


Spring 2018

Conflict Competence Among Undergraduates: Exploring the Impact of Fear of Negative Evaluation

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Appendix A

MASTER'S TITLE PAGE

Conflict Competence Among Undergraduates: Exploring the Impact of Fear of Negative
Evaluation

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in
Leadership Studies
University of Southern Maine

By
Erica E. Leighton

2018

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the number of individuals who helped me to successfully complete both this research and my master's degree. A large source of constant support and motivation has been my husband, Cole, who helps me to keep perspective and balance. A big thank you goes out to my past and current supervisor who both encouraged me to get the most out of my education, and to my coworkers who helped provide me with innovative ideas and connections and listened to my endless updates of the frustrations and rewards of doing my own research. I also would also like to thank my mother, Eileen, who having recently gone through her own research, was a wealth of knowledge and understanding, as well as my father, James, who always reminds me that I am loved and supported. Lastly, thank you to the multiple professors who have challenged and guided me, helping me to expand my learning and question my assumptions, and to become a better learner, partner, educator, supervisor, and colleague, especially Elizabeth Turesky, Brian Davenport, Dan Jenkins, Paul Dexter, Sharon Timberlake, Bill Maxwell, and Linda Varrell. Without all these individuals, I would not have been able to get to where I am today.

Abstract

According to a study by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, workplace conflict costs employers up to \$359 billion annually (as cited by CPP Global, 2008). Considering this cost, teaching the current generation of college students to effectively manage conflict is a charge for colleges and universities who aim to prepare students to successfully enter the workforce after graduation. Current methods of conflict resolution training, however, lack consistency and show varying levels of success. Developing effective tools depends on a clear understanding of barriers students face in learning to effectively resolve conflicts. In looking to examine these barriers, this study explored whether Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) correlates with avoidance among undergraduate students across the United States. While the correlation between FNE and conflict avoidance was only found to be moderate, correlations to other styles of conflict resolution demonstrate that FNE may play some moderating role in the conflict resolution styles that students most use. The difference in findings between LGBTQ+ participants and other participants with similarly high BFNE-S scores demonstrates that other factors besides FNE must also influence conflict resolution style. These findings strengthen the call for a better understanding of the multiple factors that impact conflict competence.

Keywords: Fear of negative evaluation, social anxiety, conflict competence, conflict resolution styles, LGBTQ+ populations, generation Z.

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Introduction

Conflict resolution has been a topic of intense study across many fields for a number of years (see Ayoko, Ashkanasy, & Jehn, 2014; Barki & Hartwick, 2004; O'Neill & Allen, 2014). The ability to resolve conflict is one of many soft skills that more and more employers are looking for in the workplace (e.g., Casner-Lotto, Barrington, & Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2006; Ingols & Shapiro, 2014; Jaschik, 2015). Carnevale and Smith (2013) tell us that “As the structure of the US economy has shifted... the demand for specific academic and vocational skills has been augmented with a growing need for general skills – including learning, reasoning, communicating, general problem-solving skills and behavioural skills” (p. 493). Conflict resolution is of specific importance, especially considering that a report by CPP Global (2008) states that “the average employee spends 2.1 hours a week dealing with conflict. For the US alone, that translates to 385 million working days spent every year as a result of conflict in the workplace” (p. 3). This statistic shows the importance of looking at conflict resolution in a higher education setting, especially in light of responses from a 2016 survey indicating that 84.8% of 137,456 full-time, first-time-in-college freshman indicated that they were going to college to get a better job, and 77.9% cited getting training for a specific career as very important in their decision to go to college (Egan, Stolzenberg, Zimmerman, Aragon, Whang Sayson, & Rios-Aguilar, 2017). Students are choosing to go to college specifically to find their place in the workforce, and as such, colleges and universities are charged with ensuring that their graduates are leaving with the necessary skills that employers require.

In seeking to determine best practices for how universities and colleges develop conflict resolution skills among their students, it is important to look at reasons why students

struggle with conflict competence. Avoidance of conflict is often a destructive behavior when it comes to successful conflict resolution as it prevents a true understanding of issues that are causing conflict (Folger, Poole, & Stutman, 2013). Davila and Beck (2002) state that conflict avoidance is common among individuals with social anxiety, citing a variety of other studies that support this statement (e.g., Alden & Bieling, 1997; Alden & Wallace, 1995; Hope, Sigler, Penn, & Meier, 1998; Kocovski & Endler, 2000; Meleshko & Alden, 1993). Davila and Beck (2002) specify that “by definition (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) social anxiety refers to excessive fears of negative evaluation by others” (p. 428). Watson and Friend (1969), the developers of the original Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) scale, provide a more in-depth breakdown of FNE as just one of three aspects that make up “social-evaluative anxiety” (p. 448), stating that FNE is more common than the other two aspects.

Rates of social anxiety and FNE have been reportedly high specifically among undergraduate students. A recent study cited social anxiety rates as high as 48.1% among undergraduate populations (Kudor & Grover, 2014). The correlation between social anxiety (as measured by the Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents) and FNE for this study was .94** (** $p < 0.01$) (Kudor & Grover, 2014). Considering that FNE is just one aspect of social anxiety, and that rates of FNE are higher than that of other social anxiety factors, this study will assess FNE in relation to conflict resolution, as opposed to social anxiety. Considering the stated correlation between social anxiety, FNE, and conflict avoidance (Davila & Beck, 2002) and the high rates of social anxiety and FNE among college students (Kudor & Grover, 2014), this study will explore this connection between conflict avoidance and FNE in more depth. This research will analyze if there is a direct correlation between high levels of FNE and high rates of conflict avoidance. If so, addressing FNE in college students may be a key

factor in providing graduates with the conflict resolution skills that employers are looking for upon their entrance into the workforce.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to explore what role, if any, FNE plays in the prevalence of conflict avoidance among traditional-age college students. This study also seeks to discover whether correlations are consistent amongst all traditional-age college students, or whether there is a difference among correlations for participants with higher rates of FNE. Wadsworth and Hayes-Skelton (2015) cite a variety of previous studies (e.g. Gilman et al., 2001; Potoczniak, Aldea & DeBlare, 2007; Safren & Pantalone, 2006) that show that “individuals with a marginalized sexual orientation report...[a] higher prevalence of social anxiety...than heterosexuals” (p. 181). Accordingly, for the purpose of this study, special attention will be paid to students who identify as lesbian, gay, and bisexual, as well as those who identify as transgender or queer, or who otherwise identify as a part of a minority group based on sexual orientation or gender identity (hereafter referred to as LGBTQ+). In understanding the role that FNE plays in conflict avoidance for college students, and for LGBTQ+ students, methods used to improve conflict resolution can better incorporate strategies that address underlying factors such as FNE and social anxiety, which may be inhibiting students in utilizing more constructive conflict resolution styles. Arguably, gaining a more thorough understanding of the barriers to conflict competence among college students will allow for adaptations to tools and resources designed to assist students in the development of conflict resolution skills, resulting in approaches that are more effective at helping students develop conflict competency.

Research Questions

By surveying traditional-age (18-23) college students utilizing the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale, Straightforward Items (BFNE-S, Carleton, Collimore, McCabe, & Antony, 2011; Rodebaugh et al., 2004; Weeks et al., 2005), as well as the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory- II (ROCI-II, Rahim, 1983), this study seeks to explore the following research questions:

R₁: Is there a correlation between FNE and conflict avoidance?

R₂: Are there other styles of conflict resolution that correlate with BFNE-S scores?

R₃: Does membership in a minority group with higher rates of social anxiety, specifically students who identify as LGBTQ+, impact the correlation between FNE and conflict style?

Importance of the Study

Providing students with appropriate and effective tools in developing conflict competence is a pressing issue for many colleges and universities, as can be seen by the fact that in 2003, 225 college campuses across North America reported having campus mediation initiatives (Campus Conflict Management Guidelines Committee, 2003). A 2002 study by Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, and Scultz found that when comparing students who had taken a five-week conflict resolution training with those who had the same academic curriculum without the conflict and mediation training, the former group not only used more productive conflict resolution strategies, but also had higher rates of academic achievement, and longer retention of learned content (as cited by Waithaka, Moore-Austin, & Gitimu, 2015). Yet, not all efforts to help students learn how to successfully navigate conflict are effective. A recent study in 2015 found that among a sample of 133 students, there was almost no difference in

the avoidance conflict handling style for students who were shown a conflict handling video training than their peers who were not (Waithaka, Moore-Austin, & Gitimu, 2015).

