

Interpersonal Relationship Dynamics: On the Perception of Conflict in College Students

Enrique Antonio

College friendships are a multifaceted system of conflict dynamics counterbalanced by the adolescent mindset. The current research on friendships among college students focuses solely on interactions between dyads, this study furthers current understandings of the perception of conflict and its effect on conflict styles, emotion, and life satisfaction. Methods by which data was collected included an online survey taken by undergraduate college students. Results indicated that emotion and conflict styles are related to the perception of conflict in students. Qualitative data indicated that emotional support is important to college students and affected their overall life satisfaction positively. Discussions of limitations and future research directions are offered.

Introduction

College friendships are a multifaceted system of conflict dynamics counterbalanced by the adolescent mindset. Analyzing the conflict dynamics between undergraduate students in a group setting can provide a multi-perspective lens into how conflict is handled within those groups of friends. Examining this community can also give further insight into how conflict is perceived by students in the current generation.

Current research in friendship among college students focuses solely on dyadic interactions (Boman et al., 2019). However, it is speculated that students experiencing excessive stress are more likely to put themselves around a group of friends, rather than a dyadic relationship between two persons (Dissing et al., 2019). For that reason, this study will acknowledge that college friendships are more likely to be based in groups. The phrases “my core group of friends” and “the friend group” are meant to articulate the self-reported group of friends with which an individual is closest. The goal is not to define the amount of people in a core group of friends, but rather, to examine how conflict is perceived within it.

This study will analyze the contrasting perceptions of conflict between college students. By analyzing this idea in a broad context and discovering similarities in results, this research aims to understand common perceptions between students on how a conflict is approached within their core group of friends. Over the course of this study, the importance of the perception of conflict within friend groups will be analyzed among college undergraduates. A review of literature will provide background understanding of the key variables: friend groups, conflict, emotion, and life satisfaction. The methods used to find data will be explained alongside the results. Additionally, implications of the gathered data will be discussed. An interpretation of limitations will be provided at the end.

Literature Review

The content here will explain the relevance of friend groups among undergraduate students with the perception of conflict, emotion, and life satisfaction as variables to the study. This information provided will lead to a thorough understanding of those variables and their importance to this study.

Friend Groups

Speculation suggests that students who have higher perceived amounts of stress will surround themselves with more people (Dissing et al., 2019), thus forming larger groups of friends. This may be because students who feel that their emotional needs are met embrace the idea of close emotional relationships among friends; indicating that emotional support may offset the effects of stress; reporting a

higher reason for living (Hope & Smith-Adcock, 2015). College students desire friendship now more than ever, likely because late-age adolescents are especially at high risk for experiencing loneliness (Cutrona, 1982). It is equally important to recognize that these friendships they forge may be sought out due to internal loneliness; it should not be assumed that they were cultivated due to being socially well suited for each other, or rather ‘compatible’ (Spithoven et al., 2018). These groups are generally smaller and more personal, as students opt to stick with whatever friendship is immediate to them.

Understanding friendship between students entails more than examining a perfectly compatible dyadic coupling of individuals; it is necessary to examine the differing perceptions of conflict students have. The college interpersonal relationship could offer a distinct lens into the outcomes of communication within a group setting. Adjusting focus to this idea is meant to further establish that the interpersonal difficulties a student faces is as complicated as the way they go about solving them. Several people are involved when conflict emerges, which often complicates how understandings are negotiated among friends (Hornstein, 1967). Dissecting a potential way to smooth out communication in groups is imperative for implementing measures to improve communication in this increasingly growing demographic.

Perception of Conflict Styles

Differing views of how to approach conflict resolution may vary among adolescents based on the communication styles learned from their families. As a result, adolescents unknowingly enter into relationships with others who have very different perceptions of how to address conflict. Research has shown the importance of understanding constructive conflict management for that reason (Dost-Gözkan, 2019). In spite of this, current literature has only presented finite information on conflict in friendships between adolescents, and seldom out of the contexts of dyads (Bowen et al., 2019). A student's conflict style affects the way conflict flows through a friend group due to different outcomes for differentiating and colliding conflict styles (Antonioni, 1998). Given that students often surround themselves with other students when dealing with stress (Dissing et al., 2019), analyzing these conflict styles further will deepen understandings of the complexity inherent to friend group conflicts.

