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Conflict management styles, emotional intelligence and implicit theories of personality of nursing students: A cross-sectional study

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SUMMARY

Background: Conflict management is an essential skill that nursing students need to master as conflict is unavoidable in clinical settings. Examining nursing students' conflict management styles and the associating factors can inform nurse educators on how to equip nursing students for effective conflict management.
Objectives: This study aimed at examining undergraduate nursing students conflict management styles in managing conflict with their supervisors in clinical placement. The associations of emotional intelligence and implicit theories of personality with conflict management styles were also investigated.
Design: This is a cross-sectional quantitative survey.
Setting: This study took place at a nursing school at a university in Hong Kong.
Participants: 568 undergraduate nursing students participated in the study.
Methods: Students completed a questionnaire which consisted of demographics, Measure of Implicit Theories of Personality, The Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS) and The Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II) and received a HKD 20 book coupon as compensation. The data were analyzed by descriptive statistics, reliability analyses, *t*-tests, correlational and linear regression analyses.
Results: For managing conflict with clinical supervisors, students used obliging and integrating most frequently whereas used dominating least. Emotional intelligence was a significant predictor of all five conflict management styles. The higher the emotional intelligence, the more students used integrating, obliging, compromising and dominating. The lower the emotional intelligence, the more students used avoiding. There was a significant association between implicit theories of personality and compromising. The less malleable students perceived personality to be, the more they used compromising.
Conclusions: Emotional intelligence was significantly associated with all five conflict management styles while implicit theories of personality were significantly associated with compromising style only. Efforts of nurse educators to enhance students' conflict management skills and emotional intelligence to face conflicts in clinical settings are discussed.

Introduction

Like other university students, nursing students may face conflict with teachers and classmates (Seren and Ustun, 2008). In addition, they may experience interpersonal conflict with supervisors, colleagues, and patients when they engage in clinical placement (Arieli, 2013). Conflict management is an essential skill that nursing students need to master. Understanding nursing students' conflict management styles and factors associated with their styles can provide insight for nurse educators on how to equip nursing students for effective conflict management during clinical placement as well as in their future career as nurses.

Background/Literature

Conflict is generally defined as a misunderstanding which results from different thoughts, values and feelings between two individuals or organizations (Marquis and Huston, 2000; Rahim et al., 2000). Most organizations are susceptible to conflict and the clinical setting is no exception (Almost, 2006; Pavlakis et al., 2011). The outcomes of conflict affect individuals as well as organizations, and management of interpersonal conflict determines whether the outcomes will be positive or negative (Park and Antonioni, 2007; Seren and Baykal, 2007; Tjosvold, 1998). Effective conflict management strategies can minimize the negative impacts of conflict on different parties which help create a trusting environment and healthy workplace to improve interpersonal relationship, job satisfaction and staff retention (Baltimore, 2006; Kaushal and Kwantes, 2006; Longo and Sherman, 2007).

For nursing students and nurses who work in clinical settings, a constructive conflict can inspire innovations and creative strategies to address challenging issues, improve teamwork, patient care delivery and

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outcomes, and encourage the organizations to attain higher levels of quality and achievement (Rahim et al., 2000; Vivar, 2006). However, a destructive conflict without proper management can increase the stress level of the staff, workplace tensions and staff turnover, and decrease organizational effectiveness (The Center for American Nurses, 2006). According to Ridge (2007), conflict management is a skill that nurses can sustain and develop which in turn will contribute to effectiveness in nursing practice. However, Mahon and Nicotera (2011) found that nurses were not inclined to take a direct approach to confront conflicts. Moreover, Pines et al. (2012) commented that facing the transition into the workforce, nursing students do not have sufficient preparation to face interpersonal conflict.

Research on nursing students' conflict management has been relatively sparse (Sportsman and Hamilton, 2007). Different researchers also employ different categorizations and tools to measure conflict management and this makes comparison across studies difficult. For instance, Seren and Baykal (2007) used a "conflict-solving tendency scale" and found that nursing students had a higher tendency to resolve conflict than medical students in Turkey. Sportsman and Hamilton (2007) used Thomas–Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) and found that undergraduate and graduate nursing students as well as allied health students did not differ in the prevalence of conflict management styles. Seren and Ustun (2008) used Conflict Resolution Skills Scale (CRSS) and found that nursing students in a problem-based curriculum had better conflict resolution skills such as empathy, listening, and anger management than those in a conventional curriculum. Kantek and Gezer (2009) used Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II) and found that student nurses had higher tendencies in employing integrating and obliging styles while least in employing dominating style during conflict with faculty members. Pines et al. (2012) used Conflict Mode Instrument and found that nursing students had a lower tendency in using competing and collaborating strategies.

