

EFFECTS OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION STRATEGIES ON STUDENTS' EMPATHY: EVIDENCE FROM ACCOUNTING STUDENTS AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN BANGKOK, THAILAND

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**Abstract:-**

*The purpose of this current study was to examine effects of conflict resolution strategies on empathy. A total of 105 students in the four-year program in accounting was distributed a self-administrated questionnaire for data collection. A modified version of Toronto Empathy Questionnaire and an adjusted version of Conflict Management Styles Questionnaire were employed to measure empathy and conflict handling styles of accounting students. Using stepwise regression analyses, results indicated accommodating style and collaborating style were factors that had a positive influence on empathy of accounting students, which these two conflict handling styles explained 22.1% of variance to empathy among accounting students. This could be concluded that only high degree of cooperativeness in conflict management styles had positively significant effects on empathy among accounting students. All in all, the more accounting students employed accommodating and collaborating styles, they became more empathetic on another person.*

**Keywords:-***Conflict management, Conflict resolution strategies, Empathy, Empathy level*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Conflict is inevitable. Conflict can happen in various forms of communication in every interpersonal connection, which can result in both negative and positive effects. Interpersonal conflict in organizations commonly occurs when two parties are interdependent or mutually aware that their goals are incompatible or when they have different values, thoughts, beliefs and perceptions leading to interfering another party's goal attainment (Kantek & Kartal, 2015). To properly handle conflict, individuals need to understand the consequence of conflict resolution between the conflicting parties (DeVito, 2016). Conflict handling styles proposed by conflict researchers (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974) identify the preference of conflict resolution strategies that an individual mostly uses when in a given conflict situation. To implement the suitable approach and reach the best concession for both parties, individuals need to realize and understand the differences of each side, which requires numerous key factors to support. Empathy is considered as a key factor among various components that help individuals find the best conflict resolution (Promsri, 2019). Empathy concept has long been paid much attention from scholars and researchers in social sciences for decades (Smith, 2017). Empathy refers to the ability to feel other people's emotions and imagine what another person might be feeling (UC Berkeley's GGSC, 2019). Empathy can be employed to increase relationships with other people through the understanding of others' emotions and experiences (Halpern, 2003). Empathy plays a crucial role in human interaction and communication in particular while being in conflict situation. Recent literature indicated the importance of fostering empathy to minimize conflict and improve the relationship with other people (Rutsch, 2013). Past research revealed that people with greater use of positive problem solving conflict resolution approaches had higher empathy towards their partners in connections and higher relationship satisfaction (PerroneMcGoven et al., 2014). Also, Nosek and Durán (2017) attempted to identify whether the nonviolent communication had an impact on empathy development and conflict management skills in youth. These past studies obviously demonstrated the linkage between conflict resolution strategies and empathy. According to Thomas and Kilmann (1974), there are two major dimensions that determine the characteristics of individual to respond in conflict situation. Those components compose of assertiveness and cooperativeness. In other words, individuals can handle conflict situation based on the degree on concerns for oneself and others' needs and interests. Assertiveness refers to the extent in which a person attempts to protect his/her needs, benefits, and values, which can lead to win-lose outcome in conflict resolution. While cooperativeness refers to the extent in which an individual try to help the others fulfill their needs and interests, which empathy is considered as a key factor that associates with this dimension.

Despite the importance of empathy on conflict resolution, the prior research barely examined the association between these two variables. Only a few studies attempted to explore the relationship between conflict management and empathy (Hastings, Kavookjian, & Ekong, 2019; Promsri, 2019). Moreover, exploring effects of conflict management styles on empathy has been scarce and needs more attention by researchers in social sciences. As Promsri (2019) suggested that a future research should conduct regression analysis to examine cause and effect of conflict resolution strategies and empathy. Hence, this study aimed at scrutinizing the influences of conflict management styles on empathy. This study is the first study in its field that tries to investigate the effects of conflict handling styles on students' empathy in order to enhance a body of knowledge in psychology, business, and social sciences.

## **Literature Reviews**

### **Conflict Resolution Strategies**

Jeffery and Jennifer (2007) noted that the favorable conflict handling style of individuals was developed based on Blake and Mouton's concept in which two essential dimensions: assertiveness and cooperativeness were used to determine conflict resolution strategies. The assertiveness dimension refers to concerns for an individual's own interests, values, and needs. In contrast, the cooperativeness dimension, also known as empathy, refers to concerns for others' needs and interests. The mixture of these two dimensions creates five different conflict resolution strategies included competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating styles.

The competing style represents great concern for own needs and desires, but little concern for the others' needs. This strategy leads to win-lose consequence in conflict situation. The avoiding style displays unconcern for both own and others' needs and interests. This style reflects the low degree of assertiveness and cooperativeness, which produces lose-lose solution. The accommodating style demonstrates a high degree of cooperativeness in which an individual sacrifice own needs for the sake of others' needs. The key purpose of using this approach is to maintain a relationship with the other parties. The outcome of this strategy is lose-win. The collaborating style shows the high degree of both assertiveness and cooperativeness, which a person is concerned for both own and the other person's benefits. Although this approach is ideally suitable for many conflict situations, this strategy takes more time and requires a willingness to interact and communicate between both sides. The consequence of this approach is win-win solution. The compromising style represents a middle of the road approach for conflict management in which both parties mutually win and lose. This approach might be appropriate when both sides can minimize their needs and desires to a halfway in order to maintain peace and build the long-term relationship (DeVito, 2016).

