

**The role of group leader's conflict-handling style in the Palestinian
universities students – southern West Bank.**

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ABSTRACT

The researcher and the prospective readers interest of this topic is indicated by its usefulness in developing and helping the universities to manage and reduce conflicts among their students, beside its contribution to the academic knowledge and practice of conflict management in education institutions worldwide in general.

Statement of the problem

University's students and lecturers get annoyed of the conflicting groups as they require more time in consultation and reach less frequently to agreements in their decisions, so in all cases, reducing such conflicts is helpful to all parties. Moreover it will help better understand the practice of conflict management, and the importance of the group leader in avoiding, reducing, and management conflicts in the groups.

Scope and delimitation of the study

This study tried to determine the influence of the group leaders conflicts-handling style on reducing conflicts among students. A model was developed and tested self-administered questionnaire to the Palestinians universities students-Southern West Bank. The study is limited on the perception of the respondents of the study. The study and data gathered were as of 2017.

Research Objectives

In the light of the problem statement, the researcher proposes the following research objectives,

1. To examine whether the students' conflict-handling style reduces conflicts among students.
2. To examine whether the group leader's negotiation skills reduces conflicts among students.
3. To examine whether the group's collective decision making reduces conflicts among students.
4. To identify the moderating role of emotional intelligence in reducing conflicts among students.

Significance of the Study

This study is expected to have manifold contributions. At first, this research work would provide possible ways to reduce and manage conflicts in study groups, which is a major concern for both; lecturers and students. Secondly, this research work would also contribute to the academic knowledge, as very little empirical data is available about the practice of conflict management in education institutions worldwide in general; and this shortage is more clear in the Arab and Muslim world.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is 1) to examine whether the group leader's conflict-handling style reduces conflicts among students 2) to examine whether the group leader's negotiation skills reduces conflicts among students 3) to examine whether the group's collective decision making reduces conflicts among students, and 4) to identify the moderating role of emotional intelligence in reducing conflicts among students.

Methodology: A model for reducing conflicts among students was developed and tested self-administered questionnaire to the Palestinian university students –

southern West Bank. A total of 600 questionnaires were distributed, with 510 being returned complete and valid.

Findings: Results of the analysis suggest that the collaborative conflict-handling style is best to reduce conflicts among students. Also, collective decision making and having group leaders with good negotiating skills and high level of emotional intelligence were proved to be factors of reducing conflicts among students. Meanwhile, little differences in response based on various demographic indicators were observed.

Recommendations: In order to reduce conflicts among students, efforts have to be put by universities to train students on several management and communication skills that would play a role in reducing the gap of trust among students as well. On the other hand, future research has to focus on the Islamic perspective of conflict management, and on how to prevent conflicts from happening rather than how to handle them as they occur.

Keywords: Conflict Management, Negotiation, Collective Decision Making, Emotional Intelligence.

INTRODUCTION

In this research, the current practice of conflict management among the students of the Palestinians universities in the southern West Bank will be observed and analyzed. And, accordingly, this paper intends to highlight the root cause of this problem with the underlying factors, and then propose some possible solutions that would be of a great value to students and lecturers as well.

Problem Statement

In the beginning of each semester, students – having known each other for only a short while – are asked to form groups and choose leaders, where usually a great share of the course grade is determined by these group-based assignments. In many cases, it seems that the wrong person is chosen as the group leader, either due to cultural factors, or misjudgments related to the physical appearance. In turn, this wrong choice of group leader causes severe challenges and embarrassment to the group as a whole, especially when making decisions regarding the assignments. This leads to conflicts among group members, and if not managed and resolved appropriately, these conflicts negatively would affect the final grade of the group as a whole.

Indeed, not only students are affected by this problem, but, also, even lecturers get annoyed of the conflicting groups as they require more time in consultation and reach less frequently to agreements in their decisions. In all cases, reducing such conflicts is helpful to all parties. Although the theory of conflict management is well known, there is little empirical research that shows how Muslim students react in situations of conflicts. It is therefore hoped that this paper will help us better understand the practice of conflict management. In particular, this author wants to

better understand the importance of the group leader in avoiding or managing conflict in the group.

