

## **Influence of Personality and Family on College Students' Conflict Handling Styles**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of personality and family conflict resolution on conflict handling styles of college students. Personality was measured by Big Five Inventory (BFI), while family conflict was measured by Family Conflict Resolution scale (FCRS). Conflict handling styles were measured by the Thomas-Kilmann MODE instrument. The study participants were 359 volunteer college students. The results indicated there was significant influence of two BFI personalities (Extraversion and Agreeableness) on the conflict handling styles as measured by the MODE instrument. There was no impact of family conflict resolution on handling conflict. The study makes a valuable contribution in understanding how personality and family influences conflict resolution.

### **Introduction**

There is a view that individuals tend to respond to conflicting situations based on their personality or other individual factors (Callanan, Benzing, & Perri, 2006). In this view, it is believed that individuals order their responses to conflict in a hierarchical manner such that their most dominant style is the approach they would likely use in reaction to a conflict. Renwick's research has indicated that basic psychological predisposition and differences in basic personality dimensions influence the manner in which individuals approach and manage conflicts (Moberg, 2001).

Studies have revealed that there is a negative effect on student learning when student and inter-parental conflict occurs (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp, & Dukewich, 2002; El-Sheikh, 1997). Davies and Cummings (1994) argued that there is less likelihood of a negative effect on children and young adults if conflict resolution methods are well established in the family conflict resolution styles. Cummings, Ballard, El-Sheikh, and Lake (1991) indicated that children who are subjected to unresolved inter-parental conflict display angrier reactions than those

whose inter-parental conflict has been resolved. Poskos, Handal, and Ubinger (2010) recommend more research in this area to ascertain the effects of family conflict resolution as perceived by children, adolescent, or young adults. The current study intends to use the Big Five Inventory (BFI) instrument to examine whether a strong relationship exists between personality and conflict handling styles among undergraduate college students.

### **Conflict Handling Styles**

Conflict handling refers to the resolution of the conflict. It involves the aspect of approach to conflict, behavior carried out to resolve the conflict, the propensity to handle conflict, and the relationship between individuals involved in the conflict (Janeja, 2011). Canary, Cupach and Messman (1995) noted many strategies, tactics, and styles in handling conflicts. Strategies are the approaches used to handle conflicts and can be integrative when parties work together, distributive when parties works against each other, and avoidant when a group works in opposition to another party. Conflict styles are, “individual tendencies to manage conflict episodes in a particular way” (Canary, Cupach and Messman, 1995). Curall, Friedman, Tidd, and Tsai (2000) noted that conflict styles tend to be predominant at a period of time and there are specific situations that requires certain styles

Conflict resolution practitioners must be prepared to deal with many problems and a diverse body of people in conflict resolution. Numerous studies have shown that Americans from diverse racial and ethnic groups experience conflict differently from each other and from members of outer groups (Bresnahan, Donohue, Shearman, & Guan, 2009). For example, African Americans show preference towards the highly expressive, affect-laden conflict style (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). Asian Americans prefer avoidance and a use of trusted go-betweens to seek conflict resolution (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). Native Americans have been shown to prefer restraint and use of a third-party elder for conflict orientation (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005).

Noting these differences in conflict orientation on the basis of ethnicity, it is prudent to predict that there would also be a difference in attitudes toward conflict and a willingness to seek mediation, especially if mediators are from different groups compared to parties in the conflict (Bresnahan, Donohue, Shearman and Guan, 2009). It is recommended for mediators to formulate culturally sensitive intervention to mitigate feelings of distance from the mediators and the parties concerned in the conflict. The approaches individuals use to resolve interpersonal conflicts can be due to different factors such as personality traits; family origins, which would imply a social learning theory; and power inequalities (Bandura, 1986; Weitzman & Weitzman, 2006). However, studies have indicated that certain trait-like tendencies are more reliable in predicting how individuals will attempt to control a conflict, look for a solution, or avoid the conflict all together (Moberg, 2001; Noore, 2006). College-educated people in their 20s and 30s have reported feeling unskilled in dealing with interpersonal conflicts (Gardner & Lambert, 1992). Weitzman and Weitzman (2006) indicated effective conflict resolution by young people requires them to integrate their emotions, cognition, and personal skills. These findings are important for scholars, schools, and employers to recognize the social skills and try to connect them with the intellectual and relational growth of young people as they join the wide community in various capacities (Taylor, 2010).

