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Conflict Between International Graduate Students and Faculty Supervisors: Toward Effective Conflict Prevention and Management Strategies

Shelley Rose Adrian-Taylor
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Recent research indicates that destructive conflict occurs in a significant number of international graduate student and faculty supervisor relationships. Unfortunately, a paucity of research exists to inform the effective management or prevention of this problem. To address this lacunae, international graduate students (n = 55) and faculty supervisors (n = 53) completed a survey that assessed their needs for managing and preventing destructive conflict with each other. Results indicate that 22% of international graduate students and 34% of faculty supervisors have experienced student-supervisor conflict. Some of the sources of these conflicts were lack of openness, time, and feedback; unclear expectations; and poor English proficiency. Several common needs for managing conflict were found, including a preference to use negotiation rather than more confrontational procedures such as arbitration. Recommendations regarding the management and prevention of international graduate student and faculty supervisor conflict are provided.

Keywords: *international students; graduate students; graduate supervision; conflict; faculty members*

Many international students (also termed “foreign students” or “overseas students”) leave their families, friends, and countries to attend universities and colleges abroad. The world’s largest providers of education for international students include the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, France, Ger-

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many, and Canada; estimates of international students range from approximately 3% in the United States to 18% in Australia (Marginson, 2002). At the graduate level, the figures are even more striking. In the United States, 44.6% of international students are graduate students, such that international students comprise 13.5% of the total number of graduate students in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2001a, 2001b; National Center for Education Statistics, 2001). Comparable figures for international graduate students can be noted in both Canada and Australia. In Canada, 35.0% of international students are undertaking graduate-level studies, making up 12.3% of all graduate students enrolled in Canadian institutions (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2002; Statistics Canada, 2002). Australia boasts an even higher number of international graduate students. The percentage of international students in Australia who are registered as graduate students is 30.5%, such that international students account for 20.4% of all graduate students in Australia (Commonwealth Department of Education Science and Training, 2000). In fact, it has been argued that some universities' physical science programs, such as engineering, would be difficult to sustain without international-student enrollment (Sefa Dei, 1993). Moreover, in countries such as Australia, foreign students are crucial to the resource base of many higher education institutions (Marginson, 2002).

When an international student has a positive experience abroad, he or she, host country nationals (i.e., domestic students, faculty members, staff, and community members), the educational institute, and the country stand to reap the benefits. Not only does the international student acquire an education abroad but both the student and the host country nationals benefit from the enriched learning and social environment that results from intercultural interaction. The educational institute also gains financially because of increased enrollment, and the host country gains increased international exposure and strengthened long-term commercial, trade, and diplomatic linkages with other countries (Cunningham, 1991; Prieto, 1995). Because there is much to be gained when international students have a positive educational experience (and so much to be lost when the experience is negative), it is important that every attempt be made to ensure that these students' academic and nonacademic experiences while overseas are satisfactory. To this end, cross-cultural researchers and practitioners have put considerable effort toward identifying factors that promote international students' academic success and satisfaction while studying abroad.

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Social interaction has been linked with a successful and satisfying sojourn. Specifically, the number and quality of relationships an international student has with host country nationals is positively related to his or her adjustment and satisfaction with his or her sojourn (Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Pruitt, 1978; Schram & Lauver, 1988). Although contact with and support from peers, members of the host community, and faculty members have been studied, contact with and support from the latter is particularly important for international graduate students' academic success. For graduate students in general, faculty supervisors provide support, direction, information about role expectations, and feedback regarding performance (Goplerud, 1980). Students who have a good relationship with their supervisors are more likely to experience low stress levels, minimal psychological and physical problems, and overall satisfaction with graduate school (Goplerud, 1980).

Faculty Supervisors and the International Graduate Student Sojourn

Although faculty supervisors are important to all graduate students, they may be "the central figure in the lives of these [international graduate] students" (Charles & Stewart, 1991, p. 174) as international graduate students tend to have fewer social supports to help them cope with the many challenges they face while studying abroad. Research suggests that whereas host national students seek faculty supervisors' help for academic/vocational problems and friends' help for emotional/personal problems, international graduate students tend to prefer help from a faculty supervisor for both types of problems (Leong & Sedlacek, 1986). As well, high-quality relationships with faculty members, and faculty members' interest in students' professional development have been found to provide "a strong protective function against the development of depression in international students undergoing stress" (Mallinckrodt & Leung, 1992, p. 76). Given the fact that international graduate students are willing to seek help from faculty supervisors and that such help can have a profound influence, the quality of the relationship is clearly very important.

Not all student-supervisor relationships are positive, however, and even good relationships can go through difficult periods. Although a great deal of research focuses on the needs and problems of international students at a general level (Church, 1982; Cunningham, 1991; Das, Chow, & Rutherford, 1986; Day & Hajj, 1986; Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Klineberg & Hull, 1979; Pedersen, 1991; see Prieto, 1995 for a review of past needs assessments involving international students), few studies explore issues specifically relevant to the international graduate student and faculty supervisor relationship. Research that does

explore this relationship indicates that some international graduate students experience conflict with faculty supervisors (Agyirey-Kwakye & Abaidoo, 1995; Blunt & Li, 1998; Chiste, 1997). Agyirey-Kwakye and Abaidoo (1995) found that 12% of the international graduate students they surveyed ($n = 75$) described their relationship with their supervisor as either “bad” or “very bad.” Selvadurai (1991) reported that 25% of international graduate students have a rapport with faculty members that is unsatisfactory, whereas others reported “academic advising”¹ to be a problem for one half of international students (Perkins, Perkins, Guglielmino, & Reiff, 1977). Only one study (Blunt & Li, 1998) was found that included both faculty supervisor and student perspectives.

