A Descriptive Study Examining the Correlation of Emotional Intelligence and Leadership Styles to Conflict Management Styles of Nursing School Administrators

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Abstract

AIM This study aimed to identify if a correlation exists among trait emotional intelligence (EI), leadership styles, and conflict management styles used by nurse education administrators.

BACKGROUND Nursing is fraught with incivility, bullying, and increasing physical aggression. Conflict surrounds nurses at every level. EI and leadership styles in nursing have been addressed. Few studies were found that addressed conflict management by nurse education administrators.

METHOD A quantitative nonexperimental correlational design using discriminant analysis was used in this study.

RESULTS Trait EI factors of emotionality and sociability correlated with conflict management styles. Leadership styles and conflict management styles were situational; management styles of integrating and compromising were underused in conflict situations.

CONCLUSION Nurse education administrators are in a position to become disruptive innovators in changing the nursing culture. The increased use of conflict management styles of integrating and compromising can help address incivility and bullying.

KEY WORDS Academic Nurse Administrators – Bullying – Conflict – Incivility – Leadership – Trait Emotional Intelligence

Nurses are known for their compassion and care toward patients. Nevertheless, nurses have a century-long history of treating their own with incivility, bullying, and increasing physical aggression (Anthony & Brett, 2020). Incivility and bullying occur at a 10 percent to 15 percent higher rate in nursing than in nonnursing employment and are increasing (Kaiser, 2017). Casale (2017) found that 80 percent of nurse faculty witnessed bullying in their department. The problem of incivility and bullying in nursing is not new and often commences in nursing schools (Bellack, 2018). Finding a solution to incivility and bullying is critical to all stakeholders.

This study aimed to identify whether a correlation exists among nurse education administrators' (NEAs) emotional intelligence (EI), leadership styles, and conflict management styles. Minimal research has been conducted about NEAs. NEAs are strategically situated to transform the nursing education culture and can use intentional conflict management styles to model and resolve conflict appropriately. Managing conflict ameliorates incivility, bullying, and other forms of subtle aggression to achieve superiority, dominance, control, or authority (Anusiewicz et al., 2020).

In response to bullying, educational and antibullying programs have been developed, but with minimal success (Alshawush et al., 2020). The programs attempt to curtail bullying at the victim level,

an approach that can be compared to placing an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff to treat the victim after the incident occurred. An effective and less damaging approach is to build a fence at the cliff's edge to prevent the fall. All individuals realize the benefits of civility when incivility and bullying are prevented, interrupted, or deflected. A new caring culture can commence when NEAs model high EI, appropriate leadership skills, and deliberate conflict management skills.

BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS

Attention to the problem of bullying behavior in nursing academia has increased recognition of the resulting harm caused by bullies (Berquist et al., 2017). According to research, bullying in nursing school manifests in four ways (Butler & Strouse, 2022; Casale, 2017; Christensen et al., 2021). First, faculty-to-student bullying decreases student satisfaction with the program and the profession, resulting in physical and psychological symptoms. Second, faculty-to-faculty bullying is often caused by power imbalances, resulting in a faculty member's heightened desire to leave employment, reduced time spent at work, depression, mental and physical illness, feeling alienated, lack of motivation, and decreased quality of work, all of which can impact student learning. Third, students have been identified as bullies toward other students, affecting the recipient's mental health, increasing stress, and lowering self-confidence. Fourth, the growing problem of nursing student-to-faculty incivility and bullying causes faculty to feel unsafe, anxious, and distressed. Incivility and bullying can be addressed through EI and leadership and conflict management styles.

By increasing civility at the administrative level, the culture of nursing academia improves. Berquist et al. (2017) posited that civility and caring are at the heart of nursing. Therefore, civility is central to changing the nursing culture from bullying to one of caring. In supportive

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environments, faculty provide a better teaching/learning environment for students, who in turn carry that positivity into practice. As incivility and bullying decrease, work environments improve for nurse faculty and hospital staff (Anthony & Brett, 2020). Improved work culture may increase intent to stay, positively affecting the nurse faculty and nursing shortage. When nurse faculty and nurses are not dealing with incivility and bullying, they can focus on educating students, thereby improving patient care and contributing to the profession.

Emotional Intelligence

EI has three models: ability, mixed, and trait. Ability EI is viewed as a cognitive-emotional ability measured through performance-based tests (Costa & Faria, 2020). Mixed EI continues to evolve and lacks specificity for definitive testing. Trait EI is viewed as an extension of personality and is measured through self-reporting (Alegre et al., 2019). This study used trait EI as its theoretical construct.

