

# MEN AND CONFLICT IN THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

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This paper investigates whether there is a gender-centric style of communication in the construction industry (a genderlect), whether this is a source of interpersonal conflict and whether men and women negotiate differently in conflict episodes. The critical decision method, supported by concept mapping reveals the cognitive bases of judgement and communications in hypothetical conflict settings. The paper provides evidence that the construction industry's genderlect is male-centric and that this is related to the relatively high incidence of conflict. It also argues that women and men behave differently in a conflict and in jobs that require them to engage in conflict and confrontation. Furthermore, post conflict relationships remain relatively unchanged for males compared to females. Since the construction industry is predominantly a male workforce, this research suggests that levels of conflict in the construction industry could be reduced by increased female participation.

Keywords: communication, conflict, construction industry, gender.

## INTRODUCTION

The construction industry is well known for its high levels of inter-personal and inter-organisational conflict (Gardiner *et al.* 1992, Fenn *et al.* 1997, Emmitt 2003, RCBCI 2003). Construction is also well known as a male-dominated industry with a strong masculine culture (Gale 1994, Sommerville *et al.* 1993, Dainty *et al.* 2000, Fielden *et al.* 2000, Agapiou 2002, Chandra and Loosemore 2003). Given that poor communication has repeatedly been cited as a cause of conflict in the construction industry (Brandt and Murphy 2000), it is surprising that the nexus between communication, gender and conflict has not been explored. The aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between these three issues. More specifically, it investigates the hypothesis that there is a male-centric style of communication in the construction industry which acts as a significant source of interpersonal conflict. It also explores whether men and women in the industry communicate differently in conflict situations or whether women adjust their style of communication to fit into the strong masculine occupational culture in which they are imbedded.

## THE ROLE OF GENDER IN CONFLICT NEGOTIATIONS

Gender is one's sense of maleness or femaleness, which according to social learning theory, is self perceived and learnt through a process of socialization and education and culturally determined by a society's perceptions of the roles which men and women are expected to perform (Tannen 1998, Feldman 1999, Byrne 2004). For example, Byrne (2004) notes that the cultural stereotype in most western societies

