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Conflict Management Styles and Psychological Well-Being Among Adolescents: A Gender-Based Comparative Study

Vijaylaxmi Chalwal

Research Scholar

Department of Psychology

University of Rajasthan, Rajasthan, India

Email: vijaylaxmichalwal777@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explores the relationship between conflict management styles and psychological well-being among adolescents, with a focus on gender-based differences. Conflict is an inherent process of adolescence, and how young people handle interpersonal conflict can have a major influence on their emotional and psychological growth. The research was carried out among 200 adolescents (100 boys and 100 girls) between the ages of 16–19 years in Jaipur, India. Standardized instruments, Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument and Ryff's Psychological Well-Being Scale, were employed to measure five styles of conflict and six dimensions of well-being. Descriptive statistics indicated minimal differences between the sexes in conflict style, with girls leaning slightly more towards collaborative and accommodating, and boys recording higher scores for competing and compromising. Correlation analysis showed that competing and accommodating styles were significantly negatively correlated with well-being aspects like autonomy, self-acceptance, and positive relations. Contrary to what might be anticipated, the collaborative style, traditionally viewed as good, was negatively associated with autonomy among girls, indicating that excessive use of this style would cause suppression of self. T-test outcomes revealed no gender differences in conflict styles, but significant differences in well-being dimensions such as personal growth, meaning in life, and self-acceptance. Results supported both hypotheses partly: there is a significant correlation between psychological well-being and conflict styles, and there are some gender differences in psychological well-being but not in conflict styles. The research underlines the need for encouraging balanced conflict strategies and gender-sensitive emotional support during adolescence.

Keywords: adolescents, conflict management styles, psychological well-being, gender differences

Conflict is a natural aspect of human interaction and becomes particularly relevant in adolescence, a time of swift emotional, social, and intellectual growth. Conflict has been described as a process that starts when one party believes that another is harming or soon will harm something the first party values (Rahim, 1983). In adolescence, conflict is common with parents, teachers, peers, and siblings. The conflict management styles employed by teenage individuals will have a powerful effect on their emotional and psychological development. Thomas and Kilmann (1976) identified five broad styles: competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating. Each corresponds to varying levels of assertiveness and cooperativeness and has different implications for psychological well-being and the quality of the relationship.

Psychological well-being (PWB), the foundation of positive psychology, is the state of health characterized by self-acceptance, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, personal growth, and positive relationships (Ryff, 1989). For adolescents, well-being is most closely linked to social life and the ability to cope with stress and conflicts. Resilience, self-efficacy, and harmony in interpersonal relationships are promoted by healthy conflict resolution strategies, while maladaptive methods like avoidance or aggression can result in emotion suppression, anxiety, and depression (Laursen & Hafen, 2010; Singh, 2020).

Gender is a critical factor in the choice of response to conflict. Research indicates that girls tend to exhibit more avoiding and accommodating behaviors, emphasizing emotional intimacy and relational peace, while boys tend to use dominating or assertive strategies (Brahnam et al., 2005; Rahim, 2002). These tendencies contribute to being influenced not just by biological dispositions but also by socialization processes that teach boys to be independent and assertive and girls to be cooperative and nurturing. These gendered values can lead to particular vulnerabilities, girls more likely to internalize distress and boys to externalizing behaviors, based on their conflict styles.

Conflicts also get further shaped by cultural expectations in collectivistic cultures such as India. Indian teenagers are usually socialized to adhere to values such as family harmony, respect for elders, and self-sacrifice. Girls, in specific, may suppress individual opinions to preserve relational harmony, conforming to conventional roles (Verma & Saraswathi, 2002). At the same time, adolescents in the current age are confronted with increased academic pressures, peer influence, and the immediacy of digital media, making it ever more essential to know how they resolve conflicts and how these methods affect their psychological well-being.