## **Personality and Conflict Management Styles**

Personality is a construct which describes the psychological type of an individual, and personality theory tries to explain how normal, healthy people differ from each other (Goel & Khan, 2012). Personality can directly be associated with quality of social interaction and relationships among people (Connolly, White, Stevens and Burstein, 1987). Personality factors are very significant in explaining how individuals deal with conflicts based on their interactions on a daily basis. Dealing with conflict positively leads to agreement and helps people to maintain relationships during the tense conflict phase (King, 1999). Herkenhoff (2004) argued that people who are intelligent emotionally make good friends, good partners, and better leaders. Different features of personality as described by various personality theories are found to affect conflict handling styles used by people in various social settings (Antonioni, 2007).

Antonioni (1998) concluded that personality does seem to play an important role in determining conflict behaviors. Barbuto, Phipps, and Xu (2009) indicated that there are some relationships that exist between conflict handling styles and the five dimensions of personality. Terhune (1970) revealed a strong relationship between conflict and personality traits exhibited by the parties who are in conflict. The study indicated that conflicts are more tense and tough when parties involved possess personality attributes like dominance, aggressiveness, and suspicion. However, conflicts are more manageable when concerned parties possess traits such as trust, sympathy, and open-mindedness (Goel & Khan, 2012). Terhune (1970) supported the view that some personal traits and personality attributes can predict how people will manage conflicts.

Park and Antonioni (2007) suggested that The Big Five personality factors are likely to predict how individuals can use specific conflict handling styles. Agreeableness is one of The Big Five personalities that are characterized by a strong motivation to maintain positive relationships with other people involved in a conflict, forgive others, and conform to demands involved in the resolution process (Kilpatrick & Johnson, 2001). Studies have shown that agreeable people experience more positive feelings when they get involved in cooperative behaviors rather than those that are competing. Agreeableness is a personality factor that is positively characterized by preferences for cooperation rather than competition (McCrae and Costa, 1997).

Extraverted individuals are characterized as sociable, assertive, and positive, and they are thought to be motivated by external rewards (Moberg, 2001). Gray (1981) noted the extraverted personality originates from sensitivity to reward signals, and thus they tend to use the competing style rather than accommodation or avoiding styles (Barrick, Stewart, & Piotrowski, 2002). Extroversion is a personality trait that is exhibited by individuals who are oriented toward working within groups, express assertiveness and dominance, and tend to be more forceful in communicating their opinions (McCrae & Costa, 1997).

Neuroticism is a personality type characterized by being anxious, emotionally unstable, easily embarrassed, and depressed (Park & Antonioni, 2007). People who are high in neuroticism are less able to control their emotions in social interactions. It has been reported that neuroticism has a negative relationship with dominating and a positive relationship with avoiding conflict handling styles (Antonioni, 1998). McCrae and Costa (1997) argued that neurotic individuals are sensitive to punishment and negative events, and they are likely to react more negatively to interpersonal conflict. As neurotic persons experience conflicts, they are likely to apply competing or avoiding styles of conflict handling (Antonioni, 1998; Moberg, 2001).

