

**CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES AND PERCEIVED STRESS  
AMONG FEMALE COLLEGE STUDENTS OF URBAN INDIA**

Moonmoon Dutta, Nabamita Chakraborty and Sharmili Mitra

Department of Psychology, Gokhale Memorial Girls' College, University of Calcutta, India.

Corresponding Author Email: nabamita83@rediffmail.com

**Abstract**

*This study is designed to investigate the relationship between conflict management styles and perceived stress among female college students. The sample consisted of 100 female college students from the urban background. After screening by the General Health Questionnaire (Goldberg, 1970), the sample comprised of 70 female students. The tools used for the collection of data were Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), developed by Sheldon Cohen (1983), and Conflict Management Styles Assessment (CMSA). The tools are self-administering questionnaires, wherein, the individuals were asked to rate each statement on a five-point scale. The results indicated a significant positive correlation between perceived stress levels and Avoiding and Compromising styles of conflict management.*

**Key words:** *College students, conflict management and perceived stress levels.*

**Introduction**

Perceived stress is a dynamic multidimensional concept which has a wide range of causative and contributing factors. The perceptions include medical, physical, psychological and psychosocial aspects, dependent on both cultural and social contexts. The topic of stress among college or university students has been an area of concern and much exploration for many years. Researchers have found out that perception of high stress levels in students may result in poor academic performance, depression, attrition and serious health problems (Pengilly & Dowd, 2000; Misra, West & Russo, 2000; Hudd, Dumlao, Erdman-Sager, 2000).

College students in many countries are at an augmented risk of serious health issues, substance abuse, and problems arising from anxiety, depression and distress. It is customary to understand the various factors conducive to academic performance. Mild stress may be beneficial and may enhance cognitive functioning and performance, whereas persistent and chronic stress may give rise to anxiety and depression, thereby, hindering performance. Perceived stress accounts for

how much a person is stressed, at a particular point of time or over a period of time. It is the extent to which individuals appraise situations as stressful and that their demands exceed their ability to cope with the situation. Stress in college students is increasing. (Peden, Rayens, Hall & Beebe, 2001). Sax (1997) reported that 9.7% of college freshmen suffered from frequent depression. Additionally, 48% of female students and 59.3% of male students were confident in their mental health. Hudd et al. (2000) found that students who reported high stress levels exhibited more unhealthy behaviours, including poor diet, lack of exercise and sleep patterns.

Stress and its coping may find its relation with the various ways in which an individual shows his proficiency in handling and managing conflicts. According to research, an individual who prefers to employ a certain conflict management style may express the preference of a certain coping mechanism, when facing a certain type of stressor. It is therefore expected that different types of conflict management styles would lead to different coping strategies, as well as the perception of a stressor.

Conflict is a natural, everyday phenomenon which is an unavoidable component of human activity. (Brahnam et al., 2005) that may be viewed as a situation in which the concerns of two or more people appear to be incompatible. Otherwise stated, conflict is an interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement or dissonance within or between social entities (i.e., individual, group, organizations, etc. (Darling & Walker, 2001). Brown (2007) suggests six contents for conflict- Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, Intr-agroup, Inter-group, Intra-organisational and Inter-organisational.

Flannes and Levin (2001) describe the experience of conflict using three levels of conflict experience, namely, cognitive, physiological, and affective, often occurring sequentially. They are discussed in the following table:

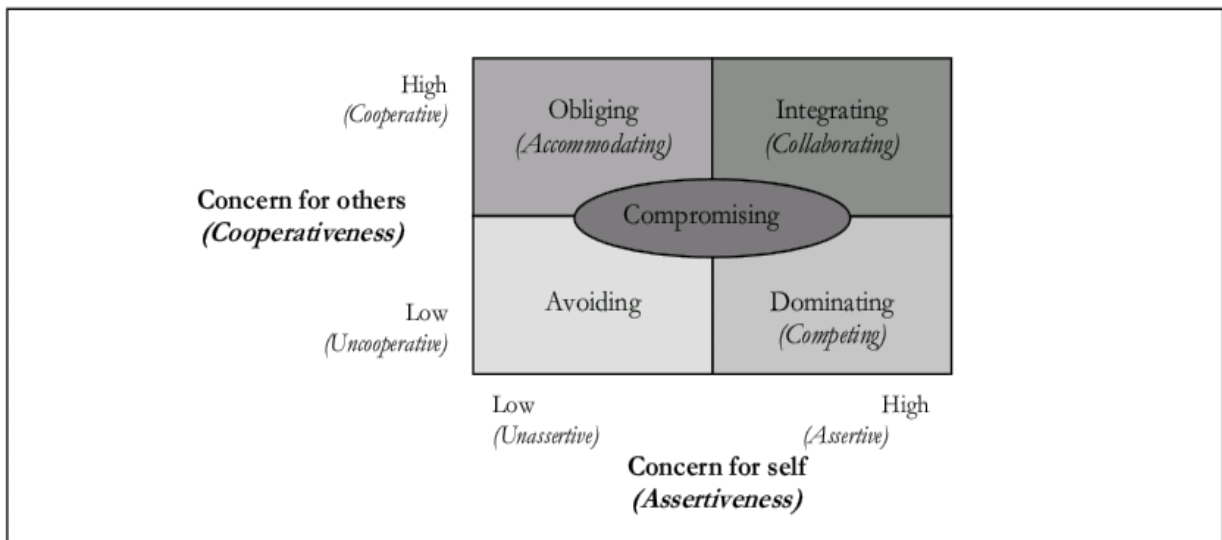
Table 1: Level of Conflict Experience and Signs and Symptoms of Conflict