Research Objectives

In the light of the problem statement, the researcher proposes the following research objectives,

5. To examine whether the students' conflict-handling style reduces conflicts among students.
6. To examine whether the group leader's negotiation skills reduces conflicts among students.
7. To examine whether the group's collective decision making reduces conflicts among students.
8. To identify the moderating role of emotional intelligence in reducing conflicts among students.

Significance of the Study

This study is expected to have manifold contributions. At first, this research work would provide possible ways to reduce and manage conflicts in study groups, which is a major concern for both; lecturers and students. Secondly, this research work would also contribute to the academic knowledge, as very little empirical data is available about the practice of conflict management in education institutions worldwide in general; and this shortage is more clear in the Arab and Muslim world.

Theoretical Framework

The following graph (exhibit 1.1)page(5) depicts the framework for this study, which was developed by the researchers, highlighting the independent, mediating and dependent variables respectively:

Exhibit 1.1: The Theoretical Framework

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.2 Definition and Nature of Conflict

As a matter of fact, conflict is natural and healthy part of any organization, though it can be very painful if it's not managed effectively (Chung-Yan & Moeller, 2010; Further, as highlighted by Shih & Susanto, 2010), conflict arises when two or more interdependent parties perceive they have incompatible goals and scarce resources, and there is some kind of interference from each of them on achieving these goals or gaining these resources. For instance, if two individuals in an organization perceive that there is a promotion, they would recognize the conflict ahead, and they may deal with it, or try to avoid it. Indeed, the level of interdependence determines the potential of conflict to occur. There are four types of interdependence; pooled interdependence is the lowest form of interdependence resulting in the least amount of conflict. Other types of interdependence include sequential interdependence, reciprocal interdependence, and comprehensive interdependence. The level of interaction increases in the sequential one, thus the potential for conflicts to occur increases as well. Whereas, the possibility for conflicts to occur is at highest levels in the last type, the comprehensive interdependence, due to the complexity of interaction.

Indeed, there has been an ongoing debate on the definition of conflict in the various fields of study, particularly psychology, sociology and politics. And, the fact is that, as observed, there is no shortage of definitions of conflict – however, no single widely accepted definition exists.

In the broad sense, according to **Robbins and Judge (2017)**, *conflict* can be defined as “*a process that begins when one party perceives another party has or is about to negatively affect something the first party cares about.*” According to them, this definition is flexible enough to cover the full range of conflict levels, and it encompasses the wide range of conflicts people experience in organizations and societies.

Other recognized definitions of conflict include Rahim's (1992), which defines conflict as “*the interactive process manifested in incompatibility, disagreement, or dissonance within or between social entities.*”

As can be seen above, the various definitions end up describing conflict as a process, and all have some sense of commonality; there are at least two parties (individuals or groups) involved; those parties do interact with each other in some way; and they perceive incompatibility between themselves.

In fact, viewing conflict as a process allows us to visualize the linkage between the inputs and outputs. For this, the major comprehensive process of conflicts was developed by Professor **Stephen Robbins**, the renowned organizational behavior expert. In his five-stage process he draws the observance of the incompatibility in views within the group, then the perception of the conflict is formed, which is followed by identifying the conflict-handling style or intention, which determines the behavior of the involved parties, and in turn, results in the

increased or decreased group performance. His model is illustrated in exhibit 2-1 in the next page(9):

Exhibit 2.1: The Conflict Process

Source: Figure from “Conflict and Negotiation” by S. Robbins and T. Judge in Organizational Behavior, 15/e, p. 450 (Pearson, 2013).

This model helps us to understand more effectively and practically our topic of discussion, conflict management, as it is represented in the middle step of the process, and reveals to us the important role of managing conflicts in order to be able to get a positive result and an increased group performance.

Types of Conflict

As we mentioned earlier, in order to know whether a conflict is functional or dysfunctional, we have to look at the type of conflict, whether it is related to task, relationship, or process.