Considering the cost and frequency of conflict cited by CPP Global (2008), and the demand of employers that students enter the workforce equipped with the skills necessary to resolve conflict (Carnevale & Smith, 2013), understanding how to effectively train students in these skills is essential to the success of colleges and universities seeking to prepare students for the workforce. This study will expand knowledge about the role of FNE on conflict avoidance as well as other conflict resolution styles, to better inform efforts that seek to shift avoidance and other destructive conflict style choices to more productive styles of conflict resolution. If this research shows that FNE is directly and highly correlated with conflict avoidance for instance, this may be a strong indicator of the need for those who utilize conflict avoidance styles to have support around FNE in addition to mediation and conflict resolution training. A lack of correlation on the other hand, could provide a path for future research to explore other underlying factors that drive conflict resolution styles used by traditional-age undergraduate students.

Literature Review

Definition of Terms

This study assesses both FNE and conflict avoidance among both cisgender heterosexual college undergraduates, as well lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender students or those who otherwise identify as members of a sexual orientation or gender identity minority (LGBTQ+). Thus, for the purpose of this study, the following definitions apply:

- Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE): “apprehension about others' evaluations, distress over their negative evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively” (Watson & Friend, 1969, p. 449).
- Conflict competence: “the ability to develop and use cognitive, emotional, and behavioral skills that enhance productive outcomes of conflict while reducing the likelihood of escalation or harm (Runde & Flanagan, 2010)” (Runde & Flanagan, 2013, p. 7).
- Sexual Identity: “An inherent or immutable enduring emotional, romantic or sexual attraction to other people” (The Human Rights Campaign, 2017).
- Gender Identity: “One’s innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both, or neither- how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves. One’s gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth” (The Human Rights Campaign, 2017).
- Cisgender: “A term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth” (The Human Rights Campaign, 2017).
- Transgender: “An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or expression is different from cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth. Being transgender does not imply any specific sexual orientation. Therefore, transgender people may identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc.” (The Human Rights Campaign, 2017).
- Generation Z or Gen Z: A term for those “born in the mid-1990s to early 2000s (some debate of this point persists)” (Forbes, 2015).

Related Research

There are multiple areas of research that come into play in exploring correlations between FNE and conflict competence. As such, the following literature review explores the areas of conflict and conflict competency, FNE and social anxiety, and the higher prevalence of social anxiety and FNE among LGBTQ+ individuals. While there is significant research included in this review that documents the detrimental role that conflict avoidance plays in successful conflict resolution, reasons for this avoidance are less clear. There is also a lack of present-day research exploring conflict avoidance among the current generation of college students, known as Gen Z. This literature review explores the available research that describes the role that social anxiety and FNE plays in conflict avoidance, and provides context for the need for the current study to better understand this correlation, especially among current Gen Z college undergraduates.

Conflict Competency and Avoidance

In looking to understand conflict competency, it is important to first explore the idea of conflict itself. Capobianco, Davis, and Kraus (2001) state that conflict is “any situation in which people have incompatible interests, goals, principles or feelings” (as cited by Runde & Flanagan, 2013, p. 19). Folger et al. (2013) define conflict as “the interaction of interdependent people who perceive incompatibility and the possibility of interference from others as a result of this incompatibility” (p. 4). A number of definitions of conflict focus on different aspects of what conflict is comprised of, as can be seen in a meta-analysis by Barki and Hartwick (2004) that looks at over 65 unique definitions of conflict over the course of 70 years. Despite the breadth of definitions present, Barki and Hartwick (2004) determine that there are three themes that emerge from those definitions, those being “disagreement, negative emotion, and interference” (p. 218). In taking into account the wealth of research in

their review, Barki and Hartwick (2004) define conflict as “a dynamic process that occurs between interdependent parties as they experience negative emotional reactions to perceived disagreements and interference with the attainment of their goals” (p. 234). It is this definition that this study relies on in exploring conflict competence and avoidance.

A fairly recent meta-analysis conducted by De Wit, Greer, and Jehn (2012) explores over 100 empirical articles about intragroup conflict involving almost 9,000 participants from the years of 2001-2011, which only partially covers the expansive amount of research surrounding conflict. While much is known about the prevalence of multiple types of conflict in teams (see De Dreu & Weingart, 2003; DeWit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012; Jeh & Bendersky, 2003, for reviews), there are many different views on how to solve conflict (e.g., Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 2011; Folger et al., 2013; Gerxon, 2006; Runde & Flanagan, 2013). Many of these authors agree however that for conflict to be navigated successfully, there needs to first be a period of what Walton (1969) refers to as differentiation (as cited by Folger et al., 2013). The basics of this period are the need for any parties involved in a conflict to understand what the conflict is actually about without falling into traps of destructive behaviors, such as personal insults or unwillingness to acknowledge or discuss the conflict (Folger et al., 2013). This is echoed in Fisher et al.’s (2011) model of focusing on interests rather than positions, and Runde and Flanagan’s (2013) assertion of the need to listen for understanding. This need for parties in conflict to develop an accurate understanding of that conflict provides clear rationale for why avoidance of conflict is referred to by many as a destructive behavior (e.g., Davis, Capobianco, & Kraus, 2004; Folger et al., 2013; Runde & Flanagan, 2013). As conflict avoidance prevents successful differentiation and understanding of conflict, this

study will focus on understanding what factors may influence its use among study participants.

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Knowing the destructive role that avoidance of conflict plays in successful conflict resolution, it is important to look more closely at why individuals avoid conflict in the first place. Davila and Beck (2002) indicate that “social anxiety symptoms were associated with the predicted interpersonal styles of...desire to avoid conflict [and] actual avoidance of conflict” (p. 436). As discussed in the introduction, FNE is a key part of social anxiety. By focusing on FNE, which is more common than the other factors of social anxiety, this research seeks to determine whether the correlations between FNE and conflict avoidance among the millennial population college students surveyed in 2002 is reflected in the current population of Gen Z students. Also, while Davila and Beck (2002) clearly state that there is a relationship between social anxiety, FNE, and conflict avoidance, further research connecting conflict avoidance with either social anxiety or FNE is limited. There have been studies that explore avoidance behaviors and social anxiety, such as the avoidance of new situations (Storch, Masia-Warner, Dent, Roberti, & Fisher, 2004), experiential avoidance (Kashdan et al., 2014), or even general avoidance behaviors (Lipsitz et al., 2008). Yet, many sources that address conflict avoidance in relation to social anxiety, including the aforementioned studies, reference Davila and Beck’s (2002) study when stating a correlation. It is this gap, as well as the new generation of traditional-age college undergraduates that prompts the current study into links between FNE and conflict resolution skills.

College Students and Conflict

While there have been a large number of studies focused on conflict resolution that utilize college students as their sample for study (see Landa-Gonzalez, 2008; Laursen, Finkelstein, & Betts, 2001), there is a paucity of research focused on the current generation of traditional-age college students, Generation Z (Gen Z). Not only is there a distinct lack of research on this generation, it is noted that much of the information regarding their conflict competence focuses on the role of technology as opposed to observed behaviors on the part of these students. For instance, a 2014 report by Knoll Workplace Research states that “the reduced face-to-face socialization of Gen Z children due to heavy online social interaction could cause problems with social interactions and conflict resolution at work” (p. 4), yet the reference section has only 12 sources, and of these, only one seems to support this finding. This source is McCrindle and Wolfinger’s (2011) *The ABC of XYZ: Understanding the Global Generations*, which states that those who grew up using computers and mobile phones, “as a result of their reliance on these technologies...often lack relational skills” (p. 160). McCrindle and Wolfinger (2011) go on to say that “Many, used to hiding behind the security of their mobile phones and computer screens, are not so good with face-to-face communication” (p. 160). Yet the only research they provide to support this claim are statistics around how many individuals own or regularly use mobile phones. Thus, conclusions that Gen Z is less likely to be conflict competent may not have much grounding, as these assertions seem to rely on the opinion of the authors, as opposed to data that supports these claims.

