Solo status. Solo status occurs whenever a person is either the only member or one of a small number of their gender or ethnic group in a work situation (Fontaine & Greenlee, 1993; Kanter, 1977). During the 1970s, because of the civil rights movement and affirmative action, African American women advanced into almost every area of the American sphere. However, they continued to earn less than other groups and experience both racial and sexual

discrimination (Spaights & Whitaker, 1995).

Women of color are likely to occupy positions of solo status as the number of racial ethnic minorities and women entering non-traditional occupations increases. "Solo status individuals are often perceived as representatives of their racial/gender group or as "symbols" rather than individuals by the majority group" (Fontaine & Greenlee, 1993, p. 122). The solos are often expected to behave in ways stereotypical for their group. The distorted expectation of behavior is used to justify the exploitation of and discrimination against the solo not only within the organization, but society at large. "A solo's performance is likely to affect not only his or her personal advancement, but also the future acceptability of other members of their [ethnic or gender] groups" (Fontaine & Greenlee, 1993, p. 122).

This stereotyping and solo status of African American women may have affected the way that they handled conflict in the past. For example, using the five-style conflict management model, she may have been classified as a compromiser or avoider in a conflict, not because it was her preferred style to handle the conflict, but because that may have been the only way that society allowed her to express herself in those situations. Therefore, it may be realistic to anticipate that stereotyping and solo status may continue to affect the way African American women manage conflict in organizations today. The five-style conflict management model does not take these oppressive forces into consideration.

Oppression: Race, Gender, and Class

Oppression. The third and perhaps strongest criticism of the conflict styles model is its failure to acknowledge the effects of oppression in a conflict situation. At the most general level, oppression can be defined as a situation in which one, or more, identifiable

segments of the society systematically and successfully act over a prolonged period of time to prevent another identifiable segment, or segments, of the population from attaining access to the scarce and valued resources of that system (Turner, Singleton, & Musick, 1984).

The five-style model does not take into account that race, gender and class oppression may be tied to why the conflict occurred in the first place. For example, although many of the conflict models are appropriate for a general understanding of conflict, they are often inappropriate for understanding race-based conflict (Waters, Jr., 1992). The three aspects of oppression: race, gender and class and their effects on conflict are described in detail in this section. The concept of multiple jeopardy and its implications for African American women and conflict is also discussed.

Race alone as a status variable. When gender studies began to burgeon in the late 1960s and 1970s, an urgent request was made that White males not be used as the standard for behavior. Yet, decades later, it appears that the standard was only broadened to include White females (Reid & Comas-Diaz, 1990). Despite the fact that investigators have demonstrated the complexity of predicting behavior for dual status groups from studies of single status populations, ethnicity as a status variable has been largely ignored within the context of gender issues.

In the United States, as in many other countries, ethnicity or racial characteristics are clues to family background and social status. An ethnic group's characteristics are sometimes easily distinguishable (e.g., skin color, facial features). Frequently decisions made in response to ethnic characteristics are biased in predictable ways. White males and females are typically assigned superior status in professional and social settings, whereas

other ethnic/racial groups are assumed to be inferior (Tumin, 1969). For example, an African

American woman in an office setting may be assumed to be the secretary, not the executive.

Gender alone as a status variable. Virtually every society uses gender in assigning

expectations and in determining distinct roles for males and females. In most societies,

males more often than females hold positions of public importance; men dominate and

control family resources; and they are more often assigned status and power as their

birthright (Reid & Comas-Diaz, 1990; Smith & Steward, 1983). In these patriarchal

societies, Sylvester describes the White male's privilege and control of society.

> Patriarchy wins because "male" rights to decide everything have become one
> of the mainstays of civilization. As well, there are rewards for women who
> accept patriarchy, play by its rules, and defend it from harm. The rewards
> include male protection from other marauding males, and the "freedom" to
> specialize in the labor of reproduction, caretaking or in public sector careers
> (Sylvester, 1992, p. 37).

In the professional realm, women expect and receive lower salaries; are more likely to have

their activities taken lightly; and are perceived as less competent and expert (Xu & Leffler,

1992).

Class (stratification) alone as a status variable. Oppression must be viewed as a

specific type of stratifying process in social systems. In all social systems, some resources

are defined as more valuable than others. Three of the most valuable resources in human

societies are material well-being, power, and prestige. Stratification is a structural and a

processional concept in that it denotes all those processes: (a) that are involved in the

unequal distribution of material well-being, power, and prestige; and (b) that create a

comparatively enduring system of ranks that divide the population of a society in terms of

their relative degrees of access to scarce and valued resources (Turner, Singleton, & Musick,

1984).

   As a dimension of stratification, oppression is a process and a structure. At the procedural level (specific acts over time), it involves specific acts by some people designed to place others in the lower ranks of a society. At the structural level, such processes create a bottom rank in a hierarchical system of ranks. The members of this bottom rank are the victims of oppression and likely to organize their lives around the fact that they will possess few valuable resources. "Caste" is a term that is often used to describe a system of stratification that reveals little mobility in and out of all ranks (Turner, Singleton, & Musick, 1984).

   In American society, oppression often occurs in comparatively open stratification systems where social mobility, at least, across some ranks is possible and frequent. In such systems a "caste-like" situation prevails for a segment of the population, as has been the case in America for African Americans. As in any patriarchal society, within the African American community, African American males are placed over the African American females. Consequently, in terms of the hierarchy, African American women are at the bottom. Oppression in America places the existence of the African American woman in jeopardy.

   Double, triple and multiple jeopardy. African American women represent the principle target group for the combined effect of race, gender and social class oppression. In describing these effects, Beale (1970, p. 92), suggests that the Black woman is "slave of a slave" and lives in "double jeopardy." Double jeopardy describes the African American woman's simultaneous Black and female identity as well as her simultaneous racial and

sexual oppression.

Subsequent writers have pointed out that most African American women and other women of color in the world are poor and thus experience the "triple jeopardy" of gender, race and class oppression (Houston, 1992). If they are also elderly, handicapped, non-Christian or lesbian, they are subjected to multiple jeopardy (Houston, 1992). In the matter of employment, for example, the effects of being both Black and female are particularly potent at the job preparation stage, where being Black means fewer years of schooling, accelerated entry into the labor force, greater need to finance one's own education and higher unemployment rates. Where being female also means fewer college degrees, accelerated maternity, deferring of advanced training, settling for short-term training programs, and a gender-segregated labor market [for African American women] (Lykes, 1983, p. 81).

Implications for African American women dealing with conflict. It does not seem possible to evaluate a person in our society without considering gender and race factors and experiences as influencing her or him in distinct and measurable ways. For African American women, the impact is evident. The circumstances that place African American women on the low end of the social stratum are race, gender, and low economic status. Sokoloff (1987) cites both race and gender, as the main reasons that African American women work in the bottom strata of female-stratified jobs. Race, gender and class serve as variables that provide further clues to African American women's experiences and social standing. Individual studies have demonstrated that each of these factors clearly influences a number of attitudes and behaviors. Investigations and explanations of these attitudinal and behavioral outcomes have typically focused on only one determining variable at a time or as

additives, one after the other (Reid & Comas-Diaz, 1990; Smith & Steward, 1983). In addition, interpretations have frequently been driven by norms and expectations developed exclusively from studies of White middle-class Americans.

Most of the research on workplace conflict focuses on White middle-class men and women. If Blacks are studied, that usually means Black males and the work tends to focus on conflict and race only (Smith & Steward, 1993; Waters, Jr., 1992). Although it may be assumed that African American females are included in these types of studies, they are not because the variable of gender is not discussed. Issues of race, gender and class permeate our conflict-ridden culture, adding more complexity to individual disputes while helping to create brand-new disputes (Gadlin, 1994, p. 33). Gender, race and class characteristics play a role in so many social situations, it is surprising that researchers have continued to overlook the possible combined or interactive effects that these dimensions may have upon conflict.

Organizational Power Structure and Conflict

The fourth criticism of the five-style model is it does not recognize how organizational power in a conflict is influenced by the oppression discussed above. It is important to understand first what power in organizations means and how it affects workers in that organization.

Kahn and Boulding (1964) define power as the ability to induce change in the behavior of others. The more disagreement and conflict which exist between the wishes of each person and the behavior of others, the greater the motivation of each to find ways of changing the other. Out of the need to induce such changes, each member of the

organization becomes a seeker of power and, if the search is successful, a wielder of power. Power is essential to the life of the organization; it prevents the emergence of conflicts that would subvert organizational effectiveness. It is instrumental to other goals because it means control of persons and, through them, access to and control of organizational resources.

Power is typically expressed in organizations through a chain of command in that control of resources and people appear sequentially. A supervisor, by virtue of his or her position, controls certain valued organizational resources. These in turn confer the supervisor's control of the people who value those resources. His or her control of the behavior of these people then gives the supervisor access to additional resources and rewards. Power inevitably begets conflict in some form or degree (Kahn & Boulding, 1964). The primary race and class difference among women, like the primary gender difference, is power; more specifically, it is the unequal distribution of and access to social and economic power and privilege. This difference pervades all aspects of our lives in the United States, including our thinking and speaking (Gadlin, 1994).

People with power act to retain it. As discussed earlier, "managers and other organizational members may interpret pressure to recognize race, gender and class diversity for some organizational conflicts as a threat to their power and privilege in the organization" (Donnellon & Kolb, 1994, p. 152). But as new social groups, such as African American women, enter the work force and move up in organizations, conflicts rooted in class, gender, race and ethnicity have become more prominent (Donnellon & Kolb, 1994). Existing discourses of organizational conflict management masks such conflicts, dealing with them in ways that are not constructive for all parties considered. Groups unequal in power are

correspondingly unequal in their access to the resources necessary to implement their perspectives outside of their particular group (Collins, 1989). According to Donnellon and Kolb (1994, p. 153), "in order for organizations to rise to new challenges, the role of social group diversity in organizational conflict must be recognized, legitimated, and incorporated into processes of conflict management and dispute resolution."

