

CONFLICT INITIATING FACTORS AND MANAGEMENT STYLES IN  
INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONSHIPS IN FAMILY AND NONFAMILY CONTEXTS:  
AMERICAN YOUNG ADULTS' RETROSPECTIVE WRITTEN ACCOUNTS

By

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### **Abstract**

Using a content analytic approach, this study examined American young adults' written accounts about their communication with older adults in conflict situations to uncover major conflict initiating factors and conflict management styles. In addition, this study examined how conflict initiating factors and management styles used by young and older adults vary depending on family and nonfamily intergenerational relationships. Following similar procedures in prior literature in interpersonal and intergenerational conflict management (Witteman, 1992; Sillars & Zietlow, 1993; Zhang, 2008; Zhang, Harwood, & Hummert, 2005; Zhang & Lin, 2009), conflict initiating factors and management styles were coded in separate passes. First, considering each intergenerational conflict scenario as a unit of analysis, the major conflict initiating factor (e.g., old-to-young criticism, young-to-old criticism, illegitimate demand, old-to-young rebuff, young-to-old rebuff, or disagreement/generation gap) was identified by focusing on the beginning stage of the intergenerational conflict reported by the young respondent. Second, the major conflict management styles (e.g., competing, avoiding, accommodating, or problem solving) used by young and older adults were identified by focusing on the communication exchanges between the young and older adult in each conflict scenario. Analysis of the conflict scenarios in intergenerational relationships revealed that old-to-young criticism was the most frequent conflict initiating factor in both family and nonfamily intergenerational relationships. Also, the competing style was used frequently by young and older adults in family intergenerational conflict across various initiating factors, especially for the young adults when there was a disagreement. In nonfamily intergenerational conflict, the competing style was also used frequently by both sides across initiating factors, especially when the conflict was initiated by old-to-young criticism. Finally, with overall high frequencies of the competing and avoiding

styles, and low frequencies of accommodation and problem-solving styles, these conflict scenarios revealed a darker side of intergenerational communication. Major findings are discussed in light of prior literature in intergenerational communication and shared family identity, and interpersonal and intergroup conflict management.

*Keywords:* Conflict initiating factors, conflict management styles, family elders, interpersonal and intergenerational conflict, nonfamily elders

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## Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	iii
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	v
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	vi
<b>Chapter One: Introduction and Rationale</b> .....	1
<b>Chapter Two: Literature Review</b> .....	4
Intergenerational Conflict .....	4
Social Identity Theory .....	6
Common Ingroup Identity Model .....	8
<b>Chapter Three: Method</b> .....	10
Participants and Procedures .....	10
Development of the Coding Scheme.....	11
Coding and Reliability Check .....	12
<b>Chapter Four: Results</b> .....	13
Research Question One .....	13
Research Question Two .....	13
Research Question Three .....	14
Research Question Four .....	16
<b>Chapter Five: Discussion</b> .....	18
Overview of Findings.....	18
Limitations .....	22
Future Research.....	23
<b>References</b> .....	25
<b>Appendix A: Questionnaire</b> .....	33
<b>Appendix B: Tables</b> .....	36

## **Chapter One:**

### **Introduction and Rationale**

The proportion of older adults in the world above the age of 65 is increasing dramatically. This phenomenon is referred to as population aging (LaPierre & Hughes, 2009). Developed nations have aged quickly over the last fifty years as the number of people aged 65 and older tripled from 131 million to 417 million (United Nations Population Division, 2009). The pace of aging for the world will continue to accelerate according to the United Nations' medium population projection that indicated by 2050 another tripling of the population aged 65 and older to 1.5 billion (United Nations Population Division, 2009). The United States is following this pattern as well. Over the past 10 years, the number of older adults in the United States increased by 15% (US Census Bureau, 2010).

The increase of population aging has created a humanistic concern for the well-being of older adults. The growing interest to proactively deal with this issue has propelled intergenerational communication research. Scholars have shown that although positive stereotypes do exist towards older adults, the attitudes that young adults hold tend to be negative (Bonnesen & Hummert, 2002; Harwood, 2000) which has negative impacts on intergenerational interactions (Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986). When young adults' communication with older adults is motivated by negative age stereotypes of older adults, intergenerational communication satisfaction decreases (Harwood, 2000; Ng, Liu, Weatherall & Loong, 1997; Ryan, Hummert & Boich, 1995).

Previous research has shown that stereotypes of aging, especially negative stereotypes, can affect intergenerational communication in a negative way (Hummert, Shaner, Garstka, & Henry, 1998). The communication predicament of aging model (CPA) focuses on the

problematic young-to-old communication processes that are prompted by negative age stereotypes (Ryan, Giles, Bartolucci, & Henwood, 1986). The CPA model outlines how young adult's speech accommodations due to age-based stereotypes may create a negative feedback cycle for older adults. This cycle can lead to constrained opportunities for communication, lower self-esteem, emotional and functional decline, and reinforcement of age stereotypical behaviors (Harwood, Ryan, Giles, & Tysoki, 1997).

Scholars have extended the use of the CPA model to include problematic old-to-young communication that is potentially harmful and unsatisfactory in intergenerational relationships. For example, research has shown that young adults can also be stereotyped and patronized by older adults (e.g., Giles & William, 1994). These stereotypes lead older adults to practice non-listening, complaining, disapproving, and over-parenting behaviors. In essence, these dissatisfying young-to-old and old-to-young communication behaviors are potential factors that lead to conflict in intergenerational relationships. Research has analyzed conflict initiating factors (Witteman, 1992; Zhang, 2004; Zhang & Lin, 2009) and conflict management styles (Sillars, Canary, & Tafoya, 2004; Zhang, Harwood, & Hummert, 2005) to address these concerns by providing insight into the conflict situations. Contributing to the growing literature on intergenerational communication research, the current study examines similarities and differences in conflict initiating factors and management styles in intergenerational relationships in both family and nonfamily contexts. Social identity theory (SIT) and the common ingroup identity model (CIIM) are useful theoretical frameworks in guiding the current study.

