

Peer-Reviewed Articles

University Students' Perceptions of Conflict Resolution

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to compare the perceptions of American and international students on conflict resolution, and to determine if the students were willing to participate in conflict resolution. A survey was given to 226 students at an eastern university that asked them to identify a major international conflict and whether they felt that the conflict could be resolved. Among this group, 122 (54%) were international students and 104 (46%) were Americans. The results indicated that most of the students felt that the conflict could be resolved. However, the foreign students were more optimistic than the American students about resolving these conflicts. The conflicts identified were consistent with the current status of the world, and reflected the knowledge of the respondents about world affairs. A follow-up survey was conducted to determine if the students were willing to participate in conflict resolution. Of the 211 who responded, both groups indicated that they were willing to participate in conflict resolution.

Key Words: conflict resolution, international students, American students, world affairs

International migration to the United States has reached unprecedented levels, and has resulted in increased scholarly interest in acculturation (Schwartz, Unger, Zanziabga, & Szaicznik, 2010). In research on cultures, it is important to compare a group of individuals from one culture with a group of individuals from another on an influential variable (Cohen, 2009). With this in mind, the purpose of this study was a two-fold: first to compare the perceptions of American students with those of international students on conflict resolution, and then to determine if they were willing to participate in conflict resolution. Conflict resolution is defined as a method and process of eliminating discord or promoting a peaceful ending of a social conflict (Weeks, 1992).

In reviewing the literature on optimism and conflict resolution, most of the studies pertain to American youth, and there is little information on the views of young people from other countries (Bulthuis, 1986; Cole, 1966; Pikeo, 2003; Saucier & Ambert, 1982; Singhal, 1978; Wolfgang, 1973). Wolfgang compared three groups of high school students at different stages of cultural transition from Italy to Canada with respect to their time perspective and optimism towards the future. His results indicated that the Italo-Canadians were more optimistic towards the future than the native

Italians. Lastly, in an early study, Singhal (1978) found that Indian and mixed foreign undergraduates had higher levels of anxiety than American students. He stated that the variation in the level of anxiety was due to their differences in socialization, knowledge and economic context of their culture. In the following section, a review of those studies which describe the methods of conflict resolution will be discussed.

It was felt that because this study would use international students, and to avoid personal biases due to culture, focus would be placed on resolving international conflicts. In discussing international conflicts, Baker (1996) stated that such conflicts destroy not only the peace and prosperity of those involved, but also the stability of their neighbors and the public confidence in organizations that seek to prevent such conflicts. There are many ways in which international conflicts can be resolved, and have included such things as interactive problem solving; creating common goals and values; building of trust among parties in dispute; direct participation of the conflicting parties in joint efforts to shape a solution; and identifying the truth about a country's conflictual past so as to aid negotiation and mediation (Beardsley, Quinn, Biswas, & Wilkenfeld, 2006; Berry, 2005; Cushner, 2005; Davidheiser, 2005; Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2006; Gibson, 2006;



Kelman, 1999; Kriesberg, 1992; Marsella, 2005; Smith, 2005; Worchel, 2005). One approach that has been discussed is interactive problem solving (Kelman, 1999). Interactive problem solving is an unofficial, third-party approach which brings together politically influential representatives of conflicting parties for direct interaction in problem solving workshops. The process of this approach involves the identification and analysis of the problem, joint shaping of ideas for solution, influencing the other side, and creating a supportive political environment. With respect to negotiating or mediation, Kelman (2005) felt that it was important to build trust among the disputing parties. He felt that parties cannot enter into a peace process without some degree of mutual trust.

With respect to determining whether the students would be willing to participate in conflict resolution, it is also felt that the parties in negotiation must be tolerant or trusting of one another (Kelman, 2005; Kelman, 2006; Malhotra, & Liyanage, 2005; Nadler, 2006). In terms of preventing conflicts, it has been argued that social welfare policies, such as reducing economic insecurity, inequality, poverty and religious-political extremism, may reduce international conflicts (Burgoon, 2006). Besides tolerance or an understanding of the other party in a dispute, it is felt that there must also be an optimistic expectation in resolving the conflict (Beit-Hallahmi, 1972; Boulding, 2000; Dickinson, 2006; Gillham & Reivich, 2004; Sydney, et al, 2005), as well as being a citizen of the United States (Goldrick-Jones, 2001; Held, 2002; Spitzer, 1947). In resolving conflicts, it is also reported that self-efficacy (both global and social) among the negotiating members is important in resolving the conflict (Desivilya & Eizen, 2005). In the same manner, the attitudes of the parties are important (Haj-Yahia, 1998; Sagy, Orr, Baron, & Awwad, 2001).