For the purposes of the current research, conflict is defined as “[real and/or perceived] incompatibility of goals or values between two or more parties in a relationship, combined with attempts to control each other and antagonistic feelings toward each other” (Fisher, 1985, p. 1). Chiste’s (1997) research identified sources of difficulty between graduate students and supervisors, including lack of information, lack of feedback or useful feedback, lack of time, excessive control on the part of a supervisor, discrimination or unfair treatment based on cultural background, lack of openness or honesty, and gender-based discrimination. Research on international graduate students and faculty supervisors pinpointed several other sources of conflict. For example, different expectations about how close and personal the student-supervisor relationship should be often exist between Chinese graduate students and supervisors because, in China, students and supervisors often have very close relationships (Blunt & Li, 1998). Different expectations about what the responsibilities of a graduate student and a supervisor are, lack of respect, poor oral and/or written English skills (Blunt & Li, 1998) and lack of feedback or useful feedback (Agyirey-Kwakye & Abaidoo, 1995) were also identified as sources of conflict between international graduate student and supervisors.

Fox (1992, 1996) described how different values regarding which skills are important to develop in university can lead to conflict between international graduate students and supervisors. For example, although Western universities value problem-solving and analytical or critical-thinking skills, East Asian education systems value tradition, history, and authority. As a result, many international students have been taught to replicate esteemed authorities’ work, rather than analyze or critique it. Different beliefs about appropriate styles of writing can also create difficulty (Fox, 1992, 1996). Fox (1992) explained that the analytical, direct, logically connected style of writing valued in Western universities is considered by some East Asian students as “‘rude’ or ‘childish’ or ‘insulting to the intelligence’ of the audience” (p. 5). These same students described a roundabout writing style as “elegant, sophisticated, polite, kind, and, above all, interesting” (p. 5).

Given the number of issues that have been identified as sources of conflict between international graduate students and faculty supervisors, a pertinent question is: How can conflict based on such issues be resolved, managed, or even prevented? Although a great deal of research exists regarding conflict management in the primary and secondary education systems (Burrell & Vogl, 1990; Johnson, Johnson, Dudley, & Magnuson, 1995; Lupton-Smith, Carruthers, Flythe, & Goettee, 1996; Thompson, 1996) and management of student-student, faculty-faculty, faculty-staff conflict in university settings (for a review, see Warters, 1995), virtually no published research was found regarding the prevention or management of international graduate student and faculty supervisor conflict. Because of the gap in our current knowledge of how international graduate student-supervisor conflict should be managed and the negative impact it can have, the present study explores the frequency of interpersonal conflict between international graduate students and faculty supervisors, their understanding and experience of conflict, and their needs for managing and preventing it.

Conflict Prevention and Management in the International Graduate Student and Faculty Supervisor Relationship

One goal of this study is to provide information regarding international graduate students and faculty supervisors' needs for preventing and managing destructive conflict. Many scholars argue that conflict itself is not inherently good or bad (Fillee, 1975; Rahim, 1992; Rubin, Pruitt, & Kim, 1994). It is described as a natural and unavoidable aspect of human interaction (Brown, 1983; Tjosvold, 1989). Rather, it is the manner in which conflict is dealt with that renders the outcomes positive or negative. In fact, many theorists suggest that if handled properly, conflict can be a positive force (Brown, 1983; Rahim, 1992; Rubin et al., 1994). Consequently, a great deal of emphasis is placed on identifying how conflict can be effectively managed, resolved, or in the case of destructive conflict, prevented. Discussions of conflict management can be focused on individual styles of conflict management (e.g., compromise, avoidance, accommodation, competition, and collaboration) or on interpersonal procedures for managing conflict (e.g., negotiation, third-party consultation, traditional mediation, and arbitration). In keeping with the interpersonal level of analysis, the current research focuses on procedures for managing conflict.

Conflict-Management Procedures

In Western society, diverse nonlegal procedures are available for resolving conflict in a variety of settings including negotiation, traditional mediation,

arbitration, and third-party consultation. The most informal procedure, negotiation, involves bargaining and “deal making” among disputants without the assistance of a third party. Because of the complexity and escalatory nature of conflict, however, disputants are often unable to manage the conflict themselves or through their representatives. In this situation, the intervention of a third party becomes appropriate.

Traditional mediation (i.e., settlement or pure mediation) involves the intervention of a third party who has knowledge of the objective or substantive issues and is able to facilitate a negotiated settlement to the dispute (Fisher & Keashly, 1988; Keashly & Fisher, 1996). Individual and joint meetings are typically used to reach the primary objective, which is settlement on a set of specific substantive issues (Keashly & Fisher, 1996). The mediator does not decide the outcome but uses reasoning, persuasion, control of information, and the suggestion of alternatives to help the parties reach a settlement (Keashly & Fisher, 1996).

Arbitration, another form of third-party intervention, differs from mediation in that the arbitrator is an authoritative third party who, unlike a mediator, has control over the outcome of the dispute (Lewicki, Weiss, & Lewin, 1992). During arbitration, parties present their side of the conflict in the form and manner of their choice. Based on this presentation of information, the arbitrator renders a decision that is binding (Lewicki et al., 1992).

In contrast to mediation and arbitration, third-party consultation takes a “more subjective emphasis, focusing on the *basic relationship* between the parties, their communication, feelings, attitudes, and perceptions of each other and the conflict” (Fisher & Keashly, 1988, p. 381). The consultant’s role is to work with the parties to improve communication, diagnose the relationship issues underlying the conflict, and facilitate creative problem solving (Keashly & Fisher, 1996). Consequently, the expertise required of a third-party consultant includes knowledge of theories of conflict and social relationships and the ability to diagnose conflict and share feelings and perceptions (Fisher & Keashly, 1988). The primary goal, to improve the relationship, is based on the philosophy that true resolution of substantive issues can only occur once the relationship issues between the parties have been addressed. If a substantive issue is resolved, but the relationship between disputants remains troubled and strained, future episodes of destructive conflict are likely.

