

The Relationship between Psychological Adjustment and Conflict Resolution Skills

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between conflict resolution skills and psychological adjustment, conceptualized in this study as happiness. A correlational research design was used to assess these variables in a sample of 158 university students. A positive correlation with happiness was found for the positive conflict resolution skills of integrity and forgiveness, whereas a negative correlation with happiness was found for anger and distrust. Therefore, it was recommended that a curriculum with emphasis on the conflict resolution skills of integrity, forgiveness, trust, and anger management would foster national unity and promote the psychological adjustment of students.

## **Introduction**

Conflict is a normal part of life that results from people having different perspectives, understandings, wants, and needs. A conflict occurs when two or more people do not agree on something (Ebombolo, Kim, Krause, & Smith, n.d.). There are two primary ways that conflicts can be resolved. Conflicts can be resolved violently, which can include physical violence, verbal violence, or relational violence. In violent conflict resolution, the goal is to hurt the other party in the conflict. On the other hand, conflicts can be resolved nonviolently, where the disagreement is discussed and a solution is arrived at collaboratively to bring the conflict to an end. This latter method of resolving conflict, which does not resort to any form of violence, will be termed positive conflict resolution.

Positive conflict resolution requires a set of skills, attitudes, values, and behaviors (Lawrence, Brown, & Henrich, 1999). These skills can be developed by observing others or directly through instruction. For example, one skill that is necessary for positive conflict resolution is the ability to manage anger. There are three ways of responding when a person feels that they have been treated unfairly: expressing anger, suppressing anger, and calming down (American Psychological Association, 2013). Expressing anger is typically the healthiest way of managing anger; however, individuals must learn to communicate their anger in a way that is constructive for resolving the conflict instead of lashing out at others. Individuals can also learn relaxation techniques for calming down when they get angry, such as deep breathing and relaxing imagery. Students who have learned to calm down when they are angry and then constructively express their anger are more likely to engage in positive conflict resolution.

Another skill that is necessary for positive conflict resolution is forgiveness. Forgiveness is a conscious decision to let go of resentment and thoughts of revenge against a person or a group of people who have harmed you (American Psychological Association,

2006). The practice of forgiveness can be taught to individuals, which helps them to be more forgiving in practice (McCullough & Witvliet, 2002). For example, people can be taught what forgiveness is, as well as what forgiveness is not (Worthington, Sandage, & Berry, 2000). Furthermore, individuals can learn the steps in the forgiveness process and how forgiveness can be personally beneficial (Enright, 2001).

Integrity is also necessary for positive conflict resolution. Integrity is defined as presenting oneself in a truthful and genuine manner (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). In positive conflict resolution, it is vital that both parties are truthful about what they have done, what they understand about the nature of the conflict, and what they are willing to do to resolve the conflict.

Trust is another attitude that is necessary for positive conflict resolution (Kelman, 2005). Trust can be built between individuals by being responsive to others' needs and to return others' acts of goodwill. A key foundation of trust, though, is integrity from all parties. The opposite of trust is distrust, when a person is continually suspicious of others, doubting their motives and their behaviors.

Both trust and integrity can be taught to students by defining the concepts, presenting positive examples of individuals who demonstrated integrity and trust, sharing negative examples of individuals who were ruined because of their lack of integrity or trust, as well as how students can demonstrate integrity and trust in their lives. However, perhaps the most powerful way that integrity and trust is learned is by teachers modeling these attitudes and practices in their lives.

### **Conflict Resolution and Nigerian Philosophy of Education**

The foundational philosophy of the Federal Republic of Nigeria is to “live in unity and harmony as one indivisible, indissoluble, democratic and sovereign nation” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004, p. 1). Since Nigeria's educational philosophy is based on the

national philosophy, one key goal is for education to promote a unified Nigeria. Because violent attempts at managing conflict hinder national unity, positive conflict resolution skills must be a foundational element of Nigerian education. The four prosocial skills and attitudes mentioned above – anger management, forgiveness, integrity, and trust – are potential topics for a conflict resolution curriculum that could meet the goal of promoting a unified Nigeria.

