

A CROSS-DISCIPLINE STUDY IN THE SCHOOL OF HEALTH AND EDUCATION:  
EXAMINING INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT IN COLLEGE LIFE  
THROUGH COLLECTIVE CULTURAL LENS

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULLFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF HEALTH, SOCIAL CARE AND EDUCATION

(Education)

THE MIDDLESEX UNIVERSITY

(London)

July 2022

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## **Abstract**

This cross-disciplinary study examines interpersonal conflict management by college students through the integrative lens of health and education, with a particular focus on students' perceptions of conflict in their college life. As an insider-researcher, my deep involvement with the students' college life experiences has enabled me to form a unique methodological framework suited to a cross-disciplinary research project. The objectives of this study were twofold: (1) to help integrate the two disciplines and thereby benefit college students through learning conflict resolution skills and recognizing the importance of human relationships and (2) to contribute to practice by providing recommendations to college practitioners. Using a qualitative research design with an interpretive approach, self-reflection reports and face-to-face interview data were collected. Self-reflection report data provides the internal thoughts regarding participants' conflictual experience. Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with the participants further revealed that mental wellness, well-being, and overall happiness improve through a constructive process of conflict management. The findings revealed that a significant level of correlation between interdependency including behavioural emotions and interpersonal conflict management. The result of the research reflects that the violation which comes from expressing negative emotions and lack of empathy can have a negative impact on interpersonal relationship.

As a college practitioner, assisting students to resolve conflict in college life, my study argues that it is important for students and college administrators to understand and address interpersonal conflict from a joint health and education perspective in order to bring about the best possible outcomes. My research proposes that college is a learning platform for acquiring important interpersonal conflict skills and constructing healthy relationships with others for better mental wellness. By providing holistic education to college students, learning about students' conflicts, and understanding how the latter may lead to relationship issues, colleges can provide better-designed mental-wellness initiatives and support for students. Findings complementing the qualitative data are also presented, as well as a discussion of the study's theoretical and practical contributions, its challenges, and future research opportunities.

## **Preface**

The aim of this cross-disciplinary study is to draw knowledge from the health discipline and education discipline to develop a theoretical framework of how culture influences interpersonal conflict in college life, using a critical study submitted through Middlesex University's School of Health and Education. Specifically, the study provides a wider critical framework focusing on student mental wellness in a Hong Kong college. The theoretical framework can be applied to obtain insights leading to practical and conceptual solutions for managing interpersonal conflict within a specific educational setting.

Interpersonal conflict or disagreement is a daily means of interpersonal communication and an expression of emotions—between or among connected individuals—that needs to be managed during different encounters with different individuals (De Vito, 2013). Interpersonal conflict is unavoidable in any relationship where some level of interdependence is found. Conflict arises when the involved parties perceive incompatibility vis-à-vis their positions on an issue (Nakayama, 2011). Such a situation may trigger complex behaviour patterns, which can be challenging for those involved as many factors potentially can lead to unexpected outcomes and instigate further conflict. This study explores the presence of conflict among students at a Hong Kong college and aims to facilitate these students' mental wellness management when interpersonal conflict takes place. The study also hopes to offer valuable insights that might have resonance in other settings.

The ability of students in higher learning institutions to manage and resolve interpersonal conflicts has been linked to social development, good problem-solving skills, and emotional security. These skills and characteristics are vital to how well students deal with conflict in their present and future life circumstances, such as the work environment where conflict situations abound (Shenkar, 2001). Students can then apply the skills they learn in the college context and enter the workforce better able to facilitate healthy peer relationships.