Level of Conflict Experience	Signs and Symptoms of Conflict
Cognitive	Presence of internal self-talk with themes suggestive of impending or current conflict states
Physiological	Awareness of body cues such as increased heart rate, decreased respiration, tightening of muscles, desire to “fight” or “flight”
Affective	Earlier noted cognitive and affective cues are now being interpreted as indicating the presence of affective states where one feels emotions such as “fear,” “anger,” “anxiety.”

Note. From “People Skills for Project Managers” (p.230), by S. W. Flannes and G. Levin, 2001,

In order to function effectively in life, management of conflicts is crucial. The most acknowledged framework of styles of resolving conflict was developed by Thomas and Kilman (1974) and Rahim and Bonoma (1979). According to this framework, there are five styles of managing conflict: Avoiding, Competing (dominating), Accommodating (obliging), Collaborating (integrating), and Compromising, determined by two dimensions, labeled as assertiveness and cooperativeness.

### A two-dimensional model of conflict handling styles



Compiled using: Rahim (1983, 369) and Thomas & Kilman (1974 in Brahnam et al. (2005, 199))

Conflict management styles comprise two underlying dimensions, namely, concern for self, and concern for others. (Rahim & Bonoma, 1979). A person's style of conflict management is to incorporate both dimensions in varying degrees. High concern for both self and others indicates a 'collaborating' style, low concern for both self and others indicates an 'avoiding' style, high concern for self and low concern for others is indicative of a 'competing' style and low concern for self and high concern for others indicates an 'accommodating' style of conflict management.

A study made by Yalew (2007) reported that the major conflict managing styles among students, in order of importance are *compromising*, *avoiding*, *collaborating* and *competing*. According to the study, *accommodating* was the strategy used least frequently while managing conflicts.