Though there is no specific recent research that demonstrates an observed lack of conflict resolution skill among current Gen Z college students, the perceptions of employers surrounding students’ readiness for the workplace in areas that directly relate to conflict

competence do create a strong case of the need for research and informed training development. In a 2013 article from *Human Resource Development International*, Carnevale and Smith state that “Interpersonal and negotiation skills are the cornerstones of successful teamwork” (p. 495). The authors (2013) highlight that “Unresolved conflicts can sap productivity and short-circuit strategic plans” (p. 495). The high cost of conflict in the workplace, reportedly as high as \$359,000,000,000 in paid hours in 2008, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (as cited by CPP Global, 2008), is likely a driving factor in the decision of many businesses and organizations to develop peer conflict management coaching (Brubaker, Noble, Fincher, Park & Press, 2014). There is also a significant difference in perceptions of the readiness of college graduates to work successfully with others in teams, as demonstrated in a study conducted by Hart Research Associates in 2014. This study, which surveyed 400 employers and 613 college students, found that while 64% of students felt that they were well prepared to work with others in teams, and 62% indicated that they felt well prepared in oral communication, only 37% and 28% of employers, respectively, reported the same (Hart Research Associates, 2015). This disparity among perceptions between students and employers indicates that increasing the skill levels of current college graduates to match the expectations of employers in the areas of teamwork and communication, both of which rely on conflict competence, is an important task for higher education institutions.

Social Anxiety and FNE in College Students

While the research on Gen Z students and conflict competence is sparse, studies documenting the high rates of social anxiety and FNE among current college students are more readily available. In a 2014 study of 54 undergraduate students between the ages of 18

and 21 (a mix of millennial and Gen Z students) surveyed using the Social Anxiety Scale for Adolescents (SAS-A), Kudor and Grover (2014) found that 26 participants, nearly half of their sample population, were “classified as having significant social anxiety” (p. 14). The relationship between SAS-A scores and FNE scores was highly significant at .94, indicating an extremely high correlation between FNE and social anxiety (Kudor & Grover, 2014). Kudor and Grover (2014) were not the only authors to report high rates of social anxiety and FNE among a Gen Z college population. Lipton, Weeks, Daruwala, and De Lost Reyes (2016) studied 375 undergraduate students with a mean age of 19.63, and found that nearly 26% reported high levels of social anxiety based on their results from three self-report scales. The mean FNE scores assessed by the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (BFNE; Leary 1983) for this portion of participants was above the clinically relevant score of 26. Though this is a significant drop from the 48% reported by Kudor and Grover (2014), this difference may be because of the use of different self-report instruments. Kudor and Grover (2014) utilized a tool specifically designed for an adolescent population with a built-in cutoff for what qualified as high social anxiety, whereas Lipton et al. (2016) utilized multiple instruments for which only those scoring in the top 25% were considered to have high levels of social anxiety. Unfortunately, neither study provided statistics for the overall number of students with clinically relevant FNE scores. Either way, whether one in four college undergraduates have high levels of social anxiety and FNE, or one in two, the prevalence of students with social anxiety and high FNE scores presents a pressing case for the need to understand the impact that FNE scores have on the conflict resolution styles utilized by current traditional-age college students when seeking to successfully resolve conflict.

Social Anxiety, FNE, and LGBTQ+ Communities

Considering that social anxiety and FNE have been shown to have a correlation to conflict avoidance as indicated by Davila and Beck (2002), it serves to reason that populations with higher rates of social anxiety and FNE, should also have higher rates of conflict avoidance. To test this hypothesis that conflict avoidance rates will be higher among a population with higher rates of FNE, this study will look specifically at individuals who self-identify as LGBTQ+. Wadsworth and Hayes-Skelton (2015) cite 11 different studies that demonstrate that being a part of a minority population based on sexual orientation or gender identity positively correlates with social anxiety. Greene, Britton, and Fitts (2014) cite similar findings, highlighting the 2009 National School Climate Survey, which indicates that “nearly nine out of 10 LGBT students had experienced harassment at school in the previous year” (p. 406) and research from Roth, Coles, and Heimberg (2002) that indicates that there is a correlation between higher rates of social anxiety and frequent teasing during childhood. Their own study of 594 individuals who were 18 or older, supports these findings, determining that “recalled school-related peer-bullying was predictive of fear of negative evaluation in LGBT adults over and above that accounted for by demographic variables” (Greene, Britton & Fitts, 2014, p. 413). Considering that the LGBTQ+ population is well documented as having higher rates of FNE and social anxiety, this current study explores whether conflict avoidance among individuals who self-identify as LGBTQ+ is consistent with the wider survey population. This research also looks at the correlations between FNE and conflict styles utilized by LGBTQ+ participants in comparison with their cisgender heterosexual peers. Noticeable differences in rates of correlation within the LGBTQ+ population, specifically in comparison with the rates of correlation among their heterosexual

cisgender peers, would indicate that FNE may not be the main factor driving conflict resolution style, prompting a new direction for future research.

Conclusion

Considering the breadth of research that highlights how avoidance plays a key role in preventing a successful period of differentiation and thus a true understanding of the conflict, it is essential that current studies focus on understanding the determining factors that influence conflict avoidance and other potentially destructive styles of conflict resolution. In exploring what correlations, if any, exist between FNE and conflict avoidance, as well as the other styles of conflict resolution, this study will help to inform future research seeking to identify ways to positively affect students' ability to navigate and successfully resolve conflict. By better understanding the reasons that individuals avoid conflict or engage in other destructive behaviors, training tools and competency models can more adequately address the underlying issues that are affecting conflict competency among undergraduate populations, better preparing students to enter a workforce in which this skill is becoming increasingly more important.

Methodology

As this study sought to explore whether there was a correlation between conflict resolution styles and FNE scores, a quantitative method was determined to be the best fit, as this method allows researchers to "examin[e] the relationship among variables" (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). The intention of this study was to sample a select population to gain an understanding of the wider, general population, and as such, a quantitative study was determined to be the most effective tool for this purpose. Instrument based questions were

used to collect both demographic information and scores from which correlations could be measured, and statistical analysis conducted, all of which are hallmarks of quantitative research (Creswell, 2014). This method provided a clear way to determine whether a correlation between FNE score and conflict avoidance existed, as well as if FNE showed a correlation to any of the other conflict resolution styles as well.

Procedure

An anonymous survey was created using SNAP Survey Software. The primary researcher sent Facebook messages and emails asking for student affairs professionals and higher education practitioners to share the link to the survey with students. Facebook messages and emails were sent to those who were sent out to those who participate in any of the following: (a) Student Affairs Professionals Facebook Group (followers as of 3/27/2018: 30,173); (b) Humans of Higher Education Facebook Community (followers as of 3/27/2018: 13,319); (c) The Association of College & University Housing Officers- International (ACUHO-I) Online Community (members as of 3/27/2018: 20,746); (d) Northeast Association of College and University Housing Officers (NEACUHO) Google Group (members as of 3/27/2018: 2,054). After the initial communication to each of these groups, one reminder was also sent roughly two months after the initial communication.

Through sending the link to such a large population, it was the intent of this researcher to collect a random sampling of undergraduate students from a variety of institutions across the United States. Though the survey was anonymous, there was a link at the end for any participants wishing to engage in a raffle for a \$25 Amazon gift card as an incentive for participating in the survey, with contact information collected independently of survey responses to ensure anonymity. The survey collected the following basic demographic

information: age, race, ethnicity, sex assigned at birth, gender identity, sexual orientation, highest level of education obtained, first-generation student status, prior conflict resolution/negotiation/mediation training, institution type and size, and year in school. The collection of this information was intended to allow the primary researcher to analyze trends between not only cisgender heterosexual participants and LGBTQ+ participants, but also to explore possible correlations based on other demographic information as well.