Cultural values and norms affect how we respond to conflict and what conflict behaviour we adopt. The students in this study are part of a collectivist society. Consequently, my main research question asks how we can understand conflict behaviour from a collectivist cultural perspective. Extreme

responses to conflict situations may exacerbate the problem but conflicts can also act as a force for good and help bridge gaps in healthy interpersonal relationships

This study is critical for fostering education well-being because it proposes a cross-disciplinary approach demonstrating that individuals can understand interpersonal conflict better through the lens of cultural factors, specifically the lens of a collectivist culture. Viewing conflict and other issues through a lens that perceives culture as important is key: There have been tremendous cultural shifts in values, lifestyle, and language at a global level, especially in multicultural countries like Canada, the United States, and Australia. Nevertheless, despite numerous studies on the cultural elements of conflict, few recommendations addressing interpersonal conflicts among students in a college environment have been made. Traditionally, interpersonal conflict studies focus on family relations or organisational behaviour. However, a conflict study in an educational setting is capable of offering a new understanding of how collectivist culture students avoid certain forms of conflict resolution (e.g., genuine dialogue). Moreover, the reflection process in such a study fosters better self-awareness, which is essential for graduates later on.

This study used data from self-reflection reports and interviews of college students in a Communications class in a Hong Kong college to determine how cultural influences affect interpersonal conflict. In total, 12 students contributed information through a self-reflection exercise and semi-structured interviews. A triangulation approach was applied to examine the data and then identify emerging patterns through themes and sub-themes. NVivo software was used to organise the data and determine its underlying themes. In addition, themes were extracted manually, and data were sorted into categories. Furthermore, the collected data was analysed and synthesised in accordance with the themes observed in the study and those already identified in the literature review. By examining the themes' interrelationships, a more meaningful summary of the data could be drawn and thereby support the research study's general outcomes.

This study re-conceptualises interpersonal conflict in a positive light as a means to enhance interpersonal relationships and bonding. More precisely, the data can help provide a theoretical framework based on cultural awareness for managing conflict in collectivist cultures. Such a framework could lead to students being offered training programs where they can learn the

importance of trust, forgiveness, and consideration for others. Therefore, the main contribution of my study is the creation of a framework applicable to a college counselling programme in a collectivist cultural environment. This framework may help struggling college students adjust to college life and deal with mental wellness issues, specifically those relating to interpersonal conflict.

## **Acknowledgements**

First, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my primary supervisor, Professor Paul Gibbs, for his continuous support of my doctoral study and for his patience, motivation, and immense knowledge, which he kindly shared with me. His guidance helped me throughout the research work and writing of this dissertation. I could not have asked for a better advisor and mentor for my doctoral study.

Besides Paul, I would like to thank my secondary supervisor, Dr Alex Elwick, not only for his insightful comments and encouragement but also for the hard questions that he asked, which encouraged me to expand my horizons with a variety of different perspectives.

Apart from my supervisors, I must express my gratitude to Dr Peter Yu (former Dean of Students of the University of Macau) for his encouragement and sharing of insightful suggestions.

I am indebted to his unceasing guidance.

Finally, I am grateful to my wife, parents, colleagues, and students who have provided moral support, encouragement, and motivation so that I can accomplish my academic goals. I am thankful and appreciative of the financial support from my parents so that I could wholly focus on my studies and work towards my goals without worry.

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## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

Social psychologists, such as Ellis and Beattie (2017), claim that conflict is a part of daily interpersonal communication. This interpersonal conflict is unavoidable and involves complicated behaviours that can be challenging for any individual because there are many influential factors involved, which could lead to unexpected outcomes that cause further conflict. This study identifies the cultural factors behind the causes and consequences of the conflicts of students in one of the colleges in Hong Kong. This chapter has six sections that discuss the research topic in general, including my observations as an educator when handling student affairs. The aim of the following sections is to provide the reader with a better understanding of the research topic through my observations, related literature readings, and interpersonal conflict studies.