A *task conflict* is related to the content and goals of the work; *relationship conflict* is attributed to conflicts involving interpersonal issues; and a *process conflict* is one that is related to how the job gets done (Huang, 2010; Parayitam, Olson & Bao, 2010).

According to researchers, relationship conflicts are almost always dysfunctional and bad for the organization, as they involved personalizing issues

and deviating the focus to an unrelated path. This is definitely a waste of time and efforts, and may develop into an uncontrollable stage of conflict. Usually, relationship conflicts involve high level of hostility between the conflicting parties, and that opens the floor for more personality clashes and reduces the mutual understanding (and sometimes respect) between both parties. Whereas, on the other hand, task and process conflicts are believed to be beneficial for the organization (Huang, 2010; Parayitam *et. al.*, 2010; Rahim, 2002).

According to George and Jones (2012), conflict, in the past, has been viewed as always bad and dysfunctional for the organization, because it leads to lower organizational performance. However, with reference to Huang (2010), the current view of conflict is that, if managed and negotiated carefully, it can usually increase the organizational performance.

2.6 Conflict Management

According to Rahim (2002), conflict management is *“the process of limiting the negative aspects of conflict while increasing the positive aspects of conflict. The aim of conflict management is to enhance learning and group outcomes, including effectiveness or performance in organizational setting”*.

2.7 Conflict Management Models

In order to assess the individual’s behavior in a conflict situation; that is, situation where the concerns of two people seem to be incompatible; Thomas developed a model identifying the primary conflict handling styles using two dimensions, *cooperativeness* and *assertiveness*. The first dimension, cooperativeness, refers to the extent to which one party attempts to satisfy the other

party's concerns; whereas, the other dimension, assertiveness, refers to the extent to which one party attempts to satisfy his or her own concerns. Based on this, five conflict handling styles can be identified; namely, *competing* (assertive and uncooperative), *collaborating* (assertive and cooperative), *avoiding* (unassertive and uncooperative), *accommodating* (unassertive and cooperative), and *compromising* (moderate on both dimensions; assertiveness and cooperativeness) (Thomas, 2002; Robbins & Judge, 2013). The following graph illustrates Thomas' model; page(11)

Exhibit 2.2: The Five Conflict-Handling Styles

Source: Figure from “Conflict and Negotiation Processes in Organizations” by K. Thomas in *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 2/e, vol. 3, ed. by M. D. Dunnette and L. M. Hough, p. 668 (Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1992).

2.8 Negotiating in Conflict Management

According to *Shermerhorn et. al. (2010)*, negotiation can be defined as “*the process of making joint decisions when the parties involved have different preferences*”. In general, in negotiating, two interdependent individuals, or groups, who perceive they have conflicting goals, state and discuss suggestions on how to reach out possible agreement to their conflict in specific terms and conditions. Negotiation, indeed, is very important to both individuals and organizations in the sense that it affects the relationship between the negotiators and the way how they feel about themselves. This process, if done improperly, might negatively affect the organization. Therefore, depending on the importance of the issue and the time

negotiation takes place, preserving healthy social relationship and behaving ethically the whole way should be as important as the outcome of the negotiation process. After all, the conflicting parties will, usually, continue working together in a team or at least for the same organization (Shermerhorn et. al., 2010; and Robbins & Judge, 2013).

2.9 Outcomes of Conflict Management

As people generally prefer positive conflicts, as they are functional and constructive, they lead us to better decisions, to more creativity and more innovation in problem solving (De Janasz et. al., 2006). Further, researchers have identified several distinctive characteristics that define positive conflicts (that is; if resulted, a conflict is considered positive). Among which are: increased employee involvement, increased cohesion, increased innovation and creativity, positive personal growth and change in individuals, clarifying key issues concerning all, clarification of values and viewpoints, and increased organizational learning (De Janasz et. al., 2006; Shearouse, 2011; Robbins & Judge, 2013).

In the meantime, conflict is considered negative, or dysfunctional, if it leads to form misperceptions about fellow parties, unresolved anger, personality clashes, lower individual's self-esteem or self-confidence, unclear grasping of individual's responsibilities, lower quality work, lower efficiency in performance, and if it leaves behind some unfinished issues or concerns of the conflicting parties (De Janasz et al., 2006; Shearouse, 2011; Robbins & Judge, 2013).