With this background, a gender comparison of conflict management styles and psychological well-being among adolescents becomes both timely and urgent. The majority of previous research either looks at these variables independently or at Western groups, omitting the intersection of gender and culture in adolescent experiences. The present study seeks to investigate gender differences in conflict management styles in Indian adolescents and how these differences are associated with psychological well-being.

Review of Literature

Current studies emphasize how the styles of conflict management change with age and have powerful effects on psychological well-being in adolescents. Laursen and Hafen (2010) established that those youth employing collaborating or compromising styles of conflict management reported healthier peer relationships and less emotional distress, while avoidance and domination were linked with interpersonal conflict and internalizing symptoms. In the same line, Zhang et al. (2024) underscored that effective conflict resolution is a protective factor in preventing anxiety and depression, particularly when exposed to peer or family stress.

Gender differences in conflict styles are documented well across cultures. In their study with Pakistani teenagers, Dildar and Amjad (2017) indicated that females endorsed compromising and obliging styles, while males endorsed dominating and avoiding styles, which are conventional gender types. Likewise, Cotar Konrad (2016) found that Slovenian females employed more compromising actions with mothers and more aggressive actions with fathers, suggesting relational context affects style. Others contend that gender role orientation, not biological sex, is a better predictor of conflict style. Bordean et al. (2020) discovered that those who identified with masculine characteristics, without regard to sex, used dominating styles more, and those who identified with feminine characteristics used avoidance or accommodation. These results indicate that conflict behaviors within gender are constructed socially, not biologically.

Culture also moderates conflict behavior. Conflict avoidance is generally positively valued in collectivist cultures as a way of maintaining harmony. Ting-Toomey's (2005) Face Negotiation Theory describes that cultures that value interdependence like to use indirect conflict approaches such as avoidance or accommodation in order to save face and avoid relational breakdown. Indian adolescents, particularly in family contexts, might therefore use more passive conflict approaches, which, although culturally acceptable, could negatively influence their emotional expression and psychological adjustment.

Conflict management style is also a good predictor of mental health. Bano et al. (2019) identified that those adolescents who used avoidance most often reported higher emotional suppression and lower self-esteem. Conversely, those who used integrating or compromising styles showed superior coping, stronger friendships, and higher self-efficacy. In females, co-rumination was characterized as too much problem talk in close friendships and was identified to intensify emotional involvement but also depressive symptoms because of rumination (Rose, 2002).

Conflict styles also change with age. Van Doorn et al., (2011) research indicated that younger adolescents use avoidance more, but as they develop socially and emotionally, more productive styles like negotiation and compromise are used. Such developmental pattern is more evident among adolescents who have higher emotional intelligence and supportive home environments. Girls tend to manifest this change earlier than boys, possibly because of their increased emotional sensitivity and empathy (Zimmer-Gembeck et al., 2016).

In spite of growing research interest, a number of gaps exist. Much of the work is Western-oriented and does not include cross-cultural viewpoints, specifically from nations such as India. In addition, few studies have examined styles of conflict management and psychological well-being within an integrated approach utilizing Ryff's multidimensional model. Although gendered differences in conflict behavior are established, the mechanisms driving these differences, e.g., emotional regulation, peer processes, and parental expectations, are rarely explored. These gaps necessitate culturally anchored, gender-sensitive research examining how adolescents' conflict responses impact psychological well-being.

Method

Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between conflict management styles and psychological well-being among adolescents?
2. How do adolescent boys and girls differ in their conflict management styles and psychological well-being?

Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between conflict management styles and psychological well-being among adolescents.
2. To explore gender differences in conflict management styles and psychological well-being.

Hypotheses

Ha1: There would be a significant relationship between conflict management styles and psychological well-being among adolescents.

Ha2: There would be a significant difference between boys and girls in their conflict management styles and psychological well-being.

Variables

- **Independent Variables (IVs):** Conflict Management Styles, Gender (Male and Female)
- **Dependent Variable (DV):** Dimensions of Psychological Well-Being: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations, purpose, self-acceptance.