### ***Section 1.1 Personal Observations***

My first job in tertiary education was Program Manager at one of the universities in Hong Kong. I was responsible for coordinating student admissions and academic matters. After four years in academic affairs, I decided to pursue my interest in teaching social science subjects, where I could share my experiences and knowledge with undergraduate students. At the same time, a major part of my work as a resident fellow was to handle student affairs and residence life. As I became more involved in my work as a lecturer of communication courses and a resident fellow at the college, I became more acquainted with the students who were learning about interpersonal conflict. They not only aspired to study the concepts and theories but also apply the knowledge to real-life situations. Their motivation arose because these students were living in the university dormitory or college residence and faced all sorts of interpersonal issues as their interactions matured with their peers. I saw that their mental wellness wellbeing was based on many different aspects, such as conflict management for healthy interpersonal relationships.

### ***Section 1.2 Background of the Problem***

This study on conflict management is significant in various ways. The objective is to examine the extent to which interpersonal conflict management amongst students may be addressed as a procedure through which individuals are taught new means to identify and resolve conflicts through non-violent means. Consequently, the study intends to provide the means for establishing ground rules, creating common goals amongst the concerned parties, deliberating on possible solutions, discussing recommended approaches in the literature for solutions, and listening. For

instance, the study offers ways to achieve effective conflict management through decision-making, consensus, mediation, and negotiation that also serve to improve the learning environment. Palmer et al. (2012) stated that a good educational community needs a healthy and constructive environment so that students can grow and learn. Their study also argued that effective conflict handling strategies could contribute to reducing the prevalence of suspensions and chronic absences from college.

Moreover, Johnson and Johnson (1996) claimed that students could improve their interpersonal conflict skills through mediation training workshops. Other important factors also emerged from their study, including the fact that conflict resolution shifts the responsibilities of the lecturers so that they can focus more on teaching and less on disciplinary actions in the college setting. In addition to enhancing the problem-solving, critical thinking, and listening skills of the students, interpersonal conflict management promotes co-existence in a multicultural environment.

### **Fieldnotes, Hong Kong – March 2017**

While living with and engaging with students of varying cultures in Hong Kong and Macau who may have suffered from mental wellness issues and interpersonal relationship problems, I was able to build up a body of direct knowledge that served to inform my doctoral research. Similarities in conflictual behaviour were found among college students in diverse institutions, and these are challenging for the college. The following example (partly retrieved from my monthly work report) of a student illustrated the concern:

One of the students (Roy, pseudonym) had studied in my advertising and communication program. His academic performance was always unsatisfactory, with many absences in class. As the Program Manager, I invited my students to come to the office for academic consultation from time to time. One day, it was Roy's turn, and he came to the office late and looked very tired. I then gave him a cup of water and asked him how I can help. I asked him what he had been doing. He explained that he had a part-time job, which was one of the reasons that he could not focus much on the lectures and assignments. I explained to him the importance of his academic performance for being a full-time student. Although he did not say too much, he finally agreed to spend more time on his studies. The week after, Roy came to have a chat with me during another conversation meeting. It was

around lunchtime, so I asked him to join me for lunch at the College cafeteria so that we could talk in a more relaxing environment. Roy told me that he had a bad experience with group projects and argued with the peers on the allocation of work. He also talked about his conflict with his father and how his father did not understand him even after they had a family conversation. I began to realize more about college students and how much they needed to talk to someone they trusted, and how much they were longing for a deep conversation with those they were close to. This happened especially when the students were under stress and having anxiety about their status because they were no longer teens but adults.