Furthermore, the Nigerian philosophy of education includes the belief that instruction should be oriented towards promoting the physical, emotional and psychological development of all children (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). Therefore, psychological adjustment is also an important goal of the Nigerian educational system. One element of psychological adjustment is happiness. Recently, a movement called positive psychology has initiated the scientific study of happiness. According to positive psychology, happiness is defined as a composite of positive emotion, engagement, and meaningfulness in life (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). However, one cannot teach happiness as one might teach anger management or forgiveness. Instead, to promote psychological adjustment, conceptualized here as happiness, the education system must focus on teaching skills and attitudes that are related to happiness.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine the relationship between conflict resolution skills and psychological adjustment. Psychological adjustment can be defined as how well a person has positive psychological functioning in response to the environment. There are many components of psychological adjustment, one which is happiness. Therefore, psychological adjustment was operationally defined in this study as happiness. If a significant relationship is found between these variables, then a conflict resolution curriculum that focuses on teaching prosocial attitudes and skills to students will have the dual purpose of improving social relationships and promoting the psychological adjustment of children.

## **Research Hypotheses**

1. There is no significant relationship between integrity and happiness.
2. There is no significant relationship between forgiveness and happiness.
3. There is no significant relationship between distrust and happiness.
4. There is no significant relationship between anger and happiness.

## **Methods**

### *Research Design*

The purpose of the study was to analyse the relationship among variables. Thus, a correlational design was employed. In a correlational design, key variables are measured separately, and then the correlation quantifies the strength and direction of the relationship between the variables. In this study, happiness was one key variable, and its relationship with integrity, forgiveness, distrust, and anger was quantified.

### *Participants*

The participants in this study included 158 students enrolled in a 300-level research methods class in psychology at the University of Jos. Slightly over half of the sample was male (56%; 32% female; 13% missing). The average age of participants was 25.75 years. Most of the participants were Christian (87%; 4% Muslim; 9% missing).

### *Instruments*

*Happiness.* Happiness was measured by four items adapted from the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). The response format of the items were slightly modified to reflect a six-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. For example, in the original instrument, the first item stem reads “In general, I consider myself...” and participants are to respond from 1, not a very happy person to 7, a very happy person. This item was modified to “I consider myself a very happy person” and participants

responded on the six-point Likert scale. The original scale was developed and validated by Lyubomirsky and Lepper (1999).

*Integrity.* Integrity was measured by seven items adapted from the Values in Action instrument (International Personality Item Pool, n.d.). The original items were modified to be written as a complete sentence. For example, the original item “Keep my promises” was rephrased to “I keep my promises.” The directions to this section read, “Below are some phrases describing people’s behaviors. Use the rating scale below to describe how accurately each statement describes **you**. Describe yourself as you typically are now, not as you wish to be in the future. Describe yourself as you honestly see yourself, in relation to other people you know of your same sex and the same age.” Participants responded on a seven-point Likert scale from 1, not at all to 7, extremely. These directions and response scale were also used for the items that measured forgiveness, distrust, and anger.

*Forgiveness.* Eight items were selected from the forgiveness portion of the agreeableness facet from the preliminary International Personality Item Pool scales (International Personality Item Pool, n.d.). Similar to integrity, items were modified to complete sentences. A sample item is, “I am inclined to forgive others.”

*Distrust.* Seven items measuring distrust were selected from the preliminary International Personality Item Pool scales (International Personality Item Pool, n.d.). A sample item is, “I distrust people.”

*Anger.* Seven items measuring anger were selected from the preliminary International Personality Item Pool scales (International Personality Item Pool, n.d.). A sample item is “I get angry easily.”

Total scores for each of the five variables were figured separately by calculating the mean across the items that measured each variable.

### *Procedure for Data Collection*

Questionnaires were distributed to students during a session in a research methods class. Students had two weeks to complete and return the questionnaire to the course lecturer. Students were given course credit for completion. However, students were assured, both in writing and verbally by the course lecturer, that their responses would be confidential and would not affect their course grades in any way.