### Characteristics of conflict handling styles

Style	Characteristics
<b>Avoiding</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Low concern for self and low concern for others; unassertive and uncooperative personality</li> <li>▪ Lose-lose outcome (because both parties refrain from communicating their needs, so neither has any needs met)</li> <li>▪ The desire to withdraw from the conflict situation or suppress the conflict</li> <li>▪ Withdrawal behavior, postponement, disengagement from conflict, hiding disagreement, sidestepping</li> <li>▪ The likely outcome is that the conflict remains unresolved</li> <li>▪ Might take the form of diplomatically sidestepping an issue, postponing an issue until a later or better time, or, ostrich-like, simply withdrawing from a threatening situation</li> </ul>
<b>Competing (Dominating)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ High concern for self and low concern for others; assertive and uncooperative personality</li> <li>▪ Win-lose outcome (because one of the parties in conflict is aggressive and attempts to make sure that only their needs are met)</li> <li>▪ Drive to maximize individual gain even at the expense of others (forcing one's viewpoint at the expense of others); a desire to satisfy one's interests, regardless of the impact on the other party to the conflict</li> <li>▪ A power-oriented mode, in which one uses whatever powers seem appropriate to win one's position, including the ability to argue, one's rank, one's economic sanctions, or forcing behavior if necessary</li> <li>▪ Individuals "stand up for their rights," defend a position which they believe is correct, or simply want to win</li> </ul>
<b>Accommodating (Obliging)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Low concern for self and high concern for others; unassertive and cooperative personality</li> <li>▪ Lose-win outcome</li> <li>▪ A self-sacrifice style (sacrifice of self-interests to satisfy the needs of others)</li> <li>▪ Willingness of one party in a conflict to place the opponent's interests above his or her own; attitudes to accommodate and accept opponent's wishes</li> <li>▪ Individuals seek consent and approval, and are eager to be helpful and supportive of others</li> <li>▪ Might take the form of selfless generosity or charity, obeying another person's order when one would prefer not to, or yielding to another's point of view</li> </ul>
<b>Compromising</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Moderate/intermediate concern for both self and others; medium assertive and cooperative personality (midpoint between cooperativeness and assertiveness)</li> <li>▪ Associated with give-and-take or sharing the search for a middle-ground solution</li> <li>▪ No-win/no-lose outcome (a middle ground in solving conflict where both parties would "give something" in order to "take something")</li> <li>▪ Both parties give up something to reach a mutually acceptable solution which prevents them from meeting all of their needs (individuals try to find some expedient, mutually acceptable solution, which partially satisfies both parties)</li> <li>▪ Might mean splitting the difference, exchanging concessions, or seeking a quick middle-ground position</li> </ul>
<b>Collaborating (Integrating)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ High concern for self and high concern for others; collaboration between parties; assertive and cooperative personality</li> <li>▪ Win-win outcome (interaction with others in a win-win manner)</li> <li>▪ Drive towards constructing solutions to conflict that meet the needs of all parties involved (each party in a conflict desires to satisfy fully the concerns of all parties); attempt to work with the other person to find some solution which fully satisfies the concerns of both persons (digging into an issue to identify the underlying concerns of the two individuals and to find an alternative which meets both sets of concerns)</li> <li>▪ Individuals are open, exchange information, examine differences between parties in order to reach a solution acceptable to both parties, and show openness to each other</li> <li>▪ Might take the form of exploring a disagreement to learn from each other's insights, concluding to resolve some condition which would otherwise have opponents competing for resources, or confronting and trying to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem</li> <li>▪ Interested in preserving longstanding business relationships</li> </ul>

Developed using: Elsayed-Ekhouly & Buda (1996), Blitman (2002),  
Goodwin (2002), Rahim (2002), and Aritzeta et al. (2005)

Variation in conflict management style, therefore, leads to differential exposure to experiences of conflict, a known stressor. (McGrath, 1976), thus increasing or decreasing the demands placed on an individual.

The present study seeks to find out the relation, if any, between the different styles of conflict management and the stress perceived by college and university students, of the age range of 18 to 29 years. It may so happen that those who use a more collaborating or competing style of conflict management, may perceive a lower level of stress, whereas those who incorporate a more accommodating or avoiding style may experience a higher level of stress.

## **Method:**

### **Objective**

The study aimed to determine the relationship (if any) between the different conflict management styles and the perceived stress level of female college and university students.

### **Sample**

The sample for the screening of the present study consisted of 100 female college and university students, coming from Urban set up (Kolkata city), of the undergraduate and postgraduate level of educational qualification. In an assessment centre for adolescents, and early adults, the questionnaires were administered to every 3<sup>rd</sup> candidate arriving for assessment purposes. Such data were later screened based on the inclusion and exclusion requirement criteria for the research.

After the screening procedure, the sample consisted of 70 female college and university students, age ranging between 18 to 24 years. Participants from both nuclear and joint family structure were integrated in the sample.

### **Tools Used**

- 1. Information Blank:** It consists of information like name, age, sex, educational qualification, family type, family history of any psychiatric illness and if the individual is presently under any medication.
- 2. For preliminary screening:**

- **General Health Questionnaire (GHQ)** developed by Goldberg in 1970, is a self-administering screen test to detect any short term changes in mental and physical health among respondents. The total number of items is 12. The reliability and validity of the scale has been confirmed.
- 3. For final sample:**
- **Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)** developed by Sheldon Cohen in 1983 is a widely used psychological instrument for measuring non specific perceived stress. The total number of items is 10. The reliability and validity of the scale has been confirmed.
  - **Conflict Management Styles Assessment (CMSA)** consists of 15 items corresponding to five conflict resolution styles, Collaborating, Competing, Avoiding, Accommodating and Compromising. The one with the highest score indicates the most commonly used strategy.

## **Procedure**

In the present study, the three tools employed are self-administering questionnaires. Three or four individuals were tested at a time. The individuals were instructed verbally and in written form. They were asked to fill the information schedule, which had questions pertaining to their name, age, gender, educational qualification, family history of any psychiatric illness and if they are under any prescribed drug.