### **Empathy**

In 1880s, German psychologist named Theodore Lipps originally proposed the term of empathy using the word "einfühlung", which literally means "in-feeling" to define the emotional appreciation of someone's feeling (Ioannidou & Konstantikaki, 2008). By definition, empathy is the ability to acknowledge the sensations or feelings of other people. Individuals use their experience to understand other people's feelings through both verbal and nonverbal communications (Badea & Penã, 2010). Empathy can be described as "the ability to see the world through someone else's eyes", which

implies establishing the capacity to imagine what another person is experiencing and thinking in a specific circumstance. The concept of empathy is broadly identified into two different facets including cognitive empathy and emotional empathy. Cognitive empathy also known as empathic accuracy refers to the ability to experience and understand the others' emotions and feelings. In contrast, emotional empathy refers to when a person is able to sense a similar feeling to another party or sensations and feelings in response to others' emotions (McCauley, 2013). In order to empathize with others, individuals need not to early judge them but to admit their existence both positively and negatively, which is known as "unconditional positive regard" (Roger, 1995). Empathy is different from sympathy in which empathy refers to the feeling of an individual has to what another person is feeling while sympathy refers to a person's feeling of a supportive emotion about the others' feelings (Keen, 2006).

***The Relationship between Conflict Management Styles and Empathy***

Hastings, Kavookjian, and Ekong (2019) investigated the association between conflict management styles and attitudes toward empathy among pharmacy students. This cross-sectional study employed Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument professional version and the Kiersma-Chen Empathy Scale (KCES) as the instrument to evaluate conflict management styles and attitudes toward empathy, respectively. Data were gathered from two batches of first year pharmacy students in a university in the U.S. through an online survey approach. Findings showed that students who had a higher score on competing style had significant lower attitudes toward empathy while those who scored higher on accommodating style had significant higher attitudes toward empathy. At the same period of time, Promsri (2019) also examined the linkage between empathy and conflict management styles among MBA students in a selected public university in Thailand. A total of 17 students were asked to complete a self-administrated questionnaire in the classroom. Empathy was assessed through the Toronto Empathy Questionnaire while a modified version of 15-item conflict management questionnaire was used to measure students' conflict resolution styles. Pearson correlation was tested to examine a relationship between empathy and conflict management styles. Results of analysis demonstrated the statistically significant association between accommodating conflict style and empathy. No significant relationship between other conflict management styles and empathy was found.

According to the literature reviews, this present study proposed research hypotheses as follows:

- H<sub>1</sub>: There was a negative effect of competing style on empathy of accounting students.
- H<sub>2</sub>: There was a positive effect of collaborating style on empathy of accounting students.
- H<sub>3</sub>: There was a positive effect of compromising style on empathy of accounting students.
- H<sub>4</sub>: There was a negative effect of avoiding style on empathy of accounting students.
- H<sub>5</sub>: There was a positive effect of accommodating style on empathy of accounting students.

**Methodology**

This study was an explanatory study. A sample of 105 undergraduate students who registered in a four-year program in accounting was participated in this study. These participants were asked to fill out the self-report questionnaire through the online system. Conflict resolution strategies were measured through a modified version of 15-item conflict handling styles questionnaire presented by Schermerhorn, Hunt, and Osborn (2002). This scale was a 4-point rating scale ranging from 1 = very unlikely to 4 = very likely included five conflict resolution approaches: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating styles. The alpha score of this scale was 0.675, which was satisfactory to be utilized to assess conflict management styles among accounting students. Empathy was evaluated by using the modified version of 10-item Toronto Empathy Questionnaire based on the development of Spreng, McKinnon, Mar, and Levine, (2009). This scale was a 5-point rating scale ranging from 0 = never to 4 = always. The alpha score of .707 indicated that empathy scale was suitable for measuring students' empathy level, according to Nunnally (1978). Descriptive statistics included frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation and inferential statistics were calculated to test research hypotheses. To explore the effects of conflict resolution strategies on students' empathy level, multiple regressions with stepwise approach were computed through the statistical computer program.

**Findings**

Among 105 accounting students, 15.2 percent of them were male and 84.8 percent were female. The average age of these students was 20.94 years old. The average income per month was 3,165.71. This group of students reported that they mostly preferred accommodating style (M = 3.39, S.D. = .436) as this style was rated as the highest mean score of conflict resolution strategies followed by avoiding style, collaborating style, compromising style, and competing style. For level of empathy, this group of accounting students reported the high level of empathy (M = 2.86, S.D. = .446).