As previously stated, there is a belief that optimism is an important component in conflict resolution (Braithwaite, 2004). With respect to this, there is a common belief that optimism is often related to young people (Eskilson, 1999; Fry, 1997; Gillham, 2004; Harrison-Hale, 2002; Klaczynski, & Fauth, 1996), and that a young person's life satisfaction often relates to his or her view of an optimistic future (Dienelt, 1984; Ek, Remes & Sovio, 2004; Leung, Moneta, & McBridge-Chang, 2005; Gillham, 2004; Pinquart, Sibereisen, & Juang, 2004). For instance, Saucier and Ambert (1982) found that French speaking adolescents from intact homes were more optimistic about the future than those from homes in which a parent was

separated, divorced or deceased.

However, in a study that examined the personal perceptions and aspirations of 187 students at two universities in Syracuse, New York, Braungart and Braungart (1996) indicated that although the subjects were most optimistic about their own future and to a lesser extent the future of Europe, they were more pessimistic about the future prospects for the United States. Eskilson (1999) questioned 462 college students about their values and goals and found that despite their general optimism, their hopes for the future were not founded on present effort and accomplishment.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 226 students who were attending a large private university in the eastern part of the United States. Of this group, 122 were international students, and 104 were Americans. For the follow-up survey, 215 students responded, of which 120 were international students and 95 were Americans. All of the students were volunteers, and the sample was obtained by making announcements about the study on the web sites of student organizations at the university, from seven courses taught by the principal investigator, and from the university's International Student and Scholar Center. It is important to note that the international students sampled in this study may not be fully representative of their peers in the host countries. That is, those that choose to study abroad may be more optimistic (or less) than their peers who do not study abroad.

The average age of the respondents was 27.6 years, and they ranged in age from 19 to 30 years of age. Most of the students were female (67.8%), and Christianity was the major religion (67.8%). One hundred and forty two of the students were undergraduates (68.9%), while 84 (31.1%) were graduate students. Of this group, 122 (54%) were foreign students while 104 (46%) were Americans. The international students were in the country for more than a year, and the average length of time was 2.5 years. With respect to majors, most of the undergraduates were in engineering (32.4%), and this was followed by business (28.2%), computer science (25.4%), psychology (9.8%), and chemistry (4.2%). Of the graduate students, 50% were in counseling psychology, 35.7% in school psychology, 7.1% in business administration, 4.8% in engineering, and 2.4% in physics. The international students represented 21 nations from Israel (12), India (12), England

(10), Canada (10), Russia (10), Singapore (8), Japan (8), Kenya (8), Indonesia (6), Italy (6), Nigeria (6), Ecuador (4), France (4), Greece (4), Netherlands (4), Vietnam (2), Norway (2), Armenia (2), Venezuela (2), and Switzerland (2).

Measure

An initial survey form was pilot tested on ten students and five faculty persons from the university. The students were from Israel, India, France, Nigeria and Venezuela. All were undergraduate students. Based on their responses, the final form was developed. All the questions were open-ended, and the responses were categorized based on the methods of conflict resolution as identified in the literature review. As previously stated, international conflicts were used so as to eliminate any personal biases among the participants which may have been the result of cultural differences. Demographic information consisted of the student's age, gender, country of origin, religious preferences, language spoken, major, and whether he or she was an undergraduate or graduate student.

The survey consisted of four questions, which were as follows:

1. What major international conflict is of most concern to you?
2. Do you feel that the conflict you identified can be resolved?
3. If yes, what are some of the ways that you feel it could be resolved?
4. If no, why not?

The second survey asked two questions:

1. Are you willing to participate in conflict resolution?
2. If no, why not?

Results

Of this group, 66.9% (82) of the students felt that international conflicts could be resolved. In contrast, only 32.7% (34) of the American students thought that they could be resolved. Based on the responses the conflicts were categorized (Table 1) so as to determine that both groups of students were identifying the same international conflict. Using a Chi Square analysis, this difference was significant. ($X^2=10.88, p=.001$).