2.10 Teams and Conflict Management

Historically, it's been believed –and still- that teams are the cornerstone of any organization, and the performance is at optimum levels when teams are working effectively. However, taking into consideration that the possibility for conflict to occur more in teams, an increased amount of the literature confirms the fact that, sometimes, teamwork lowers organizational performance when conflicts are not managed and resolved appropriately, and when leaders be biased to either sides of conflict (Chen, Zhao, Liu an Wu, 2012; Giacomantonio *et. al.*, 2011). In a conflict situation, team members might address the issues unproductively, and, over time, it could develop into a negative conflict where “*everyone achieves less*”! And this is the reason why more attention and care has to be taken in managing team conflicts.

Teams are everywhere. The reason behind this popularity is the belief that teams allow organizations to compete more effectively and efficiently, and make a better use of employee talents. In fact, the underlying assumption for the adoption of team-based management is that teams foster higher creativity, energy and performance (Robbins & Judge, 2013).

At the individual level, an employee, being a team member, gets the opportunity to reach far beyond performing the job to becoming involved in achieving the organizational goals. This adds to the energy and creativity levels for the employee, and enhances decision making and problem solving skills for team members. All this is added to the fact that team involvement builds consensus, increases support for actions and creates a cooperative environment driven by organizational goals. Research supports the idea that conflicts can improve team

effectiveness, but, on the other hand, it is evident that conflicts are very difficult to control, and this is main worry for organization leaders and managers. Overall, some level of conflict has to be maintained in order to keep the organization, teams in particular, moving forward (Giacomantonio *et. al.*, 2011). Moreover, managers should realize that work teams require more time in decision making, and team members have to possess a good share of communication and negotiation skills to smoothen and lessen the conflict situations (Chen *et. al.*, 2012).

In addition to that, the size of a team has to be quite small to be acceptable and manageable. According to Robbins and Judge (2013), in order to reduce the possibility of conflict occurrences, a team shall not exceed 9 members; an average of 5 to 9 team members is commonly accepted in the workplace.

2.11 Collective Decision Making and Conflicts

Sometimes, people are exposed to only one option in a given situation. However, this is not the case most of the time, as there are several options to most of our concerns. This triggers the need for an effective process of making decisions in order to choose the best alternative available (Pate, 1987).

Certainly, Pate (1987) confirmed the fact that various factors influence our ability to make effective decisions. According to him, a key factor influencing effective decisions is the procedure which an individual uses to evaluate the available options.

Now, with regard to the subject matter, researchers have identified several practices and styles of decision making that affect the effectiveness of the decisions made. These practices are what concern us here, as their result might lead

to either acceptance or rejection, where conflicts arise and grow with the latter (Pate, 1987).

Further, the literature on decision making is so wide and manifold in a way that is difficult to be covered in our study. However, there is a need to highlight the notion of collective decision making (versus the individual decision making), where it's believed that the collective process leads to more acceptance if done properly, but involves more conflicts if done improperly. The idea of collective decision making has its counterpart in the management literature from an Islamic perspective, where in the latter it is referred to as "*shura*", but with some variances, where *shura* practitioners are Muslims only (Ahmad & Fontaine, 2012).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design: the descriptive method was used in this research as it fits best the nature of this study. For this purpose, self-administered questionnaires were distributed to the study's sample.

Population and Sampling: the population of this study consists of the full-time bachelor students of the traditional Palestinian universities in the southern part of the West Bank, which includes Al-Quds University, Hebron University, Palestine Polytechnic University, and Al-Ahliya University – Bethlehem. The latest statistics of the Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education indicates that there are approximately 16,000¹ full-time bachelor students.

Simple random sampling (based on student presence in the classrooms) was used in this study. The sample for this research was 600 student; however, 550

¹ According to the Palestinian Ministry of Higher Education <http://www.mohe.pna.ps/mohe/factsandfigures>

questionnaires were collected, and only 510 were considered valid; resulting in a relatively high response rate of 85%.