### **Fieldnotes, Macau – April 2018**

The following example (partly retrieved from my monthly consultation report) of a student illustrated a similar concern:

A college student (Maggie, pseudonym) had a minor health issue diagnosed by the local hospital. I was assigned by the college to pay special attention to her health condition and study. I had a quite in-depth conversation with Maggie when she entered the college, and she seemed to be a cheerful young lady. In academic week 5, her English professor contacted me and said she was absent a few times, and her performance was not satisfactory. In the same week, her roommate came to my office and complained about her smoking in the room. Then, I contacted Maggie and asked her if I could provide her with any assistance with the study problem and the issue with her roommate. She told me about her problems with her peers and her family. She expressed that she felt like she had no true friend in the college. Her parents were divorced, and her relationship with her mother was not very good, and she did not want to return home at weekends to avoid seeing her mum and generating conflict with her. After understanding Maggie's problems, I began to invite her to participate more in the college groups and events. I hoped to help her by connecting her with more friends with similar interests and giving her more responsibilities in some of the college interest groups. Maggie was happy with these arrangements, and she was more actively participating in the college's events. In the second year, Maggie moved to Shanghai, where she wanted to spend more time with her father. Students can sometimes feel helpless when they are in a new environment. The conflict with peers and being anxious about schoolwork can be a challenge, especially for the freshmen. Perhaps,

a trustworthy listener who is proactive in offering help (e.g., building a relationship through trust) can lead students to blend into a new college environment more easily.

By exploring the cultural influence on interpersonal conflict in this project on conflict management, my aim is to critically assess the conflicts that Hong Kong college students experience with their peers and their conflict management style in order to identify the factors that contribute to effective communication behaviour and conflict management. The introduction presents a framework for this research and identifies the series of research goals:

- Describe and evaluate the conflict process as it unfolds from the interpersonal conflict that occurred among college students in Hong Kong.
- Critically assess the impact of Hong Kong college students' conflict management strategies, including their conflict behaviour that arises from interactions and cultural factors and identify the outcomes.
- Speculate on a framework that can be applied through the insights from the data into practical implications for managing interpersonal conflict.

### ***Section 1.3 College Life and Residential College – A Learning Environment***

A good platform for students to learn conflict management to develop healthy interpersonal relations may begin with student's four years of college life as their knowledge and life experience is still green (Manata et al., 2017). The extension of the college life experience outside of the classroom setting could be the concept of residential college. The development of residential college began in UK from reputational universities like Cambridge and Oxford (Cox and Orehovec, 2007). Influenced from UK university residential college models, universities in other countries in US and Asia have developed similar residential college system as part of a collective learning environment for better student engagement (Jiaxin, 2012). Although there are some slight differences in the residential college (RC) system in different countries, the RC system mainly aims to provide a learning environment for students and faculty members who reside in a big college community (O'Hara, 2001). For the characteristics of Residential Colleges, the traditional UK RC system is comprised of residential and academic learning. Unlike the UK RC system, United States



like Harvard and Yale has transformed to a decentralized academic RC system that academic leaning is not part of the RC system (Jessup-Anger, 2012). In higher education, the notion of the residential college system is meant to provide a holistic development for freshmen to have a better transition from high school to college/ university. During their college life, students will encounter ‘people’s problems’ like interpersonal conflict issues and strive to build positive relationship with individuals in the college community (Abubakar, Kasim and Mamman, 2015). The blended experience of college activities and social groups in the college life enable students to learn the challenges of communication and enjoy the friendship they can build in precious time.

Through collectivist culture lens, residential colleges in Hong Kong and Macau often emphasize on the Confucius values as the foundation of the college and the corresponding motto for the residential college’s development (Marginson, 2011). One of the important teachings from the Confucius value is to cultivate students to be ‘better’ people. The notion of ‘better’ people is similar to German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s interpretation on the understanding of Categorical imperative (Korsgaard, 2020). Kant explained how individual should have a moral duty to do the ‘right’ thing. If one’s action is unethical (E.g., lying to achieve personal interest), this is not going to be fair for all others (Rawls and Herman, 2000). To strengthen the argument on how college (E.g., Residential College) is a learning platform for students, this section includes a discussion on some of the core competencies in college life. For instance, some of the basic guiding competencies to learn on values and behaviour in residential colleges (Perkins, 2002):

- Interpersonal Relationships and Teamwork
- Healthy Living
- Leadership and Service
- Citizenship with Global Perspective
- Cultural Diversity