In the intergenerational communication context, group membership is an important factor in influencing communicative and relational variables. Due to prolonged average life expectancy, intergenerational relationships between young and older adults will increase (Soliz

& Harwood, 2003). Scholars have stated that research on intergenerational communication should be directed towards the communication behavior found within the grandparent-grandchild relationship (William & Nussbaum, 2001) in hopes that young adults' positive relationships with their grandparents could mitigate their negative attitudes toward older adults in general. In families, grandchildren experience most frequent and satisfying intergenerational contact through their grandparents (William & Giles, 1996). Therefore, young adults' attitudes toward older adults in general are greatly influenced by their contact with grandparents (Mitchell, 1998).

Naturally, intergenerational family relationships are closer, more interdependent, and more frequent than intergenerational nonfamily relationships (Giles et al., 2003). However, the family context is complex because it includes both intergroup and intragroup relations (Soliz & Harwood, 2006). Along with family, age is used as a category for group membership. The intergroup level is due to age identity becoming salient in a relationship. This would mean that the young adult recognizes that the older adult doesn't belong to the same age group. The intragroup level is established when shared family identity is salient. This takes place when the young adult recognizes the older adult as a part of the same family, and then the older adult is seen as an in-group member. Family elders may be categorized as "older adults", but they are naturally differentiated from "other older adults" because of shared family identity. Family older adults and nonfamily older adults are stereotyped differently which leads to differences in communication in a given intergenerational context (Anderson, Harwood, & Hummert, 2005). Thus, intergenerational relationships within families and outside of families provide interesting opportunities to examine conflict situations.

## **Chapter Two:**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Intergenerational Conflict**

Conflict is unavoidable in all types of relationships (Roloff & Chiles, 2011). Scholars have created many definitions of conflict that vary depending on the study. Because of this, Barki and Hartwick (2004) created a synthesized definition that defines conflict as “a dynamic process that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with attainment of their goals” (p. 234). Recently, scholars have begun to investigate conflict from a life span perspective that suggests that communication between people at different ages deserves special attention (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). Although there are limited studies that focus on intergenerational relationships that are between young and older adults many of them examine relationships between grandparents and grandchildren (Anderson, Harwood, & Hummert, 2005; Zhang, 2004; Zhang & Lin, 2009). Grandparent-grandchild communication should be studied extensively because this dyad takes place more than any other intergenerational dyad that spans across more than one generation (Soliz & Harwood, 2003).

Research has begun to examine family and nonfamily intergenerational relationships in conflict situations from the young adult’s perspective (e.g., Zhang, 2004). Intergenerational conflict has also been examined when adult children and elderly parents live together (Suitor & Pillemer, 1998). Findings revealed that adult children’s dependence on housing and need for financial assistance were listed as sources of serious intergenerational conflict. How money is spent, who should do household chores, and the child’s job were other sources that led to conflict (Suitor & Pillemer, 1998). In another study, adult daughter’s relationships with their aging

mothers were analyzed (Fingerman, 1996). The research was particularly interested in sources of tension in their relationship that lead to conflict. Results yielded a list of the analyzed sources of tension including intrusiveness, exclusion, inappropriate care of self or other, or referring to general habits or traits. However, the current study is first interested in how conflict begins.

**Conflict initiating factors.** Conflict may arise for a variety of reasons, but verbal or behavioral expressions of incompatible interests must occur for the perceived differences to become open conflict (Zhang, 2004). Zhang (2004) calls these perceived differences conflict initiating factors and defines them as “one party’s interference with the activity of another that escalates a situation into conflict” (p. 345). Conflict initiating factors have been examined in both interpersonal and intergenerational conflict scenarios (Witteman, 1992; Zhang, 2004; Zhang & Lin, 2009). Zhang (2004) used data from a collectivist culture and analyzed how culture interacted with age to influence conflict initiating factors in Chinese intergenerational relationships. The major conflict initiating factors included old-to-young criticism, young-to-old criticism, illegitimate demand, old-to-young rebuff, young-to-old rebuff, and disagreement/generation gap (Zhang, 2004). *Old-to-young criticism* is classified by the older person criticizing or finding fault with the young respondent’s behavior, opinion, and/or attitude (Zhang, 2004). *Young-to-old criticism* is the similar, but it is the young person who finds fault with the older person (Zhang, 2004). *Illegitimate demand* is characterized as placing or imposing wants, needs, desires or demands on the other person regardless of their wants, needs, desires, or demands (Zhang, 2004). When a person bluntly rejects the other’s request for support, approval, help, or need for attention, it is classified as a *rebuff* (i.e., either old-to-young or young-to-old; Zhang, 2004). And finally, *disagreement/generation gap* is described as a clash in attitudes, values, life style, and/or opinions between the two people in the dyad (Zhang, 2004). Age

difference is considered as the cause of this type of conflict. Zhang and Lin's (2009) research demonstrated that these conflict initiating factors also apply to intergenerational conflict situations in the U.S.

**Conflict management styles.** Along with initiating factors, this study also analyzed conflict management styles in a similar way as previous research (Zhang et al., 2005). Conflict management styles have been studied in family contexts before (Gottman, 1979; Hanzal & Segrin, 2009; Notarius & Markman, 1981; Sillars, Canary, & Tafoya, 2004). Zhang et al. (2005) examined perceptions of conflict management styles in Chinese intergenerational dyads. Four conflict management styles were used: competing, avoiding, accommodating, and problem solving. The *competing* style is characterized as negative, confrontational, assertive, and uncooperative (Zhang et al., 2005). It includes such communication behaviors as faulting and rejecting the other, hostile questioning, defending one's position, and denying responsibility. The *avoiding style* is non-confrontational, but under-responsive to the conflict (Zhang et al., 2005). It includes acts minimizing explicit discussion of the conflict, trivializing and downplaying the disagreements, and shifting the topic as a way to withdraw from the conflict. The *accommodating style* emphasizes relational harmony (Zhang et al., 2005). It includes such behaviors as recognizing the other party's needs, affirming the other's position, taking full responsibility for the problem, apologizing, and being unassertive. The *problem solving* style is assertive and cooperative in initiating mutually satisfying and acceptable solutions (Zhang et al., 2005). Like the accommodating style, it includes showing empathy and understanding for the position of the other person, but unlike the accommodating styles, it involves soliciting input from the other person and engaging that individual in finding a mutually acceptable solution.

