Relationship of Emotional Intelligence to Conflict Styles in Romantic Relationships

Erin L. Hyken and Kimberly A. Barchard
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Contact Information: Kim Barchard, Department of Psychology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 4505 S. Maryland Parkway Box 455030, Las Vegas, NV, 89154-5030, USA, barchard@unlv.edu

Abstract

Conflict in personal relationships is inevitable. Given that conflict sometimes leads to aggression, violence, and injury, it is important to understand the factors that are related to various conflict styles. The purpose of this analysis was to examine the relationship of Emotional Intelligence to conflict tactic styles in romantic relationships.

Emotional Intelligence includes the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions in the self and in others. We hypothesized that more emotionally intelligent people would have better methods of dealing with conflict. For example, they would use negotiation more and aggression less. A total of 128 undergraduates completed 13 measures of Emotional Intelligence, as well as the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales. The latter scales measure five different methods of dealing with conflict: Negotiation, Psychological Aggression, Physical Assault, Injury, and Sexual Coercion.

Several relationships were found. First, self-regulation of emotions was negatively related to both violent methods of dealing with conflict and with the use of negotiation. Second, both the ability to recognize others' emotions and the tendency to use negative emotional events to help define one's goals were positively associated with the use of negotiation. Third, delay of gratification was negatively associated with psychological aggression and physical assault. Finally, two different measures of social and emotional knowledge were negatively related to sexual coercion. This last result suggests that lack of social knowledge may be a contributing factor in incidences of sexual coercion. Future research should focus on whether training in these various aspects of Emotional Intelligence can increase the use of negotiation and reduce the use of violent methods of dealing with conflict.

Relationship of Emotional Intelligence to Conflict Styles in Romantic Relationships

An overwhelming number of people are involved in some sort of romantic relationship, and conflict is inevitably a part of every relationship. There are many different ways of handling conflict, however, including pro-social methods such as negotiation and antisocial methods such as violence and aggression.

Emotional Intelligence includes the ability to perceive, understand, and regulate emotions in the self and in others. We hypothesize that people with high Emotional Intelligence use more pro-social methods of dealing with conflict than people who are low in Emotional Intelligence. For example, they will use more negotiation and less aggression.

Goleman (1995) argued that Emotional Intelligence plays a role in establishing and maintaining successful relationships. However, researchers have not yet examined the relationship between Emotional Intelligence and conflict styles in romantic relationships. In this study, we explored the relationship between Emotional Intelligence and conflict styles by comparing two indicators of Emotional Intelligence – the Chapin Social Insight Test (Gough, 1968) and Tett's Measure of Emotional Intelligence (Tett, Wang, Gribler, & Martinez, 1997) – with the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (Hamby & Strauss, 1996).

Method

Participants

A total of 128 undergraduates (96 female) participated in this study in return for course credit. The mean age was 19.86, with a standard deviation of 3.33. The students were predominately White (57%), with the next largest groups being Asian and Hispanic (12% each).

Measures

The Chapin Social Insight Test (CSIT; Gough, 1968)

"The purpose of the Chapin Social Insight Test is to assess the perceptiveness and accuracy with which an individual can appraise others and forecast what they might say and do" (Gough, 1968, p.1). The test presents 25 situations, each of which has 4 alternative explanations. The participant then decides which explanation most appropriately addresses the situation. In the original CSIT, correct answers receive scores of 1 to 3 points. In this study, we used a short form of this test, consisting of those 11 items that were scored with a 2 or 3 in the original test, but in our study each correct answer received the same weight.

Tett's Measure of Emotional Intelligence (TMEI; Tett et al., 1997)

This self-report questionnaire has 146 items with 12 subscales, and uses a 6-point Likert-type scale that ranges from ''*strongly disagree*'' to ''*strongly agree*'' (see Table 1).

The Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS2; Hamby & Straus, 1996)

The CTS2 measures how often each partner in a dating relationship engages in physical or psychological aggression toward each other, and how often each partner utilizes reasoning and negotiation when dealing with conflict. Each item asks the participant about their own behavior, and about the behavior of their partner. There are a total of 39 items, each asked twice, and divided into 5 subscales (see Table 1)

Procedure

Participants completed 2 separate hour-and-a-half testing sessions, held one week apart. During the first session, participants completed the CTS2 along with other measures. The TMEI and CSIT were completed during the second testing session along with other measures.