Instruments

The survey was designed using two separate instruments in addition to the questions used to collect demographic information, one to evaluate FNE, and one to assess the prevalence of what Rahim (1983) refers to as the “avoiding style” of conflict resolution, as well as four other styles, listed below in the instrument description. Scores for both FNE and conflict style were calculated based on the number of points determined by response to Likert scale questions. Details for each instrument are provided below.

FNE. To assess FNE, this survey used the straightforwardly worded questions (BFNE-S) from the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (BFNE; Leary 1983), which is derived from Watson and Friend’s (1969) Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (FNE). Rodebaugh et al. (2004) have verified that the BFNE “captures more information than the full version” (as cited by Harpole et al., 2015, p. 307). Leary (1983) reported that “in an undergraduate sample, coefficient alpha and 4-week test-retest reliability have been reported to be .090 and .075 respectively for the total scale” (as cited by Harpole et al. 2015 p. 309). The BFNE-S was reported as having better reliability and validity than the BFNE assessment in multiple studies (see Carleton, McCreary, Norton, & Asmundson, 2006; Carleton, Collimore, McCabe, & Antony, 2011; Harpole et al. 2015; Rodebaugh et al. 2004; Weeks et

al. 2005) and was stated to have what Harpole et al. (2014) refer to as “superior psychometric properties” (p. 309). In addition to the studies on the validity and reliability of the BFNE-S, there was also an assessment as to whether it was discriminatory on the base of gender, race, or ethnicity, with Harpole et al. (2014) finding that the BFNE-S “does not function differentially across gender” (p. 311). Harpole et al. (2014) found that only one question shows any difference in differential item functioning (DIF) based on race (pp. 311-313), resulting in only a small impact on the BFNE-S scale when used in its entirety.

Conflict avoidance. To measure conflict avoidance, the primary researcher sought an assessment tool that specifically addresses avoidance when looking at conflict competency or conflict resolution style. The Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II, Rahim, 1983) does just this. The ROCI-II was designed to create “factorially independent scales to measure the five styles of handling conflict...and provide evidence of their reliability and validity”, those five styles being Integrating, Obliging, Dominating, Compromising, and Avoiding (Rahim, 1983, p. 369). Special attention was paid to the nature of the relationship that participants were referring to in completing the assessment, with a specific form created for assessing styles in reference to conflict with a boss (Form A), a subordinate (Form B) or a peer (Form C) (Rahim, 1983). Rahim (1983) tested reliability by collecting data from 119 undergraduate students at an interval of one week, with test-retest reliability ranging from “.6 to .83 ($p < .0001$)...and [c]oefficient alphas rang[ing] from $\alpha = .72$ to $\alpha = .77$ ” (p. 373). Criterion validity has also been assessed by many other studies (Keenan, 1984; Lee, 1990; Levy, 1989; Neff, 1986; Persico, 1986; Pilkington, Richardson, & Utley, 1988; Ting-Toomey et al., 1991; Wardlaw, 1988 as cited by Rahim & Magner, 1995), indicating that the validity of the instrument did not decrease over time. Rahim and Magner (1995) found that the five-factor

model present in the ROCI-II also received higher scores for both goodness of fit and relative non-centrality when compared with reducing to a smaller factor model across each of the forms of the assessment. Both the BFNE-S and the ROCI-II were vigorously studied, tested, and verified as reliable instruments, and each instrument fits well with the data that this study seeks to gather. Each instrument has been used with undergraduate student populations in multiple studies, indicating that they are each well suited for use with the participants for this research. A copy of each assessment tool and scoring guide is included in the appendices.

Sample

The sample population for this survey consisted of 73 undergraduate students with ages ranging from 18 to 22 years of age. Out of those 73 students, 50 identified as Caucasian, eight as Hispanic or Latino, six as Asian, two as Black or African American, five selected multiple racial or ethnic identifiers, one identified as other, and one respondent preferred not to answer. Of the respondents, 79% identified as female, 15% as male, 3% as genderqueer, and 3% as gender non-binary. Out of all respondents, 58 respondents identified as heterosexual, four as asexual, three as pansexual, two as queer, two as bisexual, one as gay, and two preferred not to answer. Accordingly, roughly 79 % of all participants identified as cisgender and heterosexual, approximately 18% as LGBTQ+, and about 3% (only 2 participants) preferred not to answer. About 34% of respondents identified as first-generation college students, and 47% reported that they attend small institutions (between 1,000 and 2,999 students), 36%, medium sized institutions (3,000-9,999 students), 11%, large institutions (over 10,000,000 students), 5%, very small institutions (under 1,000 students), and 1% were not sure. Over 60% of respondents reported that they attend a private institution, 37% a public institution, and 4% were not sure. Over half of respondents, 60%,

either reported having taken courses on conflict resolution, or receiving prior training in conflict resolution. The small size of this sample does present limitations in that it may not be generalizable to a larger population. Future research that follows the model of this survey should seek a larger sample size.

Results

To answer the research questions posed by the primary researcher, findings were analyzed using SPSS software. Of the 73 undergraduate students who completed this study, roughly 40% (n=29) were found to have what Carleton et al. (2011) determined to be a clinically relevant score, that being a score of more than 25 on the BFNE-S. This result falls between findings from Kudor and Grover's (2014) outcomes of 48% of respondents, and Lipton et al.'s (2016) results of 26% of respondents having social anxiety and high FNE. In looking at whether BFNE-S scores correlated to rates of conflict avoidance, a calculation of the Pearson Correlation score was conducted. The results are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

Correlation Between BFNE-S Score and Avoiding Score			
		Avoiding Score	BFNE-S Score
Avoiding Score	Pearson Correlation	1	.502**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	73	73
BFNE-S Score	Pearson Correlation	.502**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	73	73
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).			

This finding of .502 shows that there is only a moderate correlation between BFNE-S scores and conflict avoidance scores. In looking to better understand the role that FNE may play on conflict resolution overall, an analysis of the Pearson Correlation and Bootstrap analysis

between BFNE-S scores and each of the styles of conflict resolution assessed by the ROCI-II were also calculated, the results for which are shown in Table 2.