While the interpretation of conflict styles within current literature varies, the overarching goals of the individual styles appear to be similar across research. They differ only in what they are referred to as in current research (Adkins, 2006; Antonioni, 1998). Common responses to conflict fall into categories that include: collaboration, competition, avoidance, harmonization and compromise. A collaborating conflict style refers to both individuals working to find the best outcome for a conflict. A competing style is an authoritarian approach to the situation. Avoidance is actively dodging disagreement. Harmonizing is suppression of emotion to keep the peace during conflict. And finally, compromise is finding a middle ground accommodating to both preferred outcomes (Adkins, 2006). Each student is unique in their conflict style. When a group has several different approaches to conflict because of their individual styles, it may present difficulty for individuals to reach shared understandings (Antonioni, 1998). This adds to the growing question of how the perception of a certain conflict style may play into a student's reaction to that conflict. Understanding how perception of conflict interacts with an approach to conflict within an individual in the context of a group setting is the aim of this research. Exploring the ways that students perceive conflict is the first step.

RQ1: Does one's self-reported conflict style predict how people perceive conflict within a friendship group?

RQ2: How do students' individual conflict styles impact how they perceive the conflict styles of their friendship group as a whole?

Emotion Regulation

Emotional reactions to conflict influence decision making (Mordka, 2016). However, emotions evoke a broad complex of sensations that do not have a concrete meaning, and therefore, remain speculative in nature (Charland, 2006; Mordka, 2016). Due to this, scholarly understandings of the role emotion plays

in conflict vary (Pollak et al., 2019). In any case, it is clear that emotion is not only a response to conflict, but also an instigator of it (Caldara et al., 2017).

To set the groundwork, emotional regulation tactics are how students go about managing emotions once they experience a reaction. The reappraisal tactic manages emotions by acknowledging feelings and using that as a means to guide a response to conflict. The suppression tactic refers to subduing emotional reactions as a means to better control a response to conflict (Gross & John, 2003). These tactics vary from student to student and depend on the emotion that a student experiences. Furthermore, research indicates that individuals use prior emotional knowledge to try and predict the intensity of an emotional reaction in others. However, individual ability to do so is flawed due to the fact that students rely on their personal emotions to guide the thought process (Gendron et al., 2020). This suggests that an individual perception of another person's reaction to conflict may be largely influenced by that individual's internal emotional reaction to the situation.

Understanding how college students regulate emotional reactions on a level that we are able to quantify in relationship to conflict styles is imperative. Due to the detrimental reactions that youth can have due to these complex emotions (Pollak et al., 2019; Hope & Smith-Adcock, 2015), acknowledging the gap in research here may prove useful in improving communication tactics. In other words, college students experience complex emotions and those emotions are extremely difficult to quantify. Despite that, focusing on emotional reactions and viewing how they are related to the perception of conflict in a group setting can organize those thoughts into a recognizable pattern, thus prompting further inquiry. In doing this, emotions, and potentially how students regulate them, may be given a working function in relation to perception of conflict (Pollak et al., 2019).

RQ3: Does emotion regulation predict how individuals perceive conflict in their friend groups?

RQ4: How would students describe when their friend group does not respect their emotions?

Life Satisfaction

It is helpful to recognize that friendship is something beneficial for student success (Bronkema & Bowman, 2018). Students who report having a close college friend they are able to connect with have higher reasons for living (Hope & Smith-Adcock, 2015). This, however, would only account for the benefits of friendship and not underpinnings of the conflict that happens within it. Current research has yet to focus on friendship as a factor of overall life satisfaction in spite of growing evidence that shows friendship satisfaction as a facet of life satisfaction (Heller et al., 2004). This gap in research leaves an area of opportunity for inquiring into whether life satisfaction is affected by conflict styles. More specifically, examining the perception of conflict styles as it relates to individual and group settings. The perception of conflict may be positively linked to life satisfaction; research outlined the need for constructive conflict resolution patterns to contribute to their life satisfaction as a whole (Dost-Gözkan, 2019). Additionally, with an analysis of the relationship between emotional regulation strategies and life satisfaction, the most effective emotional regulation strategies at keeping life satisfaction higher may be discovered.

RQ5: Is self-reported conflict style related to life satisfaction?