Sample

The present study comprised a sample of 200 adolescents (100 boys and 100 girls) aged between 16 and 19 years, selected from various senior secondary schools and undergraduate institutions in Jaipur, Rajasthan, using stratified random sampling.

Inclusion criteria:

- Adolescents aged 16–19 years
- Currently enrolled in a school or college in Jaipur
- Mentally healthy with no clinical diagnosis of psychiatric illness
- Provided informed consent

Exclusion criteria:

- Adolescents not residing permanently in Jaipur

- Individuals diagnosed with psychiatric disorders (e.g., schizophrenia, bipolar disorder)
- Those with severe intellectual disabilities, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), or emotional conditions impairing self-report reliability
- Did not provide informed consent

Psychological Measures

1. **The Conflict Management Style Questionnaire (CMSQ), developed by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann (1974):**

It was used to assess how individuals typically handle interpersonal conflict. It identifies five conflict styles, namely, Avoidance, Competition, Compromise, Accommodation, and Collaboration, based on the balance between assertiveness and cooperativeness. The questionnaire includes 30 scenario-based items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never to 5 = Always), with six items measuring each style. The highest-scoring style reflects an individual's dominant approach to conflict. The CMSQ is widely used in both academic and educational settings and is particularly effective with adolescents, helping assess how they manage peer and authority-related conflicts. It has demonstrated good reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.72–0.89) and validity, with strong grounding in dual-concern theory. Its real-life conflict scenarios enhance ecological validity, making it suitable for youth populations.

2. **Psychological Well-Being Questionnaire (PWBQ), developed by Carol D. Ryff (1989):**

It was used to assess eudaimonic aspects of mental health across six core dimensions: autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance. Comprising 42 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale, the PWBQ allows for both domain-specific and overall well-being assessment. Each subscale includes seven items, with higher scores indicating greater well-being in that domain. The tool demonstrates excellent psychometric properties, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.83 to 0.91 and test-retest reliability reported at 0.86. Its theoretical grounding in developmental and existential psychology, along with strong construct and criterion validity, supports its use across diverse populations, including adolescents. In adolescent research, the PWBQ provides insights into emotional resilience, identity formation, and interpersonal functioning, making it highly suitable for examining psychological well-being in relation to personality typologies like the Enneagram.

Research Design

The present research has a quantitative, cross-sectional, correlational-comparative design. The design is appropriate to the investigation of conflict management styles and psychological well-being between adolescents, and comparing these variables in gender groups. The correlational part seeks to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between conflict management style and psychological

well-being, while the comparative part aims to ascertain gender differences in both concepts. Data were collected at a single point in time using standardized self-report questionnaires.

Statistical Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using IBM SPSS. Descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis were computed to examine the distribution and central tendencies of the variables. To assess the relationship between conflict management styles and psychological well-being, Pearson's correlation coefficient was calculated. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare male and female adolescents on conflict management styles and psychological well-being dimensions.

All assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity were tested before conducting parametric analyses to ensure the validity of results.

Results

Table 1.1: Descriptive Statistics: Mean and standard deviation of Conflict Management styles scores among male and female adolescents. (N=200)

Variables	Females				Males			
	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Collaborating	8.26	2.003	-0.095	-0.629	8.2	2.292	-0.156	-0.792
Competing	7.5	1.92	0.146	-0.646	7.87	2.368	-0.156	-1.066
Avoiding	7.83	2.301	-0.251	-0.216	7.64	1.977	-0.123	-0.67
Accommodating	8.61	2.054	-0.415	-0.738	8.27	2.201	-0.369	-0.403
Compromising	7.43	2.056	-0.113	-0.346	7.3	1.691	0.026	0.24

Table 1.2: Descriptive Statistics: Mean and standard deviation of Psychological Well-Being dimension scores among male and female adolescents. (N=200)