These management styles describe the level of self-interest versus the level of interest for the other. Zhang et al. (2005) found that older participants rated the accommodating style more favorable than the problem-solving styles while the young adults either rated the problem-solving or accommodating style most favorable. Some scholars have added *compromising* as a fifth style that lies between uncooperative and cooperative behavior (concern for self), and unassertive and assertive behavior (concern for others; Thomas, 1976). These conflict initiating factors and management styles will be used to describe conflict scenarios in the current study. Intergroup and interpersonal theory will be used to discuss the findings.

### **Social Identity Theory**

Social identity theory (SIT) originated in an attempt to explain how psychological and sociological processes interact to produce micro and macro intergroup dynamics (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). More scholars have since studied the intergroup perspective and applied it to communication. Intergroup communication occurs when either party in a social interaction defines self or other in terms of group memberships (Harwood, Giles, & Palomares, 2008). SIT states that people can understand the self in terms of personal identity and social identity. Personal identity refers to the perception of self as a unique individual with particular traits and preferences while social identity refers to the perception of self as a member of particular groups, along with the associations relevant to those groups (Harwood, Giles, & Palomares, 2008). To maintain a positive social identity, individuals must recognize distinctive differences between ingroups and outgroups that favor their own group memberships. Harwood et al. (2008) also establishes three important issues when dealing with intergroup communication. First, intergroup communication is the transmission or receptions of messages that are influenced by group memberships of the individuals involved in the interaction. Group memberships refer to the

salient group that one feels most associated with. These memberships then affect the way that people interact with each other. Second, not all the individuals involved in the interaction have to be aware of the intergroup communication in order for it to occur. If one person recognizes a certain salient identity, the other doesn't have to recognize that same salient identity in order for the intergroup communication to happen. Finally, self- and other-categorizations are linked. When a young person categorizes someone as an older person, they invoke an implicit self-categorization as not an older person. This categorization becomes relevant to both parties in the situation. Hence, when intergroup communication occurs, self- and other-categorization are inherent. One important group membership that links the grandchild-grandparent dyad is shared family identity. However, the grandparent-grandchild dyad is unique because there is a difference in age-group membership. This makes the grandparent-grandchild dyad more complex than nonfamily encounters because there are multiple salient group memberships (Soliz & Harwood, 2006). Along with race and gender, age is a fundamental aspect of social categorization (Harwood, Giles, & Palomares, 2005). Intergenerational communication can fit into both interpersonal and intergroup classifications when young and older adults interact with each other as individuals while considering group differences (Harwood et al., 2005). A solution to these group differences can be found in the CIIM.

### **Common Ingroup Identity Model and Shared Family Identity**

The major foundation for this study is rooted CIIM which is derived from SIT. CIIM claims that if members of different groups can think of themselves within a single group rather than as completely separate groups, attitudes toward former outgroup members will become more positive through the cognitive and motivational processes involving pro-ingroup bias (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). If one was able to identify with an outgroup enough to

acknowledge a broader categorization, then there would be more positive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors towards that individual. These ingroup characteristics might not be present in nonfamily intergenerational relationships. Relationships that do not have a common ingroup (i.e., shared family identity) will provide a baseline for comparing the differences CIIM might have on intergenerational conflict situations. The family provides a context within which establishing a common ingroup identity is relatively easy (Banker & Gaertner, 1998), and one can find an overarching category through shared family identity. Shared family identity has been used as a common ingroup before (Zhang, 2004; Soliz & Harwood, 2006; Soliz, 2007; Song & Zhang, 2012). If grandchildren can see the grandparents as a part of the same group (i.e., family), then this could influence the way that they manage conflict with them. The current study will apply CIIM to intergenerational conflict scenarios to help explain differences in conflict between the family and nonfamily relationships.

From the young adult's perspective:

RQ1: What are the conflict initiating factors in intergenerational relationships?

RQ2: How do conflict initiating factors differ in family versus nonfamily intergenerational relationships?

RQ3: How are the conflict initiating factors associated with management styles in family and nonfamily contexts for both young and older adults?

RQ4: How are young adult's management styles associated with older adult's management styles in both family and nonfamily contexts?

## Chapter Three:

### Method

#### Participants and Procedures

Participants ( $N = 692$ ,  $M$  age = 20.15,  $SD = 2.05$ ; 44.1% males and 55.9% females) were asked to think of an intergenerational conflict that they had with an older person (65 years or older). Participation was voluntary. They were asked to write specific communication exchanges during the conflict (i.e., what they said and did) as well as how the older person responded in order to identify how the conflict started and the conflict management strategies that were used by participants. They indicated the relationship they have with the older person and how long they had been in that relationship. Participants then rated the perceived seriousness of the conflict and their perceived relational closeness with the older adult on a 7-point scale (1 = not close at all and 7 = very close).

Young adults reported more conflict scenarios with family elders ( $n = 406$ , 58.7%) than they did with nonfamily elders ( $n = 286$ , 41.3%),  $\chi^2 (1) = 20.81$ ,  $p > .05$ . In family relationships, young adults usually reported scenarios with their grandparents, although there were also a few other family members such as aunts, uncles, grandaunts, granduncles, parents, and step-grandparents. The nonfamily elders were mostly made up of co-workers, teachers, bosses, and landlords. There were fewer scenarios that included neighbors, patients, and grocery store customers. The average length of relationship was 11.91 years ( $SD = 9.58$ , Range = 1-34).

An independent t-test indicated that the length of relationship in intergenerational family relationships ( $M = 18.86$ ,  $SD = 4.86$ , Range = 1-34) was significantly longer than with intergenerational nonfamily relationships ( $M = 1.98$ ,  $SD = 4.63$ , Range = 1-28),  $t (688) = 45.82$ ,  $p < .001$ . An independent t-test also indicated that young adults perceived themselves to be

closer to their family elders ( $M = 5.60$ ,  $SD = 1.67$ ) than to their nonfamily elders ( $M = 2.03$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ),  $t(690) = 27.49$ ,  $p < .001$ . The correlation between relational closeness and relationship type (family versus nonfamily intergenerational relationships) was significantly positive ( $r = .72$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

A one-sample t-test indicated that the mean seriousness score for the conflict scenarios ( $M = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 1.70$ ) was not significantly different from the midpoint scale (i.e., 4),  $t(691) = -1.16$ ,  $p > .05$ . Thus, the intergenerational conflict scenarios were neither extremely serious nor not serious as all. There was no difference in the young adults perceived seriousness between family ( $M = 3.91$ ,  $SD = 1.73$ ) and nonfamily ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = 1.67$ ) intergenerational conflicts,  $t(690) = -.249$ ,  $p > .05$ .