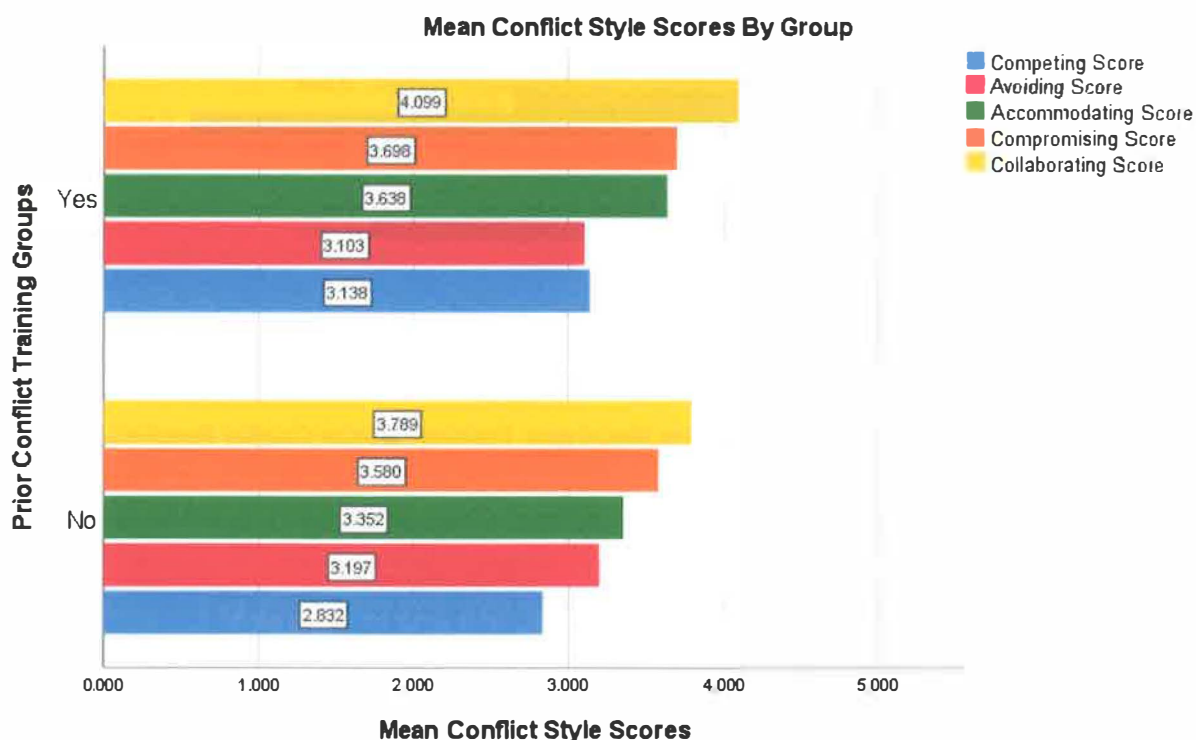
Table 2

Correlation of BFNE-S Scores and Conflict Style Scores					
					BFNE-S Score
Avoiding Score	Pearson Correlation				.502**
	Sig. (2-tailed)				.000
	N				73
	Bootstrap ^c	Bias			-.006
		Std. Error			.08
		95% Confidence Interval	Lower		.279
			Upper		.640
Accommodating Score	Pearson Correlation				.582**
	Sig. (2-tailed)				.000
	N				73
	Bootstrap ^c	Bias			-.001
		Std. Error			.079
		95% Confidence Interval	Lower		.426
			Upper		.714
Compromising Score	Pearson Correlation				.376**
	Sig. (2-tailed)				.001
	N				73
	Bootstrap ^c	Bias			-.019
		Std. Error			.118
		95% Confidence Interval	Lower		.118
			Upper		.622
Collaborating Score	Pearson Correlation				.243*
	Sig. (2-tailed)				.038
	N				73
	Bootstrap ^c	Bias			.001
		Std. Error			.123
		95% Confidence Interval	Lower		-.040
			Upper		.467
Competing Score	Pearson Correlation				-.283*
	Sig. (2-tailed)				.015
	N				73
	Bootstrap ^c	Bias			.022
		Std. Error			.114
		95% Confidence Interval	Lower		-.475
			Upper		-.043
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).					
Unless otherwise noted, bootstrap results are based on 73 bootstrap					

As can be seen, the correlation between BFNE-S scores and both avoiding and accommodating conflict style scores was significantly higher than the correlation for any of the other scores. This finding will be discussed in more detail in the discussion.

Another key factor to explore was the impact of prior conflict training. Calculations for both mean conflict resolution scores and mean BFNE-S scores were conducted for students who had received prior training (n=29) and those who hadn't (n=44). It should be noted that while the breakdown in numbers for these groups was the same as that for clinically relevant BFNE-S scores and non-clinically relevant scores, that these groups are comprised of two different populations. The breakdown of mean conflict style scores for each group are shown in Table 3.

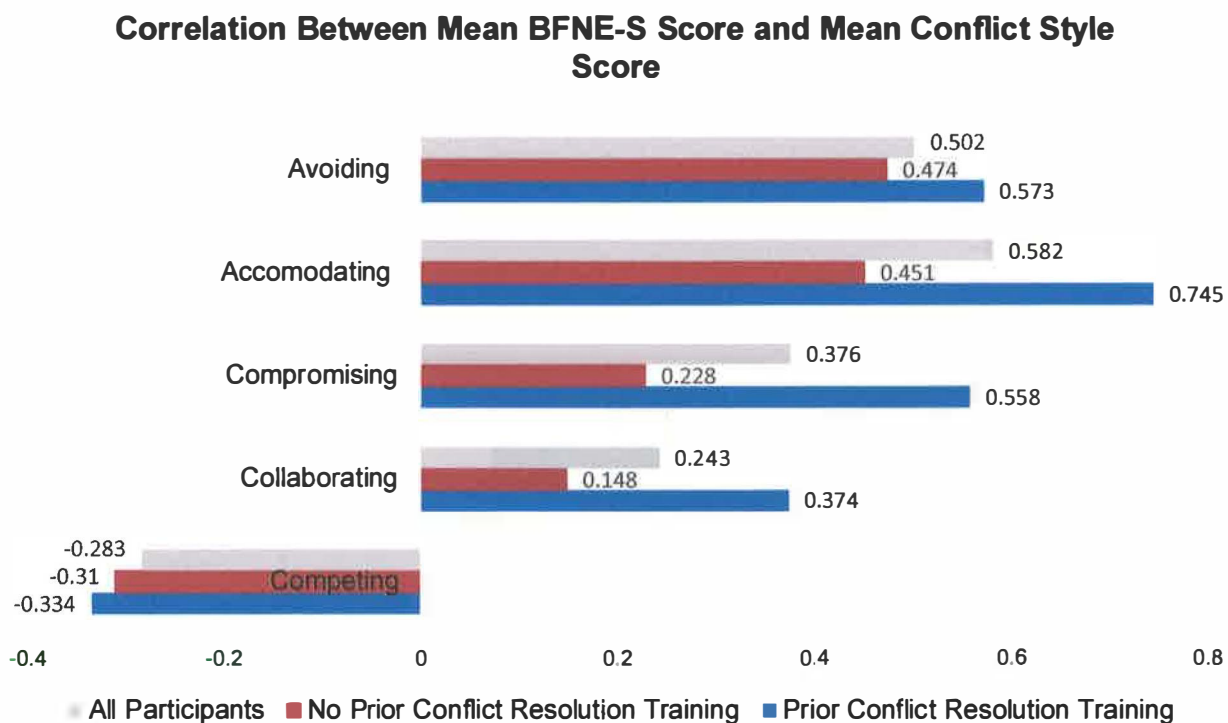
Table 3



For those who hadn't received prior conflict training (n=44), the mean BFNE-S score was 23.48, whereas those students who had former training (n=29) had a mean score of 26.03,

putting this group over the cutoff for a clinically relevant score. To explore the differences in correlations between BFNE-S scores and conflict style scores, Pearson's correlation was calculated at 93%, as a 95% interval could not be calculated for only 29 results. The differences in correlations between BFNE-S scores and conflict style scores for all participants (N=73), those who have previous conflict resolution training (n=29) and those who do not (n=44) is broken down in Table 4.

Table 4

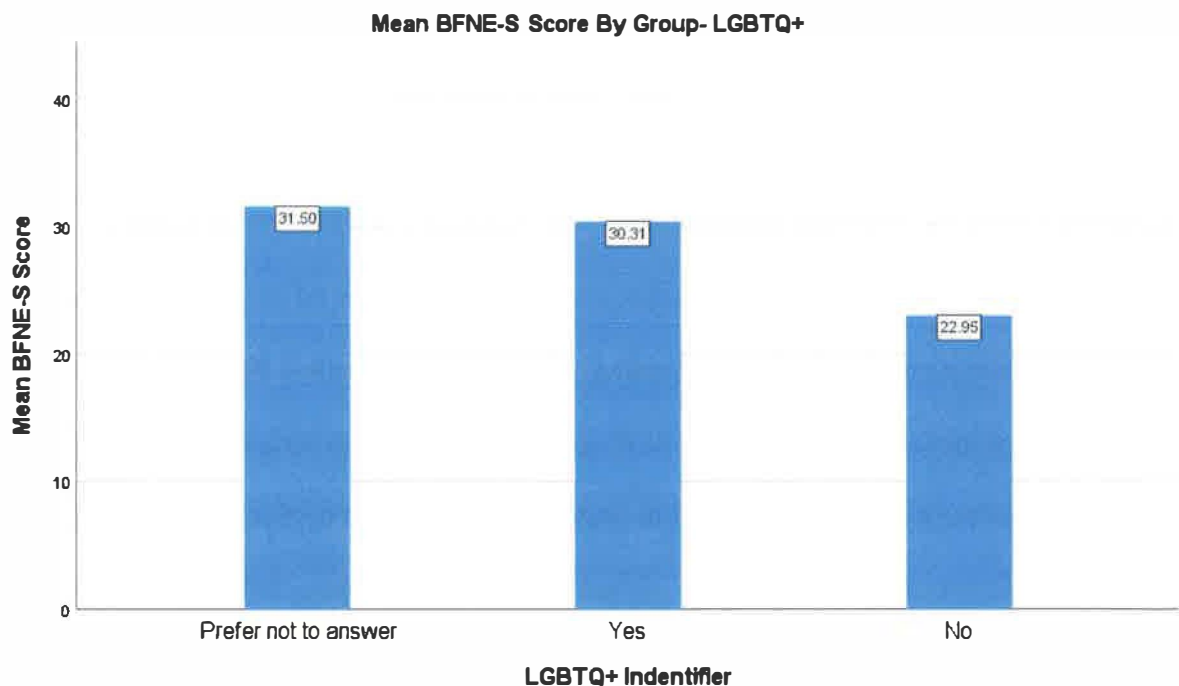


The differences, particularly in the correlations for accommodating, compromising, and collaborating are significant. The implications of these findings will also be explored in the discussion.

