

Running head: SELF-ESTEEM AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLE

College Students' Self-Esteem,
Conflict Management Style,
Depression and Aggression

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of Psychology

Salisbury State University

Salisbury, Maryland

June 21, 1996



COMPLETION OF THESIS

MEMO TO DIRECTOR OF GRADUATE STUDIES:

This is to certify that on August 5, 1996 (date)

Louise Luft successfully completed the (name of student)

oral defense of his/her Thesis entitled College Student's Self-Esteem, Conflict Management Styles, Depression and Aggression

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Psychology.

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ABSTRACT

The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (Rosenberg, 1965) was used to study college students' self-esteem in relation to age at parents' separation, perceived frequency of interparental conflict, conflict management style, depression, and aggression. One hundred fifty-one undergraduate participants were administered the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (Kilmann & Thomas, 1977) to measure avoiding, accommodating, competing, compromising and collaborating. Perceived high frequency of interparental conflict was associated with lower self-esteem in females. Results replicated R. F. Hanson's (1991) finding that perceived frequency of interparental conflict combined with conflict management style scores predict self-esteem better than either measure alone.

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1. Introduction

Many authors (Pitcher & Blauschild, 1970; Shook & Jurich, 1992; Garber, 1992; Hanson, 1991) have expressed concern about the self-esteem of college students. Some hypothesize that self-esteem is still being formed during the college years. According to Erikson (1968) age 18 to 22 is a developmental stage encompassing the formation of intimacy and identity. During this psychosocial crisis, the late adolescent must cope with autonomy, sex-role identity, internalized morality, and career choice (Erikson, 1968). The college years are a critical time for finding direction: to be encouraged about life or to become discouraged about life. Sometimes it is even a time when individuals give up on life (Lester, 1994 ; Range & Penton, 1994). For persons age 15-24 the suicide rate has moved from the fifth leading cause of death in 1950, to the third cause of death in 1980 (Curran, 1987) and to second cause of death by 1989 (Rudd, 1989). This is a time when self-esteem is important for survival, growth and success.

Success in college depends upon self confidence, ability to act independently, ability to sustain long range goals, realistic decision making and meaningful emotional involvement in one's education (Pitcher & Blauschild, 1970). Becoming a self-starter in an unstructured working environment or being one's own leader is difficult for many eighteen-year-olds. The ability to be self-reliant and independent depends upon one's sense of self-efficacy, or the belief that one can succeed in a new project (Bandura, 1982, 1989) and one's sense of control over one's self. All of these factors affect self-esteem. In addition, self-esteem affects academic success in school (Wiggins, 1968; AAUW, 1991), and academic success in high

school predicts academic success in college (Chase & Jacobs, 1989). This paper examines self-esteem in college students, their conflict style and level of adjustment (including depression and aggression), as well as whether the students' parents were separated or not.

In the last fifty years, concern for self-esteem in children of divorce has extended to college students and has prompted many research studies. Self-esteem in college offspring of divorce has been studied from the point of view of developmental age at the time divorce occurs, the havoc that divorce creates in the individual, and his/her relationships with parents, and the differential impact on male and female offspring (Shook & Jurich, 1992). Erikson (1959, 1982) lists self-esteem among the developmental tasks of early school age (4 to 6). Shook and Jurich (1992) consider whether age at the time of parental divorce affects college offspring's self-esteem. Their hypothesis is based on Satir's (1972) observation that self-esteem is not carried by family genes but is formed within the family. Satir (1972) observes that infants rely on messages of approval from those around them, as they come into the world without previous feelings about themselves. She also suggests that messages of worthiness or unworthiness have great influence during the first five or six years of life, and these messages come almost entirely from parents. Once a child is in school, Satir (1972) maintains that teachers and peers begin to shape the feelings that a child holds about him/her self. Parents and family continue strongly to influence the self-esteem of children, even during adolescence (Erikson, 1959, 1982; Satir, 1972).

Wallerstein (1985) found that children of two to five years of age whose parents were divorced suffered the most separation anxiety and in her ten year follow-up, she found girls

who had been preadolescent and older at the time of divorce to be troubled and drifting as young adults. Palosaari and Aro (1994) reviewed literature from 1972 to 1992 regarding the effect of timing of parental divorce on the child's later well being. They found that boys who experienced parental divorce during latency were more depressed in young adulthood.