A screen was placed between each individual to prevent one from seeing the work of another. The individuals were asked to read each question carefully and rate each statement on a 5 point scale. No time limit was specified; however the average time taken by the participants was 10 minutes. The individuals were asked to answer each question and not leave any question/ statement unanswered. Confidentiality was assured to the individuals. The data obtained were then scored.

## **Discussion**

Table 1: Showing the socio-demographic characteristics of subjects. (N=70)

Variable		Number	Percentage
Age	18 to 24 years	70	100%
Sex	Female	70	100%
Education	Undergraduate level	69	98.57%
	Postgraduate level	1	1.43%

Table 2: Showing the mean and standard deviation of the selected variables.

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Perceived Stress	20.10	5.007
Collaborating Style	8.442	2.082
Competing Style	7.614	1.958
Avoiding Style	7.414	2.176
Accommodating Style	8.514	1.863
Compromising Style	7.242	1.906

Table 3: Correlation coefficients between different conflict management styles and perceived stress scores (r).

	r	Significance
PSS and Collaborating Style	-0.021	0.863
PSS and Competing Style	-0.194	0.107
PSS and Avoiding Style	+0.455	0.00**
PSS and Accommodating Style	+0.0147	0.226
PSS and Compromising Style	+0.312	0.009**

\*\*Significant at 0.01 level



The study was conducted to determine the relationship, (if any) between the different conflict management styles and perceived stress among female college students of the urban population of Kolkata. The data collected were statistically analysed by computing the mean and the standard deviation of the variables, Perceived Stress and the different Conflict Management Styles. The coefficient of correlation ( $r$ ) was computed between perceived stress and the different conflict management styles.

From Table-2, it may be observed that the mean of perceived stress scores was 20.1, falling in the higher end of the range 7.1 to 20.3, for females, with a standard deviation of 5.007. The mean and standard deviation for *Collaborating* style was 8.442 and 2.007 respectively. The mean and standard deviation for *Competing* style was 7.614 and 1.958 respectively. The mean and standard deviation for *Avoiding* style was 7.414 and 2.176 respectively. The mean and standard deviation for *Accommodating* style was 8.514 and 1.863 respectively. The mean and standard deviation for *Compromising* style was 7.242 and 1.906 respectively. It may thus be observed that the style of conflict management most used by the female college students is the *Accommodating* Style. The other styles used in decreasing order of importance are *Collaborating*, *Competing*, *Avoiding* and *Compromising*.

From Table 3 ( attach Table -3), it may be observed that a positive correlation (+0.455) has been found between perceived stress and Avoiding style of conflict management significant and a positive correlation (+0.312) has been found between perceived stress and Compromising styles of conflict management, significant at the 0.01 level. This indicates that with an increase in usage of the Avoiding and Compromising styles of conflict management, there is an increase in the level of perceived stress among female college students.

Avoiding style of conflict management refers to low concern for self as well as others. Freidman et al (2000) has suggested that individuals having the tendency to use an avoiding style are ill-equipped to handle problems demanding attention. Withdrawal behaviors, postponement, disengagement from conflict, are characteristic of the avoiding style of conflict management, leading to diplomatically sidestepping from an issue. (Thomas and Kilman, 1974). Antonioni (1998) suggests that avoiding behavior results in a lose-lose outcome, since both parties refrain from communicating their needs, hence none has their needs or requirements fulfilled. It could be said that individuals who have their needs and requirements unfulfilled and have their conflicts unresolved may undergo higher levels of stress because the conflict is never dealt with and the conflict may take the form of something greater, if left unresolved.

Compromising style of conflict management refers to intermediate concern for self and others; medium assertive and cooperative personality. It is associated with a give-and-take approach in which both parties would give something in order to receive something (Thomas and Kilman,1974). Due to constantly having to compromise and give up something in order to gain something, and never arriving at the winning end, the individual may perceive greater levels of stress, desiring for more positive and favorable outcomes for the self.

(Attach Table-3) A significant positive correlation has been revealed between perceived stress and *Avoiding* and *Compromising* styles of conflict management, indicating that an increase in the usage of the aforesaid conflict management styles lead to an increased level of perceived stress among female college students.

### **Implications and Future Directions**

The results of this study offer interesting opportunities for further research. Further research could study larger populations for the difference in effects of gender and age. It could study the effects of perceived stress on conflict management styles in a regional or national basis, increasing the generalizability of findings. Furthermore, other methods could be used for identification of conflict management styles such as laboratory experiments, role play, interviews, scenarios etc.

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