### **Results**

The first research hypothesis stated that there is no significant relationship between integrity and happiness. All correlations were calculated with VassarStats (Lowry, 2013). The results for the first hypothesis are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Correlation between Integrity and Happiness

	r	t	df	p	Decision
Integrity and Happiness	.335	4.44	156	<.0001	Significant

As can be seen from Table 1, the correlation between integrity and happiness was significant. Since the correlation is positive, it means people with more integrity are happier.

The second research hypothesis stated that there is no significant relationship between forgiveness and happiness.

Table 2. Correlation between Forgiveness and Happiness

	r	t	df	p	Decision
Forgiveness and Happiness	.188	2.39	156	.018	Significant



The correlation between forgiveness and happiness was significant (see Table 2). The positive correlation indicates that the more forgiving a person is, the happier he or she is. However, this correlation was considerably weaker than the correlation between integrity and happiness.

The third hypothesis stated that there is no significant relationship between distrust and happiness.

Table 3. Correlation between Distrust and Happiness

	r	t	df	p	Decision
Distrust and Happiness	-.348	4.63	156	<.0001	Significant

Table 3 shows a significant negative correlation between distrust and happiness. The negative correlation indicates that the more distrustful a person is, the less happy they were. Put the other way, the more a person trusts others, they happier they are.

The final research hypothesis stated that there is no significant relationship between anger and happiness.

Table 4. Correlation between Anger and Happiness

	r	t	df	p	Decision
Anger and Happiness	-.316	4.16	156	<.0001	Significant

The results in Table 4 indicate a significant negative correlation between anger and happiness. In other words, the more anger a person has, the less happy they are. Stated positively, happier people have less anger.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify the relationship between psychological adjustment, conceptualized in this study as happiness, and prosocial values that are necessary for positive conflict resolution. Two positive prosocial values measured by this study were forgiveness and integrity. On the opposite side of the spectrum, anger and distrust were conceptualized as negative values for conflict resolution.

Amongst the university students who constituted the sample of this study, happiness was positively correlated with the prosocial values of integrity and forgiveness. In other words, the more people forgive others, and the more they demonstrate integrity, the happier they are. This finding is in line with other research that has found that psychological well-being is positively related to prosocial values (see Park et al., 2004).

Happiness has been conceptualized as having three elements: positive emotion, engagement, and meaning (Seligman et al., 2005). A person who lives with integrity likely has more positive emotions than a person who is insincere, which may be why integrity has a positive relationship with happiness. Furthermore, a person who has forgiven others also experiences more positive emotions than a person who holds onto bitterness (Baskin & Enright, 2004). Therefore, the relationship between forgiveness and happiness could also be due to the positive emotions that forgiveness engenders. The relationship between forgiveness and happiness is also supported by studies that show that offering forgiveness has been found to be related to positive well-being (Freedman & Enright, 1996).

Furthermore, this study also found that happiness is negatively correlated with distrust and anger. In other words, people who have less anger and less distrust are happier than those with high anger and high distrust. This is supported by other research that has highlighted the negative effects of anger. For example, Quinn, Rollock, and Vrana (2013) reported that

adolescents with higher anger have poorer health, lower quality social relationships, and lower academic performance.

Distrust and anger typically result in negative emotions. Since happiness is characterized by positive emotions, distrust and anger would therefore reduce happiness. Furthermore, individuals who are full of distrust and anger typically dwell on the negative, which would also reduce engagement, a second key component of happiness. Therefore, the presence of distrust and anger counteracts the key elements of happiness.

### **Recommendations**

Because psychological adjustment was found to have a positive relationship with the conflict resolution skills and attitudes of integrity and forgiveness, these prosocial values should be explicitly taught in the Nigerian education system. Religious studies curricula should highlight these prosocial values from relevant religious texts and provide practical guidance on how students can foster these values in their own lives. For example, forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer can be used as a basis to teach what forgiveness is (and what forgiveness is not), when forgiveness is needed, and how students can practice forgiveness in their lives. The finding that both integrity and forgiveness are related to happiness can also be used to encourage students to practice these prosocial values in their lives.