These four conflict-management/resolution procedures can be described as varying along at least two dimensions. One dimension is the degree of third-party influence over the final decision, with negotiation involving the least influence, followed by third-party facilitation, mediation, and arbitration, respectively. Another dimension is the amount of emphasis on restoring/building relationships, with arbitration involving no such emphasis and third-party facilitation

placing the greatest emphasis on relationships. The relative placement of traditional mediation and negotiation along this continuum is less consistent because the emphasis placed on relationships by disputants who are negotiating is variable. Because traditional mediation does not typically emphasize relationship building, it would likely follow arbitration on a continuum from least to most emphasis on relationships.

In the case of student-supervisor conflict, it is unclear which, if any, of these approaches would be considered most useful by international graduate students and faculty supervisors. Consequently, the assessment of international graduate students and faculty supervisors' needs for managing conflict is used to explore how well students' and faculty supervisors' needs can be met by each of these procedures.

Objectives of the Present Study

The present study explores the frequency of interpersonal conflict between international graduate students and faculty supervisors, their understanding and experience of conflict, and their needs for managing and preventing it. The questions included in the questionnaires were determined by (a) issues identified in the literature as sources of conflict and (b) issues and ideas that emerge from preliminary interviews with international graduate students, supervisors, and service providers who have experience with such conflict. In addition, as Avruch and Black (1991, 1993) pointed out, it is inappropriate to assume that a Western approach for managing conflict can be applied across cultures. Avruch and Black (1993) advised that prior to providing any type of conflict intervention, it is vital to pay attention to the disputants' respective ethnotheories (the notions of the root causes of conflict) and ethnopraxes (the local acceptable techniques for resolving conflicts) as these may differ in significant ways. Based on issues raised by Avruch and Black (1991, 1993) and Salem (1993), questions about ethnotheory and ethnopraxes were also asked in an open-ended manner that allowed for a comparison of student and faculty supervisor responses. Moreover, the present study attempts to improve on some of the weaknesses identified in previous studies by eliciting detailed responses from both international graduate students and faculty supervisors.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 55 international graduate students participated in the study, of which 29.6% were females. The mean age was 29.80 years ($SD = 5.72$). Master's students comprised 66.7% of the sample, and 31.5% were PhD students, distributed primarily across the arts and sciences (41%), engineering (33%), agriculture (11%), and medical science faculties (15%). The largest groups originated from the People's Republic of China (32.1%), India (19.6%), and Iran (5.4%), whereas the rest originated from 15 other countries. A comparison of the demographics of the sample with information available from the registrar's office indicated a close parallel with the demographics of the international graduate student population in terms of gender, type of program, and country of origin, with the exception that there were proportionately fewer students from Iran in the sample than in the population. This finding may be related to the declining enrollments of students from the Middle East in recent years.

Fifty-three faculty supervisors participated in the study, of which 11.3% were females. The mean age was 48.46 years ($SD = 8.89$). Most originated from Canada (79.2%). They were distributed primarily across the faculties of arts and sciences (28%), engineering (23%), agriculture, (30%) and medical sciences (17.3%).

Materials

Experience of conflict. Participants were asked whether they personally had experienced difficulties in a supervisor-student relationship. Respondents who had experienced conflict were asked to provide additional information about whether the conflict had been resolved, and how or what prevented it from being resolved. Information was also collected about how long the conflict lasted (open-ended question) and how serious it was perceived to be (on a 5-point scale in which 5 = *an extremely serious conflict*).

Sources of conflict. This section examined respondents' ethnotheories, or beliefs, about what caused the conflict they experienced. The 28 response categories were based on issues identified in the literature as well as preliminary interviews with students and faculty supervisors and service providers that identified likely sources of conflict between international graduate students and faculty supervisors. These included difficulties related to information access; communication; teaching/learning methods; behavior; power; expectations, values, and beliefs; and resources. Parti-

pants indicated whether each item had been a difficulty with their supervisor (or former supervisor). They checked as many items as applied to them.

Resources for managing conflict. Participants were asked to whom they would speak should they experience difficulty with their supervisor or graduate student. A list of 12 possible people was presented. If they indicated that they would not speak to that person or were unsure about whether they would speak to that person, they were asked to indicate why.

Needs for managing difficulties/conflict. Ten questions evaluated whether conflict resolution services are needed, what third-party characteristics are important, and who would be a good person to help manage student-supervisor difficulties. Another question measured the respondents' willingness to use a fifth process, an ombudsman service. All questions were answered on a 5-point scale in which 5 represented the strongest endorsement of the item.

Needs for conflict prevention services and policies. Ten questions assessed needs for conflict prevention services and policies, including various educational sessions, formal written statements of expectations, roles of the student advisory committees, and so on. The list of ideas for services and policies included in the questionnaire was derived from interviews with international graduate student and faculty supervisors. An additional question was used to elicit information about willingness to attend a conflict-management workshop. All of the questions were answered on a 5-point scale in which 5 represented the strongest endorsement of the item.

Procedural preference. Respondents were given a short scenario of a conflict between a graduate student and his or her thesis project supervisor and descriptions of four possible methods for managing the conflict (negotiation, third-party consultation, traditional mediation, and arbitration; see the appendix). Descriptions of the method were written generically, including generic labels, and their order was counterbalanced.

After imagining that they were the student in the story, participants were asked to rate how willing they would be to use each method to resolve the conflict they had just read about on a 7-point continuum from 1 (*strongly unwilling*) to 7 (*strongly willing*). The respondents were told to keep in mind the conflict scenario while answering these questions and not to focus on personal experiences with a supervisor.

Background information. The last section of the questionnaire asked students and faculty supervisors for demographic information that is needed to make comparisons across gender, age, immigrant status, country of citizenship, department, college, and student/supervisor's ethnic background and gender. Students were also asked to provide the year of study and type of program, and faculty supervisors were also

asked to provide information about their rank, how long they have been supervising international graduate students, and the number of international graduate students they have supervised.