The other factor that this research sought to discover was whether membership in a minority group with higher rates of social anxiety, specifically students who identify as LGBTQ+, had any impact on the correlation between FNE and conflict styles. Of the 29

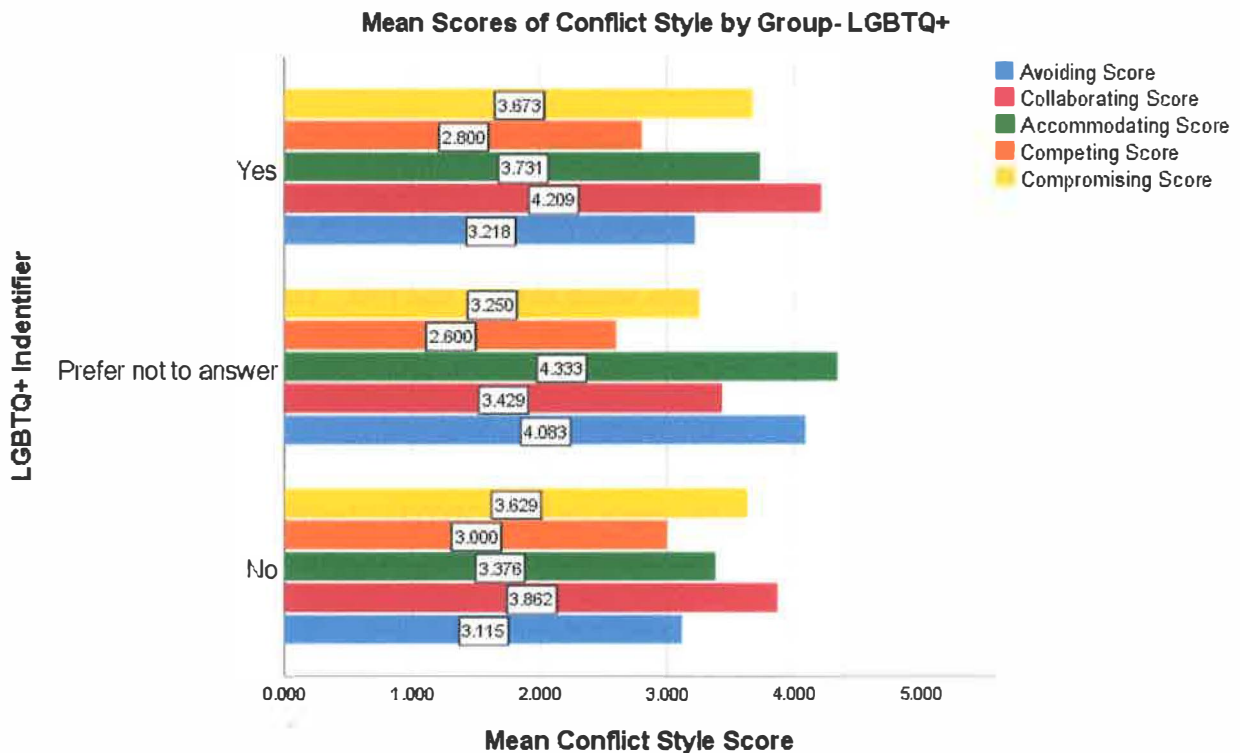
individuals who were found to have a clinically relevant BFNE-S score, nine individuals were those who identify as LGBTQ+, which is 69% of the total number of LGBTQ+ respondents. The remaining four LGBTQ+ respondents had scores of 25, 25, 23, and 21 on the BFNE-S, all of which are not far from being clinically relevant. The mean BFNE-S score for LGBTQ+ individuals was 30%, whereas those who identified as cisgender and heterosexual had a mean score of only 23%, only two points higher than the lowest BFNE-S score among LGBTQ+ individuals. This corresponds with Wadsworth and Hayes-Skelton's (2015) findings that being a part of a minority population based on sexual orientation or gender identity positively correlates with social anxiety and FNE. Table 5 shows the breakdown of mean BFNE-S scores based on whether students identified as LGBTQ+ (n=13), preferred not to answer (n=2), or indicated that they were cisgender and heterosexual (n=58) indicated in the chart as the No group under LGBTQ+ identifier.

Table 5



Not only did mean BFNE-S scores noticeably differ for students who identified as LGBTQ+, conflict avoidance scores did as well. Table 6 shows the breakdown in groups of mean conflict style scores using the same groups as the table above.

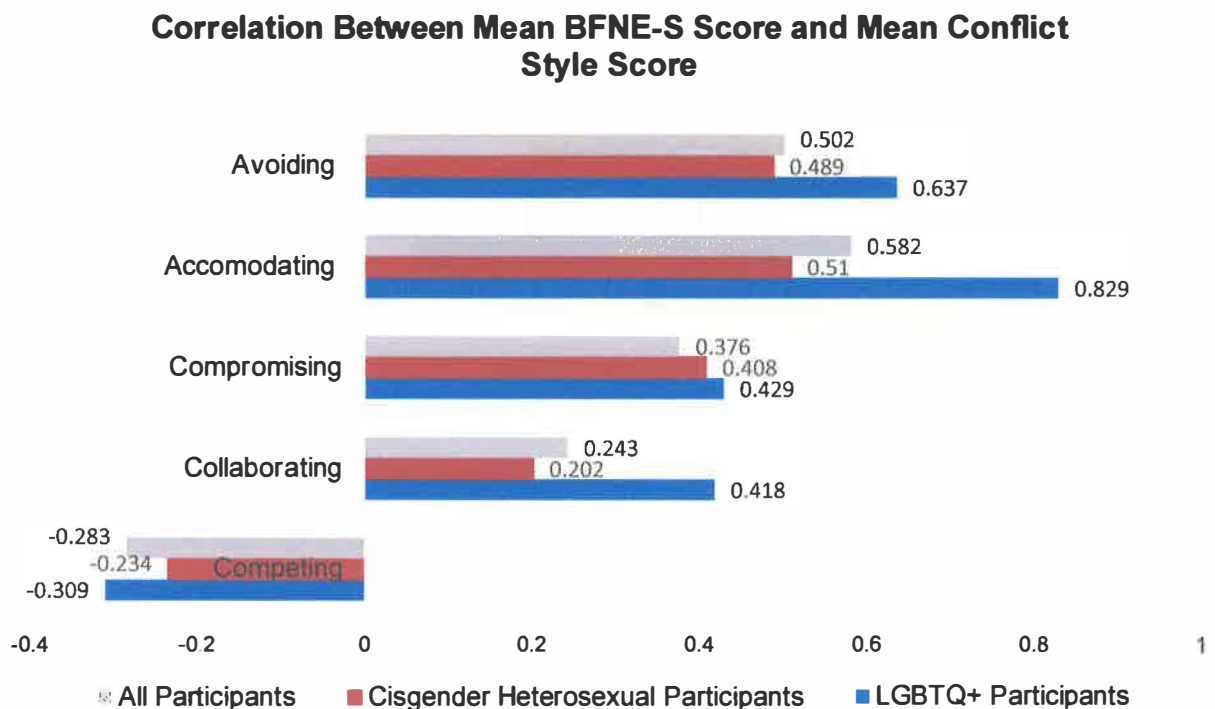
Table 6



We can see from the table that avoiding scores for LGBTQ+ participants were only somewhat higher than their cisgender peers, and those who preferred not to answer had a much higher mean avoiding score. Interestingly, LGTQ+ students had higher mean scores than their cisgender heterosexual peers in all categories of conflict style except for competing, and those who preferred not to answer were higher in both accommodating and avoiding styles than either of their peer groups. Thoughts about these differences will be expanded upon in the discussion section. Correlations for mean BFNE-S scores and mean conflict resolution style scores for the LGBTQ+ population also differ widely from those of