Reliability Analysis: In general, the higher the Cronbach's alpha is, the more trust is put on the findings; that is, the more generalizable the result are. It's commonly accepted that $\alpha > 0.6$ is required for the research to be acceptable (Serkan & Bougie, 2013). Based on the results of SPSS analysis, the Cronbach's alpha (α) for zsis study was 0.7 – as shown in [table 3.1](#) below; page(15) which is a quite high result.

Table 3.1: Reliability Statistics

DATA ANALYSIS

The questionnaire of this study comprises two sections; a) the demographic information of the respondents, b) respondents' perceptions and practices of conflict management.

The Demographic Information:

This part encompasses an analysis of the demographic data of the respondents. Light will shed on five areas, namely; gender, age group, specialization, university, and the status in group (being a leader or a member in the group most of the time). These areas were chosen carefully in order to highlight probable differences in response among students. Further elaboration is to be done in the following section. The following [table 4.1](#) page(15) summarizes the demographic information of the respondents.

Table 4.1: The Demographic Data

Respondents' Perceptions and Practices of Conflict Management:

In this part, a detailed discussion on respondents' views and opinions with regard to conflict management will be presented. In order to answer the research questions, analysis will be divided into three sections; a) general perception on conflict management, b) respondents' way of managing conflicts, and c) factors affecting conflict management.

a) General perception on conflict management:

In the first section, general questions were directed to the respondents in order to view their understanding of some basic elements of conflict management, including the definition and nature of conflicts, the causes of conflicts, and the main responsible of managing them.

First of all, when asked about their preference in doing assignments, majority of students reflected they prefer doing assignments in groups rather than individually. The average response rate was 3.83, **as shown in table 4.2 (a) below**, page(18) which is considered moderately high; however, the fact remains in mind that many respondents remained neutral with regard to this question.

The following three items (2 to 4) concentrated on the definition and nature of conflict. Based on the collected data, students seem to have an acceptable understanding of conflict and its nature and occurrence in study groups; they gave an average of 3.69, which is considered mediocre in this context. Meanwhile, they agreed partially that the vagueness of responsibilities increases conflicts, as they gave an average of 3.85 to item 4. However, a low average (2.98) was reported for

item 3, which means they're aware that having different perceptions does not necessarily lead to conflicts.

Further, items 5 and 6 directed the focus to respondents' observance of conflicts in their lives. With this regard, students' responses indicated a medium level of awareness for the conflicts occurring in their university environment; they reported medium and low averages for these two items, with 3.6 and 3.08 respectively.

Next, items 7 and 8 asked whether conflicts, in the eyes of respondents, are based on social and personal issues or based on study-related issues. The average answers were not high, as the given rates were 3.29 and 2.97 for items 7 and 8 respectively. Indeed, giving close answers to two contradicting items reveals little understanding of the meaning; however, giving a slightly higher average for item 7 – i.e. for social and personal issues being behind their conflicts - implies that their conflicts are related to personal rather than study-related issues.

Then, the next three items (9 to 11) highlighted the issue of responsibility to managing conflicts. As expected, majority believes that the group leader plays a vital role in managing conflicts, with an average of 3.8. But, on the other hand, they responded with lower averages to items 10 and 11 (3.21 and 3.07 respectively); which means that they don't agree much with the idea that group members and lecturers share the same responsibility with the group leaders in managing the conflict situation. This is considered a negative response in the sense that it reveals low readiness among students to take the responsibility to manage their own conflicts.

Lastly, majority of respondents does not seem happy or satisfied with the process of selecting group leaders in their universities. The average rate reported here were

2.93. This reveals that this process is not effective, and needs improvement; and this is one of the aims of this study.

Table 4.2 (a) below page(18) summarizes the results of the questionnaire for section (a);

Table 4.2 (a): Students' General Perception of Conflict Management

b) Respondents' way of managing conflicts:

This section sheds light on the best practice to handle conflicts, or in other words, respondents' conflict-handling styles. The model developed by K. Thomas (2002) will be utilized for this purpose. The model incorporates five styles – discussed in details in the literature above –, namely; competing, collaborating, avoiding, accommodating and compromising.