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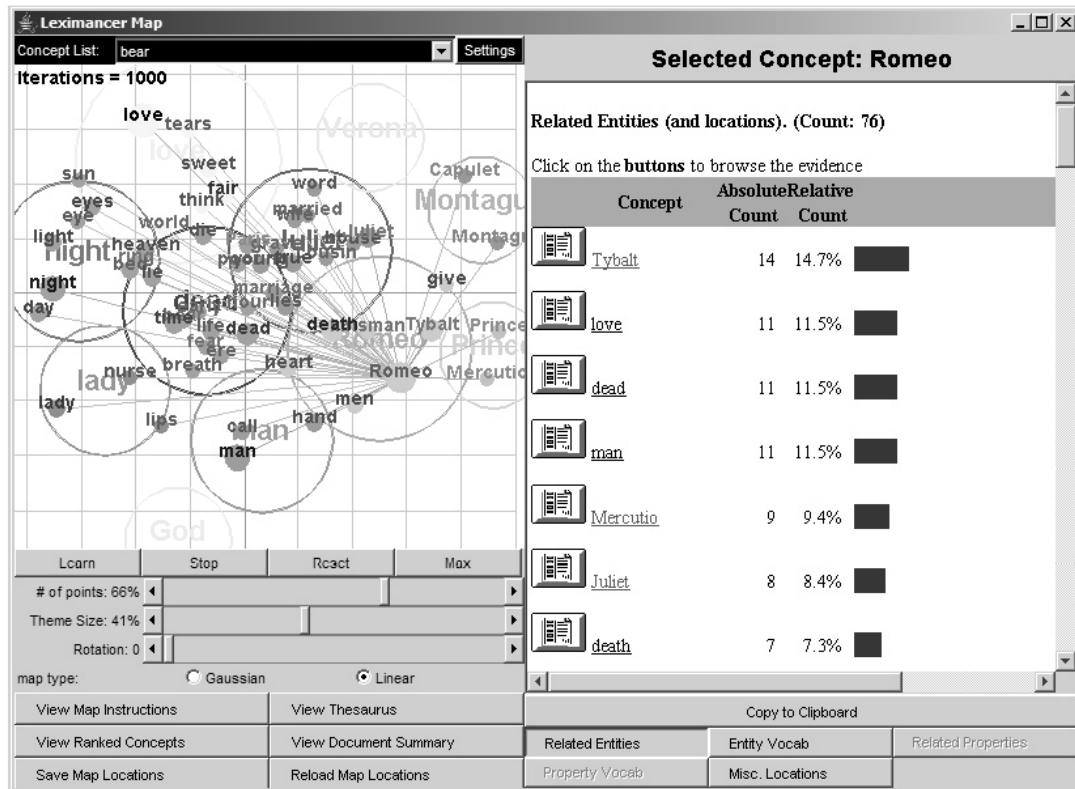
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associates masculinity with strength and power and, femininity with tactfulness and sensitivity. These expectations in turn create distinct social environments in which men and women learn to communicate and deal with conflict in quite different ways. For example, in western cultures, Coates (2004) points out that young boys tend to play in large groups, organised hierarchically and thus learn to communicate in direct and confrontational language. As Pilkington (1992) found in her study of Australian workplace meetings, this continues into adulthood where male communication styles (genderlects) are thus characterised by interruption and verbal sparring where there is a focus on an orderly exchange of views, distinct speaker roles, getting in fast, actively fending off any interruptions, using increased volume and repetition to dominate along with strong verbal signals to lay claim to the floor and silence any potential competitors. Wittig (1992) also found that for the most part, men's conversations are primarily a means to identify and preserve a certain status in a hierarchical social order by exhibiting knowledge and skill and holding centre stage through verbal performance such as story telling, joking or imparting information. As Sadri *et al.* (2003) points out, men know the importance of visibility and in contrast to women, will interject in a conversation even if he knows little about the subject.

In contrast to men, Thompson *et al.* (2001) found that women are less likely to use a vernacular and informal style of language, or jargon of a particular group. Women are also less keen to engage in conflict than men, have fewer conflict episodes as a result and use a much more indirect and less physical form of engagement. For example, Tannen (1998) found that women spend much more time discussing the dangers of anger and contention than men and their communications are characterised by the language of rapport, cooperation, conflict avoidance and nurturing. In contrast to men, conversations are characterised by few monologues symbolising solidarity rather than individuality and collective rather than individual values, within a framework of supportive, overlapping and linked ideas with fast rates of speech and frequent laughter. In a conflict situation, women tend to try to maintain interpersonal relationships and ally themselves with each other, often in opposition to others girls who are not present. They also employ more indirect psychological modes of engagement than men and their discourse is typically collaborative, levelled at creating and maintaining relationships and criticising and arguing in indirect ways (Sheldon 1993).

## **METHOD**

Klein *et al.*'s (1989) critical decision method was used to reveal the cognitive bases of male and female communications in hypothetical conflict settings. This involved scenario-based interviews using cognitive probes to tease out the knowledge and reasoning underlying responses to familiar and industry-relevant conflict situations. In this research, interviewees were presented with real-life scenarios sourced from three construction industry participant groups: site workers (N=7); site managers (N=7); Client representatives (N=6). The scenarios were hypothetical conflict situations involving a male subject in conflict with the interviewee. As a control device, each respondent was also asked to recall a recent conflict incident and to answer the same questions asked of the sample scenario. Data from the interviews was transcribed and analysed using a concept analysis tool known as Leximancer (Smith 2005). Leximancer extracts the main concepts in an interviewee's response and illustrates them as concept headings on a "concept map" (See Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** A typical concept map (Smith, 2005)

A concept map shows: the main concepts discussed in the interviews; how they relate to each other; the relative frequency of each concept; how often concepts co-occur within the text; the centrality of each concept and; the similarity in contexts in which the concept occur – thematic groups. In Figure 1, darkness of concept points represents frequency, the size of concept points indicates “connectedness”, thematic groups are surrounded by circles, strength of association between concepts is represented by their proximity, by the brightness of links and a tornado sensitivity analysis graph.