<u>Summary</u>

The four criticisms of the five-style conflict management model indicate that additional variables influence African American women in the selection of a particular conflict-handling style. First, the American society is based on a White supremacist patriarchal structure at the macro-level. This power structure is reflected in the organization's power structure at the micro-level and influences the behaviors of organizational members on the individual-level. The five-style model is written and so embedded in this hegemonic perspective that it may not acknowledge the world view or culture of other minority groups dealing with conflict in the workplace.

Second, the model appears to not account for the effects of how stereotypes and other controlling images of African American women perpetuate the patriarchal power structure of subordination and domination. It is this oppression of race, gender and class that may strongly influence the conflict-handling behavior of the African American, more so than the relational or situational influences. All these criticisms galvanize the plight of the African American women dealing with conflict in the workplace today.

<u>**Oppression and the African American Woman:**</u>
<u>**An Alternative Perspective for Conflict Resolution**</u>

In the previous section, four criticisms of the current literature on conflict styles were

discussed. How conflict is influenced by the variables of race, gender and class on an individual were examined. However, no present theory integrates the fact that African American women experience race, gender and class subordination simultaneously. Their oppression is not only by members of their own group (African American males), but by Whites of both genders (Hurtado, 1989). White theorists have failed to grasp fully what this means, how it is experienced, and, ultimately, how it is fought. Researchers need to study how race, gender, and class, particularly of African American women, interact to affect the selection of a conflict style.

A comprehensive oppression conflict resolution theory for African American women is needed to examine this problem. To develop a theory that addresses the needs of African American women, the issues must be examined under the lens of oppression. The theory should include elements of oppression, cultural hegemony and the standpoint theories. All three must be incorporated into the theory because of their unique implications for the African American women.

Oppression is the overarching premise for this theory because most American corporations are structured in the patriarchal tradition, a tradition of domination and subordination. Within oppression, there are the subcategories of cultural hegemony and standpoint theories. Cultural hegemony, which is the nullification of one culture by another, was selected because it best describes the domination and subordination on cultural and social class levels. The standpoint theory, which is an individual's social position, was selected because it illustrates oppression from the gender and social class levels, as well.

Any one of these theories alone does not describe or begin to deal with conflict from

the perspective of the African American woman. However, all three perspectives together interlock to illustrate the simultaneous effects of conflict that African American women experience in the workplace. In this section, the oppression, cultural hegemony, standpoint theories are utilized as foundations for conceptualizing an oppression perspective on conflict resolution for African American women.

Oppression

Oppression entails "a state of asymmetric power relations characterized by domination, subordination, and resistance, where the dominant group exercises their power by restricting access to material resources and by implanting in the subordinate group self-deprecating views about themselves" (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994, p. 153). Oppression, then, is a series of asymmetrical power relations between individuals, genders, races, classes, states and nations. These power relations lead to conditions of alienation, misery, inequality, and social injustice between human beings and to conditions of exploitation, fragmentation, and marginalization (Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994).

On the micro-level, organizational structures are a reflection of the social structures embedded in the larger society. The American society is built on a patriarchal system of White male domination. This domination operates by seducing, pressuring, or forcing African American women and members of subordinated groups to replace individual and cultural ways with the dominant group's world view (Collins, 1991).

The negation of the subordinate group's individual and cultural ways is dehumanizing. "Dehumanization mars not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also though in a different way, those who have stolen it" (Freire, 1970, p. 26). "A system of

oppression draws much of its strength from the acquiescence of its victims, who have accepted the dominant images of themselves and are paralyzed by a sense of helplessness" (Collins, 1991 quotes Murray, 1987, p. 106). Because dehumanization is a distortion of being fully human, sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against their oppressors. In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both (Freire, 1970 p. 26).

It is only when the oppressed attain a certain degree of social and political awareness that resistance can begin (Freire, 1972; Prilleltensky & Gonick, 1994). Collins (1991) believes it is critical that African American women's ideas and actions force a rethinking of the concept of hegemony, the notion that African American women's objectification is so complete that they become willing participants in their own oppression, to recognize that this patriarchal hegemony is not true for them as African American women.

Cultural Hegemony

To understand a clear definition of cultural hegemony, a definition of hegemony must first be posed. Hegemony rests on the observation that societies are hierarchical in many ways, the most important of which are race ethnicity, gender and class. "When individuals internalize the taken-for-granted assumptions of their culture, they also internalize its hierarchical relationships. That is, they come to see those relationships as *normal* and *natural*" (Conrad, 1994, p. 12). In the American society, the assumption is that White males are inherently better managers than White women, African American men and women and any other ethnic group. The actions and beliefs of people in society help to perpetuate

hierarchical relationships.

Cultural hegemony is the systemic negation of one culture by another. In a sense, one culture bases its existence and well-being on the ability to absorb, redirect or redefine institution building and symbol formation in the other culture (Semmes, 1992, p. 1). Cultural symbols and their formation play a very important role in the concept of cultural hegemony. They enable one to understand how ideas reinforce or undermine existing social structures. Cultural symbols such as the "all-American-boy" denote an individual that is the ideal of male masculinity and everything is good in the White patriarchal cultural structure. White males promote the ideal through language, the media and various institutions.

Another interpretation of cultural hegemony comes from the translated works of Gramsci (1971). Although they contain no precise definition of cultural hegemony, what comes closest is his often-quoted characterization of hegemony as

> "the spontaneous" consent of the population to the general direction imposed
> on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is
> "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequently confidence) which the
> dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of
> production (Lears, 1985, p. 570).

However, "to rely on a single definition is misleading," according to Lears (1985, p. 568). He believes it is important first to recognize that the concept of hegemony has little meaning unless paired with the notion of domination. For Gramsci (1971), consent and force nearly always coexist, though one or the other predominates. As mentioned above, traditional organizations attempt to control their employees' actions through rules, taken-for-grant norms and systems of rewards and punishment. The employee, in effect, consents by complying with the rules and regulations.

"Ruling groups do not maintain their hegemony merely by giving their domination an aura of moral authority through the creation and perpetuation of legitimating symbols. They must also seek to win the consent of subordinate groups to the existing social order" (Lears, 1985, p. 569). One way of doing this is through socialization. Through cultural hegemony, the world view or perspective of the oppressor becomes the perspective of the oppressed group. According to Semmes (1992), this rotation in perspective affirms the legitimacy of the world view of the oppressor that seeks to present subordination as the "normal and natural" order of the world.

> The oppressed begin to recognize the "right" of the oppressor to be dominant. This acceptance of subordination varies given the context and the circumstance but occupies significant psychic space in the oppressed group's world view. A key element of cultural hegemony is "progress" for the subordinate group means the uncritical assimilation and regurgitation of the dominant group's culture. Creativity, criticism, theorizing -- in short, reality construction -- is left to the oppressor (Semmes, 1992, p. 3).

The process of stratification complicates the relationship between the subordinated group and the dominant group. The standpoint theory is useful for explaining the stratification dynamic and its impact on gender.

Standpoint Theory

A standpoint is a social position in a power-stratified society. From that social position, certain features of reality come into prominence and other aspects of reality are obscured. From a particular social standpoint, one can see some things more clearly than others (Swigonski, 1993, p. 172). Standpoints involve a level of conscious awareness about two things: a person's location in the social structure and that location's relationship to the person's lived experience (Swigonski, 1993, p. 172 quotes Harstock, 1983). In other words,

one's standpoint emerges from one's social position with regard to race, gender, class, as well as other factors, and how these issues interact and affect one's everyday world.

By using the standpoint theory, researchers can identify research problems within the daily lives of marginalized groups. Marginalized groups are those whose life experiences have been put into the margins of scholarly works, such as women, people of color, the poor, the elderly, lesbians and gay men, and persons with disabilities (Swigonski, 1993). These research problems emerge from the everyday life of marginalized-oppressed groups in relation to the social structure (Smith, 1987). The dominant group imposes their social structure on non-dominant groups.

Standpoint theory asserts that the less powerful members of society experience a different reality because of their oppression (Collins, 1989). "An oppressed group's experiences may put its members in a position to see things differently, but their lack of control over the ideological apparatuses of society makes expressing a self-defined standpoint more difficult" (Collins, 1991, p. 26). Each oppressed group in the United States is positioned in a particular and distinct relationship to White male majority group, and each form of subordination is shaped by this relational position. White men and men of color maintain power over women, particularly within their respective groups (Hurtado, 1989). Subordinated groups typically interpret reality differently from the dominant group. To survive, they must have knowledge, awareness, and sensitivity of both the dominant group's view of society and their own--the potential for "double vision" or consciousness--and thus the potential for a complete view of social reality (Swigonski, 1993, p. 173). Factors like race, gender and class interact to affect social status and are important determinants of social

status.

African American Women's Standpoint

All African American women share the common experience of being in a society that denigrates women of African descent. This commonality of experience suggests that certain characteristic themes will be prominent in the Black women's standpoint (Collins, 1991, p. 22). Collin (1991) notes Cannon's (1985, p. 30) observation that "throughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of White supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman's reality as a situation of one White, privileged, and oppressive, the other Black, exploited, and oppressed." Black women's vulnerability to assaults in the workplace, on the street, and at home has stimulated Black women's independence and self-reliance. "In spite of the differences created by historical era, age, social class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity, the legacy of the struggle against racism and sexism is a common thread binding African American women" (Collins, 1991, p. 22).