Shook and Jurich (1992) find sex differences in the effect that age at parental divorce has on self-esteem. Specifically, if divorce occurs before the age of six, then self-esteem is lower for young adult males than for females. They theorize that the lack of positive influence of fathers, due to their absence from the home, gives young males lower self-esteem. Shook and Jurich (1992) maintain that developmental age at the time of divorce or separation, with continuing negative influence during the ensuing years may significantly affect an individual's psychological adjustment. However, Emery and Forehand (1994) find that if children of divorce who already had problems before the divorce are excluded from their study, then the effect of divorce on self-esteem appears negligible. In a meta-analysis, Amato and Keith (1991) find that the relationship between adult well-being and parental divorce is tenuous at best and suggest that other variables besides divorce are also influential. Perhaps Hetherington (1989) sums it up best, "depending on the characteristics of the child, particularly the age and gender of the child, available resources, subsequent life experiences, and especially interpersonal relationships, children in the long run may be survivors, losers, or winners of their parents' divorce or remarriage."

Going beyond a simple analysis of divorce, Garber (1992) compares the effects of divorce and interparental conflict on the self-esteem of college offspring and finds that

frequent interparental conflict predicts low self-esteem, while divorce does not. Slater and Haber (1984) find that adolescent adjustment following divorce is determined by the adolescent's perceptions of the amount of conflict in their current home environment. For example, a single-parent home where there is a minimal amount of conflict may provide a happier environment for children than living in a two-parent home that is conflict laden (Burchinal, 1964). These results indicate that self-esteem relates more strongly to the family environment than whether the parents are together or separated. These findings suggest that unresolved interparental conflict commonly results in both divorce and low self-esteem in offspring.

Research shows that frequent marital conflict is associated with lower self-esteem in children as evidenced in both children's depressive behavior (Emery & O'Leary, 1984; Cummings & Davies, 1994), and children's aggressive behavior (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Forehand, Brody, & Smith, 1986). "Feeling worthless", blaming yourself for everything bad that happens, hating yourself and "feeling ugly" are characteristics of both low self-esteem and depression. Rosenberg (1965), Tennen & Hersberger (1987), and Houlihan, Fitzgerald, & O'Regan (1994) find a strong relationship between measures of self-esteem and measures of depression. Because the feelings involved in low self-esteem are very similar to those experienced by a depressed person, subjects who score low on self-esteem usually score high on depression. Houlihan, Fitzgerald, and O'Regan (1994) find (high) self-esteem correlates negatively with both depression and aggression. However Kernis, Grannemann & Barclay (1989) find children's unstable high self-esteem correlating positively with

aggression. These findings indicate that frequent marital conflict may precipitate children's adjustment problems in depressive behavior, which is associated with low self-esteem, or in aggressive behavior which is associated with low or unstable self-esteem.

While Garber (1992) demonstrates the importance of interparental conflict in college students' self-esteem, he examines only the frequency of conflict. Hanson (1991) suggests that the type of conflict management skills the students exhibit may intensify the impact of their parents conflict on student adjustment and self-esteem. The other dimensions of conflict that may contribute to students' low self-esteem include: type (physical or verbal), subject content (child-rearing, sex, finances, power, the child him/herself), duration (minutes, hours, days, weeks), situation (whether in front of the child), verbal conflict style (avoiding, inflammatory, interrupting, escalating, volatile, assertive), affect and nonverbal messages, resolution style (compromise, accommodation, avoidance, collaboration, competition) and whether or not the problem is resolved. Hanson (1991) finds that frequency of perceived interparental conflict combined with maladaptive offspring conflict "resolution" style predicts offspring adjustment better than either variable alone. Nonetheless, Hanson (1991) leaves open the question of which specific conflict management styles are related to self-esteem, depression and aggression in college students.

In summary, the literature shows that self-esteem in college students is influenced by age at parental divorce for males (Shook & Jurich, 1992), the frequency of interparental conflict (Garber, 1992; Hanson, 1991; Slater & Haber, 1984), and the specific conflict management style used by students (Hanson, 1991). In addition, just as low self-esteem is

related to depression (Rosenberg, 1965; Tennen & Herzberger, 1987), both low self-esteem and unstable self-esteem are found separately related to aggression (Kernis, Grannemann & Barclay, 1989; Houlihan, Fitzgerald & O'Regan, 1994). Thus far, prior research has not examined the interrelationship among these variables. This study will therefore examine self-esteem, frequency of perceived interparental conflict, depression, aggression, and conflict management style in college students.

