

Nursing students' emotional intelligence and their preferred conflict resolution strategies

Samah .F. Fakhry, Hemat Abd El-Azeem,

Nursing Administration Department – Faculty of Nursing, Ain Shams University

ABSTRACT

Background Nursing is a profession affected by conflict and stress, having essential EI skills can be helpful in handling stress and conflict **Aim** to investigate the influence of EI on nursing students' conflict resolution strategies **Design** A cross-sectional analytical study was used in this study **Subjects** 363 nursing students from first and fourth year **Setting** Faculty of Nursing at Ain-Shams University at Cairo in Egypt during the academic year 2013-2014. **Tools** Emotional Intelligence was measured using BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory: Short (BarOn EQ-i: S). and the conflict-handling styles were measured using the Thomas-Kilomann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI). **Results** revealed that majority of nursing students in this study in below average area about emotional intelligence, there is a statistically significant association between nursing students' emotional intelligence levels and all of the preferred conflict resolution strategies except for the collaborating strategy, and no significant difference in the relationship between nursing students' conflict resolution strategies and their socio-demographic characteristics except for the competing and collaborating strategies and frequency of net use. **Conclusion** there is a statistically significant association between nursing students' emotional intelligence levels and all of the preferred conflict resolution strategies except for the collaborating strategy. **Recommendations** there is an urgent need to improve nursing students' EI positive and conflict resolution strategies through inclusion of nursing curricula that emphasize the two concepts.

Key words: Conflict resolution strategies, Emotional Intelligence, Nursing students.

INTRODUCTION

Emotional Intelligence (EI) is a growing topic for behavioral investigation that influence on various social interactions. Emotional Intelligence has drawn significant interest from academics and human resources practitioners throughout the world. The development of EI skills is important because it is an area that is generally overlooked when skills development programs are designed. When the emotions are properly managed, they can drive trust, loyalty, and commitment. Many of the greatest productivity gains, innovations, and accomplishments of individuals, teams, and organizations have

occurred within such a framework (*Sunil, 2009*).

Conflict formation in daily activities is a complex issue. Therefore, successful conflict resolution requires many complex skills and techniques. Successful conflict resolution can only be achieved by listening to and meeting the needs of all parties so that each party is substantially satisfied with the outcome. Conflict management may be seen as a systematic mechanism for handling different situations. Moreover, the understanding of conflict and its resolution can help people improve their relationships, including Universities, as educational organizations, where conflict occurs between different

groups within its jurisdiction as between student-student, student-instructor, student authority (*Adebayo, 2009*).

However, There are many determinants of conflict formation, including intellectual intelligence, EI (EI), personality, attitude, communal trust, and value judgment. However, the determinants can have complex interrelationships, which affect and induce conflict. Conflict arises between people or groups, due to their differences in attitudes, beliefs, values or needs (*Hoban, 2005*).

Some people can handle conflict in a tactful and sensible way (*Iain, 2005*). Bar-On hypothesizes that these individuals are, in general, more successful in meeting environmental demands and pressures, which often is an indication of one's potential to succeed in life. Some scholars apply the concept of EI quotient or emotional quotient (EQ) to quantify people's ability to manage emotion (*Bar-On, 1997; Geher, 2004*). This personality ability and trait requires the awareness of how others feel (i.e., empathy), the identification with one's social group and cooperation with others (i.e., social responsibility) and the establishment of mutually satisfying relationships with others (*Leung, 2010*). Moreover, the concept of EI involves the management of emotion within oneself. It also emphasizes the importance of recognizing one's interdependence with other people (*Bao-Yi and Chun-Chi, 2012*).

Nursing is a profession affected by conflict and stress. (*Hughes, 2008*). Understanding how to handle stress and conflict is of paramount importance. Stress and conflict cannot be totally eliminated, but learning essential EI skills can be helpful. The choice of conflict resolution strategies depends on the complex relationships of the determinants of the

conflict and the emotional aspects of a situation. Moreover, the identification of the determinants of conflict can demonstrate the importance of EI (*Leung, 2010*).

Studying at the university is a critical period of life, particularly in a discipline such as nursing which requires a lot of psychomotor skills in order to be an efficient active member for society. This period is usually associated with different types of conflict as well as great changes in social and human relationships. Any lack of attention to this period of life can cause students' psychological disorders and lead to academic as well as failure social failures. Hence, the assessment of nursing students' emotional intelligence (EI) is deemed important given the increasing attention for assessing it in health care personnel. In addition, despite the significant increase in recognizing the role of EI in managing conflict, little research has been done on the relationship between EI of nursing students and their conflict resolution strategies especially in Egypt.