Procedure

Faculty supervisors were sent an introductory letter, along with a copy of the Faculty Supervisor Questionnaire. They were asked to complete and return this questionnaire using a preaddressed return envelope included in the questionnaire package.

Graduate students received an introductory letter explaining the study and asking the students to indicate whether and when they would like to participate. Volunteers were asked to come to a designated room on the date and time they selected. Participants were given an honorarium of Can\$10.00.

RESULTS

Three sets of analyses were performed on the questionnaire data. Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, and percentages) were used to summarize and analyze demographic information. Chi-square tests and *t* tests were used to identify significant group differences in nominal and interval data, respectively. Repeated measures ANOVAs were used for analysis of within- and between-group differences, followed up by post hoc Tukey comparisons.

Experience of Conflict

International graduate students and faculty supervisors were asked the question "Have you ever experienced difficulty with a faculty supervisor/international graduate student while attending/teaching at the [university]?" Responses to these questions and questions about whether the conflict was resolved are presented in Table 1. A higher percentage of faculty supervisors reported experiencing conflict, and a much higher percentage of the same also reported that the conflict had been resolved. Although both groups described the conflict as lasting a similar length of time (international graduate students $M = 1.16$ years; faculty supervisors $M = 1.08$ years), the international graduate students described the conflict as more severe than did the faculty supervisors (international graduate students $M = 3.40$ $SD = 0.84$; faculty supervisors $M = 2.87$, $SD = 0.83$).

Of the 18 international graduate students and faculty supervisors who reported a resolution, 8 (44%) said that the conflict was resolved through careful discussion, 5 (28%) by the student quitting, and 3 (17%) by the student changing to a new supervisor. Although no themes emerged from the data to explain why

Table 1 Experience of Conflict by Group

	International Graduate Student		Faculty Supervisor	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Have experienced conflict	12	22.2	18	34.0
Have not experienced conflict	41	75.9	33	62.3
No response	1	1.9	2	3.7
Was resolved	25	46.2	38	72.2
Was not resolved	16	30.6	6	11.1
No response	13	23.2	9	16.7

some conflicts were not resolved, examples of responses include, “My problems with my supervisor are a consequence of the departments’ philosophies, and I can’t go against the system already established” and “I am hoping it will get better on its own (naive, I know!). I dread having to deal with it and keep putting it off.”

Although a sizeable number of international graduate students and faculty supervisors have experienced conflict, it is important to recognize that the majority of international graduate students and faculty supervisors do not report conflict with their supervisors or students, respectively. For example, one student said, “My supervisor has been excellent,” whereas another student said that he had been here for 9 years without any problems. One faculty supervisor said that he had “no problems with foreign students. I found them very hardworking and intellectual in producing the research.”

Sources of Conflict

Frequency tables were examined to determine the 10 most common sources of conflict reported by international graduate students and faculty supervisors (see Table 2). International graduate students reported the following sources of conflict significantly more often than did faculty supervisors: lack of feedback, lack of support or guidance from supervisor, different expectations about how close/personal the student-supervisor relationship should be, and disrespect from the supervisor. Faculty supervisors reported the following sources more frequently than did international graduate students: student cannot write, understand, and speak English adequately; student does not have adequate research skills; and student is too dependent on the supervisor. Chi-square analyses revealed no significant differences between the groups on lack of openness (student is unwilling to disagree with or confront supervisor because he or she is afraid of the supervisor’s power to make things worse for him or her), lack of

Table 2 Ten Most Common Sources of Conflict Reported by International Graduate Students and Faculty Supervisors

Sources of Conflict	International Graduate Students			Faculty Supervisors			χ^2
	Rank	<i>n</i>	%	Rank	<i>n</i>	%	
Lack of openness	1	18	32.0	9	10	18.9	2.03
Supervisor doesn't have enough time	2	16	29.1	10	9	17	1.60
Different expectations re: responsibilities of student and supervisor	3	15	27.3	8	12	22.6	0.11
Lack of feedback from supervisor	4	14	25.5	—	2	3.8	8.41**
Lack of support or guidance from supervisor	5	13	23.6	—	1	1.9	9.47**
Lack of communication	6	12	21.8	—	4	7.5	3.30
Different expectations re: closeness (personal) of relationship	7	11	20.0	—	3	5.7	3.73*
Different values re: important skills to develop in graduate training	8	11	20.0	7	12	22.6	0.01
Unclear conversation	9	11	20.0	6	15	28.3	0.61
Supervisor is disrespectful of student	10	9	16.4	—	0	0.0	9.46**
Student cannot write English adequately	—	5	9.1	1	28	52.8	22.32***
Student does not have adequate research skills	—	5	9.1	2	22	41.5	13.45***
Student cannot understand English adequately	—	4	7.3	3	20	37.7	12.78***
Student is too dependent on supervisor	—	3	5.5	4	17	32.1	10.97***
Student cannot speak English fluently	—	7	12.7	5	16	30.2	3.92*

Note: $df = 1$, $N = 108$; Yates's continuity correction is reported.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

time given by the supervisor, different expectations regarding responsibilities of student and supervisor,² lack of communication, different values about what skills are important to develop in graduate training, and unclear conversation.