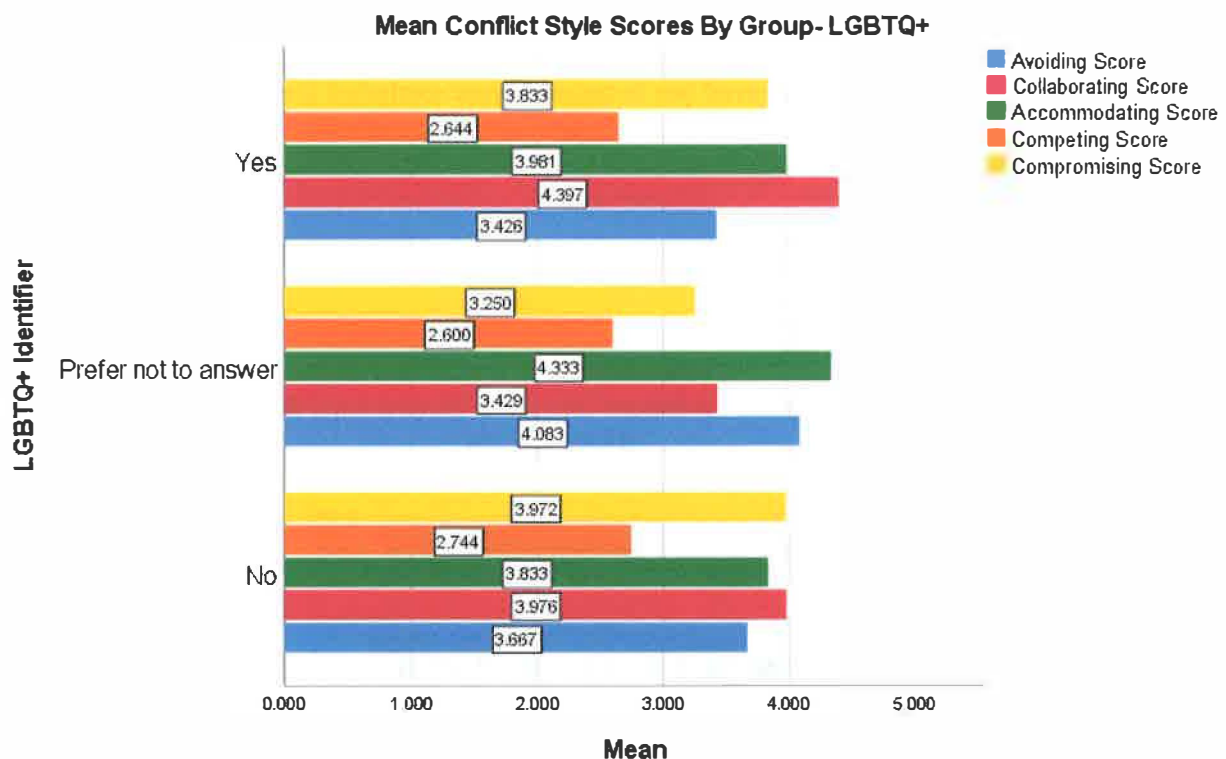
their cisgender heterosexual peers. This breakdown is shown in Table 7. It should be noted however that the sample size of LGBTQ+ students was rather small for using a Pearson Correlation, and those who preferred not to answer were excluded from this chart because of their extremely small sample size. Pearson's Correlation was utilized however, to allow data to be compared to the findings above of groups based on prior conflict resolution training.

Table 7



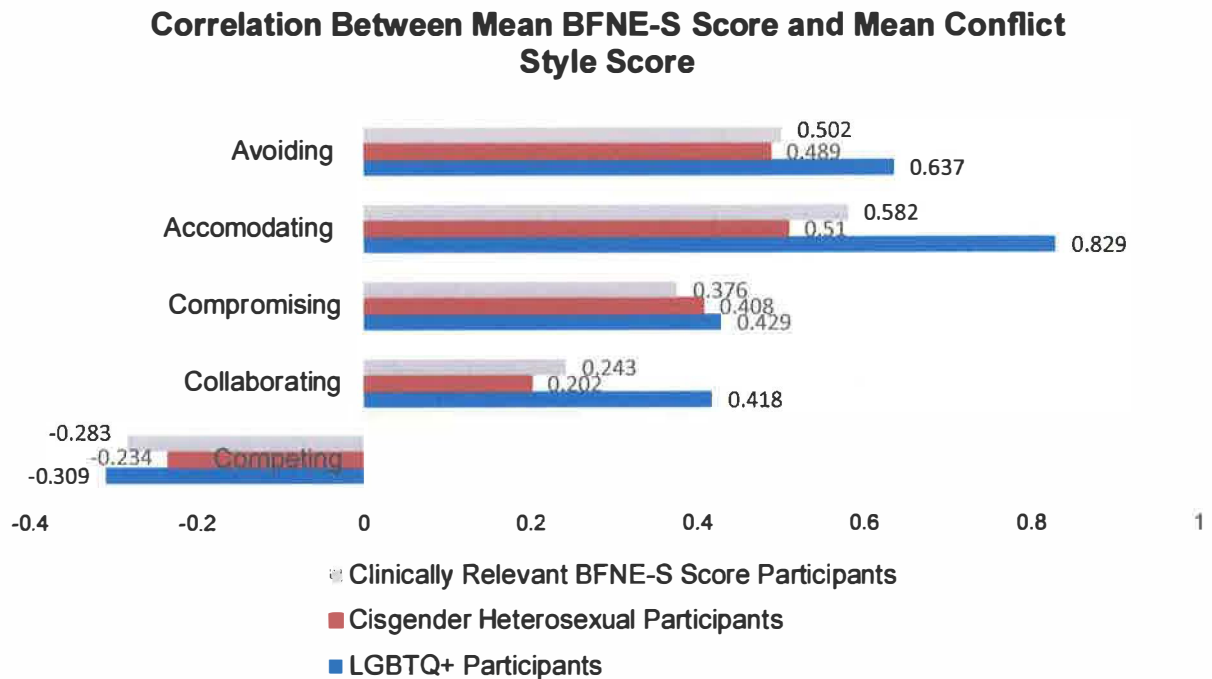
Considering that BFNE-S scores are higher among LGBTQ+ students, the difference in correlation for avoiding score, and the larger difference between accommodating correlations shows that the impact of FNE score may be more meaningful than the correlations among the full population would lead us to believe. To see if this difference was reflected among another group with high BFNE-S scores, mean conflict resolution style scores were pulled for only those respondents whose BFNE-S score was above 25, meaning only those whose score was clinically relevant. Those results are in Table 8.

Table 8



Correlations between BFNE-S and conflict style scores were also calculated for this group and compared with findings for the LGBTQ+ population and the cisgender heterosexual population. Considering that this group had a mean BFNE-S score of 33.72, 3.41 points higher than the LGBTQ+ population, it would serve to reason that correlation increases would be similar to or greater than those found among LGBTQ+ participants. The results however, were not as expected. As can be seen in the table below, the correlation in BFNE-S scores among participants with a clinically relevant BFNE-S score were much closer to the scores of cisgender heterosexual participants. These findings indicate that there may be other aspects of identity in the LGBTQ+ minority group that affect conflict resolution styles to a greater degree than FNE. Table 9 details the differences in correlation for each of the conflict style scores for these groups, showing a clear visual representation of those differences.

Table 9



Discussion

The three research questions that were posed for this paper were as follows:

R₁: Is there a correlation between FNE and conflict avoidance?

R₂: Are there other styles of conflict resolution that correlate with BFNE-S scores?

R₃: Does membership in a minority group with higher rates of social anxiety, specifically students who identify as LGBTQ+, impact the correlation between FNE and conflict styles in any way?