Aims of the study:

This study aim was to investigate the influence of EI on nursing students' conflict resolution strategies.

Subjects and Methods:

Research questions and setting:

A cross-sectional analytical study was used in this study at the Faculty of Nursing at Ain-Shams University. The researchers selected the faculty of nursing because of the importance of both variables - EI and conflict resolution strategies - for the nursing students in their future career.

Subjects:

The study population consisted of all nursing students enrolled in the Faculty of Nursing at Ain-Shams University during the academic year 2013-2014. The only inclusion criterion was being enrolled in the first or fourth years, with no exclusion criteria. These two years were selected because the first year students represent freshly enrolled students with no influence of the school on their EI or conflict management strategies, while the fourth year students represent the other extreme, with full influence of the four study years on them. All first (180) and fourth (183) years students were included. This sample size was large enough to detect a correlation coefficient of 0.25 or higher with 90% power and at a 99% level of confidence between the score of EI and conflict resolution, with a defaulters' rate of about 20%, using the sample size equation for correlation (*Stanton and Glantz, 1992*).

Tools of data collection:

A self-administered questionnaire was prepared. It included two standardized scales with high levels of reliability and validity as self-report instruments in addition to a section for student's socio-demographic data. The first scale was the BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory - Short (BarOn EQ-i: S) designed by *Bar-On (2002)* for measurement of the EI. The scale consists of 51 items distributed across 6 scales: Intrapersonal EQ, Interpersonal EQ, Stress Management EQ, Adaptability EQ, General Mood, and Total EQ. The statements are on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Very seldom or not true to me" to "Very often true of me or true of me." The researchers purchased these tools and used their bilingual (English and Arabic) versions. The scoring of the EI tool was done according to the instruction

manual (*Multi-Health Systems [MHS], 2004*).

The second scale was the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI) developed as a research tool by Kenneth W. Thomas and Ralph H. Kilmann in the early 1970s (*Thomas and Kilmann, 1974*). It helps individuals understand how five conflict-resolution strategies (competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating) affect interpersonal and group dynamics and learn how to select the most appropriate style for a given situation. By selecting responses from 30 statement pairs, individuals discover their preferred style. The TKI assessment is psychometrically sound and thoroughly researched. The scoring of the tool is done according to its instructions manual.

A pilot study was held on about 10% of the number of students for the study. The students selected for the pilot were from the second and third years to avoid decreasing the main sample size. The tools were finalized and the final timetable set based on the results of the pilot.

Fieldwork:

Upon having official permissions from the Faculty of Nursing at Ain Shams University, the researchers met with the students in the first and then the fourth years at the Faculty of Nursing in small groups and explained to them the aim and objectives of the study and its procedures. This was followed by review of the data collection instrument with them to clarify the way of filling it out. Those who consented to participate were handed the tool and asked to fill it completely without missing any item. The fieldwork lasted for three months from March 2014 to May 2014.

Ethical considerations

The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee at the Faculty of Nursing in Ain Shams University. A verbal informed consent was obtained from each participant after explaining the purpose of the study and informing him/her about the rights to refuse or withdraw from the study at any time. Confidentiality of the data collected was ascertained. The questionnaires were anonymous and self-administered.

Statistical analysis: Data entry and statistical analysis were done using SPSS 18.0 statistical software package (*SPSS Inc., 2009*). Data were presented using descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies and percentages for qualitative variables, and means and standard deviations and medians for quantitative variables. Spearman rank correlation analysis was used for assessment of the inter-relationships among scales and quantitative variables. Statistical significance was considered at p -value <0.05 .

Results:

Table 1 describes the socio-demographic characteristics of the students in the study. Their age ranged from 18 to 27 years, with a majority (73.3%) being females. More than three-fourth of the students were single (79.3%), living with family (78.0%), and having had a general secondary education (78.8%). Their birth order ranked between first and ninth with a median 2.