Table 2 also displays the rank order of the reported top 10 sources of conflict. In the international graduate student group, lack of openness, lack of time, different expectations regarding the responsibilities of students and supervisors

Table 3 Percentage of International Graduate Students and Faculty Supervisors Willing to Talk About Conflict With Others

International Graduate Students Will Talk to . . .			Faculty Supervisors Will Talk to . . .		
	%	<i>n</i>		%	<i>n</i>
Supervisor	83.3	54	Student	98.1	52
Family members	72.7	54	Graduate chair	90.2	51
Other international students	61.8	54	Department head	82.0	50
Graduate program chair	47.2	53	Colleagues within department	75.5	48
International student advisor	46.3	54	International student advisor	40.8	49
Canadian students	43.6	54	Dean of the CGSR	34.0	50
Department head	42.6	54	Colleagues out of department	26.4	46
Counselor	30.0	54			
Dean of the CGSR	24.1	54			
Graduate Students Association	18.2	54			
Doctor	12.7	54			

Note: CGSR = College of Graduate Studies and Research.

and lack of feedback were the most frequently mentioned sources of conflict. Within the faculty supervisor group, poor English proficiency and inadequate research skills were the most commonly mentioned sources of conflict.

Resources for Managing Conflict: To Whom Will International Graduate Students and Faculty Supervisors Talk About Their Experience of Conflict?

A list of people that international graduate students and faculty supervisors are willing to talk to about their experience of conflict, from the most to least likely person, is presented in Table 3. International graduate students and faculty supervisors are most likely to talk about the conflict with their supervisor or student, respectively. Following talking to their supervisor, international graduate students are most likely to talk to family members or other international students. Fewer than half of international graduate students are willing to talk to individuals within the university setting, with the graduate program chair being their most likely choice and the Graduate Student Association their least likely choice. It should be noted that services designed especially for students, the International Student Advisor's Office and the Graduate Student Association, are not used by the majority of international graduate students. In contrast, the majority of faculty supervisors are willing to talk to members of the administration, with the graduate program chair being the most popular choice, followed by the department head and colleagues within the department. Fewer than half of

Table 4 Reasons Why International Graduate Students Are Unwilling to Talk With Others

Unwilling to Talk to . . .	Reason	n	(%)
Graduate program chair	Afraid something negative might happen	8	(15)
International student advisor	Don't think it would help	9	(17)
	Don't know well enough	8	(15)
Canadian students	Don't know well enough	10	(19)
	Don't think it would help	8	(15)
Department head	Don't know well enough	10	(19)
	Afraid something negative might happen	8	(15)
Counselor	Don't think it would help	12	(22)
	Don't know well enough	9	(18)
Dean of CGSR	Don't know well enough	14	(26)
	Afraid something negative might happen	9	(18)
Grad Student Association	Don't know well enough	17	(31)
Doctor	Not appropriate	11	(20)

Note: CGSR = College of Graduate Studies and Research.

faculty supervisors are willing to talk with the international student advisor or the dean of the College of Graduate Studies and Research (CGSR).

After indicating an unwillingness to talk to an individual, the respondents were asked for further explanation. Table 4 includes the individuals or associations that the majority of international graduate students are unwilling to talk to and common explanations for this unwillingness. As seen in Table 4, "don't know him/her well enough" was the most common reason given for underutilization of potential sources of student support, followed by "don't think it would help" and "I am afraid something negative might happen." The majority of faculty supervisors are unwilling to talk to the international student advisor ($n = 9$; 18%) and the dean of the CGSR ($n = 10$; 20%) because they do not think it would help. Several faculty supervisors also report feeling uncomfortable talking to the dean about conflict ($n = 6$; 12%). They reported that their unwillingness to talk to colleagues outside of their department is because of their feeling that it is inappropriate to do so ($n = 9$; 20%).

Needs for Managing Difficulties/Conflict

Students and supervisors were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a list of ideas about types of conflict-management services (CMS) and policies that may be useful (see Table 5). Some of the needs expressed by international graduate students and faculty supervisors are similar. Both international graduate students and faculty supervisors feel that a conflict-

management service should involve face-to-face interaction and the help of a third person who is nonjudgmental, who will offer solutions, and who has conflict-management training. The groups differed, however, in other respects. For instance, compared to faculty supervisors, international graduate students rated the need for additional conflict-management services higher than did faculty supervisors. Furthermore, international graduate students thought that it was more important that the third party be knowledgeable about the research area, have power to enforce change, and be nonjudgmental than do faculty supervisors.

Through the use of open-ended questions, information was collected regarding additional, important third-party characteristics and suggestions for who would be a good third party. Three additional areas were identified as being important: (a) positive personality traits (e.g., honest, kind, friendly, helpful, empathic, etc.; $n = 32$; 60%); (b) knowledge, skills, and experience regarding supervising and institutional practices ($n = 11$; 21%); and (c) experience with international graduate students and cultural awareness ($n = 8$; 15%). The most common suggestions for a third person were the department head ($n = 9$; 20%), graduate program chair ($n = 8$; 18%), international student advisor ($n = 8$; 18%), committee members ($n = 5$; 11%), and professors within the department ($n = 5$; 11%).

Needs for Preventing Conflict

To gain insight into students' and supervisors' needs for preventing conflict, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a list of ideas for conflict-prevention services and policies (see Table 6). Although some of the international graduate students' needs were similar to the needs of faculty supervisors, others were different. Faculty supervisors and international graduate students both agreed that more information should be provided about the sources of conflict and that it would not be useful to have a qualifying year for international graduate students or to make more rules regarding who should be an international graduate student supervisor. International graduate students differed from faculty supervisors in their willingness to attend a conflict-management workshop. Furthermore, international graduate students rated conflict-management workshops and diversity training as being significantly more useful than did faculty supervisors. The student group also rated the following prevention ideas as significantly more useful than did the faculty group: (a) Summaries of faculty supervisors' performance should be made public information, (b) advisory committees should be given more responsibilities for responding to student-supervisor conflict, and (c) written expectations regarding student performance should be sent to international graduate students

Table 5 Mean Ratings and t Values About International Graduate Students and Faculty Supervisors' Needs for Managing Conflict