RQ6: Is perceived group conflict style related to life satisfaction?

RQ7: What themes are present in the qualitative emotion data set that would suggest support in friendship affects life satisfaction?

RQ8: How does life satisfaction, emotional regulation style, and self-reported conflict style predict how conflict is viewed in group friendships?

RQ9: Is emotion regulation (reappraisal and suppression) related to life satisfaction?

Methods

To test perceptions of conflict among college students, a convenience sampling method was performed via a Qualtrics survey. Use and distribution of the survey was approved by The University of

Akron Institutional Review Board. The survey was sent out to college undergraduate students through the Communication, Research, and Theory Network (CRTNET) and an email listserv. All information given by students was done so anonymously. Guidelines for inclusion in the data set were defined as college students pursuing an undergraduate degree with a close group of friends. Participants were not given parameters on how large their close group of friends may be, just that the group was close to the student and engaged in regular communication. Any participants that did not meet those criteria were excluded from the research.

Participants

The total number of participants ($N = 137$; female $n=87$; male $n=48$; non-binary $n=1$), were all undergraduate college students with ages ranging mainly between 18-26 ($M=20.84$; $SD= 3.43$ years). Students reported as White (69.85%), Black or African American (12.50%), Asian (9.56%), Hispanic or Latino (2.94%), and other (5.15%). Academic standing varied among Freshmen (20.30%), Sophomore (29.32%), Junior (33.08%), and Senior (17.29%). Their GPA was a B average of 3.32/4.00.

Conflict Styles

Five different types of conflict styles were measured via the use of a scale: collaborating, competing, avoiding, harmonizing, and compromising (Adkins, 2006). Respondents were asked to fill out the measure twice: 1st) a self-reported approach to conflict and 2nd) a perception of how their core group of friends approached conflict. The measure originally focused on generalized approaches to conflict, whereby the questions were adjusted to acknowledge friendship, e.g. changing general words such as “others” (and similar instances) to “my core group of friends.”

The scale used was a Likert one having five choices. Higher scores indicate the use of a conflict style (1=never, 5=always). Use of this scale was meant to address perception of conflict. Items for each style were added to give a total score per conflict style. Self-reported approaches to conflict scale examples include: “I explore issues with others to find solutions that meet everyone’s needs,” and “I try to see conflicts from both sides. What do I need? What does the other person need? What are the issues involved?” Examples of perception of group approach to conflict scale vary from “My core group of friends and I find solutions that meet everyone’s needs” and, “My core group of friends try to see conflicts from both sides. What do we need? What does the group need? What are the issues involved?”

Emotion Regulation

Emotion regulation was measured using the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (Gross & John, 2013). The scale is meant to measure the control someone asserts over their emotions through the lens of emotional reappraisal and suppression. The questionnaire had 10 questions. The scale was a Likert one with seven responses allowed: 1 being strongly disagree and 7 strongly agree. Emotion regulation scale examples: “I control my emotions by changing the way I think about the situation I’m in” and to contrast, “I control my emotions by not expressing them.”

Life Satisfaction

Life satisfaction was measured using the Students’ Life Satisfaction scale (Hubner, 1991). The scale is a simple seven-item questionnaire intended to measure global child life satisfaction in individuals over the age of eight. This scale was a Likert one with six options. Answers range from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Neutral options were not provided. Use of the measure here meant to simply and clearly allow students to self-report their satisfaction of life. Scale examples include “My life is going well” and, “I have what I want in my life.”

Open-Ended Response to Conflict

Use of open-ended qualitative response options on conflict in relation to each individual scale was a way this study aimed to gather qualitative data. The method here is meant to fill potential gaps in

knowledge obtained from the scales. This study excluded any responses that did not pertain to the subject or that were not filled to completion. The open-ended qualitative response options were given at the end of each Likert scale. A total of four open-ended responses were provided and students were given free rein to respond to each qualitative data statement (QDS) in a text box provided.

QDS1: Describe a moment where your core group of friends impacted your life satisfaction in any way.

QDS2: Describe a moment where you felt you handled a conflict well but your primary group of friends disagreed.

QDS3: Describe a moment where you felt your primary group of friends handled a conflict poorly, but your primary group of friends disagreed.

QDS4: Detail a moment in which you felt that your core group of friends may not have respected your emotions.