In this study, we adopted the five dimensions of conflict management styles by Rahim and Bonoma (1979), the most popular conceptualization of conflict management (Brewer et al., 2002; Hamouda et al., 2012). The five styles are integrating, obliging, dominating, avoiding, and compromising (Rahim, 1983). According to Rahim (1983), individuals who use integrating style manage conflicts in a direct and cooperative manner and aim to reach a solution collaboratively with the other parties. Those who use obliging style face conflicts in a passive and accommodating way and follow the decisions of other parties. Individuals with a dominating style endeavor to force behaviors on others and have much more concern for self than others. Individuals who use avoiding style have a tendency to sidestep conflicts whereas those who use compromising style aim to reach mutually agreed decisions between parties (Rahim, 1983). Besides examining the conflict management styles of the nursing students at face value, we endeavored to take a step back and investigate factors that are associated with the conflict management styles. Previous research suggested that personal characteristics and psychological factors such as gender and personality (e.g. Asgari et al., 2013; Brahnam et al., 2005) were important in conflict resolution, in particular, in interpersonal conflict. In the current study, we focused on two psychological factors, namely, implicit theories of personality and emotional intelligence and their associations with the five conflict management styles.

Implicit theories of personality correspond to individuals' perceived malleability of personality (Chiu et al., 1997). According to Chiu et al. (1997), individuals who believed that personality was malleable did not place emphasis on static traits when they tried to understand the behaviors of other people. Thus, implicit theories of personality are likely to influence how individuals react and respond to interpersonal conflict. Kammrath and Dweck (2006) found that whether an individual believed personality to be malleable affected their use of conflict management strategies in a romantic relationship, for instance, individuals who believed personality was immalleable were less likely to voice their concern. Lim (2009) found that in undergraduate students who

were studying psychology, implicit theories of personality were a predictor of integrating style of conflict management. No study, however, has looked at how implicit theories of personality are related to conflict management styles in nursing students.

Salovey and Mayer (1990) first proposed the concept of emotional intelligence. According to Mayer and Salovey (1997, p.5), emotional intelligence is "the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth." According to Por et al. (2011), research on emotional intelligence of nursing students is pivotal because it is essential for nursing students to read and manage emotions in their practice. Nursing unit managers and graduate nurses also agree that emotional intelligence is a key to successful nursing practice (Rochester et al., 2005). Despite its importance, such research has been scarce. Similar to research on conflict management, researchers have adopted different conceptualizations and measures of emotional intelligence. For instance, Montes-Berges and Augusto (2007) used the Trait Meta-Mood Scale to measure perceived emotional intelligence of nursing students and illustrated its importance in coping with stress in nursing students. Aradilla-Herrero et al. (2012) also used the Trait Meta-Mood Scale to examine the associations between death attitudes and emotional intelligence in nursing students. Duygulu et al. (2011) used the Bar-On Emotional Intelligence Quotient Inventory and looked at the relationship between emotional intelligence and nursing students' leadership. Beauvais et al. (2011) used the Mayer–Salovey–Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test and examined the associations between emotional intelligence and nursing performance of undergraduate and graduate student nurses.

Though theoretically, individuals with sound emotional intelligence can handle conflicts by selecting suitable conflict management strategies (Goleman, 1995; Goleman et al., 2002), there is little empirical research on emotional intelligence and conflict management of nursing students. For registered nurses, Morrison (2008) found that a higher level of emotional intelligence was positively correlated with integrating style and negatively with obliging style. Although different psychologists have proposed various models of emotional intelligence, we adopted Salovey and Mayer's conceptualization for our study because of its cohesion and comprehensiveness (Salovey and Mayer, 1990) and employed The Schutte Emotional Intelligence Scale (SEIS) (Schutte et al., 1998) which is consistent with their conceptualization in this study.

The Current Study

Previous research has demonstrated the association between emotional intelligence and conflict management styles as well as that between implicit theories of personality and conflict management styles, but no study, to the best of our knowledge, has looked at the associations among these three factors simultaneously in nursing students. This study aimed to fill the research gap by investigating nursing students' conflict management styles with their clinical supervisors and their associations with implicit theories of personality and emotional intelligence.

Methods

Design

This study adopted a quantitative approach and employed a cross-sectional survey.

Participants

Undergraduate nursing students in years 2, 3 and 4 in a university in Hong Kong were invited to participate in this study. Year 1 students were not invited as they did not have any clinical placement experience