Areas of Need	Grand Mean	International Graduate Student (n = 50)		Faculty Supervisor (n = 44)		df	t	
		M	SD	M	SD			
		A conflict-management service should involve:						
Face-to-face interaction	4.12	0.98	4.07	1.07	4.17	0.87	99	-0.49
The help of a third person	3.65	1.01	3.51	1.12	3.82	0.86	102	-1.58
A third person should:								
Not judge one person over the other	4.29	0.93	4.48	0.91	4.07	0.91	103	2.27*
Provide solutions	4.26	0.64	4.28	0.69	4.23	0.59	102	0.38
Have conflict-management training	3.96	0.98	4.09	0.95	3.82	1.01	102	1.41
Know the student's research area	3.40	1.25	3.80	1.25	2.96	1.11	104	3.64*
Have power to enforce an agreement	3.07	1.21	3.35	1.32	2.76	1.01	98	2.59*
Be outside the department	3.02	1.19	3.01	1.26	3.02	1.12	101	-0.01
Be outside the college	2.58	1.01	2.67	1.16	2.48	0.84	101	1.00
More conflict-management services are needed	3.05	1.05	3.30	1.09	2.78	0.93	101	2.58*

Note: A high score indicates strong agreement with the item.

*p < .05.

Table 6 Mean Ratings and t Values for Conflict Prevention Needs

Conflict Prevention	Grand Mean	International Graduate Student (n = 50)		Faculty Supervisor (n = 44)		df	t	
		M	SD	M	SD			
It would be useful to:								
Give international graduate students and faculty supervisors more information about what sources of conflict tend to be	4.06	0.90	4.31	0.69	3.78	1.03	104	3.07**
Have diversity training for faculty members	3.80	1.12	4.29	0.81	3.27	1.17	101	5.17***
Have conflict-management training for . . .								
faculty members	3.72	0.99	4.03	0.84	3.37	1.04	104	3.60***
students	3.65	1.10	4.03	0.88	3.23	1.18	104	3.94***
new faculty members	3.64	1.11	3.98	0.85	3.26	1.24	103	3.50***
Give advisory committees more responsibility for responding to difficulties	3.58	0.92	3.69	0.84	3.46	0.99	103	1.29
Be willing to attend a conflict-management workshop	3.56	1.11	3.89	0.99	3.17	1.12	97	3.35**
Have supervisors' written expectations sent to incoming students before they move to Canada	3.29	1.23	3.70	1.06	2.84	1.26	103	3.80***
Make summaries of faculty supervisors' performance public information	3.14	1.14	3.50	1.06	2.76	1.12	103	3.48***
Have qualifying year for international graduate students	2.48	1.25	2.37	1.31	2.59	1.19	103	-.89
Make more rules regarding who supervises international graduate students	2.70	1.18	2.93	1.18	2.47	1.16	103	2.00*

Note: A high score indicates strong agreement with the item.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 7 Procedural Preference by Group

Conflict-Management Procedures	International Graduate Student (n = 50)		Faculty Supervisor (n = 44)	
	M	SD	M	SD
Negotiation	5.29 _a	1.91	6.41 _b	0.92
Third-party facilitation	5.00 _a	1.90	5.59 _a	1.28
Mediation	4.39 _a	1.71	5.00 _a	1.54
Arbitration	3.08 _a	1.93	2.61 _a	1.74
Ombudsman	5.36 _a	1.52	3.95 _b	1.90

Note: A high score indicates strong willingness to use the procedure. Means in the same row that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .01$ in the Tukey honestly significant difference comparison.

before they move to Canada. Finally, although both groups felt that it would be useful to provide more information about the sources of conflict, international graduate students rated this idea as significantly more useful than did faculty supervisors.

Procedural Preference

A 2 (group: international graduate student, faculty supervisor) \times 5 (procedure: negotiation, third-party facilitation, mediation, arbitration and ombudsman) repeated-measures ANOVA was computed to determine how willing international graduate students and faculty supervisors would be to use five conflict-management procedures. A within-subjects main effect was found for procedure ($F[4, 478] = 45.93, p < .001$). A significant interaction, (Procedure \times Group) was also found ($F[4, 97] = 9.28, p < .001$). The mean scores for willingness to use each procedure are presented in Table 7.

The results of posthoc analyses indicate that in the international graduate student group, the mean rating for arbitration is significantly lower than that for the remaining four procedures. In addition, both an ombudsman service and negotiation were rated significantly higher than mediation. In the faculty supervisor group, arbitration was rated significantly lower than any other procedure. An ombudsman service was rated significantly lower than negotiation, third-party facilitation, and mediation. Negotiation was rated significantly higher than mediation. No other significant differences were found within each group. Comparisons across the two groups revealed that procedural preference varies as a function of group for two procedures—namely, negotiation and an ombudsman service. International graduate students rated an ombudsman service significantly higher than did faculty supervisors ($q[2, 451] = 5.77, p < .01$), and faculty

supervisors rated negotiation significantly higher than did international graduate students ($q[2, 451] = 4.54, p < .01$; see Table 7).

DISCUSSION

The objective of the present investigation was to understand the frequency and sources of conflicts experienced by international graduate students and faculty supervisors as well as the duration and perceived seriousness of these conflicts. Resolution of the conflicts and possible manners of preventing and/or managing future conflicts were also explored. In the following section, we discuss the results pertaining to each of these objectives, and provide suggestions for future practice and research in the area of international graduate student and faculty conflict prevention and management.

The Nature of International Graduate Student/ Faculty Supervisor Conflict

Although no direct comparison of the frequency of conflict between international graduate students and faculty supervisors can be made, it is noteworthy that 34% of faculty supervisors and 22% of international graduate students in the current study reported experiencing conflict in their relationship. This percentage for international graduate students is consistent with reports of unsatisfactory relationships found in previous research (Agyirey-Kwakye & Abaidoo, 1995; Chiste, 1997; Selvadurai, 1991).³ On average, the conflicts lasted just more than a year and were perceived to be fairly serious.⁴ This substantial level of reported difficulty, which is consistent with previous research, indicates that conflict is an important issue to be addressed in graduate education.