Concerning students' family characteristics, Table 2 demonstrates a higher percentage of fathers having a university degree (31.4%) compared to

mothers (19.3%). Slightly more than half of the fathers were employees (52.1%) while most of the mothers were housewives (81.0%). The majority of the students (77.4%) had their parents living together, in nuclear families (77.4%), with a crowding index less than 2 (62.5%). Slightly more than half of the students in the study sample were having urban residence (56.2%), and the majority (88.4%) were having sufficient family income.

As regards students' work history, Table 3 indicates that only approximately two-fifth (43.3%) of them had worked before. The majority of these (93.0%) worked in nursing jobs for a mean duration of 3.0 years. As for their special skills and training, the majority was having computer skills (92.6%), but only (64.0%) use it in study. About two thirds of them reported having computer at home (63.3%). As for internet, the majority was using it (88.2%). Almost a half of the students (51.8%) had previously attended workshops and seminars, while more than three-fourth (79.6%) of them carried out research. Lastly, a higher percentage of the students had previously heard about emotional intelligence (63.1%), compared to those who heard about conflict (30.3%).

The Emotional Intelligence (EI) of students in the study sample is described in Table 4. It demonstrates generally low levels in all five domains of EI, particularly the Interpersonal domain where only 2 (0.6%) students had effective functioning. On the other hand, the highest domains of effective functioning were those of stress management (45.2%) and intrapersonal (43.5%). In total, only (7.2%) of the students had effective function EI.

As regards the conflict resolution strategies used by students in the study sample, **Table 5** shows that the accommodating strategy was the most highly used, with more than half (50.7%) of them reported using it. All the other strategies were much less used, especially the collaborating strategy, which was highly used by only 6.1% of the students.

The relation between students' EI and their use of different conflict resolution strategies is described in **Table 6**. There is a statistically significant associations could be noticed between students' EI and all of

the conflict resolution strategies used except for the collaborating strategy.

Table 7 describes the correlations between students' total EI and conflict resolution strategies scores and their socio-demographic characteristics. It reveals that the only two statistically significant correlations were between the frequency of net use and the scores of competing and collaborating conflict resolution strategies. These correlations were weak and statistically significant and positive for competing ($r=0.11$) and negative for collaborating ($r=0.13$) strategies.

Table (1): Socio-demographic characteristics of students in the study sample (n=363)

	Frequency	Percent
Academic year		
1 st	180	49.6
4 th	183	50.4
Age:		
<21	212	58.4
21+	151	41.6
Range	18.0-27.0	
Mean±SD	20.1±1.6	
Median	20.00	
Gender:		
Male	97	26.7
Female	266	73.3
Marital status:		
Single	258	79.3
Married	75	20.7
Secondary education:		
General	286	78.8
Technical (nursing)	77	21.2
Living status:		
With family	283	78.0
Not with family	73	22.5
Birth order:		
1	137	37.7
2-3	163	44.9
4+	63	17.4
Range	1.0-9.0	
Mean±SD	2.2±1.5	
Median	2.00	

Table (2): Family characteristics of students in the study sample (n=363)

	Frequency	Percent
Father education:		
Lower than secondary	66	18.2
Secondary	183	50.4
University	114	31.4
Father job:		
Employee	189	52.1
Manual worker	148	40.8
Retired/unemployed	26	7.2
Mother education:		
Lower than secondary	106	29.2
Secondary	187	51.5
University	70	19.3
Mother job:		
Housewife	294	81.0
Working	69	19.0
Family type:		
Nuclear	281	77.4
Extended	82	22.6
Parents living together	281	77.4
Sufficient family income	321	88.4
Residence:		
Rural	159	43.8
Urban	204	56.2
Crowding index:		
<2	227	62.5
2+	136	37.2

Table (3): Work history and special skills and training among students in the study sample (n=363)

	Frequency	Percent
Currently working:		
No	277	76.3
Yes	86	23.7
Duration of work (years):		
<1	22	25.6
1+	64	74.4
Range	0.1-11.0	
Mean±SD	3.0±2.2	
Median	3.00	
Work in nursing	80	93.0
Had previous work (those not working)	120	43.3
Have computer skills	336	92.6
Use computer study	215	64.0
Have computer at home	231	63.6
Use internet	320	88.2
Use in study	221	69.1
Attended workshops/seminars	188	51.8
Carried out research	289	79.6
Heard about emotional intelligence	229	63.1
Heard about conflict	110	30.3

Table (4): Emotional Intelligence (EI) of students in the study sample (n=363)