There were no significant differences found between types of conflicts and whether the student was an American or from another country, and between graduate and undergraduate students and whether they felt that a conflict could be resolved.

Table 1
Conflicts identified by the respondents

<i>Type of Conflict</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Israeli-Palestinian Conflict	60
Racial Conflict	52
Iraq War	34
Darfur- Sudan	30
Territorial Dispute	18
Islamic Terror	14
Religious Conflict	12
Other	6

Of all the conflicts identified, the Israeli-Palestinian was most frequently mentioned. This was followed by racial conflicts (i.e., African-Americans; and multi-racial cultures of Singapore and Indonesia), and the war in Iraq. Also, there was a relationship between conflict and country of origin. With respect to the methods that would resolve these conflicts, most of the respondents (42.6%) indicated that tolerance or acceptance of other's beliefs and values was required. This was followed by negotiation between disputing parties (22.3%). Only 42% of the respondents responded to the question concerning their reasons for feeling that a conflict could not be resolved. These reasons involved the fact that it was a long standing dispute, lack of tolerance, understanding of the other party, and religious convictions. The reasons provided for resolving the conflicts are included in Table 2.

Table 2
Methods to Resolve Conflict

<i>Method</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Tolerance/Acceptance of Differences	40
Communication/Negotiation	36
Territorial Sovereignty	18
Removal or Terrorist Group	14
Other	8

To determine whether the students would participate in conflict resolution, a follow-up survey was conducted. As stated, 11 students did not respond to the follow-up survey. This included two international students, in which one was from Israel and the other from India. Of this group, 84 or 70% of the international students said that they would participate in conflict resolution. Of the 95 American students who responded, 50 or 52.7% stated that they would participate in conflict resolution. There were no significant differences between the groups of students. The reasons given by those students who said that they would not participate in conflict res-



olution involved the following: "People cannot compromise," 51 (63 %); "A conflict cannot be resolved," 20(24.7%); "the conflict concerned personal or private issues," 6(7.4%); and "other," 4(4.9%).

Discussion

The results the study indicated that the majority of the international students were more optimistic about conflict resolution than the American students. However, it should be pointed out that the international students may have been more "idealistic" or "realistic" than the American students. Nevertheless, this finding seems inconsistent with the view that Americans are more optimistic than persons from other countries, and could be reflective of the current state of American society with respect to the country's economic status. However, this is only conjecture by the principal investigator and there is no empirical evidence for this opinion.

The conflicts identified seem consistent with the current status of the world, and reflect the knowledge of the participants about world affairs. There was also a relationship found between the type of conflict and the country of origin of the respondent, i.e., Israeli students identifying the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Further, based on the review of the literature on conflict resolution, the methods of resolving the conflict as stated by the students were very consistent with those methods that are implemented. That is, the majority of the students felt that tolerance or understanding differences and negotiation were the best methods of resolving conflicts. Similarly, most of the students felt that a conflict could not be resolved because it was long standing or the parties were not tolerant. It is not known why less than half of the respondents, who stated that a conflict could not be resolved, did not provide a reason for their negative response.

Although the international students were more optimistic than the American students about whether an international conflict could be resolved, the majority of both groups were willing to participate in conflict resolution. This has significant implications for student behavior on campus and in residence life. There are minor and major disputes which occur on campus and in residential life on a regular basis during a student's academic life. As a person matures, it is important that he or she is able to deal with conflicts that may occur in his or her life.

Furthermore, the willingness of international students to participate is encouraging. This is especially important since many international students have difficulty adjusting to campus life, and many experience a

"cultural shock" when attending an American university. The ability for these students to resolve conflicts is part of the process of acculturation in any society. The differences in international and American students' perceptions of conflict resolution might also affect national and international affairs. An example would pertain to the difficulty with the current American budget deficit and the disagreement concerning how costs should be cut, as well as the long unsettled Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicated that international university students appear more optimistic about resolution of international conflicts than U. S. American students. However, the majority of both groups indicated that they were willing to participate in conflict resolution. The willingness to participate in conflict resolution has important implications in the campus life of these students where they will face minor and major disputes during their academic life. A major limitation of this study was the lack of random sampling, and thus, the results lack external validity. In fact, further investigation of the differences between international and U. S. American students would be of interest and provide information about a wide range of perceptions, behaviors, and cultural variables. Specifically, more work could be done to investigate the ramifications of these differences for voting behavior, and other political behavior.

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