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Research Article

Association between Perceived Empathy and Conflict Management Styles: Using Two Empathy Measurement Scales

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Abstract: This study aimed at exploring the relationship between perceived empathy and conflict management styles among undergraduate students with the use of two measurement scales of empathy. A modified version of Toronto Empathy Questionnaire and a revised version of Empathy Quotient (EQ) were used to measure empathy of students. A sample of 172 accounting students in a selected public university in Bangkok, Thailand was gathered for data collection through an online version questionnaire. With the use of Toronto scale, results of Pearson correlation analysis indicated the significant associations between empathy and collaborating, compromising, and accommodating style. In addition, when employing Empathy Quotient scale, results found that empathy had a positive significant correlation with competing, collaborating, compromising, and accommodating style. This unexpected finding was described since it was inconsistent with the previous research.
Keywords: Empathy, Conflict management, Conflict management styles, Scale measurement.

INTRODUCTION

The term of empathy was firstly coined more than a century ago by German Psychologist, which refers to the ability to feel the same experience or perspective of others [1]. This word of empathy is based on cognitive component of empathy, according to Bouton [2]. Individuals without empathy can be perceived as an insensitive person who unrespect to their perspectives, and value their needs and interests [3]. Empathy is considered as a crucial skill that helps an individual resolve conflict. Empathy in conflict resolution refers to stepping into the other party's shoes and experiencing their prospect of conflict situation through their viewpoints [4]. Report of University of Michigan indicated that today's college students had less empathetic than students in the last decade. Social media and networking can be one of key factors that minimize the level of empathic skills among college students [5]. Thus, increasing empathy of today's college students is important for all universities as empathy is a vital key to conflict resolution, which students are to greatly experience when they work as an employee in the workplace. As nature of organization is interdependence, which can cause too many forms of conflict such as interpersonal conflict, intragroup conflict, and intergroup conflict, the preparation to

effectively cope with conflict is essential and requires the cooperation. Empathy, as mentioned previously, is a key factor that helps diminish and manage conflict successfully. However, providing understanding of empathy concepts in the university has been evidently occasional if students are not in medical programs like medicine, nursing or pharmacy [6-8]. Therefore, the focus on empathy as a crucial component of conflict management should be extended to students in other programs especially business program.

Empathy is an essential trait of accountants for conflict resolution in the workplace which should be assessed during their university attendance. A systematic investigation of association between empathy and conflict management styles among accounting students is vital to construct the programs, activities, and curriculums that are suitable for students' empathy enhancement and improvement. As a recent study by University of Cambridge researchers found that empathy was not from a difference of generic basis, empathy can be developed and learned [9]. Obviously, empathy has increasingly become essential skill required by professionals to effectively work with others and find the appropriate solution when being in the conflict situation. Although empathy can be made,

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increasing empathetic skills is still limited in the medical program rather than social sciences. This study attempts to explore the importance of empathy in another area besides medical fields and to demonstrate the linkage between empathy and conflict management.

Therefore, the objective of this present study was to examine the relationship between empathy and conflict management styles among undergraduate students with a specific major in accounting. However, since various scale measurements were proposed in the past research, this study also attempted to compare the results of different empathy scale measurements to see whether or not there were different findings occurred.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

Ouzouni and Nakakis [6] explored the empathy of nursing students in Greece. Samples of 272 nursing students participated in data collection and completed the self-report questionnaire, which Jefferson Scale of Nursing Students Empathy was employed. Findings showed that overall nursing students had a moderate level of empathy. When compared the difference of empathy level in gender, results found that female nurses were significantly more empathetic than males. This study also found that religious beliefs and nationality were significant variables on empathy.

Gnawali [10] studied the relationship between emotional intelligence and conflict management. A sample of 200 higher education teachers in Nepal was involved with data collection through a questionnaire. Among these numbers, only 157 questionnaires were usable for data analysis. Results of this study showed that emotional intelligence was positively correlated with conflict management. Specifically, self-awareness and social-awareness had a low positive significant association with conflict management while self-management and relationship management dimensions were significantly correlated with conflict management in a medium level. According to these four dimensions of emotional intelligence, empathy is viewed as part of social awareness.

Hastings, Kavookjian, and Ekong [7] examined the relationship between conflict management styles and attitudes toward empathy among pharmacy students. This study was a cross-sectional study, which the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument professional version and the Kiersma-Chen Empathy Scale (KCES) were used as the instrument to measure conflict management styles and attitudes toward empathy. Data were collected from two cohorts of first year pharmacy students in one university in the U.S. by using online survey approach. Results indicated that students who had a higher score on competing style had significant lower attitudes toward empathy whereas those who scored higher on accommodating style had significant higher attitudes toward empathy.

Promsri [11] investigate the correlation between empathy and conflict management styles among graduate students in MBA program. Seventeen students were engaged with data collection, which a self-administrated questionnaire was distributed to students in classroom. Toronto Empathy Questionnaire was used to measure empathy of students while a modified version of 15-item conflict management questionnaire was employed to assess students' conflict management styles. To explore a relationship between empathy and conflict management styles, Pearson correlation was conducted. Results of this study showed that only accommodating style was significantly associated with empathy.