Based on the answers from items 13 and 14, **few respondents** seem to prefer the competing style of conflict management. They gave a somehow high acceptance average for item 13, with 3.74, and slightly lower average of 3.55 for item 14. This is quite similar to other studies in this field, as the majority of people believes competing isn't an efficient way of managing conflicts; for instance, Chen *et. al.* (2012), Shih and Susanto (2010).

Further, slightly different from the competing conflict-handling style, respondents reported higher preference to the collaborative style. This appears in items 15 through 17; where the given averages were 3.95, 3.93 and 3.78 respectively. This means that respondents agree that accepting other party demands and

understanding their views help reduce the conflicts, and thus, manage them more effectively. Further, giving a relatively high rate for seeking consensus in any decision in conflict situations reflect the readiness and preference to work in teams in an effective and productive way.

Then, when asked about the third conflict-handling style (avoiding), the majority of respondents disagreed with withdrawing from conflicts in order to keep themselves apart from problems. The rate given to item 18 was 2.69, which is relatively very low. This implies that students believe that following this way to manage conflicts is neither productive nor effective.

Next, in item 19, respondents reflected disagreement and disfavor to the accommodating style of handling conflicts. They reported a rate of 2.62, which suggests rejection of giving up own demands to keep the work going.

With regard to compromising, the fifth and last of the conflict-handling styles, respondents gave a rate of 3.41 to item 20. This rate is not very high, and compared to the collaborative style, the latter yielded higher rate that reveals stronger agreement. As the result suggests, respondents agree partially that everyone has to give up something to let work keep on.

Then, few general questions were asked with regard to conflict handling. For item 21, respondents disagreed strongly to leaving the conflict to be solved over time by itself. The average rate was among the lowest, with only 2.34, which suggests that group members have to put on immediate efforts to solve the problems as they occur. **In fact, this goes side by side with other similar research works, as it is believed that conflicts get only bigger by time.**

Further, items 22 and 23 inquired about the relation between the way of managing conflicts and the social relationship with the conflicting party, and whether it can be affected positively or negatively. Based on the answers, **presented in table 4.2 (b) below**, respondents reflected a little effect of conflicts and their way of handling them on their social relationships. In the former, they reported an average rate of 3.04, which means that their styles of managing conflicts slightly affect negatively their social relationships. And in the latter, they haven't agreed much with the statement that getting work done is more important than maintaining the relationship with other parties; they gave an average rate of 3.09.

Table 4.2 (b) below page(20) highlights the results of the questionnaire with regard to the way respondents take to handle conflicts.

Table 4.2 (b): Students' Ways of Managing Conflicts

Lastly, a quietly high majority agreed that a third-party should be sought to help find out a solution in a difficult conflict. They reported an average of 3.73 to item 24. This reflects respondents' nature of having confidence in their ability to manage their own conflicts.

c) Factors affecting conflict management:

In this section, respondents' views regarding the factors (other than conflict-handling style) affecting conflict management will be presented. These other factors, as suggested by researcher, are: the individual/collective decision making, having good negotiating skills, and having leaders and members with high level of Emotional Intelligence. Now we go through each of the remaining items.

Firstly, items 25 and 26 asked about the process of decision making in the group. The majority of respondents revealed dissatisfaction if the leader makes individual decisions regarding the group work; the rate given was 2.22 in average; which is the lowest among all other items. Conversely, the majority revealed their preference to make collective decisions regarding the group work; where all members contribute fairly to the work. This result was expected, as no one likes to be ignored in the group. Furthermore, respondents reflected, in item 27, that having everyone in the group to listen to their opinions is a must (with an average of 4.06), and this may reflect a high level of ego among students.

Then, items 28 and 29 highlighted another factor, which is negotiating skills. Even though the majority of respondents revealed mediocre agreement that they possess good negotiating skills (3.59), they have reflected a great preference (4.09) to work with leaders who are good at negotiating win-win situations.