International graduate students and faculty supervisors agreed on one third of the sources of conflict. It is noteworthy that the sources of conflict most frequently named by the international graduate students, including a lack of openness, lack of time, and different expectations regarding responsibilities, were reported just as frequently by the faculty supervisors. It seems that two of these sources, lack of openness and different expectations regarding responsibilities, could be addressed through open discussion and perhaps contracting responsibilities at the outset of the relationship.

Of all the sources of conflict that were not agreed on, three are key. According to faculty supervisors "poor English proficiency" (both oral and written) and inadequate research skills were the most common sources of conflict. In contrast, a significantly smaller percentage of international graduate students considered these to be sources of conflict. Furthermore, although several interna-

tional graduate students considered “lack of feedback” to be a source of conflict, relatively few faculty supervisors felt the same.

What might explain these key differences? With regards to English proficiency and research skills, at least four explanations seem plausible. First, perhaps in some cases, international graduate students’ English and research skills may not be at the level they need to be at for a successful experience in graduate school. If this is the case, then the recruitment process needs to be improved so that students’ abilities and potential to develop necessary skills is more accurately measured. Also, international graduate students must recognize that an acceptable TOEFL score is not the only indicator of readiness or capability of having successful experiences using English in graduate school. Other indicators, such as the degree and frequency of (mis)understanding when using the English language need to be considered when assessing English abilities. Frequent uncertainty or confusion during interactions with English speakers may indicate a need for additional English training.

Second, some faculty supervisors may measure international graduate students’ abilities by the same standards applied to students who speak English as a first language. It seems important to recognize that some differences can be expected between students who do and do not speak English as a first language. In terms of practice, perhaps English conversation circles and/or written English assignments are necessary to help increase proficiency. Furthermore, when assessing international graduate students’ writing ability, it is important for faculty supervisors to explore where the problem exists. Does “poor” writing reflect cultural differences regarding appropriate content and writing style? Does the student understand what is expected of him or her and are these expectations reasonable? Exploration of these types of questions may allow for greater appreciation of the complexities of the English proficiency/communication issue.

A third possibility is that the wording of the sources was too strong and pulled for more responses from one group than another. A fourth explanation may be a self-serving attribution bias (Bernstein, Stephan, & Davis, 1979), whereby one’s failures are attributed externally to protect one’s self-esteem. This explanation is plausible because most of the top sources of conflict named by both supervisors and students pointed to an external source (which was usually the other person).

If the self-serving attribution bias is at play, then an important question for conflict-management practitioners is, can this bias be minimized? If the mentality “It is okay to make mistakes as long as you recognize them and then learn from them” were promoted more often, could the self-serving attribution bias be minimized? Also, could acknowledging a mistake (without punishment) and then making positive behavioral changes in fact enhance one’s self-esteem? If

both parties took some responsibility when things go wrong, it would go a long way toward resolving conflict before it became destructive.

Although a very small number of studies on the topic of international graduate student and faculty supervisor conflict were found, the results of several of these previous studies were replicated here. The sources of conflict identified both in previous research and the current study include different expectations regarding the responsibilities of students and supervisors, lack of feedback or useful feedback, different expectations regarding how close and personal the student-supervisor relationship should be, different values regarding the skills that are important to develop in graduate school, and lack of respect. Other key sources found in the current study but not identified in previous research include lack of openness, lack of time, lack of support/guidance, and lack of communication.

When previous research involving mainly Canadian graduate students is compared with the current study, some sources of conflict are replicated, whereas others are not. Lack of feedback, respect, openness, guidance, and time were found in both the present study and in previous research (Chiste, 1997). Other sources of conflict related to lack of communication, unclear communication, and different expectations regarding the intimacy of the student-supervisor relationship were mentioned by international graduate students in the current study but not in Chiste's (1997) study. Finally, excessive control and gender-based discrimination were mentioned by Canadian graduate students (Chiste, 1997) but not by international graduate students in the current study.

Interestingly, international graduate students and Canadian graduate students both said that lack of feedback is a source of conflict in student-supervisor relationships. Only 2 faculty supervisors in the present study considered lack of feedback to be a problem. Students and supervisors need to discuss the type and amount of feedback that will be useful and feasible for assisting the student to complete his or her research project in a satisfactory manner.

Preventing Conflict

To prevent destructive conflict, both international graduate students and faculty supervisors said that they would like to have more information regarding the common sources of international graduate student-supervisor conflict. Each identified source could be accompanied by a description of the methods and skills that help resolve such situations and clear examples of what such methods and skills involve. Some of these examples could be (a) the roles and responsibilities that students and supervisors usually assume; (b) feedback that students find helpful and not helpful; (c) the steps of the problem-solving process; (d)

how to have honest conversation without promoting defensiveness, hurt, and anger; and (e) how to minimize one's own defensive reactions. Ultimately, these guidelines need to provide practical information that students and supervisors can apply. Development of such best-practice guidelines could involve a diverse group of people including individuals with conflict-management and prevention expertise, international graduate students, and faculty supervisors.

Managing/Resolving Conflict

Given the fact that international graduate students and faculty supervisors have shown a preference for dealing with conflict independently (i.e., without outside help), it is important that both parties be well informed of effective conflict-management/resolution methods. The same information described above for preventing conflict needs to be offered to individuals who do not want to involve a third party. These same individuals may benefit from a conflict-management "coach," so they ask questions and practice what they need to say to the student/supervisor involved. Because conflict cannot always be resolved independently, there are instances when a third party may become necessary. Because department heads and graduate program chairs were identified as individuals who would be most appropriate to serve as a third party, it may be beneficial to offer conflict-management training and intercultural training to these individuals. Furthermore, whenever possible, assistance should be offered from individuals who are in the position to be neutral, offer solutions, and provide face-to-face interaction. For some students, neutrality may mean having a third party who is outside the department and college, although for others it may mean a third party who is familiar with their research area.