The struggles of women from different racial/ethnic groups and those of women and men within African American communities to articulate self-defined standpoints represent similarly yet distinct processes. As mentioned above, most research conducted on racial/ethnic minority issues continues to treat minority groups as monolithic (Fontaine & Greenlee, 1993). Recently, researchers recognized that studies on "Blacks" usually meant Black men, and studies on "women" usually meant White women (Smith & Steward, 1983; Waters, Jr., 1992).

While race and gender are both socially constructed categories, constructions of gender rest on clearer biological criteria than do constructions of race. Classifying African

Americans into specific racial categories is considerably more difficult than noting the clear biological differences distinguishing females from males. Though united by biological sex, women do not form the same type of group as do African Americans, Jews, Native American, Vietnamese or other groups with distinct histories, geographic origins, cultures, and social institutions. The absence of an identifiable tradition uniting all women does not mean that women are characterized more by their differences than by their similarities. Women do share common experiences, but the experiences are not generally the same type as those affecting racial and ethnic groups (King, 1988). This leaves African American women in a unique position or standpoint because they are always both African American and women, therefore, constituting a unique group perspective (Hooks, 1992), one that is deprived of scholarly attention.

Another issue that African American women may experience differently from White women and Black men is the affirmative action legislation and Title VII. The affirmative action policy enables institutions to engage in "double count." An African American woman is counted as both a woman and a minority for purposes of affirmative action reporting. Such legal reforms, however, do not guarantee changes in discriminatory attitudes and behaviors. It has been more than a century since the Supreme Court declared racial discrimination unconstitutional. Some social theorists contend that due to significant advances, particularly in the previous generation, African Americans have reached a stage in history where race is no longer the critical determinant of their social and economic fate. Other social and political theorists argue that Black advancement has been token at best and is evident only among those African Americans who were already on the brink of middle-

class status (Bell, 1989). The African American woman is protected unlike any other employee in the workplace. Under the law, discrimination based on race and gender under Title VII is illegal. This makes her a super-protected employee, which may invoke the envy, perhaps, wrath of her coworkers. This double jeopardy status places African American women in a unique position for potential conflict.

<u>Summary</u>

The oppression, cultural hegemony and standpoint theories offer a foundation for developing a theory for studying conflict. Integrating the three theories into a one comprehensive theory that encompasses African American women's unique experiences is important. Race, gender and class represent the three systems of oppression that most heavily affect African American women. The significance of viewing race, gender and class as an interlocking system of oppression is that such an approach fosters a paradigmatic shift of thinking inclusive of other forms of oppression such as age, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity (multiple jeopardy) (Collins, 1991). By integrating these three theories and investigating African American women's conflict experiences in particular, this promises to reveal much about the process of domination and social structure and their impact on conflict in the workplace.

Purpose of This Study

The research and theories on conflict resolution in organizations offer descriptions of how people handle conflict and provide guidelines for effective methods of conflict management. However, most of the research has ignored race, gender, class diversity and oppression, which are likely to influence the nature of conflict and what strategies work for

dealing with conflicts. With respect to conflict management and African American women, researchers have been attempting either to employ directly some existing European models to explain the African American woman's psychological reality, or to "Blackenize" these same models in some obscure way to give them the false appearance of being relevant to the true survival needs of African American women (Azibo, 1992).

Conflict theories (Conrad, 1989; Fisher & Ury, 1991; Grace & Harris, 1990; Shockley-Zalabak, 1981; Sternberg & Soriano, 1984) have largely been based on middle-class White male and female population and they may be entirely inappropriate for use with individuals who do not fit that demographic image. In particular, African American women with work-related concerns may have developed model responses to internalized and externalized sexism, racism and classism.

The five-style conflict management model does not appear to recognize the marginalized world view, stereotypes and oppression that are likely to influence the way non-dominant groups experience and handle conflict in the workplace. The styles and strategies of conflict resolution that works well for White middle-class males may not fit the experiences of African American women. The purpose of this study is to learn how African American women experience and manage the conflicts they encounter in the workplace. Through the process of analyzing the information gathered from in-depth interviews, the following research questions will be addressed.

R1: In what ways, if any, do racism, sexism, and classism affect the conflicts of African American women in the workplace?

R2: Does the five-style conflict management model adequately capture African American women's ways of handling conflict?

CHAPTER 2

Methods

<u>Participants</u>

Ten African American women from Omaha, Nebraska participated in this study. The

participants, between the ages of 18 to 65, were recruited using the snowball method.

Snowball sampling (Babbie, 1989) is a method through which one develops an ever-

increasing set of sample observations. I asked one participant in the study to recommend

others for interviewing, and each of the subsequently interviewed participants were asked for

additional recommendations until the sample set was completed. The participants

represented a diversity of fields including education at the university and secondary levels,

business and social services. All ten women attended college, three had Masters' degrees and

two had Ph.D. degrees.

<u>Procedures</u>

To learn how African American women handle conflict in the workplace, I used the

in-depth interview method. In-depth interviewing is a data collection method described as,

"a conversation with a purpose" (Kahn & Cannell 1957, p. 149). I conducted all of the

interviews using an informal conversational type of in-depth interviewing of open-ended

questions to stimulate the conversations (Table I). The in-depth interviews allow the

participant's voice to be heard in the unique feminist style of interviewing (Oakley, 1981).

The interviews averaged from one to one-and-a-half hours and covered conflict experiences,

attitudes toward coworkers and conflict-handling styles. I did not introduce the five-style

conflict management model into the interview process until the last few questions. This was

intentionally done to allow the women to talk about their personal conflict-handling styles without imposing the model upon them. The in-depth interview method has some limitations and weaknesses. Interviews involve personal interaction and cooperation is essential. Interviewees may be unwilling or uncomfortable sharing all that the researcher hopes to explore or they may be unaware of recurring patterns. However, being an African American woman myself, may have contributed to the rapport. Many of the participants stated to me that they would have been uncomfortable and perhaps not as open discussing the questions with someone of another ethnic background.

Data Collection

The descriptive survey method, or what is sometimes called the normative survey method, was employed to process the data. The descriptive survey method deals with a situation that demands the techniques of observation as the principle means of collecting the data (Leedy, 1993, p. 98). I conducted individual interview sessions with the ten women where they were most comfortable, either at their homes or offices. The women were asked to discuss conflict situations that they experienced, that could be directly related to their race, gender and class. The interviews were taped using an audio cassette recorder with the consent of the participants. The tapes were transcribed and examined to determine contextual themes.

Data Analysis

Themes are a conventional way of organizing interview data. A theme is broadly defined as any idea or complete thought somehow related to the respondents' attitudes (Herek, 1987) about their conflicts in the workplace. I read the transcripts several times to

look for recurrent thematic statements from the women. For example, many of the women spoke about the mistrust of the White male counterparts and how that influenced their conflict-handling style. Therefore, mistrust of White male counterparts became a theme. From those themes I began to search for patterns and connections between the various themes (Seidman, 1991). The relationships between the themes provide a guide to answering my research questions.

The selected themes were intended to reflect the issues and strategies raised by African American women of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with conflict resolution in organizational settings. The interpretive themes are not mutually exclusive categories because some themes overlap. Eight themes arose with a majority (more than five women) of the women during the interviews. However, these themes are not an exhaustive account of these women's experiences.

CHAPTER 3

Results and Interpretations

Eight major themes were generated from the in-depth interviews. The themes are: 1) five conflict-handling styles; 2) a mistrust of the White male counterparts; 3) race and gender are inseparable variables in the conflict; 4) dealing with stereotypes; 5) White males are treated differently than African American females; 6) disrespect for their positions in the corporation; 7) the isolation of the solo status in the organization; and 8) a tradition of resistance to oppressive factors. An elaboration of the eight themes will be presented in the next section.

<u>Five Conflict-Handling Styles: For Better or For Worse</u>

When asked to select one of the five conflict styles that best describes the way they handled conflict in the workplace, many of the women were hesitant to name just one. The women believed because of the uneven playing field brought on by race and gender, using one predominate style was difficult and perhaps unwise. A vice-president explains why one predominate style is unrealistic.

> You have to look at the situation to decide what strategy you are going to use.
> You may use several of these strategies at different points in time during the
> conflict. Because a conflict is not a level playing field, there are many facets
> to a conflict. You have to decide which strategy you will employ and at what
> time you will employ them. Sometimes they are employed for you whether
> you know it or not.

Four out of the ten women said that they must employ all of the styles. One production supervisor had this to say:

> You know when I listen to all of that, I say as an African American woman,
> you have to pick from all of those to resolve conflict. You cannot just be
> strictly one or the other. . . . as an African American woman, you have to go

one step further. One thing that I have noticed when you have conflict between the races, you definitely do not want to take sides. You want to let both of them [employees] air what they feel and what they think. Then let both of them come up with how they want to be treated.

Four out of the ten women said that their style was closest to that of the collaborator but much more than that. One woman described herself as a collaborator but as more direct in her approach to conflict.

I am a collaborator, but I would say my style is more direct. But African American women are not allowed to speak their minds and not pay for it later in our careers.

Many of the women described their style as "direct," one derived from a feminine style of management. A style built on consensus and open discussion, not on power plays. One vice-president said that her staff was so use to the dogmatic style of her predecessor that getting use to her style of management and conflict resolution was difficult for them. Selecting a preferred conflict-handling style was difficult for these women because of the influences the eight themes brought to bear on most of their conflicts.