The Leximancer analysis was complemented by a qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts, the aim being to understand the reasoning underlying a scenario response from the perspective of those being researched. The qualitative data was collected by taking the concept maps back to respondents and discussing any inconsistencies or similarities which have emerged by reference to customs, interactions and other contextual factors that give the qualitative evaluation much of its meaning.

## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

### Quantitative Analysis

Leximancer analysis of interview data from both male and female interviewee’s, resulted in the concept map in Figure 2. Figure 3 illustrates the most central themes.



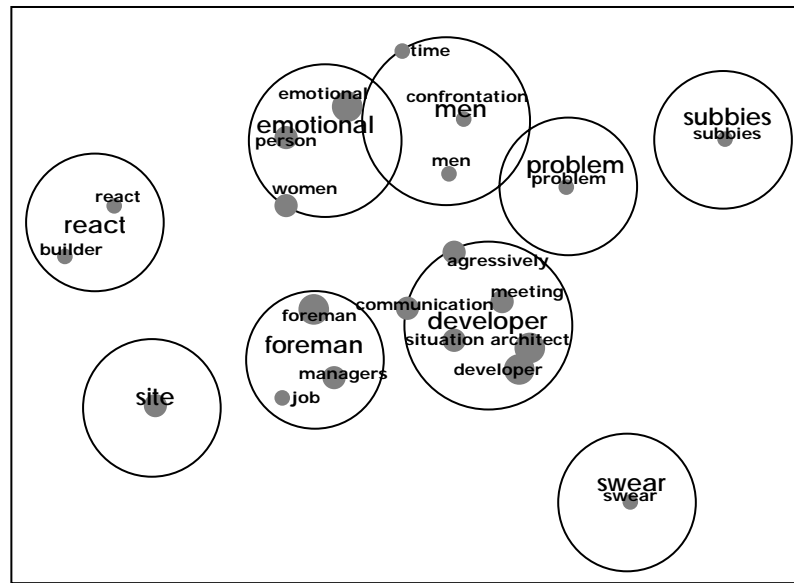


Figure 3: Female Interviewees' Concept Map

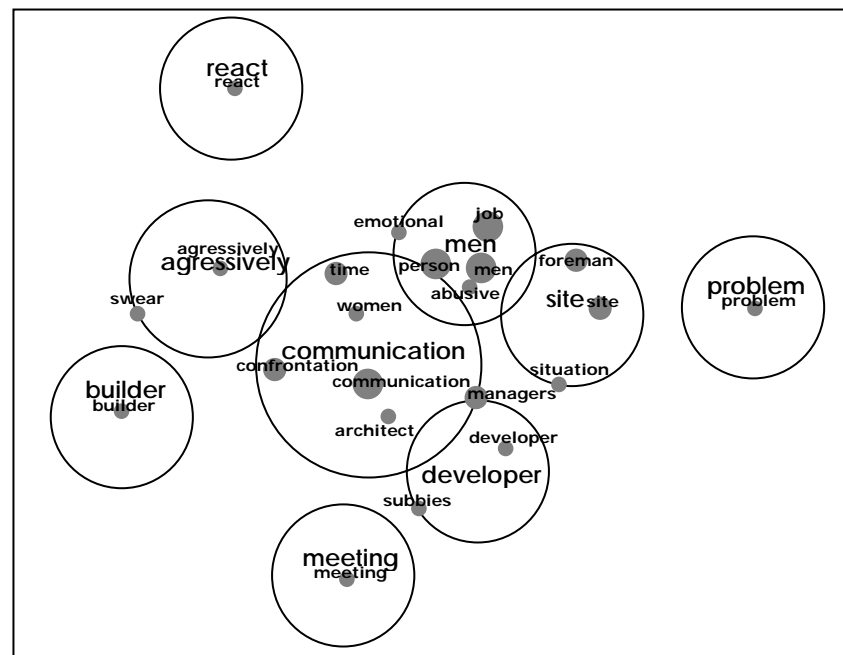


Figure 4: Male Interviewees' Concept Map

**Qualitative Analysis**

In introductory discussions, most respondents could easily recount a conflict incident. However, the manner in which male and female respondents responded to each conflict scenario differed markedly - males tending to meet aggressive behaviour head-on and using more blocking techniques and expletive language that may provoke conflict. In contrast, women tended to be more passive, willing to compromise and withdraw until emotions calmed down. This supports research by Byrne (2004) and De Klerk (2004) that men are more prone to aggression in a conflict, more willing to

engage in conflict, more forceful in pursuing their own agenda and less willing to compromise.

*“I don’t see a need in being aggressive with people, so I wouldn’t take it initially with someone but if they were doing it to me, I’d do it to them because I’m not going to take a backward step either...” - Site Worker – Male*

*“... I’d be more passive, I’d stay back and talk to them. I wouldn’t swear at them, I don’t normally yell at them, I don’t have to, generally I don’t have to. I can usually get on with them just by talking to them, treating them like people and you get that respect back....” - Site Management – Female*

The use of expletives was noted by most interviewees to be “the norm” and an acceptable way of expressing oneself on a construction site. This supports De Klerk’s (2004) link between the use of expletives in Western Society and connotations of strength, masculinity and confidence. All female interviewees had accepted this culture and adapted their communication style accordingly, supporting Byrne’s (2004) study which found females in a predominantly male environment, took on male communication styles.

*“I’ve been sworn at but it’s been like “go and fuckin’ do something about it” and I’ve answered them back because it seems the only language they understand. I’ve said “it’s not my fuckin’ job to do that, you go and do it”....” - Site Management - Female*