A personality of openness is related to imagination, non-conformity, and autonomy. This may lead to a direct confrontational attitude while seeking conflict resolution (McCrae & Costa, 1997; Tjosvold, 1998). People who are high in openness are likely to value competitiveness and tend to use a direct approach when resolving conflicts (Barbuto, et al., 2009). Open individuals tend to have positive relationships with the dominating style and are usually associated with open-mindedness and reflectivity. They take other people into consideration and engage in greater divergent thinking to come up with creative solutions to the conflict (Judge, Heller and Mount, 2002). Antonioni (1998) reported a positive relationship between the trait of openness and integrating styles, but a negative relationship with avoiding styles.

Conscientiousness is another personality that is highly associated with industriousness, discipline, and responsibility (Barbuto et al., 2009). Individuals with this personality tend to use competing styles as they tend to be better prepared to outperform the other parties in conflict situations (Park & Antonioni, 2007). Moberg (2001) noted that conscientious persons also have high integrity and they may prefer collaborative styles, which would allow other parties to be satisfied with the agreed upon conflict resolution. Conscientiousness is highly related to the intellectual dimension of personality (McCrae & Costa, 1997).

### **Influence of Family Conflict Resolution to Young Adults**

Intergenerational family conflict between parents and children is usually on the rise during early adolescence and declines by late adolescence and young adulthood (Arnett, 1999). This change is attributed to the way children establish their personal identities and social relationships as they grow up. The movement from home to college further loosens parental control, and this results in a decrease in overall family conflict (Lee, Su, & Yoshida, 2005).

Skinner, Edge, Altman, and Sherwood (2003) identified five strategies of coping with family conflict. These included problem solving, social support seeking, avoidance, distraction, and positive cognitive restructuring. One of the main negative effects of intergenerational family conflict is that individuals might not be using effective coping strategies to manage and resolve conflict; rather, they use those that have been established in their family history. Katz and Woodin (2002) noted that according to transitional theory, effectiveness of any coping strategy depends on many factors such as people involved, culture, and the situation.

One of the ingredients of a fruitful interpersonal relationship is the use of positive conflict handling styles such as problem solving, humor, compromise, and apology (Cummings, Goeke-Morey, Papp and Dukewich, 2002). Studies have shown that such behaviors can be transmitted across generations as children obtain them from their families of origin and these behaviors can be transmitted to later generations (Whitton, Waldinger, Schulz, Allen, Crowell and Hauser, 2008). Parental interpersonal conflicts act as a guide to how children will interpret the conflict within the family system (Harold, Shelton, Goeke-Morey, Cummings, 2004). Social learning theory supports the concept that behavior in the family can be modeled and carried by children through their adult relationships (Bandura, 1977). Harrington and Metzler (1997) suggested that dysfunctions in families of origin contribute to difficulties with problem solving, communication, and distress in adult intimate relationships.

Research has demonstrated that parental conflict resolution handling styles have a major influence on the way children approach conflict resolution on their own as they model and translate parental behavior outside the home (Dodds, Atkinson, Turner, Blums, & Lendich, 1999). When parents are able to resolve conflict well and appropriately, this is transmitted to the

children as effective models and skills for problem solving that can be used in those young people's future relationships with peers (Grych & Fincham, 1990).

Studies have found that sibling relationships have given family members opportunities to develop conflict resolution skills since siblings are the first peer-like relationships most children experience (Reese-Weber, 2000). The family forms the context in which siblings interact to develop conflict resolution skills that children will later use in life. The cognitive skills development of the adolescents influences the effectiveness of conflict resolution skills with family members (Smetana, 1989). Social learning theory demonstrates that behavior modeled by others is easily displayed in relationships, and the behavior of higher-status individuals is replicated by individuals of lower status in the relationship (Bandura, 1989). In the family setting, parental conflicts would more likely influence sibling conflict (Reese-Weber, 2000).

Studies have shown that parent-child interactions have a great influence on later family relationships when it comes to closeness and control of conflicts (Dumlao & Botta, 2000).