Mistrust of White Male Counterparts

There was a great deal of mistrust directed at their White male counterparts by the African American women in this study. One vice-president questions the genuineness of a counterpart's response to a conflict.

I am not sure if the typical White male response of fairness was not just a by-product in the conflict resolution. If he showed any fairness, it was in support of a power play or hidden agenda that would come later down the line.

This hidden agenda might be, for example, if an employer allowed the establishment of a multi-cultural or diversity program in the company instead of addressing the problem of hiring more minorities to diversify the employee population. In this case, the employer

(dominant group) only wants to accommodate the employees (subordinate group) in

incremental ways to not disrupt the existing hierarchy of power.

Other women referred to their White male counterparts as "sneaky" and

"underhanded" in their dealings with conflict. One vice-president commented:

> In a work situation, you have to work together. But you always have to be
> aware because they try to do sneaky things or take credit where they do not
> deserve it. One incident happened to a colleague of mine where both
> [people] were in the same position, he being a White male and she being a
> Black female.
> They were to work on a project together. He very often would say one
> thing in a meeting and come back one month later and say, "oh, I never said
> that surely, you must be mistaken." She would sit there and take it. Now he
> does not do that openly with White males. He would say, "well, we need to
> talk about this later," if they challenged him. But it was always, she must
> have been mistaken.
> One day I just said, "No, you are the one that said it, you are the one
> that is mistaken." He does not use the same verbiage with us [African
> American females] or other women as he does with other males. You have to
> speak up to him and you have to speak firmly.

In response to this mistrust of their White male counterparts in a conflict situation,

some women talked about masking their true feelings as a way of responding to the conflict.

Masking allowed them time to analyze their counterparts' motives first before responding.

One woman describes her reason for employing masking.

> I think one of the things that I do is "mask" a lot of things. I do not want them
> to know what I am thinking. I think that it is probably part of our culture to
> mask your true feelings while you are analyzing the situation. But I try to be
> open and I think that maybe my predecessor, a White male, might have
> responded probably without thinking because that was just his way.
> If he had an opinion, it was out like that. It will take me a little while
> longer to assess a situation. I am not so willing to jump out there and lay it on
> the table without any analysis.

This masking, which reflects the women's mistrust, affects the conflict because the

women are not able to deal openly with the conflict itself because they must first deal with

their personal suspicions. This mistrust will influence the way a conflict is carried out because both parties may withhold information, thereby prolonging the conflict or causing it to intensify unnecessarily. The parties may not be honest in their motives to find solutions, because they are always looking for hidden agendas. This slows down the conflict resolution process because everyone is busy jockeying for positions. One vice-president views her style in this way.

> I am trying to keep my feelings on guard. There is the old cliche, "never let them see you sweat." Never letting people know that they can really get to you. So I think that's one way of handling conflict as an African American woman is the "mask."

While the women described their personal conflict-handling style as direct, open and honest, and characterized by their getting "everything-out-on-the-table." The mistrust of their White male counterparts obviously hampers their styles. The women reserve judgment because they are trying to learn more about the person's motives before they really believe that the individual is genuine. This reservation has an impact on how they handle the conflict.

> I think because of our lives and the conflicts that we have had in our lives that we try to look for different ways and try to be aware of how what we do affects others. No matter what we do, how can we be fair, is the most important question.

For these women negotiating a conflict with someone they do not trust is very difficult. They try in spite of their suspicions to make a fair deal but they are always conscious of the possibility of a hidden agenda. The mistrust is an imbalance the women experience when dealing with conflict.

<u>Gender and Race: Intertwined and Inseparable</u>

All the women said that they had a difficult time determining whether a conflict is the result of a legitimate problem or if it is based on their race or gender. They just did not know because in various organizational conflicts, the [White] women were being mistreated just as the Blacks [men] were being mistreated. Therefore, four participants said that in the workplace being women was a greater problem. The others said to be African American was more of a problem and they took racial issues more personally. A school administrator describes her predicament:

> Sometimes you may be told that they have a problem with your race or gender, but many times you are not told. Then you have to guess does this have anything to do with my race, my gender, my looks, my social-economic background. You never quite know.

This imbalance can create an either/or situation for the African American woman. When embroiled in a conflict, she may ask herself, "am I in this conflict because of a problem or is it because of my race or my gender?" Several women said that they usually questioned themselves by asking, "if I were not Black, would this really be a conflict?" "If a White female or Black male were in the same situation would there be a conflict?" If they could say yes to that question, then they knew that it was a legitimate conflict. However, if they could not say yes, then they would have to decide, is it my race, gender or class? Which one? The African American woman engages in either/or dichotomous thinking (Bennett, Jr., 1972; Collins, 1991), *either* my race *or* my gender has caused this conflict. One female executive described her experiences with a White male coworker.

> Many times when a conflict happens, you wonder: 1) is it because you are a female, and they make more money than you or 2) maybe it's because of your race? They think that you are going to back down and take a second seat to

their opinions. I say you may be wealthy, you may have a higher position than I do but I am just as good as you, if not better!

A constant questioning period is going on before one can even deal with the particular issues of the conflict. The important concern is that although they did not vocalize these questions during the initial conflict, they were always in the back of the women's minds. All of the women said they did not automatically assume any conclusions because they wanted to look at the conflict as a distinct conflict first. A school administrator said often one did not know and other times people will just come right out and say it.

> This individual told me that he had difficulty with me being the head of this organization as a Black female. He thought that I should work with people of my own kind. So he gave me a great deal of difficulty the entire time I was in that position.

Unlike the stereotype that Black people jump to a negative conclusion and yell racism or discrimination, these women used cautious and reasonable analysis. Some even seemed reluctant to view the conflict in terms of race or gender until the evidence forced them to come to no other conclusion.

Many of the women also believed that because of their race and gender, the White males did not know how to deal with them in a conflict.

> In a way, it's really both [gender and race] because they don't know how to handle me. One coworker always liked to yell at me from behind his desk, while I sat on a couch. I had noticed this, so one day when he started to yell, I jumped up and came around the desk and started yelling back at him. He said, "Don't hit me! Don't hit me!"
>   He did not know where I was coming from, 'is this how Black people act, is she going to hit me? Or is this how women act, is she going to hit me?' I said, "No, I am not going to hit you, but you better not ever talk to me that way again." He was testing me to see how much I would take. But I broke down his social barrier. Now he watches what he says to me.

One first-line supervisor said that her experience had been that White males

automatically think they should handle African American women differently than others because of affirmative action.

> They try hard to be tactful, but they make the situation more difficult, by not dealing with the specific issue and not dealing with the African American woman as a person. They say we have to approach the conflict in this manner because we don't know what might happen. Before finding out all the facts involved, they articulate a preconceived notion of what they think is the answer.

Because of the patriarchal structures of most corporations in American society, White males and males of other ethnic groups, continue to manage with a "power over" attitude toward women. A production supervisor describes her experiences with a White male manager who uses intimidation and threats to handle conflict with White and Black females.

> We had a White male at a meeting that disagreed with this manager and he just accepted what the male had to say and left the issue alone. Now if that had been me or a White female disagreeing with him, he would have had to let everyone know that he was in charge. He does not get into conflicts with White males the way that he does with White females or Black females.

When it came to race, gender and class issues, as supervisors, some women in the study felt that they not only fought for themselves in a conflict but for their subordinates, as well.

> If it appears to be a race conflict with an African American woman, I see them [White males] as looking at the individual and myself. I feel that we are the same. If they are doing something racist against her because she is a woman and Black, will they treat me the same way?
>   So it becomes more personal, then you start fighting not only for that individual, but for yourself as well. Some days you just don't have the energy to go in and fight. Then you worry about jeopardizing your job. They always say that you will not lose your job for saying what is on your mind, but that is not true. They will make it hard for you. They want you to be a team player. You either play their way all the way or no way.

This woman said not many supervisors, White or Black, were willing to fight for

themselves or others. She, being only one of two African American female supervisors in her company, was labeled a "bitch," and the "aggressive one." She became an outcast. She eventually stepped down from her position. However, on the affirmative action reports, she was listed as a supervisor for eight months after she stepped down.

Stereotypes: the Controlling Images of Oppression

All of the women said stereotypes were flourishing in their corporations. Stereotypes such as Black women are loud talking, domineering and someone to fear. For example, one woman said, "they would say, don't make her mad or she will file a lawsuit." Most of the women said that when they do speak up, their White male supervisors view them as insubordinate. Two women stated that their White male counterparts with whom they were involved in a conflict situation said, 'don't hit me.' This implied that African American women, in supervisory or executive level positions, could only resort to violence to handle conflict situations.

> I think that they think that a Black female in a supervisory role is more
> dominant and that she is more forceful. So they don't want to get her "started"
> or make her upset because, you know, she will retaliate somehow. I think that
> is the difference with the White female, they will say, 'okay, I will "let" you
> do this and this' and they [White females] will go on about their way. But
> with a Black female, it is like they say, 'uh, they are more dominant,
> especially if she is out here working.
>   They are really dominant. I have to figure out how to deal with her.'
> They automatically think that they have to deal with you in a different way
> and they don't know how. It automatically confuses them. Instead of saying,
> 'oh, she is a person, that's how you deal with her.'