Demographics

The demographics gathered focused on general descriptors. Specifically, respondents were asked to describe their ethnicity, age, gender identification and sexuality. Academic demographics were gathered pertaining to years in college, academic standing and grade point average. With this, students were also asked of their employment status. Subsequently, students were asked to indicate their relationship status.

Data Analysis

Themes in the data set were gathered via a thematic analysis of the open-ended question responses students gave at the end of each scale. Codes included in the data set were relevant to the information found within the written answers; there was no official goal for the analysis except to find similarities within results. The processes of finding similarities in results focused on locating specific usage of words and/or phrases that indicated an idea or concept related to the perception of conflict.

Quantitative data were analyzed using regression. Predictor variables were entered in one step and examined with respect to each individual conflict style. Results are reported in Tables 1, 3, and 6.

Results

Research question one asked whether or not self-reported conflict style predicted how people perceive conflict within their friend group. To answer this question, several linear regressions were conducted to determine how the five self-reported conflict styles predict how individuals perceive that their group uses each style (collaborating, compromising, harmonizing, competing, avoiding). Each regression was significant ($p < .001$), with R^2 ranging from .20 (group collaborating) to .33 (group harmonizing). Table 1 reports the standardized betas for each regression.

Results showed several significant predictors related to how individuals viewed the conflict in their friend groups. Those who indicated they used competing and harmonizing conflict styles were likely to perceive that their friend group used a collaborating conflict style. Individuals who use a compromising and competing conflict style were more likely to believe their group used a compromising conflict style. For the group harmonizing style, three self-reported styles were predictors: compromising, harmonizing, and competing. Perceptions of the group as using a competing style were predicted by individual compromising and competing styles. Lastly, individuals who believed their group used an avoiding style were more likely to use an avoiding style themselves, as well as a competing style. Overall, the self-reported competing conflict style predicted all five of the group conflict styles. However, the self-reported collaborating conflict style did not predict any of the group conflict styles.

Table 1

Regressing Self-Reported Conflict Styles on Perceived Styles of Group Conflict

Predictors	Group Collaborating	Group Compromising	Group Harmonizing	Group Competing	Group Avoiding
------------	---------------------	--------------------	-------------------	-----------------	----------------

	β	β	β	β	β
Self-Report Collaborating	.17	-.04	-.08	-.03	-.05
Self-Report Compromising	-.04	.38**	.27*	.24*	-.03
Self-Report Harmonizing	.21*	.04	.29**	.07	.08
Self-Report Competing	.28**	.32***	.21*	.40***	.19*
Self-Report Avoiding	-.02	.02	.01	.07	.52***
Model R^2	.20***	.29***	.29***	.31***	.30***

Note. All betas are standardized betas. N = 133.

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

Research question two inquired into the prevalence of avoidance strategies used as a tactic for conflict resolution within friend groups. A theme analysis inquiring into the qualitative data responses revealed that avoidance tactics were used by the student and/or the group in conflict. Data used for the theme analysis involved responses to QDS3 and QDS2 - table 2 reports that data.

Results show that students limited communication between opposing parties as a decided-on method, by the group, of preventing future conflict. Emotional suppression was as common as avoidance; in those responses, the common underlying theme in answers involved, as respondents wrote it, "keeping the peace." The method was used to explain why emotions were being suppressed in various situations. Additionally, students detailed moments where an individual was forcibly removed from communication within the group, or as students phrased it "was cut off;" students reported the choice as a way to further prevent conflict. However, there were several students who indicated they have never experienced a disagreement in their friend group. In those responses, students alluded to pre-established common values and beliefs within the group. In other cases, various students indicated that conflict was worsened by using communication strategies, causing situations to remain tense. In those results, students indicated that the group reacted defensively to confrontation and/or the group disagreed strongly on the situation.

Table 2
Theme Analysis of QDS2 and QDS3 on Conflict

Theme	Example Word Usage	Code Extracted	Frequency	Relative Frequency
Suppression	"Kept my mouth shut," keep the peace"	" Suppression of emotion to prevent conflict.	36	0.18
Avoidance	"Left the conversation," "avoided them"	Actively dodging conflict.	35	0.17
Cutting off	"Cut off," stopped talking"	Abrupt halt in communication due to a conflict.	7	0.07
No disagreement	"Never personal," "can't think of a time"	Indicated never feeling a disagreement.	31	0.15

Unresolved	"Got a lot worse," "they got defensive"	Indicated, that after communication, the problem grew.	37	0.18
------------	---	--	----	------

Note. N=201 (108 in QDS3. 93 in QDS4.)

