

## Relationship Between Interpersonal Distress and Interpersonal Conflict Management Modes Among College Students

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To explore the status of college students' interpersonal conflict management modes and interpersonal distress, and analyze the impact of interpersonal conflict management modes on college students' interpersonal distress. **Methods:** 471 college students in Guangdong Province were randomly selected through Internet recruitment. They were investigated with Interpersonal Comprehensive Diagnostic Scale for College Students (ICDS) and Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (MODE). **Results:** (1) The total score of ICDS was  $(13.49 \pm 3.41)$ ; The scores of competition, cooperation, compromise, avoidance and accommodation were  $(7.83 \pm 1.40)$ ,  $(6.06 \pm 1.58)$ ,  $(6.59 \pm 1.37)$ ,  $(5.18 \pm 1.25)$  and  $(5.67 \pm 0.94)$ , respectively. (2) There was a significant correlation between the score of each dimension of MODE and the total score of ICDS and the scores of following three dimensions of conversation, making friends and dealing with people ( $|r| = .175$  to  $.483$ , all  $P < .01$ ). (3) The results of multivariate stepwise linear regression showed that competition, avoidance and accommodation were positively correlated with the total score of ICDS ( $\beta = .483, .461, .175$ , all  $P < .01$ ), and cooperation and compromise were negatively correlated with the total score of ICDS ( $\beta = -.311, -.298$ ,  $P < .01$ ). **Conclusion:** The interpersonal distress of college students is obvious, and their interpersonal communication ability needs to be improved. The interpersonal conflict management mode may be one of the main influencing factors of college students' interpersonal distress.

**Key words:** College Students, Interpersonal Conflict Management Modes, Interpersonal Distress, Multivariate Stepwise Linear Regression

### INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal relationship is a direct and perceptible emotional connection between people formed through communication and interaction, which is the reflection of individual belonging needs [1]. Interpersonal relationship is not only an individual's social resource, but also an important element of social support system. Interpersonal problems are important ones that college students have to face. Previous studies showed that no less than 38.6% of college

students have some interpersonal problems, and no less than 9.1% of them have serious interpersonal problems [2,3]. Interpersonal distress easily leads to negative emotions such as loneliness, depression and anxiety, as well as behavioral problems such as aggressive behavior, mobile phone dependence and Internet addiction, which are the main reasons affecting mental health [3-8].

Conflict is a form of contradictory movement formed by opposing, incompatible forces or mutually exclusive parties [9]. In view of the heterogeneity and interdependence of individuals in values, needs, abilities, personality characteristics, cognitive models and cultural backgrounds, conflicts widely exist in interpersonal relationships. As one of the unavoidable phenomena in daily life, the impact of conflict on interpersonal relations can not be ignored, and there is also great uncertainty, which not only depends on the content, intensity and object of conflict [9-10], but also on the conflict management modes of relevant parties, that is, people's general attitude, strategies and behavior orientation when dealing with conflict problems [11]. Most scholars agree that the conflict management modes actually reflect the level of people's socialization, social skills and social adaptability [12].

Conflict management mode is a multi-dimensional concept [11]. The mainstream two-dimensional model divides common conflict management modes into five categories: competition, cooperation, compromise, avoidance and accommodation [13]. Conflict management modes will affect the evolution and results of a conflict, thus affecting the level of work performance, as well as the interaction and relationship between the parties to the conflict [14-16]. However, most of the domestic research on conflict management modes focuses on the professional fields such as medical treatment and management, and there are few studies on college students' conflict management modes and their impact on interpersonal distress.

Based on the above analysis, this study intends to explore the impact of conflict management modes on college students' interpersonal distress with a large-sample and multi-center questionnaire investigation.

## OBJECTS AND METHODS

### Objects

Through online recruitment, 500 college students were randomly selected from Guangdong Pharmaceutical University, Jinan University, Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts, Guangdong University of Technology, Xinghai Conservatory of Music, Guangdong Institute of Physical Education and Guangdong University of Finance and Economics. 471 valid questionnaires were collected, with an effective rate of 94.2%. Among them, there were 246 girls and 225 boys; 139 freshmen, 117 sophomores, 109 juniors and 106 seniors.