Given the evidence cited above, self-esteem in college students is hypothesized to be lower for male college offspring whose parents separated before age six than among female offspring whose parents separated before age six. Self-esteem is also hypothesized to be lower in college students who perceive their parents to have experienced frequent marital conflict than in students who do not perceive their parents to have experienced frequent marital conflict. In addition self-esteem is hypothesized to be lower in students who exhibit maladaptive conflict management styles and higher in those with more adaptive styles. Moreover, this study hypothesizes that students who exhibit avoidance or accommodation as a conflict management style will experience more symptoms of depression, and students who exhibit competing as a conflict management style will experience more symptoms of aggression. Finally, when perceived frequency of interparental conflict is combined with students' conflict management styles, these measures should provide a better prediction of students' self-esteem than either measure alone.

2. Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 94 (62%) females and 57 (38%) males, all of whom were college students ranging in age from 17 to 26 ($M=18.9$). Participants were chosen at random from a pool of college students who had volunteered to participate in research as part of an introductory psychology course at Salisbury State University in Salisbury, Maryland. Students were asked to report age, gender, whether their biological parents were separated, and (if applicable) age at parents' separation. Although participants were not asked to report race, there were no more than ten non-caucasians observed. Participants were told that the research concerned personality attributes and conflict management style. All of the students who participated signed an informed consent form.

Instruments

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory. The widely used Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory (RSEI; Rosenberg, 1965) was used to measure self-esteem in students. The RSEI index score was obtained using the Guttman method which combined scores on the ten questions resulting in a seven point scale of possible self-esteem scores, from 0-6. A higher score indicated a lower level of self-esteem. Mallinckrodt and Fretz (1988) reported an internal consistency (coefficient alpha) of .81. Francis and Wilcox (1995) found a modest intercorrelation ($r = .52$) between the RSEI and the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory suggesting that the two scales do not assess identical aspects of self-esteem.

Personal Data Form. The 38-item Personal Data Form (PDF; Emery & O'Leary, 1982) was used to assess the frequency of marital conflict and parents' acceptance as the student perceived it. Fauber *et alii* (1990) reported that the PDF had an internal consistency of .90 and correlated at .40 with the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959) and at .48 with the O'Leary Porter Scale (OPS; Porter & O'Leary, 1980), other measures designed to assess marital conflict.

Beck Depression Inventory. The 21-item Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961) was used to measure depression. The score for each item was 0, 1, 2, or 3 depending upon the answer given and taps current affective, cognitive, motivational and physiological symptoms of depression in adolescents and adults (Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961). A higher score indicated greater depression. The BDI, used for both psychiatric patients and the general population, had an internal consistency of .88 (Beck & Steer; 1984).

Aggression Questionnaire. The 29-item Aggression Questionnaire (Buss & Perry, 1992) was used to assess Physical Aggression, Verbal Aggression, Anger and Hostility in students. This inventory asks participants to rate each item on a five point Likert scale (1=extremely uncharacteristic of me to 5=extremely characteristic of me) (Buss & Perry, 1992). Using 1,253 participants, Buss and Perry (1992) evaluated the internal consistency of the four factors: Physical Aggression, .85; Verbal Aggression, .72; Anger, .83; Hostility, .77 and total, .89). They found that test-retest correlations after nine weeks were: Physical Aggression, .89; Verbal Aggression, .76; Anger, .72; Hostility, .72 and total, .80). The

higher the total item score, the greater the aggressive tendencies. The Aggression Questionnaire is an updated version of the frequently used true-false Buss-Durkee Hostility Inventory (BDHI; Buss & Durkee, 1957).

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument. The forced-choice 30 item Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI; Thomas & Kilmann, 1977) was used to assess the conflict management style of students. The TKI was designed to measure how people resolved their conflict when their concerns appeared incompatible. The TKI measured along two basic dimensions: assertiveness and cooperativeness. Attempts to satisfy one's own concerns constituted assertiveness, whereas attempts to satisfy another's concerns constituted cooperativeness. These two behavioral dimensions are used to define five specific conflict handling behaviors:

1. *competing* (assertive and uncooperative), a power oriented mode;
2. *accommodating* (unassertive and cooperative), the opposite of competing which is neglecting self;
3. *avoiding* (unassertive and uncooperative), in which the conflict is not addressed;
4. *collaborating* (assertive and cooperative) which is the opposite of avoiding and requires digging into an issue to find the concerns of both individuals; and
5. *compromising* (intermediate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness) which is a quick middle ground search for an expedient mutually acceptable solution, equivalent to "splitting the difference".

Thomas and Kilmann assert that there are no right or wrong answers, but rather that all five conflict handling behaviors have their worthy applications. They maintain that each

individual's conflict management style results both from personal disposition and the perceived situation. Each of us uses some behaviors more than others and the TKI assesses each individual's mix of conflict handling behaviors.