Variables	Females				Males			
	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis
Autonomy	26.63	4.596	0.404	-0.407	27.63	4.485	0.308	-0.664
Environmental Mastery	30.16	5.32	0.177	-0.525	28.48	4.475	0.118	-0.294
Personal Growth	28.19	4.773	0.347	-0.331	26.85	3.983	0.384	0.226
Positive Relations	27.09	4.944	-0.139	0.254	27.69	4.38	0.522	0.961
Purpose in Life	27.64	4.487	0.079	-0.348	26.33	4.367	0.11	0.016
Self-Acceptance	25.92	4.902	0.239	-0.083	27.45	5.221	-0.081	-0.263
Total PWB	164.43	12.44	0.132	-0.604	165.63	11.04	0.694	0.508

Table 2.1: Correlation Coefficient: Correlation Between Conflict Management Styles and Psychological Well-Being and its dimensions Among Male Adolescents (N=100)

Variables	Collaborating	Competing	Avoiding	Accommodating	Compromising
Autonomy	-0.03	-0.198*	-0.066	-0.209*	-0.017
Environmental Mastery	0.13	0.146	0.085	0.166	-0.106
Personal Growth	-0.093	-0.204*	0.112	-0.128	0.041
Positive Relations	-0.226*	-0.044	-0.254*	-0.260**	-0.086
Purpose in Life	-0.103	-0.185	-0.035	-0.143	-0.059
Self-Acceptance	-0.111	-0.226*	0.12	0.126	-0.064

* Significant at $p < .05$ ** Significant at $p < .01$ **Table 2: Correlation Coefficient: Correlation Between Conflict Management Styles and Psychological Well-Being and its dimensions Among Female Adolescents (N=100)**

Variables	Collaborating	Competing	Avoiding	Accommodating	Compromising
Autonomy	-0.292**	0.067	-0.145	-0.114	0.005
Environmental Mastery	0.16	0.185	-0.185	0.117	0.024
Personal Growth	0.081	-0.048	-0.136	0.049	0.054
Positive Relations	-0.081	0.087	0.081	-0.291**	0.063
Purpose in Life	-0.092	-0.114	-0.1	-0.059	0.108
Self-Acceptance	-0.277**	-0.124	0.078	-0.257**	-0.174

* Significant at $p < .05$ ** Significant at $p < .01$ **Table 3: Gender Differences in Conflict Management Styles and Psychological Well-Being Among Adolescents: Independent Samples t-Test**

Variable		t-value	p-value
Conflict Management Styles	Collaborating	-0.197	0.844
	Competing	1.214	0.226
	Avoiding	-0.626	0.532
	Accommodating	-1.129	0.26
	Compromising	-0.488	0.626
Psychological Well-Being	Autonomy	1.557	0.121
	Environmental Mastery	-2.417	0.017
	Personal Growth	-2.155	0.032
	Positive Relations	0.908	0.365
	Purpose in Life	-2.092	0.038
	Self Acceptance	2.136	0.034
Overall PWB		-0.721	0.472

Discussion

Adolescence is a formative period characterized by accelerated physical, emotional, and social growth. During this time, individuals often experience internal conflicts, peer pressure, academic struggles, and identity concerns. Interpersonal conflict resolution and psychological well-being among adolescents play an important part in determining their eventual mental health and interpersonal functioning. Over the past few years, growing awareness of teen mental health has prompted researchers to investigate the trends in conflict resolution styles and psychological health, with focus on gender.

The current research set out to investigate the association between conflict management styles and psychological well-being among teenagers. It also set out to explore gender differences in both dimensions of conflict management strategies and psychological well-being. The two hypotheses underpinning the research were: (1) that there would be a meaningful association between conflict management styles and psychological well-being among teenagers, and (2) that boys and girls would significantly vary in conflict management and psychological well-being dimensions.