**Table 1.1***Core Competencies of Residential College*

Competency	Explanation
Interpersonal Relationships and Teamwork	<p>Interpersonal Relationships (IR) are formed in the context of social and cultural engagement. To build up IR require effort to maintain and when in a healthy relationship, it gives you joy, happiness, and satisfaction. IR are dynamic systems that grow and improve gradually, as people get to know each other and become closer emotionally, or they gradually deteriorate as people drift apart, move on with their lives, and form new relationships with others (Chang et al., 2020). In addition, Teamwork is the process of working collaboratively with a group of people in order to achieve a goal. Teamwork is often a crucial part of both business and education, as it is often necessary for classmates to work together, trying their best in any circumstance (Hoffman and Redman-Bentley, 2012). Teamwork means that people will try to cooperate, using their individual skills and providing constructive feedbacks, despite any personal conflict between individuals.</p>
Healthy Living	<p>Davis and Cooke (2007) explained that World Health Organization (WHO) defined the meaning of “Healthy Living” for mankind and setup a framework in educational environment on how to implement a healthy living. For students to recognize the value of health living, the framework can include the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Nutrition (a balance and healthy diet);</li><li>2. Healthy lifestyle (mental health and wellness);</li><li>3. Health (individual promotional and group activities);</li><li>4. Physical Exercise;</li><li>5. Chronic disease – prevention and control</li></ol>

Leadership and Service	A successful leader does have his/her own achievement but not all leaders can have an impact on other's life or change the way of life in a profound manner (Farnsworth, 2007). This is a distinction between leadership and personal achievement. A good case for the students to learn is the English gentleman, William Wilberforce, he had a mission for helping the African slaves in the Anti-slave trade movement. Not for self-interest, his service to the country is not about personal achievement but the social justice that's needed for everyone in the country (Belmonte, 2009).
Citizenship with Global Perspective	Banks (2001) explained that United Nations stated that a citizen is a member of a community with rights and responsibilities of the community. From the global perspective, this imply that college students as a responsible citizen should have obligations to the place where we live in and to extend our moral duties to the world by helping others that are in need. For instance, voting is one major obligation for students to choose the appropriate leader that represent the country does not only benefit an individual but everyone in the country (Nussbaum, 2002).
Cultural Diversity	Culture is the way of life of a people. It includes the human-created strategies for adapting and responding to the surrounding environment (Gay, 2010). The notion of cultural diversity is to capture the cultural variety that exist among people who share some physical or virtual space (Parhizgar, 2007). The space such as residential college is a learning environment where students experience and struggle with norms, beliefs and values.

Unlike course curriculum or academic assessments, these values and competencies have developed a framework for college administrators to provide RC education that incorporates general education programmes and RC learning activities to cultivate students (Jessup-Anger, 2012). From the higher

education perspective, the RC performs a number of important functions. Liou (2019) explained that instead of academic achievement, such as student's major, residential colleges provide the practice and knowledge on (1) soft skills, such as leadership, communication skills, teamwork; (2) friendship; (3) life-long learning; etc. When employers are asked "what kinds of graduates they are looking for", they emphasize: responsibility, teamwork, punctuality and proactiveness (Rose and Sriram, 2016). These are the soft skills instead of academic knowledge where it is often the second priority in a business environment. Thus, by incorporating core values and major competencies in RC, colleges aim to facilitate a learning environment to cultivate students with a holistic knowledge of general education and complement with student activities and social group engagement (Masgoret and Ward, 2006).