Research question three was proposed to discover whether or not college students' emotion regulation styles predict how they view conflict in their friend group. To test this question, a series of regressions were conducted with both emotion regulation styles (suppression and reappraisal) predicting each of the five conflict styles. Results are presented in Table 3.

Overall, emotional reappraisal more strongly predicted four of the five conflict styles. The only conflict style where emotional suppression was a stronger predictor was for the avoidance conflict style. Emotional suppression also was a significant predictor of four conflict styles, with the exception of compromising. People who saw their friend groups as using the compromising style were more likely to use emotional reappraisal in their lives.

Table 3

Regressing Self-Reported Emotion Suppression and Emotion Reappraisal with Perceived Group Conflict Styles

Predictors	Group Collaborating β	Group Compromising β	Group Harmonizing β	Group Competing β	Group Avoiding β
Emotional Suppression	.18*	.15	.25**	.18*	.26**
Emotional Reappraisal	.30***	.42***	.31***	.21*	.20*
Model R^2	.14***	.21***	.18***	.09**	.12***

Note. All betas are standardized betas. N = 133.

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

Research question four asked how students would describe their interpretation of the group's respect for their emotions, specifically, regarding how they may not have been respected within their friend group. A theme analysis conducted on the qualitative data from QDS4 found common responses - students indicated several themes throughout the set. The data is reported in Table 4. Mostly, students indicated that when their emotions were not paid attention to by others, they perceived that their emotions were not respected. It is worth noting that some students felt their emotions were always respected; in those instances, common responses included themes of emotional support and emotions being listened to.

Additionally, student answers indicated instances of emotional suppression and, more so, emotional reappraisal. In the suppression related responses, students indicated suppression as a way to prevent future conflict. Instances where students felt unable to share their emotions also fell were present in suppression as well. In those instances when emotional reappraisal was prevalent, students described communicating personal emotions and preferences with the friend group.

Research questions five and six were proposed to determine how the self-reported conflict styles, perceived group conflict styles, and emotional regulation relate to life satisfaction. To test these questions, Pearson correlations were applied to each of the variables. Research question five addressed self-reported conflict styles and life satisfaction. The only significant relationship that emerged from these tests was for the collaborating style. Individuals who used a collaborating conflict style were more likely to feel that they were satisfied with their lives ($r = .18, p < .05$). Research question six was proposed to test how life

satisfaction relates to perceived group conflict styles. Results showed that none of the group conflict styles were found to be significantly related to life satisfaction.

Table 4
Theme analysis of QDS4 on Emotion

Theme	Example Word Usage	Code Extracted	Frequency	Relative Frequency
Being ignored	"Didn't seem to care," "Ignoring"	Friend group ignoring a communicated emotional preference of a student.	25	0.25
Emotions respected	"listened to," "my friends always support me"	Students failing to report an experience.	15	0.15
Emotional suppression	"I don't really express my emotions," "restrict my emotions"	Students indicate they did not communicate emotions with the group.	16	0.16
Emotional reappraisal	"I told them how I feel," "expressed my point of view"	Student indicates communicating emotions with the group.	24	0.24

Note. N= 99

Research question seven examines how students would describe the effect their friend group has on personal life satisfaction. A theme analysis into QDS1 was performed to find common responses. Data is reported in Table 5.

Table 5
Theme Analysis of Qualitative data for QDS1

Theme	Example Word Usage	Code Extracted	Frequency	Relative Frequency
Support	"Support," "been there for."	Implied and/or direct instances of moral support.	63	0.55
Cheered up	"Cheered me up," "helped me out of a funk,"	Description of a lifted negative emotional state due to friends.	20	0.18
Sense of belonging	"Included," "a part of."	Described sense of belonging to the friend group.	10	0.09
Abandonment	"Abandoned," "cut off,"	Description of feeling abandoned by the friend group.	5	0.04

Note. N= 114

Results indicate that students felt their life satisfaction benefited from the friend group in many ways, but moral support was uniquely common. In these responses, it was regular for a student to indicate their friend group being important to the student. Additionally, students reported being lifted out of a negative emotional state by their friend group. Those responses described deep depressions that the friend

group helped a student out of; all responses within this theme indicate that friend groups can greatly impact the mental health of a student for the better.