**Table 1 Mean and Standard Deviation of Conflict Resolution Strategies and Empathy (n =105)**

<b>Conflict Resolution Strategies</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Competing Style	2.76	.408	5
Collaborating Style	3.08	.508	3
Compromising Style	2.90	.447	4
Avoiding Style	3.08	.443	2
Accommodating Style	3.39	.436	1
<b>Empathy</b>	2.86	.446	

The basic assumptions to confirm the suitability of using stepwise regression were performed carefully prior to conducting stepwise regression analysis in order to create the best model that accounts for the most variance in the outcome variable (R-squared). Kolmogorov-Smirnov test (sample size was more than 50) was computed along with Scatterplot and P-P Plot of Regression Standardized Residual to determine the normality. As Kolmogorov-Smirnov test demonstrated the p-value greater than .05 ( $p = .200$ ) indicating that the sample of this study was normally distributed (Ghasemi & Zahediasl, 2012). In addition, P-P Plot of Regression Standardized Residual graph showed no significant deviations of residuals from the line and the line was not curved indicating the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance (Heidel, 2019). The Durbin-Watson was also computed to assess autocorrelation in regression data, the value of 2.228 could be assumed that there was no autocorrelation (Groebner, Shannon, & Fry, 2014). Additionally, the calculation of multicollinearity was conducted through the examination of tolerance and VIF, which value of tolerance was .859 and VIF was 1.164 (Model 2). Values of these measures indicated no presence of multicollinearity (Researchconsultation, 2007). Table 2 demonstrated model 1 of stepwise regression, which accommodating style could explain 17.9% of variance to empathy ( $R^2 = .187$ ,  $F(1, 105) = 23.624$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Based on the model 1, the standardized coefficients for accommodating styles ( $\beta = .432$ ,  $p < .01$ ) was significant. This explained that only accommodating style was factor that had positively impact on empathy of accounting students.

**Table 2 Stepwise Regression Analysis of Conflict Resolution Strategies on Empathy: Model 1**

Model 1	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
Constant	1.365	.312		4.379	.000**		
Accom	.442	.091	.432	4.860	.000**	1.000	1.000
<b>n = 105</b>							
<b>F = 23.624</b>		<b>df = 1</b>	<b>p-value &lt; .01</b>	<b>R<sup>2</sup> = .187</b>	<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .179</b>		

\*Significant at 0.5 level, \*\*Significant at 0.01 level. Accom = Accommodating Style

Table 3 displayed model 2 of stepwise regression, which two conflict resolution strategies included accommodating and collaborating styles could explain 22.1% of variance to empathy among accounting students ( $R^2 = .221$ ,  $F(1, 105) = 4.45$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Findings revealed that coefficients for accommodating style ( $\beta = .357$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and collaborating style ( $\beta = .199$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were significant. This explained that accommodating style and collaborating style were factors that had a positive impact on empathy of accounting students. Based on these findings, this could be concluded that only high degree of cooperativeness in conflict resolution strategies had positively significant effects on empathy among accounting students. In sum, the more accounting students employed accommodating and collaborating styles, they became more empathetic on another person. As shown, the research hypothesis #2 and #5 were confirmed.

**Table 3 Stepwise Regression Analysis of Conflict Resolution Strategies on Empathy: Model 2**

Model 2	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
Constant	1.085	.334		3.248	.002**		
Accom	.366	.097	.357		.006**	.859	1.164
Collabo	.175	.083	.199		.037*	.859	1.164
<b>n = 105</b>							
<b>F = 4.45</b>		<b>df = 1</b>	<b>p-value &lt; .01</b>	<b>R<sup>2</sup> = .221</b>	<b>Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = .205</b>		

\*Significant at 0.5 level, \*\*Significant at 0.01 level. Accom = Accommodating Style; Collabo = Collaborating Style

### Conclusions, Discussions, and Recommendations

The objective of this present study was to examine the effects of conflict resolution strategies on empathy among undergraduate students who studied in a four-year program in accounting at a select public university in Bangkok, Thailand. Analyses of stepwise regressions indicated that accommodating and collaborating styles are conflict resolution strategies that had a positively significant effect on empathy of students. These findings partly confirmed the previous studies of Hastings, Kavookjian, and Ekong (2019) and Promsri (2019), which the association between accommodating style and empathy was discovered. However, the effect of collaborating style on empathy was a new knowledge and needed more attention in the further study in this topic. Also, the results of this present study were consistent with concept of conflict resolution strategies proposed by Thomas and Kilmann (1974), which accommodating and collaborating styles represent high degree in cooperativeness or empathy while being in a conflict situation. The higher degree in these two styles a student had, he/she is more likely to become more empathetic.

For limitations and recommendations for further studies, the scale measurements in this study need to be rearranged through a confirmation of validity and reliability in the next study as the alpha score for both instruments were quite low. Besides, the sample size should be expanded as this study gathered data solely from the junior students who studied in a

four-year program in accounting. Students in other programs and study years should be concentrated for data collection in the next study. Thus, the generalizability of this study needs to be conducted with caution. For research implications, this selected public university can use the results of study as a direction for developing training programs and activities that support the improvement of students' conflict resolution skills and empathy. Besides, rearranging curriculums and course instructions that add the knowledge and idea on how to enhance these skills is also recommended.

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