Residential college in higher education is a major part of college life where students can live together and learn together in a community (Werch et al., 2000). To many freshmen in their college life, residential college is like a second home because it is the place where students hang out with their classmates, and students learn how to engage and communicate with people with a different set of values and backgrounds. For instance, college students may have the opportunities to experience memorable events like high-table dinners where all the college students are invited for fine dining with student performances and a remarkable speech by the college administrator (Horwitz, 2016). Another example is that college students may also experience negative issues, such as a conflict between roommates where they argue about noises the other student makes or the cleanliness of the room (Dusselier, 2005). The activities in a residential college, a conflict between students or roommates and relationships in the educational environment help us to realize that students do not just learn about academic topics but also learn how to preserve relationships in a college learning community is equally important for student success (DuFour, 2004).

College's residential experience is a unique and defining feature of college life. Living on-campus – living where students study, studying where students live – offers a fundamentally distinct way to engage in college life (Jessup-Anger, 2012). Living at the residential college can be rewarding because it helps students to create a sense of belonging, as the residential college is part of the university system. This is how students can learn to communicate in a constructive way and build relationships. Even though students can be in conflict, it is part of the students' experience to learn

how to handle such conflict. The residential college provides many opportunities and challenges to deepen students' ties to both the college and the university at large by building deep, long-lasting relationships that will last (O'Hara, 2001).

The college experience provides students opportunities to learn more than just to live with students of their age coming from different countries, different backgrounds, and different faculties: students should learn mutual respect to each other and learn from each other for how to build a harmonious community (Jessup-Anger, 2012). That learning could benefit individuals by providing an opportunity for them to develop into a better person with good communication skills and empathy for others, to accommodate the needs of others, and of course, the residential college learning community by modelling a "home-away-from-home" for all students (Gomes, 1999).

In the college environment, learning not only means acquiring knowledge from textbooks. Students can learn from peers, whether from junior or senior students, for knowledge and life experience via daily life and college activities – having a night chat, reading club, interest groups, etc. The College Master and residential tutors are always there to provide guidance for academic, living, and personal development (Bloomdahl & Navan, 2013).

In short, a residential college is a place where students of different backgrounds, disciplines, years of study, and talents can meet, interact, and learn from each other while growing in their personal experience and characters (Davis et al., 2001). The college encourages students to join the various college activities of their interest and, moreover, to take the lead in organizing functions of their own. Activities such as joining the Residential Students' Association or participating in the college's sports teams on events, etc., will enhance students' college life and broaden the horizon of their personal development (Kang et al., 2014).

### ***Section 1.4 The Explorative Process of an Insider-Researcher***

As an insider-researcher, I was able to understand my participants' daily college activities, roles, and responsibilities, as well as the college facilities available to them. My role as a Resident Fellow and Lecturer provided me with the opportunities to explore the mental wellness of college students, specifically through research on interpersonal conflict management in an educational

setting. My key responsibility as a Resident Fellow was to assist the College Master in overseeing all aspects of student life. I thus resided in the college and helped the College Master plan and deliver residential college-related education programmes. I also facilitated academic tutorials, seminars, and other experiential learning opportunities/activities for students on a regular basis and provided pastoral care to students. My role also involved collaborating closely with the student leaders, student affairs office, faculties, and staff from across the university to support and engage students.

My insider status is evident through my multiple connections with the participants, as well as our shared cultural values, language, educational experiences, relationships, roles and responsibilities, and lifestyle. My research goal does not only address why perceptions of interpersonal conflict focus on unfavourable outcomes but also promote a better understanding of how interpersonal skills can help a college and its students develop more healthy relationships. As such, students will not wholly rely on counsellors and teachers but learn about communication skills and improve them to resolve some of the conflicts themselves in a constructive manner. This learning process helps college students rethink their conflictual behaviour and come up with better strategies. Secondly, as a college practitioner, this study allows me to examine students' communication and conflictual behaviours, which will then enable me to provide appropriate support when students experience problems related to mental wellness.