As with much research, the answers are not as straightforward as they may seem. For question one, this study sought to understand what correlation, if any, existed between FNE and conflict avoidance. Study results showed a moderate correlation (.502), however, a deeper dive into the results of LGBTQ+ participants, those with clinically relevant BFNE-S

scores, and those who had received prior training provide more factors to consider. The higher correlation between BFNE-S score and avoiding style scores among both LGBTQ+ participants and participants who had received prior conflict training, and the fact that this higher correlation was not reflected among participants with clinically relevant BFNE-S scores show that FNE is likely not the factor that has the most impact on the avoidance of conflict.

This finding leads into question two, which looks at the correlation between BFNE-S scores and other conflict styles. A more significant correlation than that between BFNE-S scores and avoiding scores was that of BFNE-S scores and accommodating scores. If we consider the different elements of both avoidance and accommodating conflict styles, the reasoning for this becomes more evident. Folger et al. (2013) tell us that an accommodating style “is sometimes used to improve a bad or shaky relationship or to preserve a good one” (p. 118). Avoidance on the other hand, often leaves conflict unaddressed, meaning that though a conflict may be avoided, the negative emotions caused by the conflict can still affect relationships. Considering that FNE is defined as “apprehension about others’ evaluations, distress over their negative evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and the expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively” (Watson & Friend, 1969, p. 449), the significant correlation between BFNE-S scores and accommodating scores is not surprising. Individuals who fear that someone will evaluate them in a negative manner are more likely to choose a style that allows them to cater to the needs of the person with whom they have a conflict with in hopes of avoiding a negative reaction or outcome.

The group with the highest level of correlation between BFNE-S scores and all conflict scores was that made up of individuals who identified as LGBTQ+ showing a positive

response to question three. On the surface, it would appear that this group of LGBTQ+ students, who also have a higher mean BFNE-S score than that of individuals who identify as cisgender and heterosexual, is perhaps indicative of a correlation specifically between high BFNE-S score and three conflict styles in particular, those being accommodating, avoiding, and collaborating. Yet analysis of the population of cisgender heterosexual students with high BFNE-S scores does not support this finding. The correlation rates for the high BFNE-S participants who did not identify as LGBTQ+ were much more similar to the wider cisgender heterosexual population's correlations than they were to the correlations for LGBTQ+ participants, despite LGBTQ+ participants also possessing high BFNE-S scores. Correlations between BFNE-S scores and accommodating, avoiding, and compromising scores were high for students who had received prior conflict training. This commonality prompts delving deeper into these two groups.

Not only were correlations between BFNE-S scores and conflict style scores higher for avoiding, accommodating, and compromising, mean conflict scores for both accommodating and collaborating styles were also higher among the LGBTQ+ population. Collaborating was also higher among those with prior conflict training, but only marginally. Both collaborating and accommodating styles allow for a more thorough understanding of the needs of others, and both styles when "used skillfully" can allow for relationships to be improved (Folger et al., pp. 119-122). As such, it is recommended that future research focus on the factors that influence conflict style choice and specifically explore what other factors besides FNE may be at play for both LGBTQ+ individuals, individuals with social anxiety and high FNE, and other populations as well. How conflict styles are being used has a major impact on how constructive they are in a given situation, and as such, exploring both why

and how individuals are using specific styles would provide better insights as to what conflict training needs to cover in order to help students choose the style that is best suited to specific conflict situations.

Conclusion

While this study did not provide a strong correlative connection of FNE to conflict avoidance, it did provide new insights around how FNE does correlate, and to what level, with each of the different conflict style scores. In learning that FNE may play a larger role in accommodating styles for instance, and that it correlates more highly with conflict resolution styles that are based on maintaining relationships, future research could be conducted to better understand this connection. Training on how a number of different styles can positively impact relationships may help increase understanding of whether addressing concern over relationships is an impactful tool for developing conflict competence among both those with high rates of FNE, and others as well and should be explored in more detail.

The differences in conflict styles used, and correlation of those styles to BFNE-S scores among LGBTQ+ participants that were unique to that population helps provide direction for future research. Considering that FNE was not the driving factor in these differences, future researchers would do well to explore other factors that drive decisions about conflict resolution scores in addition to FNE. Trends may better be explored through the use of qualitative questionnaires distributed after initial analysis of a conflict style inventory. Considering that there is a moderate correlation between FNE and multiple conflict styles however, future research should take FNE into consideration even as it seeks to explore other factors that influence conflict competence. Efforts should also be made to increase sample size so that findings will be more generalizable to the wider population. For

both employers and universities seeking to provide conflict coaching to employees, adding assessments around both FNE and styles used may help employees and students gain a better understanding of how they are approaching conflict. Training tools may also benefit from exploring both benefits and drawbacks of each style, rather than focusing on any one style as a preferred method. It is the hope of this researcher that in exploring other factors that may impact conflict competence among the current generation of college students, that conflict can be embraced as tool for growth, both in terms of creativity and efficiency, as well as building relationships, and train individuals to handle it as such, not only in the workplace, but in our wider lives as well.

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Appendix B

FINAL APPROVAL FORM

The University of Southern Maine

Masters of Arts Degree in Leadership Studies

May 3rd, 2018

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Erica E. Leighton entitled Conflict Competence Among Undergraduates: Exploring the Impact of Fear of Negative Evaluation be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Masters of Arts Degree in Leadership Studies Degree Program.

 Thesis Advisor (signature)

 Second Reader (signature)

Accepted  (signature) Director

Appendix C

Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II, Form C**Strictly Confidential**

Please check the appropriate box after each statement, to indicate *how you handle your disagreement or conflict with your peers*. Try to recall as many recent conflict situations as possible in ranking these statements.

	Strongly Disagree		Strongly Agree		
	1	2	3	4	5
1. I try to investigate an issue with my peers to find a solution acceptable to us.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. I generally try to satisfy the needs of my peers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. I attempt to avoid being "put on the spot" and try to keep my conflict with my peers to myself.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. I try to integrate my ideas with those of my peers to come up with a decision jointly.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. I try to work with my peers to find solution to a problem that satisfies our expectations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. I usually avoid open discussion of my differences with my peers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. I try to find a middle course to resolve an impasse.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. I use my influence to get my ideas accepted.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. I use my authority to make a decision in my favor.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. I usually accommodate the wishes of my peers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. I give in to the wishes of my peers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. I exchange accurate information with my peers to solve a problem together.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. I usually allow concessions to my peers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. I usually propose a middle ground for breaking deadlocks.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. I negotiate with my peers so that a compromise can be reached.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
16. I try to stay away from disagreement with my peers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
17. I avoid an encounter with my peers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
18. I use my expertise to make a decision in my favor.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
19. I often go along with the suggestions of my peers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
20. I use "give and take" so that a compromise can be made.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
21. I am generally firm in pursuing my side of the issue.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
22. I try to bring all our concerns out in the open so that the issues can be resolved in the best possible way.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
23. I collaborate with my peers to come up with decisions acceptable to us.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
24. I try to satisfy the expectations of my peers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
25. I sometimes use my power to win a competitive situation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
26. I try to keep my disagreement with my peers to myself in order to avoid hard feelings.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
27. I try to avoid unpleasant exchanges with my peers.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
28. I try to work with my peers for a proper understanding of a problem.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Appendix D

Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation, Straightforward Items

(Carleton, Collimore, McCabe, & Antony, 2011; Rodebaugh et al., 2004; Weeks et al., 2005)

Please circle the number that best corresponds to how much you agree with each item.

	Not at all characteristic of me	A little characteristic of me	Somewhat characteristic of me	Very characteristic of me	Entirely characteristic of me
1. I worry about what other people will think of me even when I know it doesn't make any difference.	1	2	3	4	5
2. I am frequently afraid of other people noticing my shortcomings.	1	2	3	4	5
3. I am afraid that others will not approve of me.	1	2	3	4	5
4. I am afraid that other people will find fault with me.	1	2	3	4	5
5. When I am talking to someone, I worry about what they may be thinking about me.	1	2	3	4	5
6. I am usually worried about what kind of impression I make.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Sometimes I think I am too concerned with what other people think of me.	1	2	3	4	5
8. I often worry that I will say or do wrong things.	1	2	3	4	5

Score: _____