Internal consistencies for TKI "modes" were within moderate range: *competing*, .71; *collaborating*, .65; *compromising*, .58; *avoiding*, .62; and *accommodation*, .43 (Kilmann & Thomas, 1977). Thomas and Kilmann (1978) reported a test-retest reliability of .64 which they found to be the best test-retest reliability of four different measures of conflict management each having five styles. In order to perform a concurrent validity test, Thomas and Kilmann compared their conflict management instrument with those of Blake-Mouton, Lawrence-Lorsh, and Hall. They found that the TKI correlated best with Blake-Mouton on *competing*, .59 and *collaboration*, .23, and with Hall on *compromising*, .24; *avoiding*, .39; and *accommodating*, .27. A higher score indicates a greater tendency to use a given style.

Looking at each students' primary (most frequently used) conflict management style, "maladaptive" or "win-lose" conflict management styles were hypothesized to be *competing*, *avoiding* and *accommodating*. "Adaptive" or "win-win" conflict management styles were hypothesized to be *compromising* and *collaborating*. The RSEI mean was calculated for participants in both the "maladaptive" and "adaptive" conflict management style groups.

Procedures

Questionnaires were administered to students during fifty minute intervals during a three week period in the spring semester of 1996. Each student who signed an informed

consent form filled out a demographic variables questionnaire.

The students then completed the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Inventory, the Personal Data Form, the Beck Depression Inventory, the Aggression Questionnaire, and the Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument. All answers were recorded on a mark-sense form. A computer program was written for reporting scores on the questionnaires.

3. Results

Table 8 in the Appendix shows the mean, standard deviation, skewness, and other summary statistics for all of the measures. Table 9 shows how the subjects are distributed by sex and primary conflict management style. An *alpha* level of .05 was used for all statistical tests. Remember that the Rosenberg RSEI score is an inverse measure of self-esteem, so any measure which correlates negatively with RSEI *ipso facto* correlates positively with self-esteem.

Self-Esteem and Age at Separation

Self-esteem was hypothesized to be lower for males whose parents separated before age six than among females whose parents separated before age six. Before this hypothesis could be tested, self-esteem data were explored. A histogram of the self-esteem (RSEI) scores revealed them to be severely skewed (+1.35); 47% of the subjects were tied at zero on a seven point scale. Therefore, RSEI scores were unsuitable for a *t* test, ANOVA, or classical regression. However, when cell sizes are about 30, a *z* test may be used to test a difference of means from a non-normal distribution. But when the cell sizes are small and unequal (as in the self-esteem scores for students whose parents separated before age six) it is necessary to use a nonparametric test that will work for small samples, such as the Mann-Whitney *U* (Mann & Whitney, 1947). The Mann-Whitney *U* may be viewed as considering all possible pairs from the two samples and counting those in which the observation from one population is larger than the other.

Using the Mann-Whitney U test, all possible pairs of males and females whose parents separated before age six were compared to discover those pairs in which the males had lower self-esteem. In 98 comparisons, 58 (66%) showed male self-esteem to be lower than female self-esteem, 13 comparisons were tied, and 27 showed female self-esteem to be lower. While this indicates a trend in the direction hypothesized, the difference of means was not significant ($U = 64.5, p = .14$). The larger mean for males resulted partly from the greater (high) skewing of the smaller sample. The means and standard deviations are shown below in Table 1.

Table 1. Effect of Sex and Age at Parents' Separation

Dependent Measure: RSEI		Age at Parents' Separation		
		Less than Six	At Least Six	
Sex	Female	$M = 1.57$ $N = 14$	$M = 1.36$ $N = 11$	$M = 1.48$ $N = 25$
	Male	$M = 2.43$ $N = 7$	$M = 1.00$ $N = 8$	$M = 1.67$ $N = 15$
		$M = 1.86$ $N = 21$	$M = 1.21$ $N = 19$	$M = 1.55$ $N = 40$

Self-Esteem and Perceived Interparental Conflict

Self-esteem was hypothesized to be lower in college students who perceived their parents to have experienced frequent marital conflict than in college students who did not perceive their parents to have experienced frequent marital conflict. With RSEI as dependent measure and PDF as classifier, the data were highly skewed. Eighty-seven (or 58%) of the

PDF scores were zero (skew = 2.80). Therefore the data were classified into high marital conflict versus low marital conflict. The 87 scores of zero were considered *low* PDF, and the other 64 scores were considered *high* PDF ($M = 1.92, SD = 1.68$). A z test was performed to consider whether self-esteem was lower in college students who perceived their parents to have experienced frequent marital conflict (Hi PDF) than in college students who did not perceive their parents to have experienced frequent marital conflict (Lo PDF). The results were not significant ($z = 1.05, p = .15$), even though they were in the hypothesized direction. The means and standard deviations are shown below in Table 2.