### **Development of the Coding Scheme**

The first step in the current analysis was to develop a coding system that is applicable to intergenerational conflict. Interpersonal conflict research has been applied to intergenerational contexts before (Zhang, 2004; Zhang et al., 2005). In a similar way, coders familiarized themselves with the list of conflict management styles (i.e., competing, avoiding, accommodating, problem solving) and conflict initiating factors (i.e., old-to-young criticism, young-to-old criticism, illegitimate demand, old-to-young rebuff, disagreement/generation gap, young-to-old rebuff). Each conflict scenario was considered as a unit of analysis.

Two graduate students served as coders in this study. Previous studies of conflict-initiating factors in peer relationships (Witteman, 1992) and intergenerational relationships (Zhang, 2004; Zhang & Lin, 2009) were referenced in the development of the categories and their operational definitions. Conflict management styles were referenced as well (Zhang et al., 2005). Before the coding began, each coder spent time familiarizing themselves with the conflict

initiating factors (Table 1) and conflict management styles (Table 2). After they felt comfortable with the operational definitions, they began to code conflict scenarios to ensure that the list was exhaustive. They coded scenarios ( $n = 110$ ) individually then compared their findings. If there were any disagreements, the coders discussed the scenario in more detail until an agreement was made. Throughout the coder training process, adjustments were made to the operational definitions of both conflict initiating factors and conflict management styles for clarity. When the list of initiating factors and management styles proved to be exhaustive the 110 scenarios were returned to the larger pool for later coding but were not include in the subsequent reliability check.

### **Coding and Reliability Check**

After the training process, each of the two coders individually analyzed a total of 140 scenarios in different stages of the coding process (20.23%) for reliability checks. The conflict initiating factor and management styles used by young and older adults were identified in each scenario in separate passes. If a scenario had an initiating factor or management style that did not fit into the list, it was coded into the “other” category. The overall intercoder reliability for initiating factors, young adults’ management styles, and older adults’ management styles was measured using both percent agreement (.84, .88, and .86 respectively) and Cohen’s Kappa (.89, .85, .81 respectively), which was satisfactory. The disagreements in this stage were discussed and resolved. The remaining 552 scenarios were split up and individually coded by each coder. Thirty initiating factors (4.3%), twelve conflict management styles of older adults (1.7%), and thirteen conflict management styles of the young adults (1.8%) were placed in the “other” category. The other category was not included in later data analysis.

## Chapter Four:

### Results

#### Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked about the types of conflict initiating factors in intergenerational relationships as reported by American young adults. Chi-square analysis indicated that old-to-young criticism was the most frequently reported (33.8%,  $n = 234$ ), followed by disagreement/generation gap (18.1%,  $n = 125$ ), with old to young rebuff (13.4%,  $n = 93$ ), young-to-old criticism (13.3%,  $n = 92$ ), and illegitimate demand (10.4%,  $n = 72$ ) as the third most frequent category, and young-to-old rebuff (6.6%,  $n = 46$ ) and other (4.4%,  $n = 30$ ) as the least frequent, overall  $\chi^2 (7) = 410.22, p < .05$ . Table 4 presents the frequencies of the seven initiating factors identified in the intergenerational conflict scenarios.

#### Research Question 2

Research Question 2 examined whether the conflict initiating factors reported by the participants were associated with family versus and nonfamily intergenerational relationships. Table 4 presents the frequencies of the seven initiating factors identified in the conflict scenarios in both family and nonfamily intergenerational relationships. Specifically, cross-tabulation results indicated that older adults criticized ( $n = 125$ ; %XX) and rebuffed ( $n = 47$ ) nonfamily young adults significantly more than young adults who they were related to ( $n = 109, 46$ ). On the other hand, young adults rebuffed family elders significantly more ( $n = 37$ ) than nonfamily elders ( $n = 9$ ). Finally, generation gap/disagreement was reported as a conflict initiating more frequently in family intergenerational relationships ( $n = 102$ ) than in nonfamily intergenerational relationships ( $n = 23$ ). Young-to-old criticism and illegitimate demand were equally distributed in family versus nonfamily intergenerational relationships (See Table 5).

### Research Question 3

Research Question 3 examined how the conflict initiating factors and management styles used by young and older adults were associated with each other in family and nonfamily relationships. A series of two-way chi-square analyses were conducted to answer this question. First, chi-square analysis indicated that there was a significant association between the conflict initiating factors and young adults' conflict management styles in family intergenerational relationships,  $\chi^2(15) = 77.53, p < .05$ . Post hoc one-way chi-square tests were used to examine whether the four conflict management styles were distributed equally across each initiating factor. Most of the tests were significant. The competing style was used most frequently by young adults in family intergenerational conflict across various initiating factors, especially when there was a disagreement ( $n = 83$ ; 32.9%). Although the accommodating style was not used as frequently as the competing style, it is mostly used when young adults were criticized by the older adults ( $n = 27$ ; 57.4%). The avoiding and problem solving styles were least frequently used across the initiating factors (See Table 5).

Second, chi-square analysis indicated that there was a significant association between the conflict initiating factors and young adults' conflict management styles in nonfamily intergenerational relationships,  $\chi^2(15) = 39.88, p < .05$ . A similar pattern was found in that the competing style was used most frequently by young adults in nonfamily intergenerational conflict across various initiating factors. Unlike in family contexts, the young adults' competing style was used most frequently ( $n = 69$ ; 41.6%) when the conflicts were initiated by old-to-young criticism. Young adults' use of the avoiding ( $n = 25$ ; 49%) and accommodating ( $n = 31$ ; 67.4%) styles was most associated with old-to-young criticism as well. Similar to family relationships,

young adults used problem-solving very infrequently in nonfamily intergenerational relationships regardless of the conflict initiating factors (See Table 5).