Most of the women said if the White males could "know them as individuals" through work-related experiences or by talking through conflicts before jumping to conclusions, they could eliminate the misconceptions and stereotypes. Another stereotype encountered by

some of the women was the idea that all African American women were from low income families with little or no formal education. All of the women in this study were college educated, five had Masters degrees, and two had Ph.D. degrees. One of the woman, who was teaching part-time, while working on her Ph.D. said this of her Freshman and Sophomore-level college students:

> When I taught at the university, I saw a lot of preconceived ideas based on the stereotypes from people who had difficulty even being in the presence of people who were African American. For example, I was the first African American instructor that many of them had ever had in their whole [school] careers. There were preconceived ideas in reference to my background and where I came from.
> There was the assumption that you grew up poor or that you were not exposed to something based on your race or income level. Well, when I would share with them that my dad being in the government, not the armed services, caused us to travel around a lot and I was raised in a pretty nice cultural environment; they were very surprised.

One first-level supervisor expresses her frustrations with the lip service of diversity programs in her organization.

> We talk about change and diversity in organizations. However, the stereotypes will continue until they meet enough Black women . . . supervisors or in some type of management so that they can see that this is nothing new. If you put ten or fifteen Black supervisors in there [the corporation] they would all show you the same thing, that those stereotypes are just not true.

However, it is because of these stereotypes that the women believed that management in their organizations looked down on them sometimes and did not trust them in the same way that they trusted White men and women.

White Males Are Treated Different Than African American Females

All the women stated that there was a difference between their treatment and the treatment of White males in the organizations. This differentiation in treatment has had an

impact on the way the women handle conflict with White males. One first-line supervisor

commented, "In our society a White male is the one. He can do no wrong, say no wrong, and

what he says is the 'answer' or that's what he wants everyone to believe." The women also

believe that White males are allowed to speak more freely about discrepancies and concerns

during a conflict without fear of reprisal. One elementary school principal said,

> I feel that we, as African Americans, it is very sad to say, we almost have to
> go out of our way and kiss folks' behinds so that things can go well. Then you
> have to do so much -- trying to please everybody. I felt I had to do that at my
> job . . . I felt that it's that way for all African Americans, females or males.
> We have to do everything ten times better than the White folks because they
> are constantly looking at us. You know, we make one little slip, you see what
> I am saying. They can make fifty slips, and you know, but that will never
> mean anything. We just have to be on top of everything all the time.

From experience, the women believed that White males were afforded the respect and

trust of management from the very start in their positions. Whereas African American

women at the same level of responsibility must earn management's respect and trust over

time, "once they get to know them as individuals."

Disrespect for Their Positions in the Corporation

Many of the women said that their White male counterparts disrespected their

positions and discounted their authority. Sometimes the White males would treat them as if

they were their [White male's] secretaries, when women were at the same level or at a higher

level than the White males. One person recounted that a friend in a vice president's position

was told by a counterpart, 'you do this and you do that.' She told him, 'if you want it done,

you better do it yourself.'

> They think that you should do exactly what they tell you to do although your
> position may be the same or greater than theirs. There are some that you run
> into that think, "I am in charge of you."

The women also believed that they could have all of the degrees and more professional credentials than their White male counterparts, but they still would not get the respect for their professional opinions that White males, with fewer credentials, received. In addition, the White males would trivialize the opinions and issues of the African American women. One African American female supervisor spoke about the frustrating and dehumanizing effect of not having her voice heard even when she went through all the "right channels" to resolve a conflict.

> It was brought to my attention from an employee that a person in a lead clerk position was commenting on the work my employees were doing. She told the clerk that if we were just using the screen to call up the information and just write it down . . . that any monkey could do that. To African Americans, a monkey is usually associated with Black people in a derogatory manner.
>
> I brought it to her attention and she did not seem to think that it was a big deal. She thought that she did not do anything wrong. She tried to deny it. So I went through the proper channels by talking to the next in line and telling them about the situation, but nothing else happened. I kept asking about it for a few months and did not get any feedback about it.
>
> It was always we are going to get to it. It made me feel like any time something comes up that could be considered racial, nothing is done about it. I think that it is mostly my fault for letting it go and not pursuing it harder than what I did. Instead of going 'oh, well, what does it matter,' I should have fought it.
>
> I think it made me feel like, 'oh, well, nothing is ever going to change,' because that person was known for that type of behavior. Letting it go does not help either, but I felt defeated. [I just] licked my wounds and went on (laughter). Get ready for the next battle because there are more to come.

Several of the women felt that the White males' decisions are not questioned whereas their decisions are constantly being second guessed or questioned. A first-level supervisor describes her frustration with her superiors.

> Even in the hiring, when I interview and I hire someone it seems like they question me more. Oh, and don't hire the same race -- have you ever noticed -- all the supervisors I have ever had have always been White. When they interview and hire a White person it is no big deal. I have always been the

only or next to the only Black in my department -- period -- for a very, very
long time -- for years.

There was never any question. Now when I became a supervisor, and
I started hiring Black people. Then they started questioning me on it. But
instead of asking me first, they would call the individual and do a sneaky,
underhanded interview over the phone. But they say there were a few
questions they wanted to make sure that they [the interviewees] understood.

This disrespect for the African American woman in a position of authority is another

form of oppression. In essence, the White male's disrespect for her opinion and/or authority,

including knowledge as well as position, is saying it does not matter how much education

you have, what position in the hierarchy that you attain. You are still a woman and a

minority, therefore, inferior to me. In turn, this disrespect breeds resentment and the

resentment breeds isolation for both groups.

The Isolation of Solo Status

All the women in this study said that being the only one or one of a few African

American women in a company was one of the most difficult issues that they have to

experience in the workplace. The solo status effect adds the pressure of being extra careful

with everything they do and say because they realize they are the prototypes for all African

American women. They realize that if they make a mistake it could limit the opportunities

for other African American women and African Americans overall, in the corporations. One

vice-president reflects on her experiences.

Well, you know when you are one of a few. You are the model whether you
want to be or not for others. If you mess up the possibility exists that they are
not going to give us any more chances. That is always in the back of your
mind.

I am not sure whether I consciously keep it there and how I handle
conflict because of that but I am always reminded that whatever I do because I
am an African American woman it is going to be judged and it may be judged
differently. It may be judged more stringently, but I have no control over that.

So I have to do my best as I am going along. You try to do your best so when there is a comparison it will be a good one.

Another complication of solo status in an organization for these women is the limited amount of informal mentoring or training that they might receive if there were other African Americans at higher levels in the organization. A training executive expressed it this way:

> There are two Black males that are my mentors, but there are no African American females that I can confide in. There is one that is a vice president at another corporation that I confide in but it is not the same as having someone in your own company that is familiar with the day-to-day issues and the corporate structure. I have several young women that come in and talk to me. That is why I stay around for them, but that's not enough to keep me here much longer.

There is a deep sense of isolation in their positions for these women, however, that does not affect their professionalism and their commitment to their professions. Many of the women used their professionalism as a way to resist the race, gender and class oppression that they experienced in the workplace.

The Tradition of Resistance: A Tool for Conflict Management

Four of the women spoke of their professionalism on the job as one way of resisting oppression. A school administrator uses her professionalism as a way to resist the stereotypes and degradation that accompany them.

> As a professional, so many people look up to me . . . [because] I have won the trust of my staff. They know what I can do and what I cannot do. Because of the strong Black woman that I am, stereotypes do not affect me in that way. No, they cannot say, "we put you here because you are a woman or they just put you here because you are Black." They put me here because they knew that I could deal with the kids, and the parents. They knew I could do the work. Some may say they needed more Blacks, but in my case they needed me!

By viewing herself as a professional, the African American woman is creating a new

narrative or world view that rejects the controlling images of the matriarch and mammy.

African American women often use logical reasoning to support their resistance to oppression. One production supervisor recalls her defiance of sexist and racist remarks when she was promoted to the supervisory level.

> When I first got promoted as a supervisor, African American women were not supposed to be supervisors. You are taking away a job from a White male that has a family and kids. I had a supervisor tell me that. He said, "you know, you are single and you don't have a family. That job should have been given to somebody that is married and has children."
> I said, "you know what, that is your choice to get married and to have children and it is my choice to be single." "So why shouldn't I reap the same monetary rewards that you are reaping." One of the things that they do not want to do is pay you. They believe you are not suppose to get the same salary as your White male counterparts.
> They come up with all kinds of reasons not to pay you. If it means going out on the shop floor and finding someone to say derogatory things about you they will do that. I have had them say to me that we heard that you don't like White people. I said, "well, I don't recall telling you that or indicating that to you. So why would you bring that up." I said, "I know that you are not going to use this when it comes to determining my salary. Because if you do, we are going to have a fight."

In the past, as today, African American women were often subjected to the "dirty" jobs of the domestic and factory worker (Hooks, 1981) that no one else wanted to do. In addition, today they are also subjected to the "dirty" job of handling conflict situations that White males do not want to handle. The production supervisor had this to say about the African American women dealing with conflict in the workplace.

> Most White males don't want to handle conflict. They are more the avoiders. The ones that I have been around do not want any kind of confrontation. They don't want to have to deal with it. They just ignore it and pretend it did not happen. Then when it festers to the point where it is out of control, then they want to bring in a Black female to solve all the problems in the work area.
> That is how I got into this area that I am in because they had White supervisors that could not deal with anything. They wanted someone that

they knew could come in and handle the conflict. Well, I am tired of coming in and clearing up their messes and then being sent to another area . . . they [White males] are getting paid more than me, let them clean up their own messes.

Doing the "dirty work" is a form of oppression that African American women now resist. Throughout history the African American woman has exhibited a high rate of resistance to the influences of race, gender and class oppression (Beale, 1970; Collins, 1991; Hooks, 1981). According to Adams (1983, p. 76), this suggests she has been "allowed" to assert her views, both within her own race where her contributions were recognized as important to the survival of African Americans and within the White race where she has struggled to represent the interests of her race.