Social learning theory predicts that behavior patterns learned in the family are practiced in young adulthood (Andrews, Foster, Capaldi, & Hops, 2000). Coercion theory predicts that ineffective parental conflict management styles will produce coercive, unskilled responses to family, young adult, and peer relationships (Andrews, Foster, Capaldi and Hops, 2000). Reese-Weber and Bartle-Haring (1998) noted that father-adolescent conflict resolution styles were related to sibling conflict resolution styles. It is believed that adolescent conceptions of parental authority and parenting styles have a lot to do with intensity and frequency of adolescent-parent conflicts (Smetana, 1995). Dumlao (1997) noted the connection between family communication and several conflict handling styles while children were dealing with their fathers in situations involving conflict.

## **Method**

This research was quantitative and utilized survey research method. The Big Five Inventory (BFI) and Family Conflict Resolution Scale (FCRS) instruments were used to collect data on participants' personality and family conflict resolution respectively. Participants of the study responded to two different surveys on personality and family conflict resolution levels. The data obtained was used to determine the influence they have on participants' choices of conflict handling styles using the Thomas –Kilmann Conflict Mode instrument.

## **Study Settings**

Participants of the study are undergraduate students from different majors in a public state University in the USA, with an enrollment of approximately 13,303 undergraduates (2012-2013 academic year). Gender distribution of all undergraduate students is 47% male and 53% female. About 6.6% of the undergraduate students live in college housing and 93.4% of the students live off campus. Ethnicity by percentage showed that Asian/Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander were 1%, Black or African American—17%, Hispanic/ Latino—3%, White—72%, Two or More Races—1%, and Non-Resident Alien—1.0%. Attendance status of the students is 78% full-time and 22% part-time.

## Participants Demographic Information

A total of 359 participants responded to the survey. The mean age of the participants was 20 years with the youngest being 17 and the oldest being 58 years. The majority of the participants were females contributing to 60% and males 40% of the sample.

Sophomores formed the majority of the participants at over 33%, followed by juniors with 24 % and seniors with 11%. Students who identified as Caucasian formed about 73% of the participants followed by students who identified as African American at 16%, and about 10% did not declare their ethnicity. 22% of the participants were from the Criminal Justice major followed by Nursing at 11%. About 20% of the participants did not declare their major of study.

## Research Questions

RQ1. *Is there a statistically significant difference in how individual personality, as measured by BFI personality instrument, influences the conflict handling styles that students use as measured by Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument?*

RQ2. *Is there a statistically significant difference in how students' family conflict resolution styles, as measured by the Family Conflict Resolution Scale, influence conflict handling styles as measured by Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument?*

## Instrumentation

1. *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument*: The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode instrument (TKI) measures conflict handling styles of individuals (an additional version provides a 360 conflict style assessment). The TKI categorizes the conflict styles of individuals along two dimensions – assertiveness and cooperativeness (Thomas, 1976). Assertiveness indicates the degree to which an individual attempts to satisfy one's own concerns, while cooperativeness measures the degree to which a person attempts to satisfy the concerns of others. Five conflict modes are plotted based on the assertiveness vs. cooperativeness axes (Womack, 1988). These five modes of managing conflict include the following:

- i. Collaborating: Assertive and cooperative, people using this mode try mutual problem solving to satisfy both parties.
- ii. Compromising: Individual using this mode try to use both assertiveness and cooperation. They try to exchange concessions to resolve conflict.
- iii. Competing: Persons using this mode demonstrates conflict resolution styles that are more assertive and less cooperative.
- iv. Accommodating: Individuals who use this mode are unassertive and cooperative; they try to satisfy other people goals.
- v. Avoiding: People using this mode are unassertive and uncooperative. They usually postpone or avoid any unpleasant issues when dealing with others.

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode instrument consists of 30 paired items, which makes a total of 60 statements. Participants are asked to choose the response from each statement pair that best describes the way one usually behaves in conflict situations (Womack, 1988). It should be noted that there are no “good” or “bad” styles; rather, style efficacy is situational.