	Frequency	Percent
Intrapersonal		
Area of enrichment(below average)	205	56.3
Effective functioning	158	43.5
Interpersonal		
Area of enrichment(below average)	361	99.4
Effective functioning	2	0.6
Stress management		
Area of enrichment(below average)	199	54.8
Effective functioning	164	45.2
Adaptability		
Area of enrichment(below average)	244	67.2
Effective functioning	119	32.8
General mood		
Area of enrichment(below average)	270	74.4
Effective functioning	93	25.6
Total EI		
Area of enrichment(below average)	337	92.8
Effective functioning	26	7.2

Table (5): Conflict resolution strategies used by students in the study sample (n=363)

	High		Intermediate		Low	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Competing	48	13.2	220	60.6	95	26.2
Collaborating	22	6.1	176	48.5	165	45.5
Compromising	44	12.1	256	70.5	63	17.4
Avoiding	84	23.1	223	61.4	65	15.4
Accommodating	184	50.7	162	44.6	17	4.7

Table (6): Relation between students' Emotional Intelligence (EI) and conflict resolution strategies used

	Total EI				r- test	p-value
	Below Average		Effective functioning			
	No.	%	No.	%		
Competing:						
High	35	90.9	13	9.1		
Intermediate/Low	302	93.6	13	6.4	0.67	0.001**
Collaborating:						
High	10	89.5	10	10.5		
Intermediate/Low	327	93.5	16	6.5	0.21	0.05
Compromising:						
High	32	72.7	12	27.3		
Intermediate/Low	305	96.5	14	3.5	0.63	0.001**
Avoiding:						
High	70	94.0	14	16.0		
Intermediate/Low	267	95.5	12	4.5	0.91	0.001**
Accommodating:						
High	168	95.2	16	4.8		
Intermediate/Low	169	91.1	10	8.9	0.98	0.001**

Table (7): Correlation between students' emotional intelligence and conflict resolution scores and their socio-demographic characteristics

	Spearman's rank correlation coefficient					
	Compe-ting	Collabo-rating	Compro-mising	Avoiding	Accommo-dating	EI
Academic year	-0.02	0.02	0.07	0.01	-0.06	0.08
Age	-0.01	0.05	0.02	-0.01	-0.03	0.08
Frequency of net use	0.11*	-0.13*	-0.02	0.01	0.03	0.02
Father education	-0.03	0.08	0.05	-0.02	-0.09	0.06
Mother education	0.08	0.00	-0.04	0.02	-0.09	0.06
Crowding index	-0.04	0.00	-0.04	-0.01	0.03	0.00
Income	0.10	-0.03	0.02	-0.05	-0.04	-0.09

Discussion:

The Emotional Intelligence (EI) is an essential ability in life, especially for nurses who have to deal with a variety of situations and persons that require understanding, patience, and compassion. It should have positive contributions to the features of nurses with developed compassion (*Şenyuva et al., 2013*). The present study findings demonstrated very low levels of EI among first and fourth year nursing students. Moreover, their EI level has a significant relation with the types of conflict resolution strategies they prefer. The finding is expected since the concept of EI not very recently introduced in nursing, and still has not gained the importance it deserves in nursing education in Egypt. In support of this is the finding of no significant difference between the first and fourth year students in their level of EI, which indicates that the EI of these students does not develop and grow during their study years at the Faculty of Nursing.

In agreement with this current study finding, a study in Hawaii found that approximately 30% of the nursing students had less than average level of EI (*Marvos, 2013*). Similarly low levels of EI were reported among clinical practice nurses in Hawaii (*Codier et al., 2009*). In line with this, *Rochester et al (2005) and Codier et al (2010)* stressed that undergraduate nursing education must provide a learning environment that emphasizes the importance of EI by nurturing and facilitating the development of these qualities since it is a prerequisite for effective nursing leadership, competent nursing practice and quality clinical outcomes.

According to the present study findings, only less than 7% of the nursing students had "Effective functioning" EI,

while the majority were in the "Area of Enrichment" or below average. These extremely low levels of EI are needed to be improved; such students become compatible with an effective nursing work. In agreement with this, *Strickland (2010)* and *Freshwater and Stickley (2004)* highlighted that an Effective or Average EI level of functioning is needed for nursing students to meet the proposed workplace challenges that are current in today's healthcare context. Hence, the nursing leaders who advocate for the inclusion of EI in nursing curricula recognize the need for students to address both the personal and social competencies to enable them to work effectively (*Bellack et al, 2008*). However, in disagreement with these present study results concerning the very low EI levels among nursing students, *Benson et al (2010)* in a study in Canada, found that the majority of baccalaureate nursing students across all the four years had "Effective" or "Average Functioning" EI scores.

