Background

- Conflict with a superior elicits an obliging response; individuals take an integrating approach to conflict with a peer (Rahim, 1983)
- Outcome variables in dyad decision making task are mediated by individuals’ sense of power (Anderson et al., 2002)
- Conflict is more likely to be pursued if stakes are high (Leung, 1988)

Predictions

1. We predicted that students would be less aggressive in their response to conflict with a professor and have a lasting negative emotional response.

2. We predicted that students would be more aggressive in their response to conflict with a peer and have a fleeting negative emotional response.

Method

- Participants read 4 online scenarios involving:
  - Conflict with peer over parking spot
  - Conflict with professor over parking spot
  - Conflict with peer over place in line at coffee shop
  - Conflict with professor over place in line at coffee shop

- Following each scenario, participants chose an action that was later coded for level of aggression
  - 1 = no action, 2 = ignore, 3 = smile, 4 = wave, 5 = dirty look, 6 = confront, 7 = yell

- Participants then picked their emotional state (from a provided list of emotions)

Results

- In our coffee shop scenario, there was a statistically significant difference in level of aggression depending on whether or not the conflict was with a professor (M = 2.72) or a peer (M = 4.61), $\chi^2(1) = 97.05$, $p = 0.000$.
- In our parking lot scenario, there was a statistically significant difference in level of aggression depending on whether or not the conflict was with a professor (M = 2.57) or a peer (M = 4.46), $\chi^2(1) = 96.58$, $p = 0.000$.
- Our prediction that students would be more aggressive with their peers than their professors was supported.
- We were unable to find a statistical analysis that was sufficient to test our emotional response data.

Conclusions

- The results of this study indicate that undergraduate students at Rice University are less likely to be aggressive when in a conflict situation with a professor (high power differential) compared to a conflict situation with a student (lower power differential).
- The type of conflict situation (coffee shop or parking lot) did not mediate the level of aggression.

Future Work

- Future studies should investigate the effect of conflict scenarios on emotions – both during the scenario, shortly thereafter, and longer-term.
- Next steps could also include investigating whether these effects are consistent in other populations of college students, as well as other kinds of interactions (employment settings, familial settings, etc.)
- A greater understanding of the motivations behind these behavioral responses would be beneficial in understanding the underlying mechanisms that are activated in a conflict scenario.

References