Trait EI is the ability to perceive one's emotions, including awareness, understanding, and controlling one's own and others' emotions (Petrides, 2016). Trait EI is a collection of emotional perceptions identified as sociability, well-being, emotionality, self-control, adaptability, and self-motivation (Chirumbolo et al., 2019). Trait EI has 15 facets positioned within the four factors of sociability, well-being, emotionality, and self-control. In this study, the four factors of trait EI were used to measure the relationship of trait EI on leadership and conflict management styles.

Limited research has focused on the impact of nurse faculty EI on student EI (Omid et al., 2018). A new emphasis on researching EI includes the relationship to critical thinking (Christianson, 2020), positive affect and virtues (Ros-Morente et al., 2018), and resilience in nurses (Cuartero & Tur, 2021), which can have an impact on nurses' response to incivility and conflict in the workplace. High EI promotes dealing with conflict in an environment fraught with lateral bullying (Berquist et al., 2017; Kaiser, 2017; Meires, 2018). Emotionally intelligent leaders encourage the development of emotionally intelligent nursing students.

Leadership

Bass and Avolio (1994) developed the full-range leadership model, which provides leaders with a full range of leadership behaviors. The model incorporates transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant leadership styles; nine constructs are represented within the three styles. Transformational leadership's five constructs include intellectual stimulation, individual consideration, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence (attributed and behavioral). The two transactional leadership constructs are management by exception active and contingent reward. Passive-avoidant is the absence of leadership or ineffective leadership and includes management by exception passive and laissez-faire (Bass & Avolio, 1994).

Leadership styles used by nurse leaders make a difference in how a leader handles conflict. The American Organization of Nurse Leaders identified transformational leadership as the preferred type for all nursing leaders (Giddens, 2018). According to Thompson and Miller (2018), transformational leadership requires EI to realize its full potential as a disruptor of the present hostile climate in nursing. A transformational leader provides civil leadership and encourages behaviors of dignity, caring, respect, kindness, and tolerance toward everyone. A leader who applies and models these characteristics will disrupt the climate of incivility (Darbyshire et al., 2020). The NEA transforms the nursing education environment through the four constructs of transformational leadership: influencing, motivating, stimulating, and considering (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). Transformational leadership describes leaders who align their own and others' goals for the good of the group or organization (Boamah & Tremblay, 2019). According to Bureau et al. (2017), the transformational leadership style decreased incivility in the workplace. In contrast, the laissez-faire leadership style facilitated bullying (Kaiser, 2017). Also, transformational leadership reduced conflict triggers, leading to a more productive workforce (Kammerhoff et al., 2019).

Conflict Management

Conflict is a negative social interaction resulting from incompatibility or disagreement (Meires, 2018). Conflict is often emotional, and a person with EI manages conflict by discerning the emotions behind the conflict (Martins et al., 2019). Conflict is inevitable but can be managed to minimize or eliminate the negative impact resulting from subtle aggression of incivility and bullying and less subtle forms of physical aggression. Employing the two-dimensional conceptualization of conflict management, Rahim and Bonoma (1979) suggested concern for others and concern for self (Thomas, 1988). Rahim's conflict management model contains five levels: avoiding, compromising, dominating, integrating, and obliging.

Avoiding is ignoring the conflict (lose-lose), also recognized as low concern for self and low concern for others. The person refuses to acknowledge there is a problem or conflict and avoids the problem at all costs. Compromising is achieved when both parties give something up (Gunkel et al., 2016). This style indicates an intermediate concern for self and others and involves give and take to reach a mutually agreeable decision (Rahim, 2017). Dominating is satisfying personal interest (winning) at the cost of the other (losing). Dominating individuals have high concern for themselves and low concern for others; they want to "win" through the power of their position, assertiveness to defend their position, or deceit. Integrating seeks to solve problems, resulting in a win-win for both parties, demonstrating concern for self and others and engaging in collaboration. This style requires exchanging information, openness, identifying alternative solutions, and examining differences to reach a consensus (Rahim, 2002). Obliging, or accommodating, emphasizes commonalities and reduces differences; one party yields the win to the other. Obliging individuals have low concern for self, demonstrated through self-sacrifice and high concern for others. Such individuals have been called *conflict absorbers* (Rahim, 2017). Another term for obliging is accommodating.