Third, chi-square analysis indicated that there was a significant association between the conflict initiating factors and the older adults' conflict management styles in family intergenerational relationships,  $\chi^2 (15) = 65.73, p < .05$ . Overall, there were similarities between the older adults' and young adults' use of conflict management styles in family relationships. Competing was used the most by older adults in family relationships. The competing style was most associated with old-to-young criticism ( $n = 97; 29\%$ ) and disagreement/generation gap ( $n = 97; 28.4\%$ ) while the avoiding style was most associated with young-to-old criticism ( $n = 11; 29.7\%$ ) and old-to-young rebuff ( $n = 11; 29.7\%$ ). The accommodating and problem-solving styles were used very infrequently by family elders regardless of the conflict initiating factors (See Table 6).

Fourth, chi-square analysis indicated that there was a significant association between the conflict initiating factors and the older adults' conflict management styles in nonfamily intergenerational relationships,  $\chi^2 (15) = 39.07, p < .05$ . Following the previous trend in family relationships, the competing style was used most frequently regardless of the conflict initiating factor ( $n = 122; 50.6\%$ ). However, nonfamily elders' use of the competing style had a greater association with the old-to-young criticism initiating factor than did family elders'. Similar to family elders, the nonfamily elders' use of the avoiding style was associated with young-to-old criticism ( $n = 7; 31.8\%$ ) and old-to-young rebuff ( $n = 7; 31.8\%$ ) more than any other initiating factors. Also, the accommodating and problem-solving conflict management styles were not frequently used regardless of the conflict initiating factors (See Table 5).

#### Research Question 4

Research Question 4 examined how the management styles used by older adults are associated with the management styles used by young adults in family and nonfamily relationships. In order to answer this question, two chi-square analyses were conducted. Table 7 displays the styles used by young adults and older adults in both family and nonfamily relationships.

First, chi-square analysis indicated that there was a significant association in conflict management styles used by the young adults and family elders,  $\chi^2 (9) = 247.99, p < .05$ . Post hoc chi-square tests were used to examine the frequency distributions of the management styles used by family elders within each conflict management style used by the young adults. Results indicated that young adults' use of the competing style was associated most with the older adults' use of the competing style ( $n = 240; 70.8\%$ ). This was also true for the avoiding and problem-solving styles (See Table 7). The older adults' conflict management style was most associated with the young adults' use of the same style. The one exception of this was the accommodating style which was used infrequently.

The second chi-square analysis indicated that there was a significant association between management styles used by the young adults and nonfamily elders,  $\chi^2 (9) = 169.65, p < .05$ . Although the overall chi-square analysis was significant, there were no obvious patterns indicating how the conflict styles used by young versus older adults were associated with each other. The young adults' use of the competing style was most associated with the competing style from the nonfamily elders ( $n = 152; 61.5\%$ ), second most with the avoiding style ( $n = 13; 61.9\%$ ), and third most with the accommodating style ( $n = 3; 75\%$ ). There were no cases in which the older adult used the problem-solving style. When the avoiding and accommodating

styles were used by young adults, nonfamily elders were more likely to use the competing style than any other conflict management styles (See Table 7). Finally, when young adults used the problem-solving style, nonfamily elders were more likely to use the problem-solving style than any other conflict management style ( $n = 7$ ; 100%).

Given the small frequencies of the accommodating and problem-solving styles, Table 8 focused on the associations between competing and avoiding styles used by both parties. Results indicated that family elders' use of the competing style is more associated with young adults' use of the competing style (82.2%). The same pattern can be found with the avoiding style. Family elders' use of the avoiding conflict management style was more associated with young adults' use of the avoiding style (66.7%). Essentially, if family elders competed or avoided, young adults followed suit. However, in nonfamily relationships, there were no such associations.

## **Chapter Five:**

### **Discussion**

#### **Overview and Findings**

This study examined young adults' written accounts of their communication with older adults in conflict situations to uncover major conflict initiating factors and management styles. Specific attention was given to how conflict initiating factors and management styles used by young and older adults vary depending on family and nonfamily intergenerational relationships. In light of the main findings, three major themes have emerged in the conflict scenarios from the young adults' perspective. First, criticism, specifically by the older adult, is the driving force behind the initiation of intergenerational conflict. However, in family relationships, disagreement/generation gap deserves special attention. Second, the competing style is the dominant management style used by both sides in intergenerational conflict. Third, there are differences in the way that conflict is initiated and managed between family and nonfamily relationships.

The most frequently reported initiating factor was old-to-young criticism (33.8%) which supports previous findings that suggest older adults can be critically restrictive, interfering, and meddlesome (Zhang & Lin, 2009). However, nonfamily elders were responsible for significantly more scenarios of criticism than family elders. Similarly, old-to-young rebuff (13.4%) showed the same pattern. That is, nonfamily elders were more likely to rebuff young adults than were family elders. Many of these cases dealt with issues between young adults and their professors, bosses, or co-workers. When the young adults would make a request to the nonfamily older adult, the request would typically be rejected with little remorse. Considering SIT, and specifically CIIM, one of the explanations of why family elders criticize and rebuff less is due to shared family identity, which is positively associated with relational closeness. Previous research

has claimed that shared family identity is relatively easy to establish (Banker & Gaertner, 1998) and once established can lead to more positive interactions (Gaertner et al., 2000). Also, family elders have been seen as more supportive to young people than nonfamily elders (Giles et al. 2003; Ng et al., 1997). Therefore, the tendencies to support young adults by not criticizing, disapproving, or rejecting a request could be enhanced by having a common ingroup identity.

CIIM acknowledges that group memberships are important aspects of relationships. In the current study, family and nonfamily relationships played an important role in intergenerational communication in conflict situations. Prior research in intergenerational conflict has indicated that nonfamily elders tend to be more critical and less supportive of young people than were family elders (Zhang & Lin, 2009) and that nonfamily elders are more nonaccommodative to young people than family elders (Giles et al., 2003; Ng et al., 1997). Thus, the findings from this study support previous conclusions that relationship type influences intergenerational relationships (Zhang & Lin, 2009).