The White patriarchal society has historically "allowed" more assertive behavior from African American women than from African American men, since they considered females of any race less dangerous than males. The African American woman's resistance to these influences has earned her the reputation of being domineering, and has reinforced other controlling images, although studies show she does not assert herself any more than African American males (Adams, 1983, p. 76).

Resisting oppression could not have occurred without Black women's longstanding rejection of controlling images such as mammies, Aunt Jemimas and matriarchs. African American women continue to challenge race, gender, and class oppression by empowering themselves and redefining their standpoint. Hooks (1989, p. 43) states, "oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, and telling their story."

Resistance as a Conflict Management Tool

Resistance and defiance in the face of controversy are perhaps the last conflict

mechanisms available to African American women. The five-style model does not equip the

African American woman with the tools that she needs to combat the effects of oppression

embedded in workplace conflicts. From the interviews with the ten women several stances

emerged. Three will be discussed in relation to conflict in the workplace.

Passive defiance stance. Passive defiance is one way that African American women

in this study handled their conflicts. In this stance, the women take a stance, which could

also be known as, the "Rosa Parks" stance (C. L. Jenkins, personal communication, February

24, 1997). In this stance, the African American woman is tired of all the oppressive

treatment that she has experienced in the workplace and she is not going to take it any more.

A school administrator gave a poignant example of how she resisted the disrespect of her

White female boss during a conflict.

> One day we were sitting in the conference room and she [the principal] put
> her finger in my face and started yelling at me. I told her, "as long as you are
> living and breathing--living and breathing--don't you ever put your finger in
> my face again." I left, I was going to quit that day. I had taken so much that I
> was tired of dealing with it. All the little "penny ante stuff" that she had done.

A production supervisor commented on her defiance to the poor treatment by her

White counterparts.

> I find that African Americans are very passive here [Midwest]. They allow
> European Americans to say things to them and they let them get away with it.
> I am just not accustomed to them saying those things to me. I don't like to
> make trouble, but I definitely cannot let them get away with it.

In this stance, African American women assert themselves in ways that may be

. threatening to White males and others who are not accustomed to seeing them react in this

way. Depending on the degree of oppressive treatment, the African American woman may move to the stance of active defiance.

Active defiance stance. The active defiance stance emerges out of the resistance tradition's search for justice. The women in this study stated that their preferred style was similar to the collaborator or a combination of all of the styles. They were very direct, and "ardent" in the dealing with conflict. Ardent is emphasized in the stance because it describes the passion, desire and fervor the women expressed toward getting to a fair and equitable resolution for all parties involved in the conflict. One vice-president describes how her past injustices have influenced her conflict-handling behavior.

> I am originally from the South, lived through the Civil Rights Age and I have seen a lot of changes in the country and in the South. I believe as an African American that all of your life's experiences impact how you interact with people. You learn to smile through the tears because of the kind of conflicts you have experienced with people in the South . . .
> You learn throughout the years that you are going to be treated differently [because of your race and gender]. And I have been on the bottom and I know that is not a good place to be. I think because of our lives and the conflicts that we have had in our lives, we try to look for different ways [to handle conflict]. [We] try to be aware of how what we do affects others. I have tried throughout my career to be fair in any conflict situation.

The women's directness also comes out of a sense of, if they did not address the conflict in that way their White male counterparts would not take them seriously. One assistant principal believes that her directness in often misunderstood.

> I have a very stern and strong voice, so I think that people may think that I am being mean or loud when I am not. That is just my normal voice. It is important for them to get to know me. To know that I am a professional person, a no-nonsense person when it comes to dealing with a conflict.

The women believed that if they allowed the conflict to become subterranean they would put themselves in a worse position than if things were aboveboard and out-in-the-

open.

        Warrior stance. In this stance, the African American woman utilizes all of her

resources and abilities to reject the negative forces of oppression (C. L. Jenkins, personal

communication, March 1, 1997). In this stance she may utilize all the conflict styles. She is

the ultimate protector of self. She is keenly aware of her strategies and those of her

opponent. She knows when she can fight and when she cannot be victorious (Tzu, 1963).

One vice-president had this to say about the five conflict styles.

> Collaborator . . . There are some people who want everyone to come out [of a
> conflict] feeling good about themselves. But that is not a role for me because
> it can be detrimental. You spend an awful lot of energy and I say why waste
> it in that role. It depends on your role and who the people are, what is at stake
> and what's in it for me.

> Compromiser . . . A compromise can be obtained but that should not be your
> first objective. In a conflict, my first objective is to win and compromising
> comes forth or fifth down the line. It is a problem-solving process . . . if I win
> what do I get out of it or what am I willing to give up? How important is it
> really to you?

> Accommodator . . . Scratch it! That is not a health strategy to follow. It is not
> a good survival strategy.

> Controller . . . I might fit that mode in conflict, I guess. But I would modify
> it because winning is not always everything. Sometimes I enjoy the conflict .
> . . It [conflict] is not for everyone and sometimes the conflict is something
> that you are really interested in or something that is important.

> Avoider . . . There are sometimes in conflicts that you can be an avoider.
> Especially, if you have other things that take a higher priority or issues that
> you feel are not worth your time and effort. But if they are important conflicts
> you should engage in them.

> Because a conflict is not a level playing field . . . you have to decide which
> strategies you will employ and at what time you will employ them.

In some cases during the warrior stance, the African American woman may perceive

her work environment as a constant source of conflict or a continuous battle. One vice-president relates to one White male counterpart, in particular, in this way.

> If you are going to argue you decide what your stance is going to be and you hold firm . . . I know that it is always going to be a battle when I go into a meeting with him [a White male coworker] . . . a battle! It is always going to be a conflict no matter what it is. It's that simple.

In the extreme cases, the African American woman can never let down her guard (Scott, 1991). She is on constant alert to any conflict that may have racist or sexist undertones. One school administrator describes her warrior stance in reaction to a conflict with a female coworker.

> [As a teacher] One day I was sitting in my classroom and I had the television on. When a White teacher came in and unplugged it while I was watching it. I said to her, "I am watching the television." She said, "well, it belongs to me, it does not belong to you."
> So I told her, "she better hurry up and get the 'Hell' out of my room right now," because that was rude. So then she got in my face. I told her, "she better get out of my face because you get in my face and I am going to have to knock you down."
> So she ran out and told the principal that I hit her. I told the principal, if I had hit her, he would have known that I had hit her because she would have been on the ground. And she still would not be able to get up. So that started a whole big mess . . . They never say that I was in the right and never said that she was wrong. You know, that's White folks.

The repeated attempts to deal with conflict, within a social structure that denigrates the African American woman's efforts to use the other styles, compelled her to use the warrior stance.

Summary

The influence of oppression, cultural hegemony and the standpoint theories are woven throughout the eight themes. First, the five-style model is inadequate for the African American woman because it fails to equip her with the tools she needs to combat five of the

eight themes, for example, the mistrust of the White male counterpart is based on her mistrust of the patriarchal system. The women said that something similar to the collaborator might work in a conflict situation, but they did not believe that the "win-win" goal was realistic based on many of their experiences.

This mistrust of White male counterparts was also due in part to the disrespect they received from them. The women said that White males did not respect their authority in their positions because of their race and gender, even when the women were ranked higher than the White males in the organization. The African American women in this study believed that modern day stereotypes and being the only African American woman in a position of authority in the organization, had a great impact on this disrespect.

However, the African American women in this study, rejected those stereotypes and controlling images. This resistance tradition enables African American women to cope with and usually, transcend the confines of race, gender and class oppression (Collins, 1991; Hook, 1981). The voices of these African American women are not the voices of victims but survivors. Their actions and spirit to endure in the face of conflict suggest that their standpoint is truly unique. The articulation of this Black female standpoint has been essential to their survival. In the next section, the implications of this research for African American women are discussed.

Chapter 4

Discussion

Racism, sexism and classism are oppressive elements that continue to affect every aspect of African American women's lives. One gap in the present conflict styles literature involves the issues of whether, and how, race, gender and class oppression affect one's conflict-handling behavior. This investigation sought to evaluate the impact of oppression on the conflict-handling styles of African American women in the workplace. Although several theorists have developed various studies on the individual and additive effects of these variables on conflict, none have developed a theory for the simultaneous effects that African American women experience in the workplace.

Two research questions were examined. Research question one asked whether race, gender and class affect the conflicts African American women experience in the workplace, and if so, in what ways? The answer to this question that emerged in my interviews is yes, and the effects will be examined in the following pages. The second question asked, whether the five-style conflict management model adequately addresses the ways that African American women handle conflict in the workplace. The answer that emerged to this question is no, and this study provides some answers to the question, "why not?"

Race, Gender and Class Oppression: Its Impact on Conflict in the Workplace

The eight themes presented in this paper illustrate the simultaneous effects of race, gender and class on the conflict-handling styles of African American women in the workplace. The reluctance to select a preferred conflict-handling style, the mistrust of White male counterparts, being disrespected in their positions, the stereotypes, solo status and

resistance, all played a significant role in the African American woman's world view and her place in the organization.

Patriarchal Power Structure

Embedded in the framework of all of the themes is the patriarchal power structure of the organization. The oppression, stereotypes, controlling images of African American women and mistrust of White males that originated under the patriarchal system of slavery exist today in organizations. Over time, the White supremacist patriarchal structure in society at the macro-level has not changed. It is reflected in organizations at the micro-level and influences the behaviors of organizational members on the individual-level.