### Tools

#### ***Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, MODE***

Compiled by Thomas and Kilmann (1974) [17], **MODE** has 60 items, including 30 pairs of articles. Respondents are required to choose a statement in each pair of articles that is more consistent with their behavior in the conflict situation; If not, select the most likely action. Based on the two dimensions of self-confidence and cooperation, the above 60 items are divided into five dimensions: competition, avoidance, cooperation, compromise and accommodation. The

score of each dimension is 0 ~ 12. The higher the score, the more inclined to adopt this management mode. In this study, *Cronbach's a* coefficient of the total scale is 0.785; *Cronbach's a* coefficients of 5 dimensions are 0.733, 0.753, 0.745, 0.724 and 0.709, respectively.

### ***Interpersonal Comprehensive Diagnostic Scale for College Students, ICDS***

ICDS is developed by Zheng Richang et al. (1999) [18] to measure the degree of interpersonal relationships puzzles and interpersonal ability. A total of 28 questions are mainly in four dimensions: conversation, making friends, dealing with people and heterosexual interactions. Adopt the "yes-no" scoring system in which "yes" gets one point while "no" means no point. The higher the score, the more serious the one puzzled by interpersonal relationship and the lower interpersonal ability he/she has. According to the total score, it can be divided into three levels: few or no communication trouble, namely high interpersonal ability (0-8 points); a certain degree of communication distress, namely moderate interpersonal ability (9-14 points); and serious communication problems, namely low interpersonal ability (15-28 points). In this study, *Cronbach's a* coefficient of the total scale is 0.845; *Cronbach's a* coefficients of 4 dimensions are 0.776, 0.780, 0.743 and 0.768 respectively.

### **Data Processing**

SPSS 20.0 is used for the statistical analysis of effective data. Descriptive statistics are used to calculate the average score and standard deviation of the subjects on each scale. Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient is used to explore the correlation between variables. Multivariate stepwise linear regression is used to analyze the impact of the scores of the four dimensions of MODE on the total score of ICDS.

## **RESULTS**

### **General Situation of College Students' Interpersonal Conflict Management Modes and Interpersonal Distress**

It can be seen from table 1 that this group of college students have general interpersonal skills [18], with high score of competition, moderate scores of cooperation and compromise, and low scores of avoidance and accommodation [17].

Frequency statistics shows that college students belong to the conflict management modes of competition, cooperation, compromise, avoidance and accommodation account for 42.7%, 24.2%, 19.7%, 7.4% and 6.0% of this group respectively. College students with high, medium and poor interpersonal ability accounted for 21.9%, 53.3% and 24.8% respectively.

**Table 1 Descriptive Statistics of MODE and ICDS Scores (n = 471)**

| Dimension                     | Mi<br>n | Ma<br>x | M         | SD   | Number<br>of items | Average<br>score of<br>items | Standard<br>deviation of each<br>item |
|-------------------------------|---------|---------|-----------|------|--------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Competition                   | 4       | 11      | 7.83      | 1.40 | 12                 | 0.65                         | 0.12                                  |
| Cooperation                   | 2       | 10      | 6.06      | 1.58 | 12                 | 0.51                         | 0.13                                  |
| Compromise                    | 3       | 10      | 6.59      | 1.37 | 12                 | 0.55                         | 0.11                                  |
| Avoidance                     | 2       | 8       | 5.18      | 1.25 | 12                 | 0.43                         | 0.10                                  |
| Accommodation                 | 3       | 8       | 5.67      | 0.94 | 12                 | 0.47                         | 0.08                                  |
| Conversation                  | 0       | 7       | 3.35      | 0.95 | 7                  | 0.48                         | 0.14                                  |
| Making friends                | 2       | 6       | 3.99      | 0.82 | 7                  | 0.70                         | 0.11                                  |
| Dealing with<br>people        | 1       | 6       | 3.66      | 0.91 | 7                  | 0.64                         | 0.12                                  |
| Heterosexual<br>communication | 1       | 6       | 2.49      | 0.65 | 7                  | 0.39                         | 0.09                                  |
| Total score of ICDS           | 0       | 25      | 13.4<br>9 | 3.41 | 28                 | .50                          | 0.12                                  |

### Correlation Analysis between College Students' Conflict Management Modes and Interpersonal Distress

It can be seen from table 2 that there is a significant correlation between the score of each dimension of MODE and the total score of ICDS and the scores of following three dimensions: conversation, making friends and dealing with people ( $|r| = .175 - .483$ , all  $P < .01$ ).