This study contributes to the body of research guided by the CPA model as well. Specifically, this study supports the idea that nonaccommodative old-to-young or young-to-old communication could lead to intergenerational conflict. As noted, the overall most frequent conflict initiating factors was criticism. The young respondents described criticism as often involving a manner that was inappropriate or patronizing by the older adult, which echoes previous findings of negative/nonaccommodative intergenerational communication behaviors of older adults (Giles & Williams, 1994). One explanation of older adults' critical behaviors, considering the CPA model, is age-based stereotypes of the young. Previous studies on stereotypes of young adults have found that older adults see young adults as party animals, disrespectful, and irresponsible (Matheson, Collins, & Kuehne, 2000). However, the CPA model

works differently as role expectations vary within relationship type (Zhang & Lin, 2009). Shared family identity contributes to this discussion by providing an explanation of why this might be.

In family relationships, there was another dominant nonaccommodative initiating factor. Disagreement/generation gap initiated nearly as much conflict as old-to-young criticism in family relationships (25.1%). Previous scholars have noted that family elders may feel that they have more obligations to grandchildren and hence tend to impose their own opinions and desires on young people (Zhang & Lin, 2009). This could help explain the large amounts of conflict due to disagreement/generation gap in family relationships. Because young adults are typically familiar and close to their family elders, they may be less likely to mask their true feelings, expect more from each other, and be more likely to assert their own independence. In other words, young people may feel fewer obligations to keep quiet and more freedom to voice their own opinions, feelings, and ideas with the family elders because of a closer, in-group relationship. Prior research on CIIM has also shown that if ingroup members are not seen as normative, they can be evaluated more negatively (Haslam, Oakes, McGarty, Turner, & Onorato, 1995). Non-normative behaviors often include violating group norms or not supporting the ingroup. If the older adult participated in one of these non-prototypical behaviors then it could influence how the young adults handled the conflict.

Similarly, young people were much more likely to rebuff family elders than nonfamily elders. The majority of these situations dealt with the family elder making a request, such as a visit from the young adult, which was not granted. The young adult didn't feel that it was necessary to accommodate to their family elders requests. This could be attributed to many of the same reasons as disagreement/generation gap. Young adults' perceived their relationships with family elders as more close than with nonfamily elders. This could create a sense of relationship

stability and lead the young adults to believe that it is unnecessary to fulfill each one of the family elders' requests.

In both family and nonfamily relationships, young and older adults were more likely to use the competing style than any other conflict management styles regardless of how the conflict was initiated. However, there was an interesting association between styles in family relationships. When family elders competed, young adults were more likely to compete as well. In the same way, when family elders avoided, young adults avoided as well. This pattern suggests that family members who are involved in intergenerational conflict tend to reciprocate with the same style as the other individual. Reciprocity has been studied in family conflict situations before (Cichy, Lefkowitz, & Fingerman, 2012) and has shown that negative reciprocity can have a negative effect on certain relationships in families (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995). Family relationships have also been shown to have a norm of reciprocity that can be either harmful (Kim et al., 2001) or beneficial (Schwarz, 2010) to the relationship. Consistent with the interpersonal conflict literature in both family and nonfamily contexts (Afifi, McManus, Steuber, & Coho, 2009; Hanzal & Segrin, 2009; Song & Zhang, 2012), the negative reciprocation of the competing and avoiding styles could be harmful to these intergenerational relationships in the long run. More attention should be paid to this phenomenon in future studies.

Although the results show frequent initiating factors and management styles that may be seen as negative or dark, the scenarios show that this is not entirely true. Analyzing the written accounts revealed common difference in some family and nonfamily accounts. In the disagreement/generation gap scenarios, the young adults seemed to care more about the family elders' beliefs, opinions, or feelings than nonfamily elders. Nonfamily elders were labeled more negatively (e.g., crazy) and young respondents typically were faster to discount their position.

However, young adults would be much more likely to disagree or argue with a family member because they “love” them and want them “to understand” both sides. In many cases the arguments that ensued from disagreement/generation gap were carried on by the young adult to help the family elder understand something or change their way of thinking for the benefit of the family elder. Some scenarios ended in an accommodating manner where both parties realized the other side’s position. Although disagreement/generation gap seems negative, this study hints that there might be a positive side to it as well.

### **Limitations**

The conflict scenarios that were analyzed in this study were written by young adults retrospectively. Of the six main initiating factors that were identified, three were attributed to the older adults’ criticism, illegitimate demand, or rebuff (57.7% of the scenarios). The other cases were either attributed to both parties (disagreement/generation gap; 18.1%) or the young adults (young-to-old criticism and young-to-old rebuff; 19.9%). Overall, conflicts were attributed to older adults much more frequently than to young adults. Previous research has shown that people tend to hold others more responsible than themselves, especially when there is a negative outcome (Ross, 1997). The retrospective written accounts young adults’ therefore could be subject to bias. The attributions about negative communication situations (i.e., conflict) might have influenced the results as well.

Also, regardless of the initiating factor, the competing management style was used more than any other style (61.4%) while the avoiding, accommodating, and problem-solving styles were used less frequently. A possible explanation emerges from the data. The data collected for this study was written retrospectively from the young adults’ perspective. Also, the scenarios were not written about general conflict that they have with older adults. Instead, the

questionnaire asked respondents to write about a specific conflict scenario they recently had with an older adult. Conflicts in which the competing style was used could be more memorable and therefore more likely for the young adult to recall. Regardless, the data provided sufficient information to analyze conflict scenarios and further research in this area, but the reports may not be true representations of how young and older adults handle intergenerational conflicts in daily life. Assuming that more goes on in a conflict than just what one party perceives, these limitations should be acknowledged when considering this study.

### **Future Research**

Future research should focus on the older adults' perspective of similar conflict scenarios. This would allow for researchers to compare perspectives between both parties represented in the conflict. Previous literature has shown that older adults sometimes view conflict differently and often attribute the conflict differently than young adults (Clarke et al., 1999). A negative relationship between the age of adult children and their reports of conflict with their parents has been shown (Cicirelli, 1981). As young adults age, maturity plays a role in the base for their conflict. Also, adults tend to prefer solution oriented conflict management as their age increases (Bergstrom & Nussbaum, 1996). These previous findings allow for the anticipation of a lower frequency of conflict initiation attributed to the older adult. Older adults might attribute conflict more evenly among self-initiated, other-initiated, or mutually initiated categories than young adults.