Last but not least, with regard to emotional intelligence, on the contrary, the average rate given was not as high as expected; respondents reported an average of 3.2 to item 30. This implies that a great share of respondents does not acquire enough knowledge about “EI”, as some have noted in the questionnaire. In light of the last two items, there is a clear need to train students on these necessary skills in order to develop students' abilities and improve their conflict handling skills.

Table 4.2 (c) below page(22) highlights the results of the survey questionnaire with regard to the other factors affecting reducing conflicts among students.

Table 4.2 (c): Students' response to CM Factors

Difference in Response Based on Demographic Variances

In this part, the differences in responses based on the various demographic factors mentioned in the questionnaire were examined. These demographic factors include gender, age group, specialization, university and the status in group (being the leader or just a member in the group).

In fact, after conducting Independent Sample T-Tests and One-Way ANOVA through SPSS software, no critical differences in responses were found. This would suggest that the level of education in these universities does not vary that much.

However, in a similar study² conducted by the first researcher at the International Islamic University Malaysia, it is observed that students there gave more positive responses, especially for the last subsection of the questionnaire; "factors of reducing conflicts". IIUM students were inclined more towards cooperation and implementing collective decision making techniques as well as using good negotiation skills to prevent destructive conflicts. Indeed, the relatively low agreement – shown by Palestinian students – to the positive role of emotional intelligence and collective decision making in reducing conflicts suggests two things; either they have little information about the subject matter; or they have bad experiences where they could not use these techniques in resolving group projects' arising conflicts. In both ways, universities have to put more efforts in improving students skills in these areas.

The full detailed results of these tests are exerted in the appendix section.

² Master's dissertation under the same title, using an old version of this study's questionnaire.

FINDINGS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the discussion of results of the questionnaires, The researcher believe that the objectives of this research were fulfilled and follows here are the answers for each of the research questions.

1. Does the students' conflict-handling style reduce conflicts among students?

According to the data collected, the group leader's conflict handling style has a great effect on reducing and resolving conflicts if the appropriate style was used at the right time. Analysis shows that the collaborative style is most preferable among students. however, in the meanwhile, the competing style is the second most favored, and compromising style is very disfavored. This, indeed, explains why students reported a high level of conflicts in their study life currently. Therefore, results of this study are in line with other studies, mainly those highlighted by [Robbins and Judge \(2013\)](#), [Chen *et. al.* \(2012\)](#), [Shih and Susanto \(2010\)](#).

2. Do the group leader's negotiation skills reduce conflicts among students?

Based on data analysis, majority of students prefer to work with leaders possessing the ability to negotiate win-win situations. And cases from the real life confirm the fact that leaders with good negotiation skills are better able to handle and resolve conflicts. This adds another confirmation to the literature of the subject matter, [especially the studies performed by Thomas \(1979\)](#), [Rahim \(2002\)](#),

3. Does the group's collective decision making reduce conflicts among students?

The analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data shows that the involvement of all group members in decision making helps improve the outcome, and helps reduce the conflicts in study groups. This, also, goes in line with numerous studies, especially the studies of Choi (2013) and Chen *et. al.* (2012).

4. What is the moderating role of emotional intelligence in reducing conflicts among students?

As a matter of fact, emotional intelligence is believed to have a great impact on conflict management, not only on reducing and resolving conflicts, but, also, in avoiding them in the first place. This factor, however, is not supported well by literature nor by the collected data in this research. It's believed that this study has contributed to the field, but much more elaboration is still needed. Other studies that highlighted the role of emotional intelligence include Shih and Susanto's study conducted in 2010.

Recommendations

Researcher believe that further research efforts with concentration on reducing conflicts in the educational process has take part. Methods to improve students' levels of emotional intelligence and negotiation skills and their practice of collective decision making have to be developed and implemented through various training programs.

Higher education is a major investment by middle and lower income level families in Palestine. Therefore, more efforts have to be put in improving students' skills.

Furthermore, In order to reduce conflicts among students, efforts have to be put by universities to train students on several management and communication skills that would play a role in reducing the gap of trust among students as well.

On the other hand, future research has to focus on the Islamic perspective of conflict management, and on how to prevent conflicts from happening rather than how to handle them as they occur.

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