Descriptive statistics presented in Tables 1.1 and 1.2 gave the first impression of adolescents' patterns in both conflict resolution and well-being. As for conflict management styles, female adolescents had a bit more moderate score in collaborating ($M = 8.26$, $SD = 2.003$) and accommodating ($M = 8.61$, $SD = 2.054$), while male adolescents reported a higher mean score in competing ($M = 7.87$, $SD = 2.368$) and compromising ($M = 7.3$, $SD = 1.691$). The avoiding style had gender-equal means. These trends reflect a general pattern in which females adolescents are more likely to use cooperative and accommodating styles, and males are more likely to use assertive or competitive ones. This was an expected finding based on previous research, including that of Dildar and Amjad (2017), which found that girls are more apt to use accommodating and collaborating styles in social situations due to traditional gender socialization.

In psychological adjustment, certain subtle but intriguing gender differences were found. Female adolescents had higher scores in environmental mastery ($M = 30.16$, $SD = 5.32$) and personal growth ($M = 28.19$, $SD = 4.773$), indicating a stronger emphasis on self-expansion and adaptive functioning. On the other hand, males rated higher on autonomy ($M = 27.63$, $SD = 4.485$), self-acceptance ($M = 27.45$, $SD = 5.221$), and positive relations ($M = 27.69$, $SD = 4.38$). This indicates that male teenagers can be seen to define themselves as more independent and emotionally regulated. Nonetheless, the total psychological well-being scores were almost identical across the two groups (Females: $M = 164.43$; Males: $M = 165.63$), which indicates overall equivalence in the overall level of well-being across both sexes. This result concurs with that of Azad and Kaur (2024), who explained that although boys and girls might vary across isolated components of psychological well-being, the overall result tends to level out.

To examine the relational patterns among conflict management styles and psychological well-being, Pearson's correlation coefficients were computed independently for male and female adolescents (Tables 2.1 and 2.2). For male adolescents, there were a number of conflict styles with significant negative correlations

with certain dimensions of psychological well-being. For example, competing style correlated negatively with autonomy ($r = -0.198, p < .05$), personal growth ($r = -0.204, p < .05$), and self-acceptance ($r = -0.226, p < .05$). In the same vein, accommodating correlated negatively with autonomy ($r = -0.209, p < .05$) and positive relations ($r = -0.260, p < .01$). Avoiding style also had a significant negative correlation with positive relations ($r = -0.254, p < .05$). These findings indicate that male adolescents who exhibit avoiding and dominating styles in conflict interactions could have lower self-confidence, interpersonal harmony, and personal growth. This is corroborated by the results of Borecka-Biernat, (2022), who indicated that avoidant and aggressive conflict tactics are associated with lower psychological functioning among adolescents.

Patterns among female adolescents differed. Style of collaboration was strongly negatively related to autonomy ($r = -0.292, p < .01$), whereas accommodating style was strongly negatively related to positive relations ($r = -0.291, p < .01$) and self-acceptance ($r = -0.257, p < .01$). These results point to the potential that although collaboration is generally considered a healthy strategy, girls' over-collaboration, presumably due to social pressure or conflict avoidance, may be at the cost of their independence. Equally, accommodating could result in self-worth and interpersonal satisfaction-decreasing internalizing behaviors. Such gendered aspects of conflict resolution are consistent with Brown and Gilligan (1993) study, which evidenced that girls tend to suppress their needs during conflict in order to preserve harmony at the expense of their well-being.

Notably, the total psychological well-being score (summed over all six dimensions) was significantly negatively correlated with accommodating style for males and females ($r = -0.238$ and -0.238 respectively, $p < .05$), and weakly but negatively with collaborating for females ($r = -0.206, p < .05$). This is consistent with the notion that although these styles may be adaptive, overuse without assertiveness might inhibit overall well-being. These findings align with results reported by Wang et al., (2020), who found that adolescents employing submissive conflict styles often find themselves with inner emotional tension and impaired psychological adjustment.