The social stratification and oppression inherit in the patriarchal structure places the African American woman in a low status position in comparison to her White male counterparts. This dyad between the African American woman and the White male represents the greatest power differential. This social standpoint differential creates a disadvantage for the African American woman before a conflict is even present. Therefore, when a conflict arises she is not only faced with the dealing with the conflict but also the overt and covert influences of oppression. The conflict then becomes a conflict of a higher order, and it must be viewed and dealt with on that level.

Disrespect and Mistrust of the African American Woman

This power structure not only influences the interaction of the African American women with their White male counterparts but it also influences the perceptions and interactions of the White males toward these women. For example, there was disrespect for the African American woman in a position of authority, even when she is ranked at the same

level or higher. The White male either discounted what she said or attempted to place her in a subservient position in spite of her authority or knowledge.

Stereotyping is another mechanism to control and keep the African American woman in a subordinate position. For example, stereotypes such as she is loud, domineering, and has a chip on her shoulder, all attempt to dehumanize and denigrate her authority similar to the stereotypes of the Aunt Jemima, matriarch and mammy, a few decades earlier. Negotiating with someone who is dealing from this perspective is difficult for the African American woman. He or she is only dealing with the stereotype and preconceived notion of the African American woman instead of dealing with the conflict itself.

All of this leads to mistrust on both sides. How can you negotiate fairly with someone you do not trust? Then again, if they agree, the parties may have only discussed the surface causes of the conflict. They may never address the underlying causes that they embed in the patriarchal oppressive structure of the corporation. For the African American women, this mistrust may be far more than a mistrust of the individual White male counterpart as much as it is a mistrust of the system that he represents. This mistrust creates and sustains an imbalance for the African American woman dealing with a conflict.

Either/Or Orientation versus Both/And Orientation

Many women in the study said they had difficulty distinguishing whether a conflict was a legitimate one or if their race or gender caused it. This confusion creates an either/or dilemma for many African American women. If it is not a legitimate conflict, *either* her race *or* her gender has caused it. In the Results section, five of the women said that race was more important to them when it came to conflict in the workplace. Three women said that

gender posed a greater threat, while two of the women said it was really both gender and race that caused the most concern. The either/or orientation has always been a tool of the patriarchal system to maintain its dominance and subordination over the African American woman by clouding the issue of her oppression. However, it is more for all of the women to view the either/or orientation as the latter two women did, a futile debate. The African American woman's oppression has always been based on both racism and sexism. The two variables are inseparable. Trying to separate them is to negate the African American woman. For an African American woman to say, "I am a woman, first or I am African American, first" is to place a part of her identity in a second-class status. This perpetuates patriarchal and cultural hegemonic ideologies of African American womanhood.

The African American woman who realizes this is empowered to define her own standpoint. She is beginning to reconceptualize her own meaning of African American womanhood. She is taking control of the apparatus of self-definition and can take action to change her world. By eliminating the need to categorize the conflict as either/or (gender or race), the African American woman can determine if the conflict is a legitimate one or one based on oppression (*both* gender *and* race). The both/and orientation is another tool that enables the African American woman to resist oppression.

Resistance Combats Cultural Hegemony

Understanding the impact of race, gender and class oppression is important for the African American woman, to deal effectively with conflict. It is vital to her survival that she no longer accepts these forms of oppression as the normal course of things. These forms of oppression are not normal or natural. They are destructive to her Afrocentric world view.

To survive, the African American woman must be a "watcher" (Lorde, 1984 in Collins, 1991, p. 91). The watcher is a form of resistance that generates a dual consciousness in the African American woman, one in which Black women become familiar with the language and manners of the oppressor, and two, develops a self-defined standpoint of resistance.

This tradition of resistance suggests that a distinctive, collective Black women's consciousness exists. A consciousness that knows the images of the African American woman created by racism, sexism and classism are not true. One woman in the study stated, "They did not hire me because I was Black and a woman." "They hired me because they knew I could do the job." "They hired me because they needed me." Like this woman, African American women must understand these negative images, deal with them and destroy them. With the understanding that, if African American women can understand the nature of the conflict relationship between themselves and White males, they can begin to develop styles to cope with conflict. They can develop styles that take into account the simultaneous effects of race, gender and class on a conflict.

Racism, sexism and classism do affect the conflicts of African American women in the workplace. Oppression is embedded in the patriarchal structure of society at the macro-level and influences every aspect of society including the conflict interaction on the individual level. This is evident by the disrespect, mistrust, stereotypes and either/or dilemma African American women are continuously subjected too in the workplace. The White supremacist patriarchal power structure continues to subjugate and dominate the African American woman's ability to deal effectively with conflict in the workplace.

Five-Style Model: Inadequate for African American Women

A clear answer to the second research question also emerged in this study. The five-style conflict management model does not adequately capture African American women's ways of handling conflict. The reasons for the model's inappropriateness revolve around the problems of race, gender and class oppression articulated in the preceding discussion section. When the women in the study were asked what style best describes their conflict-handling methods, they were reluctant to choose just one. Four of the women identified with the collaborative style, four of the women said they used all five styles, one said she was a compromiser and one said none of the styles described the way she handles conflict. This reluctance to select a preferred conflict style can be attributed to several possible factors.

First, it may have been because the one paragraph description of the styles presented to the participants was brief. If fuller descriptions of the various styles were provided, perhaps the women would have been less reluctant to select a prevailing style to describe themselves. Second, it may have been the broadness of my interview question, assuming that one preferred conflict-handling style fits all situations and relationships. Perhaps if I had asked the women to describe the conflict style they tend to use in a more narrowly defined context, more of them may have identified a preferred conflict-handling style. Other factors, such as time, location, or comfort level during the interview, also could have prohibited the women from selecting a preferred conflict-handling style.

However, I believe the reluctance to select one style had little to do with a situational or relational context, and more to do with the oppressive nature embedded into the patriarchal structure of the organization. Why did so many women say they must use all of

the styles? And when the women did choose just one style, why did so many select the

collaborator's style?

Five Conflict-Handling Styles: All or None

Four of the women in the study said they would use all five of the styles to handle

conflict in the workplace. I believe that because of her standpoint and the reality of

oppression, as explained by oppression theorists (e.g., Freire, 1970; Lears, 1985; Semmes,

1992), the African American woman is placed at an uneven-segregated table during

negotiations in the workplace. The uneven-segregated table is created when the combination

of gender, race, and class oppression denigrates the woman's knowledge and a White male

counterpart discounts her before she has a chance to state her opinions in a negotiation

situation.

The African American woman is not automatically afforded the luxury of trust,

respect and credibility given to White males. As one woman stated, "African American

women are not allowed to speak their minds and not pay for it later in our careers." This lack

of trust, respect and credibility makes it impossible for her to negotiate with just one style.

For example, if she were to use the controller style because she was confident in her own

opinions, she may be viewed as domineering or pushy. Whereas if a White male used the

controller style, he would be viewed as confident and correct in his actions. The

compromiser and accommodator styles may be viewed as the African American woman

being weaker or a pushover instead of a team player.

Collaboration: Is It Really the Best Option for African American Women?

Four of the women believed that they must maintain a collaborative stance in order

not to damage their future relationship in the organization. However, their view of collaboration is different from the one described in the five-style model. These women viewed the collaborator's emphasis on a "win-win" solution in a unique way. Because of the reality of oppression, the women did not consider it realistic to expect a solution to give all parties everything that they want. Although they aim for the best solution under the circumstances, their primary goal was a more fundamental one: for all parties to be truly heard and understood. So, for these women, a collaborative style involves open and direct communication without fear of retribution.

For most of the women, one or all the other conflict styles must supplement the collaborative style. By using techniques similar to collaboration or a blend all of the styles, these women are striving to correct the imbalances of an uneven-segregated table. However, as long as there are power imbalances brought on by patriarchal structures in organizations, where one party has to empower the other in order to come to an agreement, the goal of having all voices heard and truly understood can only be an illusion.

Direct Conflict-Handling Style

When the ten women were asked how they handled conflict, most of the women said they used a very direct, get-everything-out-on-the-table manner. They believed that if they were not direct, specific and firm they would not be taken seriously. I heard the frustration in their voices but it was much more than the frustration of unresolved conflicts. It was more the frustration of dealing with the oppressive undertones of the conflicts, the stereotypes, the mistrust and invalidation of their opinions.

The women's mistrust of their White male counterparts grew out of their mistrust of

the patriarchal system of the oppressor vs. the oppressed. The five-style model does not encompass the apparatus needed by African American women to deal with the oppression that influences the conflict situation. In dealing with conflict, it is important for the African American woman to understand the underlying issues that influence the conflict, not from a fatalistic perspective that sees everyone against her, but from a place of power where she understands what she is up against and is able to maneuver and adjust accordingly.

Resistance Approach: Beyond the Five-Style Model

The oppression perspective on conflict management developed in this paper, sheds light on the underlying dynamics of oppression and its influences on the conflict-handling behavior of African American women. One way that the African American woman deals with the dynamics of oppression is through a history of resistance, as described earlier in this thesis. Out of this history of resistance emerges the resistance approach of conflict management for the African American woman.

The resistance approach is one aspect of an overall oppression perspective of conflict management that recognizes the impact of race, gender and class on conflict. This approach addresses several elements that the five-style conflict management model ignores. These elements include but are not limited to the following.

1.   Defiance to the oppressive nature of the White patriarchal structure and its overt and covert influences on conflict.
2.   Frustration and disillusionment with the five-style model's inability to address the needs of African American women in conflict.
3.   A need to balance the power or neutralize the power of the White male counterpart during conflicts. (D. M. H. Lewis, personal communication, February 24, 1997)

Three resistance stances were presented in this thesis, passive defiance, active

defiance, and the warrior. These stances were born out of a tradition of resistance and empowerment. They may view the resistance approach on a continuum or in degrees (similar to a thermometer). African American women who utilize these and other stances are not trying to have "power over" others but to have the power to protect themselves from being disempowered by others.