Limitations of the Present Study and Directions for Future Research

Although this study has contributed to the understanding of international graduate student and faculty supervisor conflict and its management, several limitations of the study encourage future examinations. One limitation was that small sample sizes prevented important comparisons within the international graduate students and faculty supervisor groups. For example, comparisons across the cultural backgrounds of international graduate students and faculty supervisors were not possible. Because culture is like "a perception-shaping lens... [or] a grammar for the production and structuring of meaningful action" (Avruch & Black, 1993, p. 132; see also Avruch & Black, 1991; Salem, 1993), individual perception, interpretation, evaluation, and action in conflict situa-

tions will likely vary across cultures. Consequently, it is unclear whether any systematic differences exist between these cultural groups or other relevant social groupings (e.g., gender, type of program, year in program, etc.). Moreover, future research may fruitfully explore how the match between international graduate student and faculty supervisor from similar and different cultural backgrounds may differ in terms of the type and extent of conflict experienced and the appropriateness of different conflict-management strategies.

Also, the generalizability of the results may be limited to international graduate students and faculty supervisors from 25 departments at one university. Given the fact that institutions usually house a variety of subcultures, perhaps the excluded departments differ in ways that are relevant to the current findings. By extension, these results may be restricted to this particular university, although the similarities with findings reported in other studies conducted at other universities support the possibility that the recommendations made here may be useful in other settings.

Finally, a multicultural team of researchers would have been preferable. Although every effort was made to seek the advice, input, and guidance of individuals from a variety of cultures, it would have been useful to have such input from the planning stage onwards. A multicultural team may have had more insight into the optimal method of data collection, which may have resulted in a higher international-graduate-student response rate. Interpretation of the data may have also been more sensitive to the nuances of the various cultural groups involved.

Despite these limitations, the current study makes a significant contribution toward understanding how frequently international graduate student and faculty supervisor conflict occurs, perceptions of what causes it, and what may contribute to its management and prevention. Although many international graduate students and faculty supervisors reported healthy productive relationships, student-supervisor conflict is a significant issue that requires ongoing recognition and attention. Reported sources of conflict, such as deficient feedback, different expectations, lack of openness, and deficits in English proficiency and the communication process, resulted in recommendations that call for a variety of actions such as conflict-management training, clarification of expectations, ongoing discussion and negotiation, awareness, and accountability. These recommendations do not target one person or group as responsible for managing and preventing student-supervisor conflict. Rather, they suggest that ongoing effort from international graduate students, faculty supervisors, student services, departments, and others is necessary to effectively manage and prevent student-supervisor conflict.

APPENDIX
Student-Supervisor Conflict Scenario

Directions: Read the following story:

A student has been working with a thesis/project supervisor for a year. Initially, the student and the supervisor had a pleasant and friendly relationship. The student believes it is important to have a good relationship with a supervisor and felt lucky to have one.

In the past few months, however, the student and the supervisor began experiencing some difficulties. After reading the first part of the student's thesis, the supervisor wrote comments on it saying that it was poor and that he or she was concerned that some of the ideas had been copied from other sources. The student read these comments, made the suggested changes, and then handed in a second copy of the thesis. Again, the supervisor commented that the thesis was poor. The student continued to work hard to improve the thesis, but the supervisor continued to say that the work was not good enough. Recently, the supervisor told the student that if the work didn't improve, he or she may not be able to supervise the student anymore.

The student is very upset by the supervisor's comments. The student feels that he or she has done everything that the supervisor asked him or her to do. The student thinks the work is very good and does *not* agree that it needs improvement. The student is most upset with the idea that he or she may have to find another supervisor.

If you were the student in the story, how would you solve this difficulty?

Method A. A third person will listen to an explanation of what happened from you and your supervisor. Based on this information, the third person will decide how the difficulty will be solved. You and your supervisor must do what the third person says.

How willing would you be to use Method A to solve the difficulty?

Method B. You, your supervisor, and a third person meet together as a group. The third person's job is to find a compromise (a solution whereby some, but not all of your needs are met). You and your supervisor will make the final decision as to how the difficulty will be solved. The goal of this meeting is to find a solution for solving the difficulty, not necessarily to improve the relationship.

How willing would you be to use Method B to solve the difficulty?

Method C. You, the supervisor, and a third person meet together as a group. The third person's job is to help improve the relationship between you and the supervisor and to *guide* a problem-solving meeting (which involves finding a solution that meets both your needs). You and the supervisor will be responsible for thinking of possible solutions and deciding which one is best. The goals of this method are to (a) improve the relationship between you and your supervisor and (b) solve the difficulty.

How willing would you be to use Method C to solve the difficulty?

Method D. You and the supervisor talk about the difficulty and try to come up with a solution to solve it without outside help.

How willing would you be to use Method D to solve the difficulty?

NOTES

1. These authors do not specify what the term *academic advising* refers to. Although advising provided by faculty members is of interest here, it is possible that this term includes advising provided by administrative staff.

2. According to informal discussion with several international graduate students, they expected their supervisor to take more responsibility in terms of helping them choose a thesis topic and providing ongoing guidance and support.

3. Because of a lack of research involving faculty supervisors, a comparison of their experiences reported here and in previous research is not available.

4. It is possible that the reported frequency of international graduate student-supervisor conflict in this and other studies is not the same as the actual frequency of conflict. As was true in the current study, international graduate students who had experienced conflict may be too fearful to participate, regardless of the reassurances of anonymity. At the same time, it must be recognized that reported figures might arguably be an overestimate of the frequency of conflict because it is possible that people who have experienced conflict are drawn to such studies.

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