Independent samples t-tests were used to statistically test for gender-based differences (Table 3). No major gender variations were detected on any of the five conflict management styles, such as collaborating ($t = -0.197, p = .844$) and compromising ($t = -0.488, p = .626$), meaning that the male and female adolescents use these styles with equal frequency. This accords with Raval and Walker (2019), which reported no robust gender effect in adolescent conflict resolution behavior, indicating that contemporary socialization is bringing about greater equality in interpersonal dynamics.

Strong gender differences were, nonetheless, reported across a number of psychological well-being dimensions. Female adolescents were negatively scored significantly higher for environmental mastery ($t = -2.417, p = .017$), personal growth ($t = -2.155, p = .032$), and purpose in life ($t = -2.092, p = .038$). These results suggest that adolescent girls might be more concerned about personal development and finding meaning in life while growing up. However, males performed significantly better on self-acceptance ($t = 2.136, p = .034$), implying a more stable or stronger self-concept.

This concurs with Aqil and Fatima (2015), who observed that male adolescents in India are likely to be more self-confident and less self-critical than their female peers.

In spite of these variations in certain dimensions of well-being, total psychological well-being between genders was not significantly different ($t = -0.721, p = .472$). This indicates that although boys and girls tend to have different strengths and weaknesses in the different aspects of well-being, their general state of mental health is similar. This finding confirms the inferences drawn by Yoon et al., (2023), who advocated that with changing roles and expectations in society, the gender differential in adolescent mental well-being is slowly reducing.

Implications

- **Conflict styles influence mental health:** Accommodating and competing styles were negatively associated with psychological well-being, illustrating the emotional toll of aggressive or submissive strategies.
- **Encourage self-advocacy in girls:** Overuse of collaborating and accommodating styles in female teenagers may result in lower self-acceptance and autonomy. Assertiveness training and boundary-setting are necessary in programs, particularly for girls.
- **Incorporate conflict resolution in schools:** Educating teenagers about the strengths and drawbacks of different styles of conflict is likely to enhance not only peer relationships but also emotional regulation and mental resilience.
- **Gender-specific intervention:** Because boys and girls exhibit distinct patterns, gender-specific mental health interventions can more effectively help teenage emotional development and conflict management.
- **Early prevention emphasis:** Encouraging emotionally resilient conflict approaches in adolescence can serve as a preventative factor for long-term stress, relationship problems, and mental health issues.
- **Teachers' and parents' role:** Teachers and caregivers need to teach healthy conflict resolution and emotional expression, providing a safe setting for adolescents to practice these skills.

Future Research Directions

- **Larger and more diverse sample:** Subsequent studies should incorporate adolescents from different regions, socio-economic backgrounds, and cultural environments to enhance generalizability.
- **Longitudinal research:** Longitudinal follow-up studies over time can monitor how conflict management styles and well-being change through various adolescent stages.
- **Investigate mediators and moderators:** Factors such as emotional intelligence, parental behavior, peer relationships, and school environment may mediate or moderate the association between conflict styles and well-being.
- **Add qualitative approaches:** Interviews or open-ended questions can reveal more in-depth understandings of adolescents' lived realities and cultural conceptualizations of conflict.

- **Investigate online conflict:** As adolescents spend more time online, research in the future should examine how social media and electronic communication affect conflict resolution and mental health.
- **Develop and test interventions:** Research should be aimed at creating, implementing, and assessing training programs that foster adaptive conflict management and enhance psychological health.

Conclusion

This study explored the link between conflict management styles and psychological well-being among adolescents, along with gender differences in both. The findings partially supported Hypothesis 1, confirming that certain conflict styles, like accommodating, competing, and avoiding, were significantly related to lower psychological well-being, especially among males. For females, collaborating and accommodating were negatively linked with autonomy and self-acceptance. However, not all styles showed significant correlations. Hypothesis 2 was also partially supported. While no significant gender differences were found in conflict styles, girls and boys differed significantly in several psychological well-being dimensions, such as environmental mastery, personal growth, and self-acceptance. Overall, the results highlight that conflict handling styles are meaningfully linked to emotional well-being, and that gender shapes how adolescents experience and manage these dynamics.

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