The passive defiance stance is not a passive giving in nor is it a passive/aggressive style of conflict management. It is a passive defiance out of the civil disobedience framework (C. L. Jenkins, personal communication, February 24, 1997). The African American woman in this stance is not trying to demonstrate "power over" the conflict situation as much as she is attempting to reject the oppressive overtones of the conflict. She is in effect saying, "I am tired of this treatment and I am not going to take it any more." For example, when the administrator quoted earlier in the study spoke up to her abusive boss and walked out of the meeting, she was striving to maintain her dignity and stand up for her rights as a human being. Leaving the room or intentionally refusing to do a required task that she feels is unjust and demoralizing may be outward signs of this stance.

In the active defiance stance, the African American women in this study were interested in direct, open and honest communication with no hidden agendas. It was important for these women to create a space that was culturally sensitive to their needs and to the needs of others. An atmosphere where there was a sense of warmth and trust, and people felt free to speak openly about conflicts. In this stance, the African American women are rediscovering their "voice." The focus of this stance is to reclaim what has been denied them. These women are more likely to use methods of cooperation and consensus building

to deal with their conflicts.

The warrior stance is the survivor's stance. This stance in the resistance approach can be viewed on a continuum or in degrees. The amount of oppression an African American woman experiences will determine how much resistance that she will assert, from the passive defiance to the warrior and any other "yet to be discovered" stances.

In spite of the frustration of dealing with conflicts in the workplace, there was a strength in the participants' voices and laughter at some of the situations, as the women reflected on the past. This stems from the resistance tradition and a sense of empowerment that involved the rejection of patriarchal ideologies that perpetuate domination and subjugation of the African American woman. All of the women were very strong-willed individuals. They had to be in order to achieve, maintain and work effectively in their positions.

Although this study focused mainly on the workplace, it is important to acknowledge the impact of their families, churches and communities on lives of these women. These support systems strongly influenced the development of their ability to resist the oppressive forces that they faced in the workplace and the White patriarchal system in society.

Conclusion

African American women have difficulty working in White organizations. The power structure of these organizations emulates the larger American society, a patriarchal society of subordination and domination that has plagued the African American woman. The American society has had a notorious history of treating women and minorities, in particular African American women, as second-class citizens.

The oppression and controlling images of the African American woman that originated under the patriarchal system of slavery still exist today because the White male supremacist patriarchal structure in society has not changed. The prejudices and discrimination embedded in the patriarchal structures of organizations has created conflict-inducing experiences for the African American woman that are different and more complex than those conflicts experienced by her White male counterparts. Race, gender and class oppression could not continue without powerful ideological justifications for its existence. Existing power inequities among groups must be addressed for any conflict handling style to be effective.

The five-style model cannot begin to fully address the needs of African American women in conflict situations because it is derived from a system of oppression. The conflict management styles model(s), as conceptualized by Thomas and Kilmann (1974, 1977, 1978), Blake and Mouton, (1964, 1978, 1985) and other theorists (Shockley & Zalabak, 1981), are inadequate devices for African American women to effectively deal with the conflicts that they face in the workplace. The five-style model fails to recognize that factors other than situational, relational and personality influence the selection of a particular conflict style. Those factors are superficial in comparison to the simultaneous influences of racism, sexism and classism on the selection of a style by an African American woman.

The oppression perspective of conflict management moves away from a stylistic paradigm to a strategic conceptualization of conflict management for the African American woman. A strategic or stance approach offers the African American woman more flexibility and latitude to deal with conflict. She can be direct and open at the same time in her

communication without being labeled a controller or accommodator. She may use the resistance approach with all of the styles or none of the styles depending on the situation, relationships and the degree of oppressive elements in the conflict.

By placing Black women's experiences with conflict at the center of analysis, one gains a fresh insight to the prevailing concepts, paradigms, and epistemologies of her world view and on the feminist and Afrocentric critiques of conflict. Viewing the world through a both/and conceptual lens of the simultaneity of race, gender and class oppression creates new possibilities for empowering Afrocentric feminist knowledge (Collins, 1991), one distinct from the White male patriarchal model that suppresses Black women's voices and ways of knowing.

By integrating the oppression, cultural hegemony and the standpoint theories into an oppression theory for conflict management, one rejects the additive approaches to oppression. By embracing a paradigm of race, gender and class as interlocking systems of oppression, African American women are then able to reconceptualize the social relations of domination and resistances. This new way of knowing allows the African American woman to reframe her own reality and that will ultimately affect the way she handles her conflicts in the workplace.

Despite African American women's potential power to reveal new insights on race, gender and class issue, a Black women's standpoint is only one angle of vision or a partial perspective on the issue. The overarching matrix of oppression affects multiple groups, each with varying experiences with penalty and privilege that produce corresponding partial perspectives. No one group has a clear angle or vision. However, viewing the world as one

in the making raises the issue of individual choice and responsibility to make changes in the current social structures. Only through human action can we transform the world from a system of domination and subjugation to one of cooperation and self-actualization.

Limitation and Implications for Future Research

Ten African American women were interviewed for this thesis, therefore, generalizability is limited. Although qualitative researchers believe that ten is a good number to gather information using in-depth interviews, other investigators may wish to interview more women using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The triangulation of methods will offer more statistical and empirical data over a larger population. The qualitative in-depth interviews with a smaller sample of that population will allow for the personal narratives or voice of the participants that is unique in the feminist style of interviewing (Oakley, 1981). Considering the fact that the women in this study had difficulty identifying with the five-style model, further research may be done to reveal more resistance stances or other stances unique to them as a group.

Evaluating White male employees' responses to their interactions with African American women and conflict in the workplace would also be important. It would be useful to evaluate their perspectives on how African American women handle conflict. It would be interesting to get their perspective on how the patriarchal structure of society affects the organizational structure and ultimately the way that they handle conflict with African American women. It would be interesting to get their opinion on the oppression perspective on conflict management and the interplay of oppression, cultural hegemony and the standpoint theories for dealing with conflict.

More research is needed on the effects of race, gender, and class at different levels of interaction in the workplace. African American women in managerial positions experience conflicts with superiors, peers and subordinates. Each level of interaction offers unique challenges and strategies for dealing with conflict. African American women in positions of authority must be conscious of the oppressive influences from superiors. They must also be sensitive to their own use of authority over their subordinates not to perpetuate that same forms of oppression.

More research on African American women's coping responses to race, gender and class oppression is needed, not only for women in managerial positions but in a variety of settings and populations. All of the women in this study were well educated and had progressed to high levels in their careers. Therefore, their class issues were not as salient as they might have been with someone with less education or in an entry level position. More research needs to be done on the various class levels and how they affect conflict-handling styles.

Further work on an oppression theory of conflict management is also needed. In this study, I outlined an overall perspective, however, further research is needed to develop this perspective into a theory. The theory would then need to be tested for its reliability and validity for African American women. This theory, hopefully, would bring some understanding to the psychological influences for selecting one style or another. To determine this, factors such as the stage of the African American woman's psychological development, identity awareness and self-esteem need to be investigated. The degree of assimilation and acculturation into the White patriarchal society versus Black nationalist and

separatists ideologies and their influences on conflict-handling style selection would be interesting to research.

The problem of race, gender and class oppression as it pertains to conflict management restricts the professional development of individuals and affects the productivity of organizations. More information about effective ways of coping with race, gender and class oppression as they operate in conflict situations will be a general benefit to society as well as to the women who deal with conflict in their everyday lives and workplaces. For the women in this thesis, however arduous their move into positions of power, the key to their achievement seems to lie in their ability to assess reality, never forgetting for a moment that they are African American and female.

Table I

How African American Women Handle
Conflict in the Workplace

Area 1

Explain a conflict situation that you were confronted with in the workplace?

    a. How did the conflict occur?
    b. Who was involved in the conflict?
    c. What was the main issue of the conflict?
    d. What emotions came out in the conflict? How did it make you feel?

Area 2

How did you handle the conflict?

    a. What was the outcome of the conflict?
    b. Were you satisfied with the outcome? If you could handle if differently, would you?
    c. When resolving the conflict was it more important for you to maintain the relationship with the person involved in the conflict or did the outcome depend more on the situation?
    d. Do you think that you would have handled the conflict situation differently, if it had not happened in the workplace, but at home or in a social setting?
    e. Do you think a person's position in the organization influences the way you handle a conflict with that person? Why?

Area 3

Does race, gender and class influence the types of conflict that you experience? For example:

    a. Does your cultural background (being an African American) affect the conflict?
    b. How have your family background, and family beliefs influenced the way you handle conflict? If any?
    c. As an African American woman (your job title), do you think a White male counterpart involved in the same type of conflict would be treated the same as you?
    d. Do you think your income level influences the conflict situation or outcome? For example, if you made more money or less money would that make a difference in how you are treated?

    e. Do you handle conflicts any differently when you feel that they are race-, gender-, or class-based? Why?
    f. Do you think that being the only one or one of a few African American women in a

supervisory position affects your conflicts and how you handle them?

g. Do you feel that you are being stereotyped during or after a conflict because you are an African American woman?

Area 4

I am going to read you descriptions of five conflict-handling styles. Please tell me which one best describes your preferred way of handling a conflict. (Read the descriptions of the five-style conflict management model from Lawyers and Katz (1985), p. 13 in this paper.)

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