Possessing high EI was associated with the choice of positive conflict strategies used by nurses (Meires, 2018). Conflict management is a frequent concern for NEAs as faculty and students turn to them for help and support. The choice of which conflict management style to use is influenced by EI (Al-Hamdan et al., 2019). Gunkel et al. (2016) explored how culture affects EI, impacting the conflict management style applied; this is reflected in the culture of nursing and education.

Leadership styles also influence the conflict management style used in organizations. Bakhtawari et al. (2016) studied the correlation between leadership styles and conflict management modes in the service sector. They found that competing was used the most, with collaborating second; avoiding was used the least by leaders self-identified as transformational. Transformational leadership positively correlated with obliging and integrating, transactional leadership style correlated with compromising, and passive-avoidant leadership style correlated with the avoiding conflict management style.

METHOD
Design and Setting

The study used a quantitative, nonexperimental, correlational design using discriminant analysis. Following institutional review board approval, email invitations were sent to the target population of 643 NEAs nationwide with publicly available contact information. The convenience sample included 120 participants who responded and completed the email survey, for a 19 percent response rate. Nursing administrators included deans, assistant deans, department chairs, department heads, and those with any administrative title currently serving in a baccalaureate or graduate nursing program.

Measures

One QualtricsXM survey used three questionnaires for this study. The first was the 30-item Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-short form (TEIQue-SF) by Petrides (2009). The TEIQue-SF uses a Likert scale with scores ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) that tests the EI factors of emotionality, sociability, well-being, and self-control. The TEIQue-SF tests how individuals perceive their ability to understand, regulate, and express emotions through self-reported responses.

The TEIQue-SF has been shown to have incremental validity and superior psychometric properties, with a 95 percent confidence interval (CI) and a standard error (*SE*) of .0116. The reliability and validity of this research study's four factors (variables) and the 15 facets are 95 percent CI and *SE* of .116 (Andrei et al., 2016). The TEIQue-SF has been compared to other self-report measures of EI and has been found superior (Petrides, 2009). Reliability for the TEIQue-SF varies between .71 and .91 for facets with internal consistency at $\alpha = .90$ (Mikolajczak et al., 2007).

The second questionnaire was the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire self-report (MLQ-5x Short) by Bass and Avolio (1994). The MLQ includes 36 items on a Likert scale to identify the leadership styles of transformational, transactional, and passive-avoidant and the nine constructs within the three leadership styles. Responses range from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*frequently*). The MLQ was normed for adults in management or leadership positions (Pittenger, 2014). According to Jensen et al. (2019), the four-factor correlation is between .589 and .135, well below Cronbach's alpha threshold of .7. In a review by Bessai (2016), the alpha reliability coefficient is .60 to .92. Bass and Avolio acknowledged that self-ratings tend to be higher but are also more consistent. A separate review by Kirnan and Snyder (n.d.) noted that the alpha reliability coefficients were .77 to .95, and the criterion-related validity was high.

Third, conflict management data were collected using the 28-item Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory-II (ROCI-II) questionnaire (Rahim, 2021). The ROCI-II identifies conflict management style usage with different referent individuals: bosses, coworkers, and subordinates. It uses a 5-point Likert scale, with scores ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) to identify conflict management styles of avoiding, compromising, dominating, integrating, and obliging. The ROCI-II is normed for adults in a work environment, such as managers, employees, and supervisors. The internal consistency reliability is at .72 to .77, better than many other instruments that test conflict management (Thornton, 2014). Demographic variables and response bias do not contaminate the ROCI-II. The instrument's validity is through the consistency of conflict style usage with different referent individuals (bosses, coworkers, and subordinates).

Data Analysis

Discriminant analysis allows for the simultaneous classification of individuals into groups using multiple variables. Each independent variable of EI and leadership style was analyzed independently from the selected dependent variable of conflict management using stepwise discriminant analysis to check for correlation. Variables that showed weak correlation were removed from the analyses. Discriminant analysis requires categorical data for the independent variable and ordinal data for the dependent variable to run the analysis (Kothari, 2004). Therefore, the dependent variables of the ROCI-II were converted to dummy scores to make them ordinal data. Raw data scores below the national mean score of <55th percentile were given a dummy variable of 0. Raw data scores between the 55th and 75th percentiles were given a dummy variable of 1, which was considered average usage. Raw data scores >75th percentile were given a dummy variable of 2, considered above-average usage of the conflict management style.