To make an impact from the inside, I involved my academic abilities and practical action to contribute to the college. By drawing knowledge from mental wellness and tertiary education research, the exploratory nature of this cross-disciplinary study permits me as insider-researcher to function as a practitioner within an educational setting. The collected data will better support my services to students and provide recommendations on how the college can design and develop future well-being programs addressing student mental wellness. It should be noted that my relocation from Hong Kong to Macau has not stopped my research on student life. As a Resident Fellow at a university in Macau, one of my key responsibilities is to focus on student life and student affairs. Although the majority of the data was collected in Hong Kong, I was able to continue gathering data through my daily work observations following my relocation to Macau.

This study on how college students can manage interpersonal conflict will deepen my engagement with students and build more trusting relationships with them. To illuminate my motivation for conducting this study, I have further explained my work in residence life in Appendix 2. Other than my work scope as a Resident Fellow, I am a lecturer of communications-related courses at the university. In terms of academic teaching, I will be able to apply the collected data and reflections to create role-play exercises for my students. Such exercises will motivate them to participate more in class discussions as they are derived from real-life situations. In short, this research will greatly benefit students as they rethink their interpersonal conflict skills. It will also provide recommendations to college administrators and contribute important data to my ongoing academic research as an insider-researcher.

#### ***Section 1.4.1 Recognition of Limitations***

A study of interpersonal conflict through an understanding of cultural behaviours has never been easy. Researchers like me always keep in mind that it is important to avoid stereotyping when analysing a participant's conflictual behaviour when considering the cultural factors. Due to the spread, time and intensity of engagement with some of my participants can be affected. Another major limitation of this study is to have the college students complete the data collection process. Originally, 36 participants returned signed consent form and agreed to participate in this research study. During the data collection process, about two-thirds of the students dropped out of the study. Many participants replied by email and said that they did not have time for the study. Other participants came to me in class and said they were busy with their assignments, so they could not continue with the study. I believe the reason for the high drop-out rates is that there was no physical reward provided for this study. Participants also did not fully understand the benefits of how such a study can help to improve self-awareness in interpersonal communication.

#### ***Section 1.5 Organization of the Study***

This chapter presents the experiences that motivated the research. These provided the opportunity to observe the experience, behaviour, and circumstances of students that had problems in interpersonal conflict and mental wellness issues. The qualitative research provoked observation, reflection, and the development of the research questions. From the analysis of the data, themes begin to emerge. These themes are illustrated by examples drawn from student life. Together, these

stages served to inform the research, provide the basis for student affairs, and facilitate the participant's journey of self-awareness in college and the workplace.

The research is presented in Chapters Two to Eight. Chapter Two explains the use of cross-disciplinary approach integrating the field of health and education. Chapter Three provides an overview of relevant literature that mainly focuses on collectivist culture in interpersonal conflict and identifies the research gaps showing the importance of taking cultural awareness and conflict management practices into consideration. Chapter Four explains the methodological paradigm of the study. Having chosen to do a thematic analysis in qualitative research, I have clarified how the participants were chosen, the criteria used in the selection, the use of interviews, self-reflection reports, and participant observation, with continuous reflection in the analysis of the studies. Chapter Five begins with an introduction of the coding process, data collected, and a description of the participants of this research. These are drawn from face-to-face interviews and self-reflection reports.

Chapters Six through Eight present a dynamic and often cyclical process of stages in the development of trust in the processes of interpersonal conflict, mental wellness, and relationship emerging from the data. This process of analysing the quality of data provides a more comprehensive picture of the 'developing puzzle'. The social science of conflict and culture is included; it explains the process of changing schema patterns. Chapter Six introduces a theoretical framework on the enactment of a construct between interpersonal conflict and the participants. This heuristic process initiates the components of conflict, including interdependency, emotions, and conflict management. The chapter also presents the construct of forming an identity rooted in trust and connection, interpersonal communication, and a sense of worthiness. In Chapter Seven, the challenges and limitations of the research study were further discussed. Chapter Eight concludes with the findings, clarifying a model for student affairs intervention through analysis of interpersonal conflicts that hinder or enable the development of trust and understanding – human connection. The entirety of the research, considering the diversity of age and ethnicity of participants, exposes a unity found in their similarity of behaviour, language, and process of connection.