Table 2. Effect of Interparental Conflict

Dependent Measure:	RSEI	Perceived Parental Conflict		
		Low	High	
		$M = 1.14$	$M = 1.42$	$M = 1.26$
		$SD = 1.62$	$SD = 1.62$	$SD = 1.62$
		$N = 87$	$N = 64$	$N = 151$

Kendall's tau was computed using the RSEI and PDF scores for all subjects. Because tau uses all the information from individual subject scores (a z test looks only at means and standard deviations), there was a statistically significant positive correlation ($\tau = .13, p = .05$) between RSEI and PDF. Although this correlation was not clinically significant, it demonstrates a tendency for students' self-esteem to be lower as students' perceived frequency of interparental conflict increases.

Next, this hypothesis was examined separately for each sex. Two z tests were performed to see whether high parental conflict was associated with low self-esteem for females and for males. The self-esteem difference between Hi PDF and Lo PDF for women was statistically significant ($z = 2.01, p = .02$). The self-esteem difference between Hi PDF and Lo PDF for men was not significant ($z = -0.9, p = .82$). The means and standard deviations are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Interaction of Parental Conflict with Sex

Dependent Measure: RSEI		Perceived Parental Conflict		
		Low	High	
Sex	Female	$M = 0.98$ $SD = 1.52$ $N = 56$	$M = 1.68$ $SD = 1.74$ $N = 38$	$M = 1.27$ $SD = 1.64$ $N = 94$
	Male	$M = 1.42$ $SD = 1.78$ $N = 31$	$M = 1.04$ $SD = 1.37$ $N = 26$	$M = 1.25$ $SD = 1.61$ $N = 57$
		$M = 1.14$ $SD = 1.62$ $N = 87$	$M = 1.42$ $SD = 1.62$ $N = 64$	$M = 1.26$ $SD = 1.62$ $N = 151$

Self-Esteem and Conflict Management Style

Self-esteem was hypothesized to be lower in students who exhibited "maladaptive", or win-lose, conflict management styles (competing, avoiding and accommodating) than in students with "adaptive", or win-win, conflict management styles (compromising or collaborating). A z test was proposed to compare self-esteem ratings of students who exhibited "maladaptive" versus "adaptive" conflict management styles. For this analysis, each

student's primary conflict management style was categorized as "adaptive" or "maladaptive". The RSEI mean was then calculated for subjects in both the "maladaptive" and "adaptive" conflict management style groups. A z test compared means for "adaptive" ($M = 1.12$, $SD = 1.51$) and "maladaptive" ($M = 1.29$, $SD = 1.69$) conflict management styles. The results of the z test were not significant ($z = .55$, $p = .29$). The means and standard deviations are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Effect of "Adaptivity"

Dependent Measure: RSEI		Primary Conflict Mgt Style		
		Adaptive	Maladaptive	
		$M = 1.12$	$M = 1.29$	$M = 1.25$
		$SD = 1.51$	$SD = 1.69$	$SD = 1.64$
		$N = 34$	$N = 99$	$N = 133$

In examining the data further, associations were attempted between self-esteem and each of the five conflict management style scores for all subjects. In college offspring, competing scores correlated significantly negatively¹ with RSEI ($\tau = -.15$, $p = .02$). Also for college offspring, accommodating scores correlated significantly positively with RSEI ($\tau = .18$, $p = .006$). Avoiding ($\tau = .06$, $p = .35$), compromising ($\tau = -.04$, $p = .52$) and collaborating ($\tau = -.03$, $p = .63$) had no association with RSEI.

In summary, only two of the Thomas-Kilmann conflict management styles correlated significantly with RSEI. Competing correlated negatively and accommodating correlated

¹ It is helpful to remember here that high scores on the RSEI are equivalent to lower self-esteem.

positively with RSEI.¹

Depression and Avoidance or Accommodation

Students whose primary conflict management style was avoidance or accommodation were hypothesized to experience more symptoms of depression than students who exhibited other styles of conflict management. The BDI scores were highly skewed (+2.74) and 75% of them were in the interval 0-9, considered minimal depression. A *z* test was performed on BDI means to determine if they were significantly higher (indicating more depression) for students whose primary style was avoidance or accommodation than for students whose primary style was competition, compromise or collaboration. The *z* test was significant ($z = 1.91, p = .028$) statistically but not clinically. The means and standard deviations are shown below in Table 5.