Research question eight was proposed to look at the combined effects of life satisfaction, emotional regulation, and self-reported conflict styles on how individuals perceive conflict in their friend groups. To test this question, a regression was completed with each of the independent variables (life satisfaction, emotional reappraisal, emotional suppression, five conflict styles) for each of the group conflict styles. Table 6 shows the results of this test.

Table 6

Regressing Emotional Regulation, Life Satisfaction, and Self-Reported Conflict Styles on Perceived Styles of Group Conflict

Predictors	Group Collaborating β	Group Compromising β	Group Harmonizing β	Group Competing β	Group Avoiding β
Emotional Suppression	.18*	.13	.20*	.14	.15
Emotional Reappraisal	.14	.24**	.16	.03	.18*
Life Satisfaction	.05	.04	-.03	-.11	.03
Self-Report Collaborating	.16	-.09	-.07	.02	-.08
Self-Report Compromising	-.04	.36**	.26*	.24*	-.04
Self-Report Harmonizing	.17	-.004	.24*	.05	.04
Self-Report Competing	.24**	.27**	-.02	.36***	.14
Self-Report Avoiding	-.03	.02	-.02	.03	.51***
Model R^2	.25***	.39***	.36***	.34***	.35***

Note. All betas are standardized betas. N = 133.

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

Individuals who were more likely to suppress their emotions and use a competing conflict style in their lives were more likely to perceive their friends as using a collaborating conflict style. Those who use emotional reappraisal, as well as compromising and competing conflict styles were most likely to believe their group used a compromising style. Individuals who reported that they suppress their emotions and use a compromising and harmonizing conflict style in their lives were more likely to feel their group used a harmonizing conflict style. The competing group conflict style was predicted by two self-reported conflict styles: compromising and competing. Lastly, those who use emotional reappraisal and self-report as avoidant in their conflict style were more likely to report that their friend group used an avoiding conflict style.

Research question nine was proposed to view whether emotion regulation styles were correlated with life satisfaction. As seen on table three, while emotional suppression was not significantly related to life satisfaction, individuals who indicated that they used the reappraisal emotional style reported that they were happier ($r = .26, p < .01$).

Discussion

The present study examined the relationship between students' perceptions of their own and friend group conflict styles. This discussion explores the meaning and implications of the results.

Emotion

The data clarifies a point made prior stating that individuals lack the prowess necessary to accurately predict the emotional reactions of another person (Gendron et al., 2020). Those reactions a student experiences while in conflict determine how that student perceives the group reaction to the situation. This was clear in QDS4; students who felt they were not listened to perceived that as the group was fully ignoring them. Students indicated no middle ground; when students felt an emotion, they felt it to the fullest capacity possible out of the conflict. The responses presented showed that when the student feels a certain emotion during conflict within a friend group, the students drift towards jumping to the conclusion that those friends were the catalyst for those feelings. This occurred despite the fact that many of the conflicts that students experience in groups happen due to externalities and/or circumstances beyond their control. In a sense, the internal emotion a student feels during a conflict is pointed at others in the group. Rather than directing the anger of the situation at the circumstances that facilitated the environment students find themselves in, the students will choose to blame each other.

Furthermore, emotion regulation tactics employed by students do indicate that students who reappraise their emotions are more likely to employ beneficial conflict styles. This includes compromising and collaborating. Implications of this information could suggest that college students would benefit from taking a step back and being proactive about how they will decide to regulate their reaction. It is unrealistic to change the way a student feels, but rather how a student reacts to those feelings can be adjusted. This, alongside emotional reappraisal, could help modify communication and minimize conflict opening up new pathways for solving situations.