**Table 2 Correlation Analysis between MODE and ICDS scores (n = 471)**

| Dimension                        | 1       | 2       | 3      | 4      | 5      | 5      | 6      | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|----------------------------------|---------|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---|---|---|----|
| 1. Competition                   |         |         |        |        |        |        |        |   |   |   |    |
| 2. Cooperation                   | -.548** |         |        |        |        |        |        |   |   |   |    |
| 3. Compromise                    | -.476** | .442**  |        |        |        |        |        |   |   |   |    |
| 4. Avoidance                     | -.519** | .300**  |        |        |        |        |        |   |   |   |    |
|                                  | .488**  |         |        |        |        |        |        |   |   |   |    |
| 5. Accommodation                 | -.607** | .397**  | .341** |        |        |        |        |   |   |   |    |
|                                  | .375**  |         |        |        |        |        |        |   |   |   |    |
| 6. Conversation                  | .453**  | -.380** | .585** | .214** |        |        |        |   |   |   |    |
|                                  | -.533** |         |        |        |        |        |        |   |   |   |    |
| 7. Making friends                | .616**  | -.412** | .601** | .266** | .628** |        |        |   |   |   |    |
|                                  | -.554** |         |        |        |        |        |        |   |   |   |    |
| 8. Dealing with<br>people        | .664**  | -.434** | .637** | .170** | .479** | .492** |        |   |   |   |    |
|                                  | -.496** |         |        |        |        |        |        |   |   |   |    |
| 9. Heterosexual<br>communication | .046    | -.021   | -.019  | .027   | .531** | .572** | .441** |   |   |   |    |
|                                  | .030    |         |        |        |        |        |        |   |   |   |    |
| 10. Total score of<br>ICDS       | .483**  | -.311** | .461** | .175** | .833** | .860** | .714** |   |   |   |    |
|                                  | -.298** |         |        |        |        | .783** |        |   |   |   |    |

## Multivariate Stepwise Linear Regression Analysis of the Impact of Conflict Management Modes on College Students' Interpersonal Distress

Taking the total score of ICDS as the dependent variable and the scores of the five dimensions of MODE as the independent variables, a multivariate stepwise linear regression is carried out within the 95% confidence interval. The results are shown in Table 3.

It can be seen from table 3 that the three factors of competition, avoidance and accommodation are positively correlated with the total score of ICDS ( $\beta=.483, .461, .175$ ; all  $P < .01$ ), and cooperation and compromise are negatively correlated with the total score of ICDS ( $\beta=-.311, -.298$ , all  $P < .01$ ).

**Table 3 Multivariate Stepwise Linear Regression Analysis of the Impact of Each Dimension of MODE on the Total Score of ICDS**

| Dependent<br>Independent<br>Variable | Variables     | Non standardized<br>coefficient |      | standardized<br>coefficient( $\beta$ ) | $t$    | $P$   | $R^2$ | $R_{adj}^2$ |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|---------------------------------|------|----------------------------------------|--------|-------|-------|-------------|
|                                      |               | $B$                             | SE   |                                        |        |       |       |             |
| Total score<br>of ICDS               | Compete       | .675                            | .087 | .483                                   | 6.795  | <.001 | .466  | .461        |
|                                      | Avoiding      | .765                            | .072 | .461                                   | 8.002  | <.001 |       |             |
|                                      | Accommodation | .239                            | .343 | .175                                   | 6.393  | <.001 |       |             |
|                                      | Cooperation   | -.387                           | .067 | -.311                                  | -5.644 | <.001 |       |             |
|                                      | Compromise    | -.438                           | .089 | -.298                                  | -9.103 | <.001 |       |             |

## DISCUSSION

The interpersonal ability of this group is at the medium level, with obvious interpersonal distress, high competition score, medium cooperation and compromise score, low avoidance and accommodation score, which is consistent with the results of previous studies [2, 8, 19], suggesting that the interpersonal ability of college students needs to be improved and their conflict management modes are not active enough.