Table 5. Effect of Primary Style

Dependent Measure: BDI		Primary Conflict Mgt Style		
		Avoiding & Accomodating	Other	
		$M = 8.33$	$M = 5.63$	$M = 7.05$
		$SD = 10.15$	$SD = 5.71$	$SD = 8.42$
		$N = 70$	$N = 63$	$N = 133$

In examining the data further, the associations of avoidance and accommodation with BDI were investigated separately. The correlation of depression with accommodating was statistically significant ($r = .15, p = .01$) but not clinically significant. There was no

association of depression with avoiding ($\tau = -.01$, $p = .84$).

In summary, students with a primary conflict management style of accommodation showed more depressive symptoms as a group than students who had other primary management styles. The other Thomas-Kilmann conflict management styles avoidance ($p = .84$), compromise ($p = .51$), collaboration ($p = .35$), and competing ($p = .43$) did not correlate with depression.

Aggression and Competition

Students whose primary conflict management style was competing were hypothesized to experience more symptoms of aggression than students who exhibit the other styles of conflict management. In this situation there were 149 degrees of freedom so that t is indistinguishable from z . The cell with the larger standard deviation has the larger sample, so the z test is conservative. Therefore, a z test was performed to determine if the AGQ mean for students with a primary conflict management style of competition was higher than the AGQ mean for the other styles. The results were significant ($z = 3.05$, $p = .001$) statistically but not clinically. The means and standard deviations are shown below in Table 6.

Table 6. Effect of Competing

Dependent Measure:	AGQ	Primary Conflict Mgt Style		
		Competing	Not Competing	
		$M = 83.10$	$M = 72.50$	$M = 74.81$
		$SD = 15.88$	$SD = 17.32$	$SD = 17.52$
		$N = 29$	$N = 104$	$N = 133$

In summary, the students for whom competition was a primary conflict management style had an AGQ mean significantly higher than students who exhibited other primary styles even though there was no clinical significance.

Self-Esteem, Perceived Parental Conflict, and Conflict Management Style

When perceived frequency of interparental conflict was combined with students' conflict management style scores, these two measures were hypothesized to predict students' self-esteem better than any one measure alone. The proposed analysis was a regression with students' self-esteem as the dependent variable and students' perceived frequency of interparental conflict and students' conflict management styles as predictor variables.

Three linear regressions were performed in order to compare ability to predict self-esteem. Since both the RSEI and PDF were severely skewed they were replaced by their ranks. Only four conflict management styles were used because the five style scores are linearly dependent: they always add to the number of questions answered. Perceived frequency of interparental conflict and students' conflict management style scores together

predicted students' self-esteem more accurately than either measure alone. (See the table below.)

Table 7. Three Regressions of **RSEI Ranks** on Different Sets of Predictors

Predictors	Adjusted r^2	Model df	Error df	Data F	Observed Level p
Ranks of PDF	.017	1	149	3.6	.06
Conflict Management Styles	.041	4	146	2.6	.04
Conflict Management Styles and Ranks of PDF	.055	5	145	2.8	.02

In all cases, the total degrees of freedom are 150 because there were 151 subjects. The observed level of significance decreases as you move down the table even though the Data F decreases because the model degrees of freedom increase. The ordinary r^2 is 1 minus the fraction of error sum of squares. The ordinary r^2 may be misleadingly large if some predictors explain very little as in this case. As you move down the table, the adjusted r^2 (1 minus the fraction of error mean square) does increase, although it is never very large. This suggests that perceived parental conflict is a better predictor than conflict management style scores and the combination predicts best of all. The combination gives a better prediction, because it explains more of the variance in ratio to the total variance.

4. Discussion

This study supports some of the hypotheses and results of other researchers with statistical significance, but little clinical significance. (In this paper, a difference of scores is called *clinically significant* when it is deemed large enough to matter to a clinician.²) Most students in this sample have high self-esteem, no depression and no parental conflict. For this discussion, the term self-esteem refers to the high end of the self-esteem continuum and low or lower self-esteem refers to the low end of the continuum (not the RSEI score).