Conflict Styles

Various conflict styles lead to varying perceptions of what conflict style the group is using. The conflict styles students perceive generally coincide with the goal of a student's personal conflict style. For example, compromisers are more likely to view the group as collaborators due to the fact that collaborators work for the same outcome as compromisers. Vice versa, with avoiders, they are more likely to view others in the group as harmonizing because both of those styles have the same goal: for the conflict to stop without communication. Students want to believe that those around them have the same goals for solving conflict. Additionally, the research data shows that collaborators are happier than the other conflict styles users. This may be because those students actively see their problems being solved rather than letting those small conflicts build up. This could be an implication as well. If future students are encouraged to collaborate in conflict, this research suggests that those students may feel high levels of life satisfaction. Due to the detrimental consequences of an unhappy student (Pollak et al., 2019; Hope & Smith-Adcock, 2015), addressing this phenomenon in future research may be worth putting some time into. That way there is more comprehensive and personable information present that can be offered to students in a constructive setting.

The data also suggests that the college students sampled tend to be highly competitive when they are trying to solve conflict. This poses an interesting point, not only because competing is a more authoritative approach to conflict, but also because competing could have a negative effect on conflict. Speculation could suggest that if a student is a competitive conflict style user, that would imply others can perceive that. This could potentially lead students to respond to that conflict style by being more competitive, or in a worse outcome for the friend group, disengaging completely and cutting friends off from the group due to their aggressive conflict resolving behavior. As stated before, students can and will jump to conclusions about the way they feel if given the opportunity and a competitive conflict style

encourages that thought process substantially due to its aggressive nature. Implications could suggest that, while a competitive style can come in handy in some cases, conflict resolution among college friends about interpersonal happenings in the group may not be that case.

In conclusion, the qualitative data results show that students who employ avoidance as a strategy for solving conflict view themselves as peacekeepers. Meanwhile, there is ample evidence to suggest that students who use collaborative tactics as a means to solve conflict are happier than those who use avoidance tactics. Additionally, though it works for some situations, using competing as a style for solving conflict can be a slippery slope.

Life Satisfaction

Early in the study, whether or not conflict styles relate to life satisfaction was questioned; the data indicated that it does not. This research found that students felt greatly impacted by their friend group in a different sense—via support. An analysis of the qualitative data showed that students felt their life satisfaction was improved when their friend group supported them. Students provided an in-depth personal description of how they felt supported in their friend group. Implications here could suggest that students who feel supported in their friend groups are more likely to have higher life satisfaction. This could mean that students can be encouraged to find friends that they feel supported around and curb those they do not. Furthermore, implications of the results suggest that students who collaborate and feel supported are more likely to feel higher life satisfaction in their friend group.

Practical Implications

At this research's core, the idea of being aware of one's reactivity during tense communication within interpersonal relationships is omnipresent. Conflict, put simply, is just communication interpreted in a way that is offensive to another individual. Being cognizant of this individual reactivity provides ample enough opportunities to regulate the emotions an individual may feel. This research brings forth the value of being proactive about the way one is reactive. Stepping back, deciding what the value of this difficult communication is, and *then* moving in the direction of working to solve the conflict is key. Ram Dass, formally PhD. Richard Alpert, said it best, "It is important to expect nothing, to take every experience, including the negative ones, as merely steps on the path, and to proceed." In modern psychology, the concept of mindfulness suggests that if an individual having thoughts takes a non-judgmental approach to observing those emotions, there is more opportunity to regulate complex feelings (Ong & Shults, 2010). Much like the words spoken by Ram Dass, this suggests that emotions can be observed, taken with a grain of salt, approached objectively, and understood with clarity.

The ideas that build into emotional regulation and mindfulness boil down to the same things; being aware of one's thoughts rather than acting on them. And though this research concentrated on a youthful demographic, the implication of the findings can be expanded to the daily machinations of functioning adults. This research may not be the first to recognize the importance of perceiving conflict, it does provide further evidence that suggests becoming aware of and responding to one's own and others' communication styles is key to improving the current status and/or longevity of a valued relationship.

Limitations and Future Research

A major limitation present in this study was its inability to grasp anything beyond perception in this context via survey research. There is a hyperbolic wall separating what is real and what students see; this research focused only on what the students see. Over the course of this study, the intention was to examine the perception of conflict in college students within their friend groups. The study found that perception of conflict is related to emotion and conflict styles. Additionally, it was discovered that emotional support in friend groups is vitally important to students.