2. *Big Five Inventory Instrument*: The Big Five Instrument was developed by Lewis Goldberg. This 44-item inventory measures an individual on the Big Five Factors of personality (Goldberg, 1993). The Big Five Inventory (BFI) is a self-report inventory designed to measure five personality dimensions and consists of short phrases with relatively accessible vocabulary. The personality dimensions measured includes:
  - i. Extraversion: encompasses traits such as talkativeness and assertiveness.
  - ii. Agreeableness: Has traits such as sympathetic, kindness and affectionate.
  - iii. Conscientiousness: With traits such as being organized, thorough and playful.
  - iv. Neuroticism: Traits such as being tense, moody and anxious.
  - v. Openness: Includes traits such as having interest, resourcefulness and insightfulness.

The five subscales in the instrument include Extraversion (8 items), Agreeableness (9 items), Conscientiousness (9 items), Neuroticism (8 items), and Openness (10 items).

3. *Family Conflict Resolution Scale (FCRS)*: The Family Conflict Resolution Scale (FCRS) was developed as a measure to assess conflict resolution within the family. A total of 17 of items were used to provide a total score for family conflict resolution. Fourteen (14) items were answered using a true/false response format.

## Results

RQ1. *Is there a statistically significant difference in how individual personality, as measured by BFI personality instrument, influences the conflict handling styles that students use as measured by Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument?*

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with Thomas-Kilmann Conflict MODE styles as the dependent variables (Competing, Collaborating, Compromising, Avoiding, and Accommodating) and each of the five personalities as measured by Big Five Personality Instrument (Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness) as the factor or independent variable. A significant effect was found for Extraversion and Agreeableness. For Extraversion ( $\Lambda(108, 1296) = .645, p = .006$ ). For Agreeableness ( $\Lambda(112, 1293) = .632, p = .004$ ).

Therefore analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted as a follow-up procedure. However no significant effect was found for Conscientiousness ( $\Lambda(104, 1295) = .711, p > .05$ ), Neuroticism ( $\Lambda(116, 1290) = .687, p > .05$ ) and Openness ( $\Lambda(108, 1298) = .690, p > .05$ ).

One Way ANOVA was conducted with the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument as the dependent variables (Competing, Collaborating, Compromising, Avoiding, and Accommodating) and the two Big Five Instrument personalities that showed significant effect in the MANOVA (Extraversion and Agreeableness) as the factor or independent variable.

For the Extraversion BFI subscale, one-way ANOVA yielded a significant difference for the competing subscale ( $F(27, 330) = 2.02, p < .05$ ). For the Collaborating subscale ( $F(27, 329) = 1.10, p > .05$ ). For the Compromising subscale ( $F(27, 330) = 1.04, p > .05$ ). For the Avoiding subscale ( $F(27, 329) = 2.17, p < .05$ ). For the Accommodating subscale ( $F(27, 330) = 1.11, p > .05$ ).

For the Agreeableness BFI subscale, one-way ANOVA yielded a significant difference for the competing subscale ( $F(28, 329) = 1.77, p < .05$ ). For the Collaborating subscale ( $F(28, 328) = 1.31, p > .05$ ). For the Compromising subscale ( $F(28, 329) = 1.48, p > .05$ ). For the Avoiding subscale ( $F(28, 328) = 0.84, p > .05$ ). For the Accommodating subscale ( $F(28, 329) = 1.67, p < .05$ ). The results indicated statistically significant difference in how some individual personality influences the conflict handling styles that participants used in conflict resolution.