The current study results demonstrated that the lowest domain of EI among the nursing students was that of Interpersonal. Only two of them (i.e. less than 1%) had Effective Functioning in this domain. This striking finding is of major importance given the significant value of this domain in the future nursing practice of these students. Thus, *McQueen (2004)* and *Rochester et al (2005)* clarified that Effective Functioning on the interpersonal subscale is indicative of satisfactory interpersonal and working relationships and being capable of working effectively in a team environment.

The results of the present study demonstrate no difference of statistical significance between the first and fourth year students' EI levels. As discussed before, this indicates no maturation of students' EI throughout their school years.

The finding is in agreement with previous studies that showed no relations between students' educational level and their EI (*Noor-Azniza et al., 2011; Gooya et al., 2012*). However, this result is in disagreement with *Bar-On (2002)* who showed that students in each Level of the program had higher total EI scores than students in the prior year with the highest scores occurring in Level 4 students, suggesting that EI capacity may develop over time. Moreover, year 4 students had enhanced skills in total EI Functioning, that is, well-developed emotional and social capacity as compared to students in the prior three years (*Benson et al., 2010*). Additionally, a significant relationship was observed between the self-management domain of EI and nurses' educational level (*Saeid et al., 2013*). The discrepancy with these studies are certainly attributed to the deficient training in EI in our study.

The present study assessed the use of conflict resolution strategies by nursing students. This is an important area that needs to be considered in nursing education as outlined by *Pines et al (2014)*. The results demonstrated that the accommodating strategy was the mostly used, and the collaborating was the least. This reflects the preference of a more soothing approach rather than the two opposing extremes of avoiding or competing and compromising. It may indicate a low tendency to team work, and could be attributed to lack of students' self-assurance to confront conflict as stated by *Valentine (2001)*. In partial agreement with this, *Sportsman and Hamilton (2007)* reported that slightly more than half of nurses and students chose two or more conflict resolution styles, commonly avoidance and accommodation, while about one-tenth chose collaboration. Meanwhile, the accommodating strategy

came second in preference in *Shazly et al (2005)* in Egypt and *Fakhry and Abou El Hassan (2011)* study in Egypt and Lebanon. However, in disagreement with this, *Hamouda et al. (2012)* found that the nursing students In Alexandria chose the avoiding style as the highest used. This was attributed to that both teachers and students might perceive that experiencing a conflict would damage their relationship.

According to the present study results, the frequency of internet use showed a positive correlation with the competing and collaborating strategies in the present study. This indicates that these more positive and assertive strategies may be acquired through interacting social media. In agreement with this, *Fakhry and Abou El Hassan (2011)* showed that Lebanese students preferred the competing strategy while the Egyptians preferred the accommodating one. They attributed this to the different cultures and norms, with more assertiveness among Lebanese students and their more openness to various media.

Lastly, the present study examined the relation between students' use of various conflict resolution strategies and their EI. The study results revealed an association of statistical significance between students' EI level and all of the strategies except the collaborating strategy. The finding is in agreement with *Chan et al (2014)* whose study demonstrated that EI was a significant predictor of all five conflict resolution strategies. Students' EI positively predicted all strategies except the avoiding one which was negatively predicted by EI. Other studies revealed significant relations with some of the domains of EI such as the relation with the self-management domain (*Mirhashemi et al, 2008; Morrison, 2008*).

Conclusion and Recommendations:

The study concludes that the nursing students have low levels of Emotional Intelligence (EI), and they mostly use the accommodating conflict resolution strategy. The use of competing and collaborating strategies is correlated to the frequency of internet use. Meanwhile, the use of conflict resolution strategies is significantly related to students' EI. Based on these findings, there is an urgent need to improve nursing students' EI and positive conflict resolution strategies through inclusion of nursing curricula that emphasize the two concepts. Training in selecting and using the most appropriate conflict resolution strategy is recommended, with emphasis on positive strategies as the collaborating one. Further research is proposed to assess the relations between assertiveness and conflict resolution strategies, and to evaluate the effect of training in EI and its impact on the use of appropriate conflict resolution strategies.

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