When male interviewees were asked how they would react if the other person in the conflict scenario was a female, the majority of male interviewees said they would be more conciliatory, suggesting that conflict communications are gender-sensitive and supporting Tannen’s (1998) findings.

*“....., I’d never be aggressive in talking to a girl and telling them to get lost. To a guy, the initial conflict, you’d like to assert your authority and say “come on mate”, if it was a lady, you’d try and talk a little differently...” - Site Worker – Male*

*“The problem would have arisen possibly in a different way. I can’t possibly imagine a woman treating or giving a man shit like this. They are far more consultative...” - Client Base – Male*

In terms of post-conflict relationships, our research supported the findings of Tannen (1994) and Eckert (1989) who argued that gender influences the relationship people have with each other - post conflict. In particular, that males often continue a relationship with a person after they have been in conflict with them or even strengthen it.

*“Yes, I’d go and have a beer with the guy, I mean, we have to do a job...” - Site Management - Male*

In contrast to our male respondents, our female respondents were more cautious saying that the post-conflict relationship would depend on how the pre-conflict relationship:

*“Depends on how things were before hand I guess. ...” - Site Management – Female*

## **CONCLUSION**

Our research indicates that communication in the industry is dominated by a male genderlect. Although the possibility of conflict in discourse is context dependent and not automatic, the common male genderlect increases the chances of escalation, especially in male-to-male interactions. Men-to-men conflict episodes are dominated by masculine values of confrontation followed by appeasement, whereas men-to-women and women-to-men conflicts tend to do the opposite. In male-female and female-female conflicts, our research indicates that the risk of escalation is reduced by the tendency of female presence to reduce levels of confrontation and aggression in interactions and, if necessary, be willing to withdraw from a discourse. It has also indicated that for men, the choice of words and tone used to communicate in a conflict episode can perpetuate a conflict, whereas women seem more able to disconnect themselves from the tone and nature of discourse and engage the underlying causes of a dispute more rapidly. Since the construction industry is predominantly a male workforce, our research suggests that the level of conflict in the industry would benefit from an increase of female participation.

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