RESULTS

The demographic results showed a varied sample. Most respondents were female (*n* = 101, 84%). Their ages ranged from 25 to 34 (1%), 45 to 54 (24%), 55 to 64 (41%), 65 to 72 (20%), to 73 and over (4%). Most (76%) of the NEAs reported receiving formal leadership training. The type of leadership training was not identified because it did not directly impact this study. The participants indicated that the number of students in their nursing programs ranged from approximately 35 to approximately 3,000 students in baccalaureate or graduate programs. They supervised as few as four to 275 full-time, part-time, and adjunct faculty.

The data analysis showed that the independent trait EI variables of sociability and emotionality correlated with the conflict management styles of obliging, dominating, and avoiding. The leadership style constructs varied in their correlation to the three conflict management styles remaining in the analysis. Variability was most noticeable in the relationship being considered, whether with superiors, peers, or subordinates.

During the data analysis, because of homogeneity, discriminant analysis retained the conflict management variables of obliging, dominating, and avoiding for all three relationships: superiors, peers, and subordinates. The integrating and compromising conflict management styles were removed due to heteroscedasticity. Compared to the ROCI-II national managerial norms, survey participants reported using the conflict management styles of integrating and compromising consistently below the national norms of 55 percent. After applying dummy variables, the integrating and compromising styles were removed during the discriminant analysis.

The trait EI factors of emotionality showed a very strong positive correlation to the conflict management styles of dominating for subordinates (*r* = .83) and peers (*r* = .88) but lacked a correlation to superiors. Sociability showed a very strong correlation to dominating for superiors (*r* = .93), peers (*r* = .90), and subordinates (*r* = .96). According to Petrides (2016), emotionality is the ability to perceive emotion in oneself and others. Sociability is social awareness, managing others' emotions, and demonstrating assertiveness. Emotionality and sociability are important EI factors when dealing with conflict.

The end goal and the relationship can influence the leadership or conflict management style used. The leadership style of laissez-faire had a very strong correlation to obliging in all three relationships: superiors (*r* = .88), subordinates (*r* = .90), and peers (*r* = .90). There was a strong correlation between laissez-faire and avoiding for

superiors (r = .72) and a very strong correlation between laissez-faire and avoiding for subordinates (r = .89). The laissez-faire style showed no correlation to the conflict management styles of dominating and avoiding for peers. Laissez-faire falls under the passive-avoidant leadership style. Using the laissez-faire leadership style when managing conflict may save a relationship but is ineffective in resolving the conflict. Also, the dominating leadership style strongly correlated to management by exception active in all three relationships: superiors (r = .94), subordinates (r = .93), or peers (r = .97). Individual consideration was also very strongly correlated to dominating for superiors (r = .89), subordinates (r = .89), and peers (r = .87).

DISCUSSION

The results support a correlation among trait EI, leadership styles, and conflict management. However, the correlations are neither definitive nor clear-cut. The results support the situational outcomes of leadership and conflict management's superior, subordinate, and peer relationships. The study results that require further discussion include the consistent removal of the conflict management styles of integrating and compromising during the data analysis.

The raw data showed that NEAs used integrating and compromising. However, when the raw data were converted to dummy variables for the discriminant analysis, the participants reported using these styles below the national norms. The reported use of integrating and compromising below the national norms was an unexpected result because integrating is a win-win and compromising is a no win-no lose involving give-and-take to obtain an equally acceptable result. Both styles are preferred because the outcome positively benefits both parties.

In the three conflict management styles that remained in the analysis, someone is a loser in the conflict. Dominating is a win-lose, obliging is a lose-win, and avoiding is a lose-lose. The participants reported using the three styles consistently, with the most significant number of respondents employing avoiding above the national norms in all three relationships: superiors, subordinates, and peers. There is a similarity in the conflict management style used by the participants related to the fight-or-flight response where dominating equals fight and obliging and avoiding equal flight. Recognizing the "natural" response of fight or flight provides leaders with a place to start developing conflict management skills that go beyond dominating, obliging, or avoiding.

The sociability factor was significantly correlated to obliging, dominating, and avoiding conflict management styles. The sociability facets are emotion management, assertiveness, and social awareness. Because there are three EI facets, it is difficult to know which specific facet contributed to the correlation with the conflict management styles. By identifying which facets contribute to the sociability factor, leaders can focus on developing EI traits that align with conflict management styles.

The constructs of individual consideration and active management by exception are adjacent in the full-range leadership model. Active management by exception occurs when the manager corrects current actions while monitoring for deviations from expected outcome. When leaders are dominating, they have a high concern for self and low concern for others and want to exert control or power through their position. Active management by exception supports dominating behavior, and dominating is linked to incivility and bullying.