Furthermore, teachers should also be encouraged to demonstrate forgiveness and integrity in their lives for two reasons. First, students learn values by observing their teachers (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006). Therefore, when teachers demonstrate integrity and forgiveness, they are modeling these prosocial values for their students. More personally, teachers can be encouraged to practice integrity and forgiveness because integrity and forgiveness are related to happiness.

On the other hand, happiness had a negative relationship with anger. As previously mentioned, there are practical skills that can be taught to help students manage their anger,

such as techniques for calming down and strategies for constructively expressing feelings. These anger management skills are most effectively taught to young children who are in the beginning stages of learning to manage their emotions. Therefore, students should be taught skills for effectively managing their anger, both in social studies and in religious studies courses. Again, the finding that happier people have less anger can be used to encourage students to learn to control their anger.

Happiness also had a negative relationship with distrust. Distrust is rooted in the belief that another will either hinder or harm oneself. The social studies curriculum has a powerful role to play in improving trust, particularly between the many diverse ethnic and religious groups in Nigeria. By highlighting the beliefs, values, and practices of people from other cultural groups, students will learn that there are many similarities between themselves and others. This can help to improve trust between cultural groups. Furthermore, students should be taught to be trustworthy themselves so that others can trust them.

### **Conclusion**

Two goals of the Nigerian education system include promoting a unified Nigeria and fostering the psychological adjustment of all students. Unity is based on the use of positive conflict resolution strategies. The skills of controlling one's anger, trusting others, forgiving others, and living with integrity are all key skills that are necessary for positive conflict resolution. This study found a positive relationship between psychological adjustment and the prosocial values necessary for positive conflict resolution. In other words, youth who have skills necessary for positive conflict resolution tend to be happier. The fact that youths who practice positive conflict resolution skills tend to be happier can be used to encourage youths to learn and practice positive conflict resolution skills in their lives.

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## Appendix Part 1

Please circle the most appropriate response.

1. **Gender:** Male                      Female
2. **Age:**      18-19                      20-21                      22-23                      24-25                      26-27                      28+
3. **Religion:**                      Christian                      Muslim                      Traditionalist                      Other:

### Part 2

Below are some statements with which you may agree or disagree. Please read each statement carefully and respond by using the following scale from 1 to 6.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Slightly Disagree</b>	<b>Slightly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
1. I consider myself a very happy person.					Disagree	Agree
2. Compared to most of my friends, I think I am more happy.					1 2 3 4 5 6	
3. I am generally very happy regardless of what is going on.					1 2 3 4 5 6	
4. I never seem to be as happy as I could be. (R)					1 2 3 4 5 6	

### Part 3

Below are some phrases describing people's behaviors. Use the rating scale below to describe how accurately each statement describes **you**. Describe yourself as you typically are now, not as you wish to be in the future. Describe yourself as you honestly see yourself, in relation to other people you know of your same sex and the same age.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Not at All					Not At All	Extremely
1. My friends and family trust me to keep secrets.						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
2. I feel attacked by others.						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
3. I try to love my enemies						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
4. I am often in a bad mood						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
5. I distrust people						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
6. I can be trusted to keep my promises						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
7. I am nice to people I should be angry at.						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
8. I get irritated easily						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
9. I seldom get mad (R)						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
10. I am inclined to forgive others						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
11. I am suspicious of others						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
12. I sometimes lie to get myself out of trouble (R)						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
13. I feel short-changed in life						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
14. I tend to hold a grudge (R)						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
15. I keep my promises						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
16. I trust what other people say. (R)						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
17. I find it hard to forgive others (R)						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
18. I get upset easily						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
19. I get back at people who insult me (R)						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
20. I suspect hidden motives in others						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
21. I believe that honesty is the basis for trust						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
22. I trust others (R)						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
23. I get even with others (R)						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
24. I often lose my temper						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
25. I try to forgive and forget						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
26. I rarely get irritated (R)						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
27. I sometimes to over-state my troubles (R)						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
28. I get angry easily						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely
29. I am true to my values						1 2 3 4 5 6 7	Extremely