Future scholars should invest time into understanding what strategies of communication work best within groups of individuals to best get information across. The total emotional mindset of an individual does not have to be understood to figure the best way to communicate with that mindset. Finding common approaches to communication that facilitate a healthy, productive conversation should be the focus of future research. The college friendship is a multifaceted system of conflict dynamics counterbalanced by the adolescent mindset. However, the perceptions and reactions of this mindset can be analyzed to better help students with communication in their close interpersonal relationships.

References

- Adkins, R. (2006). *Conflict management styles quiz*. Ncsu. <https://facultyombuds.ncsu.edu/files/2015/11/Conflict-management-styles-quiz.pdf>
- Antonioni, D. (1998). Relationship between the big five personality factors and conflict management styles. *International Journal of Conflict Management*, 9(4), 336–355. <https://doi.org/10.1108/eb022814>
- Boman, J. H., Mowen, T. J., & Castro, E. D. (2018). The relationship between self-control and friendship conflict: An analysis of friendship pairs. *Crime & Delinquency*, 65(10), 1402–1421. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011128718765391>
- Bronkema, R. H., & Bowman, N. A. (2017). Close campus friendships and college student Success. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 21(3), 270–285. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025117704200>
- Caldara, M., McBride, M., McCarter, M., & Sheremeta, R. (2017). A study of the triggers of conflict and emotional reactions. *Games*, 8(2), 21. <https://doi.org/10.3390/g8020021>
- Charland, L. C. (2006). Cognitive modularity of emotion. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy Supplementary Volume*, 32, 213–228. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cjp.2007.0030>
- Cutrona, C. E. (1982). Transition to college: Loneliness and the process of social adjustment. In D. Perlman & L. A. Peplau (Eds.), *Loneliness: A Sourcebook of Current Theory, Research and Therapy (Wiley Series on Personality Processes)* (pp. 291–309). Wiley.
- Dissing, A. S., Jørgensen, T. B., Gerds, T. A., Rod, N. H., & Lund, R. (2019). High perceived stress and social interaction behaviour among young adults. A study based on objective measures of face-to-face and smartphone interactions. *PLOS ONE*, 14(7), e0218429. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0218429>
- Dost-Gözkan, A. (2019). Adolescents' conflict resolution with their parents and best friends: Links to life satisfaction. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 28(10), 2854–2866. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-019-01465-x>
- Gendron, M., Hoemann, K., Crittenden, A. N., Mangola, S. M., Ruark, G. A., & Barrett, L. F. (2020). Emotion perception in hadza hunter-gatherers. *Scientific Reports*, 10(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-020-60257-2>
- Gross, J. J., & John, O. P. (2003). Individual differences in two emotion regulation processes: Implications for affect, relationships, and well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85(2), 348–362. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.85.2.348>
- Heller, D., Watson, D., & Ilies, R. (2004). The role of person versus situation in life satisfaction: A critical examination. *Psychological Bulletin*, 130(4), 574–600. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.130.4.574>
- Hope, K. J., & Smith-Adcock, S. (2015). A reason to live: Can understanding close friendships in college prevent suicide? *College Student Affairs Journal*, 33(1), 85–104. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csaj.2015.0001>
- Hornstein, M. G. (1967). Accuracy of emotional communication and interpersonal compatibility. *Journal of Personality*, 35(1), 20–30. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1967.tb01413.x>
- Huebner, E. S. (1991). Initial development of the student's life satisfaction scale. *School Psychology International*, 12(3), 231–240. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034391123010>
- Mordka, C. (2016). What are emotions? Structure and function of emotions. *Studia Humana*, 5(3), 29–44. <https://doi.org/10.1515/sh-2016-0013>
- Ong, J., & Sholtes, D. (2010). A mindfulness-based approach to the treatment of insomnia. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 66(11), 1175–1184. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.20736>
- Pollak, S. D., Camras, L. A., & Cole, P. M. (2019). Progress in understanding the emergence of human emotion. *Developmental Psychology*, 55(9), 1801–1811. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000789>
- Dass, R. (2020, August 15). *Ram Dass Quotes*. Ram Dass. <https://www.ramdass.org/ram-dass-quotes/>

Spithoven, A. W. M., Bastin, M., Bijttebier, P., & Goossens, L. (2018). Lonely adolescents and their best friend: An examination of loneliness and friendship quality in best friendship dyads. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 27(11), 3598–3605. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-1183-4>