The results of multivariate stepwise linear regression analysis show that the following three factors of competition, avoidance and accommodation are positively correlated with the total score of ICDS, and the following two factors of cooperation and compromise are negatively correlated with the total score of ICDS, which is consistent with the results of previous studies [19-24], suggesting that conflict management strategies can affect the nature and development of interpersonal relationships.

The establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships need to comply with the following three principles [25]: (1) **Interaction principle**. This principle emphasizes the correspondence of interpersonal communication in behavior tendency. Due to the influence of egocentric tendency, we always hope that the other party will first recognize our own value, accept, like, praise and support ourselves. On this basis, under the role of the fair principle of "returning the favor", we will also think that we "should" give the other party a corresponding friendly answer, so as to reduce our psychological pressure and maintain our psychological balance; When the other party first denies our value, repels, hates, scolds or opposes us, we will also "tit for tat", refuse and alienate the other party. (2) **Utilitarian principle**. This principle emphasizes the need to maintain exchange equivalence in interpersonal communication.

Interpersonal communication is essentially a process of social exchange. We hope that the result of this exchange is worthy to ourselves, and the gain in the exchange process is greater than or at least equal to the loss. (3) **Protection of self-worth.** People have an unconscious psychological tendency and always tend to protect and improve self-worth and prevent self-worth from being denied.

The reason why adopting the mode of competition, avoidance or accommodation can easily lead to more interpersonal problems is that these three modes all violate the principles of interaction, utility and self-worth protection; The reason why adopting the mode of cooperation or compromise is easy to lead to less interpersonal problems is that these two modes are more in line with the requirements of interaction principle, utilitarian principle and self-worth protection.

Those who adopt the competition mode pay high attention to their own self-worth, position and interests, and rarely consider or even completely deny the other parties' self-worth, position and interests. They tend to use their power and influence to force the other parties to accept their own opinions, so as to make the results of conflict handling meet their own needs to the greatest extent and maximize their own interests; At the same time, they also suppress the other parties' demands, ignore the other parties' self-worth and sacrifice the other parties' important interests. Obviously, the social behavior of those who adopt the competition mode violates the three principles of interpersonal relationship. They are vulnerable to others' dissatisfaction, disgust and resentment, and make themselves fall into more trouble of interpersonal relationship.

Those who adopt the avoidance mode are indifferent to their own and the other parties' interests, positions and self-worth, and avoid conflicts by reserving opinions and ignoring contradictions. It can be seen that the use of avoidance mode can not reflect the self-worth of each side, nor can it meet the important needs of each side. Although this has suspended the debate or dispute, the contradictions, differences and problems between the each side continue to exist. If this method is adopted for a long time, the contradictions, differences and problems between each side will accumulate and become more and more serious, and the relationship between each side will become more and more estranged.

In contrast to those who adopt the competition mode, those who adopt the accommodation mode, in the face of conflict, out of paying attention to the interests of others and the relationship between each side, meet the requirements and expectations of the other parties as much as possible, and even sacrifice their own position and principled interests. This is not in line with the three principles of interpersonal relations: Although it can make the other parties' self-worth be respected to the greatest extent, accommodationists' own self-worth is depreciated to the greatest extent, which is easy to lead to the following results: On the one hand, the accommodationists will feel unfair and too wronged because the pay is far greater than the gain. Out of the need of self-worth protection, they will change the conflict management mode or alienate the other parties; On the other hand, they also lose the respect of the other parties. The other parties will put forward more and more and higher and higher requirements or expectations. If they are not quite satisfied, the other parties will despise and ignore the accommodationists, resulting in setbacks in the relationship between the two sides.

Those who adopt the cooperation mode pay high attention to the interests of themselves and the other sides, and try to find a constructive solution that brings "win-win" results and has considerable sense of gain and development space for each side on the basis of full communication and in-depth discussion of the existing conditions. The individuals adopting compromise mode tend to solve the conflict by a compromise way in which each side takes a step back. Although the solution can not meet all the needs, each side have little sacrifice, and can retain principled interests and maintain basic self-worth. Therefore, the cooperation mode and compromise mode can best reflect the three principles of interpersonal relationship: both modes can reflect the self-worth of each side to a considerable extent, meet the basic needs of each side, enable each side to continue communication and strengthen the relationship on the basis of "mutual benefit".

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