The sample obtained tends to support the finding of Shook and Jurich (1992) that for younger children, boys' self-esteem is more affected by parental divorce than girls' self-esteem. In the current study only seven men were younger than six when their parents separated, therefore the small, unequal cells necessitate using the Mann-Whitney *U*, which is not a powerful test. The results are not significant at the .05 level, but are close to being significant (.14) at the .10 level. Skewing of the dependent measures and a lack of participants whose parents are separated may obscure the effect of age at separation.³

Shook and Jurich (1992) theorize that the lack of a positive same-sex role model in the home after a divorce could be responsible for male self-esteem being lower than female self-esteem if the child is younger than six when the parents separate. In a five year study,

² To be clinically significant, a correlation between measures would need to be .4 or higher.

³ Rosenberg's (1965) classic study on adolescent self-image, in which he used the seven point Self-Esteem Inventory with the Guttman scaling, had over 5,000 participants from a stratification of communities.

adolescent males showed problems after separation but not before separation (Doherty & Needle, 1991). This result suggests that divorce resulting in separation from the father can be the cause of low self-esteem and behavior problems for adolescent males (Amato, Loomis & Booth, 1995). The lack of large sex differences in self-esteem in the current study suggests that both boys and girls need a positive role model in order to feel good about themselves.

Age at separation needs more research. The way a child copes with parental separation at a particular developmental stage may influence the resolution of the corresponding psychosocial tasks.⁴ In the current sample not all participants whose parents were divorced before the child was six have lower self-esteem. Future research needs to explain how a child copes according to developmental stage and to clarify differences in coping mechanisms between males and females.

In the present study, correlation shows that students who perceive their parents to have higher frequencies of conflict tend to have lower self-esteem. These results support Garber (1992) who found that frequent interparental conflict predicts low self-esteem, and Slater and Haber (1992) who found that adolescents' perception of interparental conflict affects adolescent adjustment. There were no gender differences reported in these studies.

However, the present study finds that females are more likely than males to suffer low self-esteem when they perceive high levels of interparental conflict. This result supports Doherty and Needle (1991) who found a striking gender difference in the timing of the effects

⁴Also, sex differences in children's response to divorce may depend upon the age of the child (Hetherington, 1987).

of divorce. Boys demonstrated ill effects after the divorce and girls showed negative reactions prior to the separation (Doherty & Needle, 1991). Amato, Loomis and Booth (1995) argue that this result suggests conflict rather than divorce causes low self-esteem and behavior problems in girls.

The result that women's self-esteem decreases more than men's self-esteem as perceptions of interparental conflict increase may mean that for females cooperation is more agreeable than competition. Tannen (1990) suggests that women's first response to others is to connect while men's first response to others is to compete. Since competition is more in their nature, males may find conflict less bothersome. In addition, competition between males is accepted as natural behavior by society (Maccoby, 1988)

Accordingly, there is a societal tendency to accept men's right to dominate women (Weygandt, Donat & Bondurant, 1992). It is quite possible that a young girl, who frequently observes her mother faring poorly in conflict with her father, may identify with her mother. Daughters who see and hear their mothers being dominated by their fathers, may judge themselves to be as their father perceives their mother: inferior. Such a mother-daughter identification might produce low self-esteem in females who perceive high parental conflict.

This study responds to the question left open by Hanson (1991): Which specific conflict management styles relate to self-esteem, depression and aggression in college students? Of the five Thomas-Kilmann conflict modes, *competing* associates positively with self-esteem and *accommodating* associates negatively with self-esteem. *Avoiding*, *compromising* and *collaboration* show no association with self-esteem and only

accommodating associates with depression. These findings suggest that avoiding confrontation frequently may be appropriate and helpful, but that always giving others' feelings a higher priority than your own may hurt your self-image. This result is interesting clinically, and would be a good direction for future research.

This study suggests that the individual whose conflict management style is more competing will have higher self-esteem. While discussing the "new narcissism", Lasch (1979) does not associate competition with self-esteem, but he does associate fear of competing with doubts of self-worth. In the current study, the association of *competing* with self-esteem shows *competing* to be adaptive rather than maladaptive among college offspring for both men and women. This result suggests that in our culture the *competing* style and the "one who wins" are admired by others and, therefore by one's self. But judging by Maslow's (1970) theory, one wonders how self-actualized the "winners" really are. Self-actualization involves personal growth and self-fulfillment, characteristics not apparent in "one who wins" only for the sake of winning.

Competing and aggression are both traditional masculine stereotypes (Unger & Crawford, 1992). Watson, Taylor, and Morris (1987) found "masculinity" directly related to self-esteem and inversely related to depression. In the current study, *competing* associates not only with self-esteem but also with aggression for both men and women. It would appear that, in our culture, competition, aggression and self-esteem are related in both male and female college students. This suggests that a masculine style of personal behavior including competing and aggression is more highly rated in our culture than the feminine

qualities of accommodation and passivity.