METHODOLOGY

This study attempted to examine the association between empathy and conflict management styles. Samples of 172 accounting students at a selected public university were gathered for data collection through an online version questionnaire posted in Google classroom. Instruments used to measure empathy among undergraduate students composed of a modified version of 14-item of The Toronto Empathy Questionnaire developed by Spreng, McKinnon, Mar, and Levine [12], and an adjusted version of 5-item The Empathy Quotient (EQ) proposed by Loewen, Lyle, and Nachshen [13]. Due to the lower Alpha scores for both instruments, this present study had to modify the Toronto scale from 16-item to 14-item while Empathy Quotient was adapted from 8-item to 5-item to ensure the internal consistency of these scale measurement. According to Nunnally [14], the alpha score of 0.6 was considered being acceptable for data collection. After the scale modification in accordance with advice of Cronbach's alpha if item deleted, the alpha score of the Toronto scale was 0.632 while Empathy Quotient's alpha score was 0.619. To assess conflict management styles, an adapted version of 15-item conflict management styles questionnaire proposed by Schermerhorn, Hunt, and Osborn [15] was utilized. This scale was a 4-point rating scale ranging from 1 = very unlikely to 4 = very likely encompassed five conflict handling styles: competing, collaborating, compromising, avoiding, and accommodating styles. The alpha score of this scale was 0.703, which was acceptable to be employed to measure conflict management styles among students. To explore the relationship between empathy and conflict management styles, Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient was conducted.

FINDINGS

The majority of participants in this study was female (86%) with the average age of 20.99 years old and had an average income of 3,384.30 baht per month. Sixty-one percent of participants were 4-year program students while 39% of them were 2-year program students. Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was computed to scrutinize the association between empathy

and conflict management styles. The Toronto Empathy scale measurement indicated that an overall score of respondents' empathy was in a high level (M = 2.95, S.D. = .361). Moreover, the Empathy Quotient scale demonstrated a different overall score of participants' empathy, which was in a moderate level (M = 2.18, S.D. = .577). For conflict management styles, accommodating style had the highest mean score (M = 3.38, S.D. = .439).

Table-1 showed the associations between empathy with different measurement scales usage and conflict management styles. With the use of the Toronto Empathy scale, results of analysis indicated low positive significant associations between empathy and collaborating(r = .389, p < .01), compromising (r = .217, p < .01), and accommodating style (r = .298, p < .01). Additionally, when using Empathy Quotient scale, results found the unexpected assumption in which competing conflict management style was discovered to have a positive significant correlation with empathy (r = .280, p < .01) like other styles including collaborating (r = .371, p < .01), compromising (r = .319, p < .01), and accommodating style (r = .357, p < .01).

Table-1: Correlation between Empathy and Conflict Management Styles: The Comparison between Two Empathy Measurement Scales

		Competing	Collaborating	Compromising	Avoiding	Accommodating
Empathy1	**Pearson Correlation**	.110	.389**	.217**	.110	.298**
	Sig (2-tailed)	.149	.000	.004	.130	.000
	N	172	172	172	172	172
Empathy2	**Pearson Correlation**	.280**	.371**	.319**	.093	.357**
	Sig (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.225	.000
	N	172	172	172	172	172

++Empathy 1 = Toronto Empathy Questionnaire, Empathy 2 = Empathy Quotient
** Significant at .01 level

CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This current study's findings were inconsistent with Promsri [11] in which only accommodating style was found to have a significant correlation with empathy. With the use of 14-item Toronto Empathy Questionnaire, this study found that three conflict handling styles included collaborating, compromising, and accommodating style were significantly associated with empathy. Moreover, using 5-item of Empathy Questionnaire, this study revealed that competing style was also included as the additional conflict management style that was related to empathy. These findings partly supported Hastings, Kavookjian, and Ekong [7] in which competing style had a negative significant relationship with empathy while accommodating style had a positive significant correlation with empathy. Additionally, this study found low positive significant correlation between empathy and conflict management styles, which was consistent with previous research [10].

Findings of positive significant correlation between empathy and collaborating, compromising, and accommodating style were reasonable as these conflict management styles place emphasis not only on individual's concerns for needs and interests, but also other concerns for their needs and values as well. However, accommodating style had an exception as this style focuses on concerns for others rather than oneself. In addition, the positive relationship between empathy and competing style when measured with Empathy Quotient was problematic and inconsistent with prior research. As those with competing style are more likely to focus on their own needs and interests than other needs and benefits, the relationship between empathy and this style should have been in the opposite direction. This phenomenon may be quite difficult to describe through concepts of empathy and conflict management. Individuals who prefer to use competing style tend to focus on their own stakes rather than the others, which is quite irrational to have cooperativeness with other people. However, this can be implied that those with competing style preference may have empathy during the conflict situation but they ultimately choose to protect their needs and interests rather than the others' needs and concerns.

As the unexpected finding of second measurement scale occurred, this study recommends rechecking a validity and reliability of this scale to ensure the internal consistency of scale. In addition, as this study collected data from one group of students with specific major, the further study should extend its sample sizes to students in other programs in the same university. As this study gathered data from undergraduate students through a self-administrated survey and may be subject to social desirability bias, generalization of this study needs to be conducted with caution. Also, as this study examined only the relationship between empathy and conflict management styles, the next study should assess the causal relationships between variables through regression analysis to examine cause and effect of these variables.

For research implication, the university can assist students in becoming more empathetic through the critical training included interviews, case studies, and role plays [3]. Hastings, Kavookjian, and Ekong [7] noted that role plays with feedback can help enhance

students' ability to understand others' perspectives and feelings and improve their social awareness to respond to other people more empathically. Training activities in empathy and conflict management should be conducted and delivered to students on an academic term basis to ensure that they understand the concepts of empathy and conflict management and resolution.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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