Future research should also be dedicated to analyze the use of the competing style. There were a few conflict scenarios that started with the competing style but then shifted to a different style. Giving special attention to these types of scenarios could uncover insight into why the competing style is so prevalent in intergenerational conflict scenarios. This type of study should

be more focused on the stages of conflict rather than the main management style used. The stages of conflict could shed light on how family and nonfamily intergenerational relationships are handled differently in conflict situation (e.g., how the competing style is used differently in family versus nonfamily relationships). Furthermore, research should continue to examine the complexities of shared family identity and the role it plays in intergenerational conflict.

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41836

## Appendix A: Tables

Table 1

*Definitions of the identified initiating factors in intergenerational conflict (adapted from Zhang, 2004)*

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Old-to-young criticism: The elderly person criticizes or finds fault with the young respondent's behavior, opinion, and/or attitude. Frequently, this type of criticism is endless or repeating.

Young-to-old criticism: The young respondent criticizes or finds fault with the elderly person's behavior, opinion, and/or attitude.

Old-to-young Illegitimate demand: The elderly person places or imposes his or her wants, needs, desires, or demands on the young respondent regardless of the young respondent's wants, needs, or desires based on the belief that the older person has the right or status to do so. No explicit criticism was indicated as the initiating factor of the reported conflict.

Old-to-young Rebuff: The older person bluntly rejects the young respondent's request for support, approval, help or need for more attention, affection, or understanding. In other words, the young respondent does not get the desired reaction or response from the older person. No explicit criticism or demand is indicated.

Young-to-old Rebuff: The young person bluntly rejects the older respondent's request for support, approval, help or need for more attention, affection, or understanding. In other words, the older respondent does not get the desired reaction or response from the young person. No explicit criticism or demand is indicated.

Disagreement/generation gap: The young respondent not only perceives a difference or clash in attitude, values, life style, and/or opinions between him or her and the older person, but also argues with the older person. Age difference is considered as the cause of this type of conflict. No explicit criticism or demand is indicated.

Table 2

*Definitions of the identified conflict management styles in intergenerational conflict (Adapted from Zhang et al., 2005)*

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Competing: This style is characterized as negative, confrontational, assertive, and uncooperative.

It includes such communication behaviors as faulting and rejecting the other, hostile questioning, and denying responsibility. The person who uses this style defends his or her positions furiously or firmly and does not concern much about the other side's interests, needs, and desires.

Avoiding: This style is non-confrontational, but under-responsive to the conflict. It includes acts minimizing explicit discussion of the conflict, trivializing and downplaying the disagreements, and shifting the topic as a way to withdraw from the conflict. This style is very passive and sometimes the person retreats from the social scene by excusing him or herself from the situation.

Accommodating: This style emphasizes relational harmony. It includes such behaviors as recognizing the others party's needs, affirming the other's position, taking full responsibility for the problem, apologizing, and being unassertive. This style is also characterized by its lack of collaborative problem solving orientation. The biggest concern of the person in conflict is to please, satisfy, or sooth the other side.

Problem Solving: This style is assertive and cooperative in initiating mutually satisfying and acceptable solution. Like the accommodating style, it includes showing empathy and understanding for the position of the other person, but unlike the accommodating style, it involves soliciting input from the other person and engaging that individual in finding a mutually acceptable solution. Overall, this is a communication style that focuses son satisfying others sides' needs in positive and cooperative ways. .

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Table 3

*Coding Procedure*

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1. Please read each scenario carefully and as many times as you want to gain a complete understanding of how the conflict started and how the young and older adults managed their conflict.
  2. After you have gained a good understanding of the conflict, please indicate whether the young adult or the older adult initiated the conflict. Typically, the initiating factor can be found at the beginning of the communicative conflict. Record the initiating factor.
  3. Please code the conflict scenario by identifying the main conflict management style according to the definitions provided. Code the young and older adult's style in two separate passes. If there are two management styles used by one individual that are evident throughout the conflict, please record the first/main style that was used.
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Table 4

*Frequencies of the Identified Conflict Initiating Factors in Family and Nonfamily Intergenerational Relationships*

Factors	Frequency	Intergenerational Relationship Type		Adjusted Residual
		Family (%)	Nonfamily (%)	
Old-to-young criticism	234 <sup>a</sup>	109 (26.8%)	125 (43.7%)	4.6**
Young-to-old criticism	92 <sup>c</sup>	51 (12.6%)	41 (14.3%)	.7
Illegitimate demand	72 <sup>c</sup>	43 (10.6%)	29 (10.1%)	.2
Old-to-young rebuff	93 <sup>c</sup>	46 (11.3%)	47 (16.4%)	1.9*
Disagreement/generation gap	125 <sup>b</sup>	102 (25.1%)	23 (8.1%)	5.8**
Young-to-old rebuff	46 <sup>d</sup>	37 (9.1%)	9 (3.2%)	3.1**
Other	30 <sup>d</sup>	18 (4.5%)	12 (4.2%)	1.1
Total Count	692	406	286	-
Percentages	100	100	100	-

Note. Different superscripts in frequency column indicate significant differences according to Chi-square analyses.

\*  $p < .05$  if adjusted residual  $> 1.96$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$  if adjusted residual  $> 2.58$ .