Most of us want either to "look good" or to "be on top". Through advertisements that promote personal attractiveness and power, our consumer economy encourages narcissistic thought and behavior (Lasch, 1979). In addition, automobile salespeople compete for our purchases, songs like Madonna's "I'm a Material Girl" make the top forty, and for some, keeping up with the Joneses is an American tradition. The relationship between self-esteem, aggression and competition deserves further study.

The negative correlation of *accommodating* with self-esteem means that the more accommodating an individual's conflict management style, the poorer the individual's self concept. In the 1950's the ideal mom "did for" her family. For some, the 1950's concept of motherhood was equivalent to the current-day conceptualization of codependency. Her family was her life. She accommodated to their needs or feelings and rarely expressed her own. With this cultural background, perhaps it is not too surprising that women more than men suffer from low self-esteem and depression (Weissman, 1982).

Compromise and *collaboration* both imply a "win-win" stance and were expected to correlate positively with self-esteem, and therefore were termed "adaptive". Theoretically, collaboration is the ultimate "win-win" as opposed to compromise - a meeting halfway in which no one really wins. Bush and Folger (1994) recommend a *collaboration* style of conflict resolution, which involves both parties working toward meeting the other's wants and needs as well as their own - a bilateral accommodation. They recognize that "My own needs are better met, if I meet your needs." Covey (1989) advises that "without trust, the

best we can do is compromise."

Bush and Folger (1994) suggest that those who collaborate will feel better about themselves and others primarily because of the joy of transforming a conflictual relationship into a trusting relationship. In contrast, the present study has only 13 students with a primary conflict management style of *collaboration*, and of those 8 have low self-esteem. Perhaps *collaboration* is not yet understood nor appreciated by college students or the public in general as a desirable method of resolving conflicts. Education in the area of peaceful and satisfying conflict resolution and relationships could greatly reduce war and violence.

It is of particular significance that this study, while using different instruments and a broader population, replicates Hanson's (1991) finding that students' perceived frequency of interparental conflict combined with students' conflict management style scores better predict students' self-esteem than either measure alone. Hanson's population includes only college offspring under 25 who have never been married and who lived as children with parents who were never separated. The sample for the present study includes never married, married, separated or divorced college students whose parents are married, dead, separated, divorced or never married. The fact that Hanson's finding still holds suggests that the relationship between frequency of interparental conflict, students' conflict resolution style, and self-esteem is quite robust.

Although this study supports research findings already in the field, there is more work to be done. Age of separation in males and parental conflict in females need further study. The association of accommodation with depression and of competition with aggression both

require more research. Interest in resolving conflict continues to spur education and research on conflict management styles, especially collaboration. Anxiety (which this study neglects) is strongly related to depression, aggression, self-esteem, and conflict management style. All of these concepts need to be studied together.

Acknowledgments

First, I want to thank my husband, Philip E. Luft, for providing me with a continual sounding board and help with computer programming, statistics and document design.

Finally, I want to express my appreciation to my thesis advisor, Adeline Tryon, for the time, patience, insight and encouragement which she generously provided.

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Table 9 Subject Distribution by Sex and Primary Conflict Style

(Eighteen Subjects Excluded Because of Ties for Primary Style)

	Primary Conflict Management Style					Total
	Avoi	Cmpr	Clb	Cmpt	Accm	
Female	20 24%	18 21%	10 12%	16 19%	20 24%	84 100%
Male	18 37%	3 6%	3 6%	13 27%	12 24%	49 100%
Total	38	21	13	29	32	133

Appendix

Table 8 Summary Measures for All Subjects

Variable	N	Min	Max	Range	Mean	Std Dev	Skew
RSEI	151	0	6	6	1.26	1.62	1.35
BDI	151	0	57	57	6.77	8.03	2.78
PDF	151	0	8	8	0.81	1.45	2.80
AGQ	151	38	124	86	74.85	17.59	0.34
AVOID ¹	151	2	12	10	6.73	2.21	-0.16
CMPR ²	151	1	12	11	6.68	2.00	-0.10
CLLB ³	151	1	12	11	5.34	2.23	0.06
CMPT ⁴	151	0	12	12	4.92	3.14	0.55
ACCM ⁵	151	1	12	11	6.33	2.43	0.00

¹Avoiding, a Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Style.

²Compromising, a Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Style.

³Collaborating, a Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Style.

⁴Competing, a Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Style.

⁵Accommodating, a Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Style.