Results and Conclusion

We correlated the 13 EI scales with the 5 measures of conflict tactics (see Table 1). Of these 65 correlations, there were 10 significant relationships. These are discussed in detail below.

All five of the Conflict Tactic Scales were negatively related to Tett's Regulation of Emotion in the Self scale, and four of these correlations were statistically significant. The Psychological Aggression, Physical Assault, and Injury scales had significant negative correlations, indicating that higher levels of self-regulation are related to lower levels of violent or aggressive methods of dealing with conflict. However, the Negotiation scale was also negatively associated with self-regulation. This suggests that people who self-regulate their emotions are not discussing relationship problems with their partners. The combination of these two results suggests that people who are self-regulating their emotions are simply not acknowledging or dealing with negative emotions associated with relationship problems. Therefore, efforts to reduce violent methods of dealing with conflict should probably NOT focus on increasing self-regulation: pro-social methods of dealing with conflict might also be decreased.

Two variables were positively related to the use of Negotiation. These were Tett's Recognition of Emotion in Others scale and Tett's Mood-Redirected Attention. Thus, it appears that people who are good at recognizing other people's emotions, and those who use emotions to help them think more deeply about their values and goals are

those people who are more likely to use Negotiation. This suggests that future research might examine whether improvements in these skills increases the tendency to deal with conflict in a problem-focused, pro-social manner.

Tett's Delay of Gratification scale was negatively correlated with both Psychological Aggression and Physical Assault. This means that people who put off immediate rewards in favor of long term gains are less likely to use violent methods of dealing with conflict. On the other hand, Delay of Gratification had a near-zero relationship with Negotiation. This makes Delay of Gratification a good target for future research focused on possible methods of reducing violent or anti-social conflict tactics.

Two Emotional Intelligence measures were negatively associated with Sexual Coercion. These were Tett's Emotional Appropriateness scale, which measures knowledge of the relationships between social situations and emotions, and the Chapin Social Insight Test, which measures the ability to forecast others' actions, words, and feelings. Thus, it appears that lack of social knowledge is related to Sexual Coercion. Future research could focus on whether increases in knowledge of social situations can reduce the incidence of sexually coercive behaviors.

This research has suggested several different areas that future research could explore, in terms of reducing violent and aggressive methods of dealing with conflict, increasing pro-social methods of dealing with conflict, and reducing sexual coercion. This future research should attempt to teach these Emotional Intelligence skills to determine if these other variables can be influenced.

References

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence.* New York: Bantam Books, Inc.

Gough, H. G. (1968). *Manual for the Chapin Social Insight Test.* Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologist Press

Hamby, S.L. & Straus, M.A. (1996). The Revised Conflict Tactics Scales. *Journal of Family Issues, 17,* 283-317.

Tett, R., Wang, A., Gribler, J., & Martinez, A. (1997). *Development of the self-report measures of emotional intelligence.* Paper presented at the 1997 Annual Convention of the Southeastern Psychological Association, Atlanta, GA.

Table 1
Correlations of EI Scales to Revised Conflict Tactic Scales

Emotional Intelligence Measures	Revised Conflict Tactics Scales				
	Negotiation	Psy. Aggression	Phy. Assault	Sex Coercion	Injury
Chapin Social Insight Test	-0.1	-0.13	-0.12	-0.28**	-0.02
Tett's Subscales					
Recognition of Emotion in Self	0.1	-0.07	-0.03	0	-0.15
Non-verbal Expression of Emotion	0.08	-0.04	-0.01	-0.08	0.03
Recognition of Emotion in Others	0.19*	0.02	0.03	-0.08	-0.04
Empathy	0.11	-0.8	0.11	-0.15	0.06
Regulation of Emotion in the Self	-0.21*	-0.32**	0.17*	-0.1	-0.20*
Regulation of Emotion in Others	0.12	-0.01	0.11	0.04	-0.02
Intuiton vs. Reason	0.08	0.03	0.07	0.1	0.04
Creative Thinking	0.07	-0.12	0	-0.01	-0.02
Mood Redirected Attention	0.27**	0.14	0.12	0.09	0.08
Motivating Emotions	0.15	-0.05	0.01	0.11	-0.07
Delay of Gratification	-0.4	-0.21**	-0.19*	-0.03	-0.07
Emotional Appropriateness	-0.7	-0.04	0.02	-0.18*	0.12

$* p < .05.$ $** p < .01.$