Table 5

*Associations between Conflict Initiating Factors and Management Styles of Young Adults in Family and Nonfamily Intergenerational Relationships*

Factor		Young adult's style								$\chi^2$ <sup>a</sup> (df = 3)
		Competing		Avoiding		Accommodating		Problem-Solving		
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Family	Old-to-young criticism	54	21.4	24	31.6	27	57.4	4	36.4	46.49*
	Young-to-old criticism	35	13.9	13	17.1	2	4.3	1	9.1	58.73*
	Illegitimate demand	33	13.1	6	7.9	4	8.5	0	0	36.61*
	Old-to-young rebuff	30	11.9	12	15.8	1	2.1	3	27.3	45.65*
	Disagreement/ Generation gap	83	32.9	14	18.4	1	2.1	2	18.2	245.75*
	Young-to-old rebuff	17	6.7	7	9.2	12	25.5	1	9.1	15.22*
	Total	252	100	76	100	47	100	11	100	
Non-family	Old-to-young criticism	69	41.6	25	49.0	31	67.4	0	0	27.34*
	Young-to-old criticism	28	16.9	8	15.7	4	8.7	1	10	43.39*
	Illegitimate demand	18	10.8	4	7.8	6	13	1	10	23.00*
	Old-to-young rebuff	30	18.1	8	15.7	3	6.5	5	50	59.28*
	Disagreement/ Generation gap	19	11.4	3	5.9	0	0	1	10	25.39*
	Young-to-old rebuff	2	1.2	3	5.5	2	4.3	2	20	0.33
	Total	169	100	55	100	46	100	10	100	

Note. <sup>a</sup>  $\chi^2$  values indicate differences in the frequencies of each initiating factor across management styles used by young adults

\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 6

*Associations between Conflict Initiating Factors and Management Styles of Older Adults in Family and Nonfamily Intergenerational Relationships*

Factor		Older adult's styles								$\chi^2$ <sup>a</sup> (df = 3)
		Competing		Avoiding		Accommodating		Problem-Solving		
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Family	Old-to-young criticism	97	29.0	6	16.3	2	40.0	4	40.0	238.34*
	Young-to-old criticism	38	11.4	11	29.7	1	20.0	1	10.0	71.90*
	Illegitimate demand	42	12.6	1	2.7	0	0.0	0	0	39.09*
	Old-to-young rebuff	32	9.6	11	29.7	0	0.0	3	30.0	29.26*
	Disagreement/generation gap	97	28.4	4	10.8	0	0.0	1	10.0	175.24*
	Young-to-old rebuff	30	9.0	4	10.8	2	40.0	1	10.0	62.67*
Total		341	100	39	100	6	100	14	100	
Non-family	Old-to-young criticism	122	50.6	3	13.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	113.29*
	Young-to-old criticism	31	12.9	7	31.8	3	75.0	0	0.0	33.56*
	Illegitimate demand	27	11.2	1	4.6	0	0.0	1	14.3	46.62*
	Old-to-young rebuff	37	15.4	7	31.8	0	0.0	3	42.9	44.09*
	Disagreement/Generation gap	19	7.9	2	9.1	1	25.0	1	14.3	40.83*
	Young-to-old rebuff	5	2.1	2	9.1	0	0.0	2	28.6	2.00
Total		169	100	22	100	4	100	7	100	

<sup>a</sup>  $\chi^2$  values indicate differences in the frequencies of each initiating factor across management styles used by older adults

\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 7

*Associations between Older Adult Conflict Management Style and Young Adult Conflict Management Style in Family and Nonfamily Intergenerational Relationships*

		Competing		Avoiding		Accommodating		Problem-solving		$\chi^2$ <sup>a</sup> (df = 3)
Young Adult's Style		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Family	Competing	240	70.8	12	30.8	2	33.3	2	14.3	646.38**
	Avoiding	52	15.3	24	61.5	3	50	0	0.0	45.90**
	Accommodating	44	13.0	2	5.1	1	16.7	1	7.1	113.83**
	Problem-solving	3	0.9	1	2.6	0	0	11	78.6	17.00**
	Total	339	100	39	100	6	100	14	100	
Non-family	Competing	152	61.5	13	61.9	3	75.0	0	0.0	382.08**
	Avoiding	49	19.8	5	23.8	1	25.0	0	0.0	77.38**
	Accommodating	44	17.8	2	9.5	0	0.0	0	0.0	38.35**
	Problem-solving	2	0.9	1	4.8	0	0.0	7	100	6.2*
	Total	247	100	22	100	4	100	7	100	

Note. <sup>a</sup>  $\chi^2$  values indicate differences in the frequencies of each initiating factor across management styles used by older adults

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 8

*Associations between Competing and Avoiding Styles used by Young and Older Adults in Family and Nonfamily Intergenerational Relationships.*

	Conflict style of the young adult	Conflict style of the older person		Adjusted residual
		Competing	Avoiding	
Family	Competing	82.2%	33.3%	6.6**
	Avoiding	17.8%	66.7%	6.6**
	Total	100%	100%	-
Nonfamily	Competing	75.6%	72.2%	.3
	Avoiding	24.4%	27.8%	.3
	Total	100%	100%	-

Note. \*\*  $p < .01$  if adjusted residual  $> 2.58$ .



3. What did you say or do during the conflict? What did the other party do or say during the conflict? Please provide details.

4. How long have you known this person? \_\_\_\_\_ Year(s) \_\_\_\_\_ Month(s)

**Note:** If you have known this older person for less than one month, indicate how many days you have known him or her in the following space.

\_\_\_\_\_ day(s).

5. What is your relationship with this older person? \_\_\_\_\_

6. How old is this person? \_\_\_\_\_

7. The other party's gender: Female \_\_\_\_\_ Male: \_\_\_\_\_

**Section II.**

1. Instructions: Consider the conflict scenario you have just reported, please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement by circling a corresponding number (1 = Strongly Disagree, 4 = Moderate, and 7 = Strongly Agree).

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>				<b>Strongly Agree</b>		
I had a close relationship with this older person.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The conflict was serious.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

**Section III.** Instructions: This section asks you to provide some basic background information. Please answer the following questions by choosing a corresponding number or filling in blanks.

1. What is your age?

\_\_\_\_\_ years old

2. What is your sex?

1. Male
2. Female

3. What is your racial/ethnic background?

1. European American/Caucasian/White
2. African American/Black
3. Latino American/Hispanic
4. Asian American
5. Other: Please specify \_\_\_\_\_

4. How many years of education have you received? (e.g., 12 for 12 years)

\_\_\_\_\_ years

5. What is your school year at KU?

1. Freshman
2. Sophomore
3. Junior
4. Senior
5. Graduate
6. Non-degree seeking
7. Other: Please specify \_\_\_\_\_