Bellack (2018) posited that EI, specifically emotional and social competencies, are essential skills in a "relationship-intense profession" (p. 455). This study substantiated Bellack's view with the resulting correlations of high emotionality and sociability. Because conflict management skills are necessary when incivility and bullying occur, the study results confirmed that high trait EI factors of emotionality and sociability correlated with conflict management styles.

Implications

The removal of the conflict management styles of integrating and compromising from the data analysis prompted reflection on why NEAs did not use those styles more frequently. It can be conjectured that integrating and compromising conflict management styles are not intuitive. The natural reaction to conflict is fight-or-flight, directing the individual to conflict management styles of obliging, dominating, or avoiding.

Nurses are known for empathy and nurturing and may see that avoiding and obliging are congruent with caring behaviors. Nurses are expected to put the patient first by demonstrating caring and compassion. As in business, the conflict management styles of compromising and integrating need to be taught to NEAs. Also, in compromising and integrating styles where both parties benefit, both parties must want to work toward an agreement. Integrating and compromising cannot be reached if only one party wants to participate. Nursing leadership development programs often focus on the curriculum, roles and responsibilities in the leadership position, and administrative duties. Little attention is given to developing conflict management skills, especially compromising and integrating, that lead to positive outcomes following conflict.

Nursing education administrators are ideally situated to lead the culture of change in reducing incivility and bullying (Anthony & Brett, 2020; Casale, 2017). As the culture of civility in nursing education becomes the norm, faculty and student performance will improve. As students enter the profession, they will take the culture of civility and caring into clinical practice, where the benefits will have a ripple effect on patients and the interprofessional team.

Limitations

Using a convenience sample has limitations, as the results cannot be generalized to the entire population of NEAs. Online surveys are only one way to collect data and may not appeal to everyone. Several individuals began the surveys but did not complete them. Self-reports are considered a limitation because of the chance for social desirability bias. Likert scales can be a limitation because they are nominal and considered least precise when comparing groups. Likert scales do not provide an exact measurement of behavior. The selection of discriminant analysis has its limitations. The requirement to make the dependent variables categorical resulted in removing the variables of compromising and integrating from the data analysis when the dummy variables were applied.

Recommendations

To manage conflict better, NEAs can develop and strengthen personal, faculty, and students' emotionality and sociability EI. The study results also identified that NEAs do not use integration and compromise enough or effectively. NEAs can increase their skills in conflict management, particularly integration and compromise, where all involved parties benefit. Once mastered by the NEA, these skills can be taught to faculty and nursing students.

This research study's broad-view approach suggests numerous recommendations for further research. With the removal of integrating and compromising from the analysis, gaps remain in identifying

the correlation of trait EI to those conflict management styles. Further studies are needed to address conflict management fully. A more accurate picture of which EI traits correlate with specific conflict management styles may be obtained by further refining the four EI factors down to the 15 facets. Greater awareness is needed to understand the relationship among obliging, dominating, and avoiding and the fight-or-flight response. Applying a different methodology, such as regression analysis, to the study would allow the researcher to analyze the variables differently. Regression analysis would look at the dependent variables individually and could include integrating and compromising.

Future research could include the demographics of the participants. Also, the size of the nursing program and the number of faculty could influence leadership styles. Other questions concern leadership training, number of years as a leader, conflict management training, and how this impacts leadership and conflict management styles. Finally, qualitative studies provide additional opportunities to identify other factors influencing or contributing to EI, leadership, or conflict management styles.

CONCLUSION

NEAs are positioned to address and mitigate incivility and bullying early in the education of nursing students. Although leadership training encompasses many responsibilities of the leadership role, more emphasis must be placed on developing the conflict management styles of integrating and compromising to ensure success for individuals and groups involved in the conflict. Integrating and compromising can be incorporated into communication, delegation, teamwork, and interprofessional development in education and practice. Future leadership development and succession planning can focus on the development of compromising and integrating with conflict management.

NEAs are positioned to change the culture of incivility and bullying as soon as students begin nursing school by modeling and teaching conflict management skills. EI and leadership styles correlate with conflict management styles, but further research is needed to clarify and refine the specifics of the correlation to guide future practice and education. Nursing is a profession fraught with incivility, bullying, abuse, and extreme stress. Academia is competitive and demanding. Leadership roles are either desired or appointed. Understanding and utilizing EI and appropriate leadership and conflict management styles can negate much of the hostile environment surrounding nursing and academia.

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