*RQ.2. Is there statistically significant difference in how students' family conflict resolution as measured by Family Conflict Resolution scale influence conflict handling styles as measured by Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument?*

One Way ANOVA was conducted with Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Styles as the dependent variables (Competing, Collaborating, Compromising, Avoiding, and Accommodating) and the Family Conflict Resolution scale totals as the factor or the independent variable. The one-way ANOVA yielded the following results: For the competing ( $F(31, 326) = 0.81, p > .05$ ), Collaborating ( $F(31, 325) = 0.69, p > .05$ ), Compromising ( $F(31, 326) = 1.05, p > .05$ ), Avoiding ( $F(31, 325) = 0.99, p > .05$ ) and Accommodating ( $F(31, 326) = 0.66, p > .05$ ). The results indicated there was no statistically significant difference in how students' family conflict resolution influenced conflict handling styles.

## Discussion

This evidence supports research findings that indicate some personality traits tend to influence the choice of conflict handling styles. Extraverted individuals are characterized as sociable, assertive, and positive, and they are thought to be motivated both external and internal rewards (Moberg, 2001). It has been noted that the extraverted personality originates from sensitivity to reward signals, and thus they tend to use the competing style rather than accommodation or avoiding styles (Barrick, Stewart, & Piotrowski, 2002). Extraversion is a personality trait that is exhibited by individuals who are oriented toward working within groups, express assertiveness and dominance, and tend to be more forceful in communicating their opinions (McCrae & Costa, 1997). The current study did not agree with a study by Olekaln and Smith (1999) that argued that individuals with high extraversion tend to possess high pro-social orientation, which leads to high concern for others, and hence they are more inclined toward integrating and compromising styles while handling conflicts (Olekalns & Smith, 1999).

The current study indicates that agreeableness was statistically significant to competing and accommodating styles. This finding concurred with Kilpatrick and Johnson's, (2001) study that reasoned that agreeableness is characterized by a strong motivation to maintain positive relationships with other people involved in a conflict. Agreeable people experience more positive feelings when they get involved in cooperative behaviors rather than those people that are competing. Agreeableness personality is positively characterized by preferences for cooperation rather than competition (McCrae and Costa, 1997). Persons high in agreeableness tend to demonstrate sympathy and help other people. Antonioni (1998) indicated that agreeableness is positively related to integrating and avoiding, however negatively related to dominating. The result showed that Thomas-Kilmann Mode Conflict handling styles was not influenced by the Family Conflict resolution Scale (FCRS). The Conflict MODE handling styles instrument has five subscales (Competing, Collaborating, Compromising, Avoiding and

Accommodating). The researcher expected participants with a high score on the family conflict resolution scale (FCRS) to score high on the conflict MODE handling styles in the areas of cooperativeness such as Compromising and Collaborating.

The results defy the Social Learning Theory and the Coercion Theory that each predicts an association between conflicts within the family and dysfunctional conflicts in young-adult relationships. Social Learning Theory predicts that behavior patterns learned in the family are practiced in young adulthood (Andrews, Foster, Capaldi, & Hops, 2000). Coercion Theory predicts that infective parental conflict management styles will produce coercive, unskilled responses to family, young adult, and peer relationships (Andrews, Foster, Capaldi, and Hops, 2000).

Arnett (1999) noted, intergenerational family conflict between parents and children is usually on the rise during early adolescence and declines by late adolescence and young adulthood. The sample of this study was mainly composed of young adults who might have changed their perceptions of family conflict that they had when they were adolescents. The mean age of the sample was 22.06 years with a mode of 20 and a range of 58.

The movement from home to college leads to further loosen parental control, and this may result in a decrease in overall family conflict (Lee, Su, & Yoshida, 2005). The movement from home to college may have contributed to the change in perspective of the family of origin conflict. College students may be dealing with other types of family conflict such as marriage conflict, cohabiting issues and conflict of starting families of their own. Such may make conflict of their family of origin of less significant at this stage of their life.

## Conclusion

MANOVA indicated that there was significant influence of two BFI personalities (Extraversion and Agreeableness) on the conflict handling styles as measured by The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode instrument (TKI). ANOVA indicated there was no impact of family conflict resolution on conflict handling styles.

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