### ***Section 1.6 Summary of My Cross-disciplinary Study***

As explained by Turner and Shepherd (1999), health and education initiatives of colleges and universities are capable of raising awareness about the important connections between education and health by focus on the development of relationship: The association between education and health has deeper root causes, such as the economic and social conditions students have experienced, the skills and networks they build through college life. Entering a college or university is a major transition in the life of high school graduates, and it is a time when their mental resilience may begin to weaken under the new pressures of college life coupled with the need to perform academically. As the awareness of the importance of mental wellness increases, more research is being conducted to demonstrate the link between the learning process and mental wellness.

Furthermore, Tzani-Pepelasi et al. (2019) explain students suffering from poor mental wellness may find it difficult to concentrate in class and experience symptoms such as restlessness, short attention span, being distracted, and having difficulties in remembering course materials. In addition, the state of one's mental wellness is associated with the way interpersonal conflict is handled. This translates to students having difficulty interacting with another person and deciding whether to run away from an argument or engage in it and seek a positive resolution. In college life, it is important in getting the students out of their shells while also encouraging them to be more involved in social interactions and teaching them how to best deal with their daily problems.

Whether building relationships with professors, friends, part-time job colleagues, romantic partners, roommates, or nurturing existing relationships at home, college students find themselves involved with other people in every facet of their lives (Sanger, 1997).

The college years are a time of transition for most students as they navigate new relationships on campus and try to maintain relationships with friends and family back home. Sometimes the biggest challenges for a healthy relationship, whether it be with a roommate, a romantic partner, a family member, or even a professor, are differences in communication styles and unclear expectations. Many college students do not know how to tackle conflict and, in the end, resort to avoiding it or choose violence to resolve it (Straus, 2004). Other students can only deal with conflict by blaming and accusing others. Unfortunately, while expressing negative feelings may

seem easy, managing them so that they do not damage the relationship is rather difficult. As a result, students may suppress or fail to communicate negative feelings out of fear of offending the other person or making the relationship worse (Bower, 1992).

In college, students may experience conflicts with friends, roommates, romantic partners, professors, teaching assistants, employers, and even their parents. One study showed that, unsurprisingly, when parents and students agreed on the relative importance of goals, less conflict followed (Brem et al., 2003). Students tend to value independence, control of their emotional environment, health and social relationships, and freedom of financial concerns. Parents, on the other hand, value moral, religious, and educational goals (Morton & Markey, 2009). When conflict arises between students and their parents, a good strategy is to understand what both parties are disagreeing about.

The higher education environment in which this cross-disciplinary research endeavour takes place consists of other elements pertinent to the conceptualization building implicit in the cross-disciplinary research in health and education. In my study, the cross-disciplinary approach revealed that a constructive process of conflict management benefited students' mental wellness and enhanced their overall happiness. Without the ability to address conflict, when faced with it, much of the students' energy is spent on managing emotions and generating coping strategies. In such instances, students may feel fearful, angry, resentful, hopeless, and stressed (Lee, 2011). To exemplify the concept, my cross-disciplinary study looks at the integration of these areas:

- Interpersonal conflict—as part of a college mental wellness initiative
- College life—the student's experience and their development in the college/university system

This study provides an opportunity for the involved college students to reflect on and learn productive means of conflict management. The college students had the opportunity to re-think the following:

- a. their relationships with people,
- b. their ways of communicating emotions in conflict situations, and
- c. their conflict management style to develop a positive mindset towards effective conflict-handling behaviours.

Although some students understood they needed to change their behaviour, there is still much work that needs to be done overall for the rest of the student population in the higher education discipline.

Putting it all together, from my higher education experience, interpersonal conflict has not been treated professionally as a mental issue in the education environment because it is only a small part of mental wellness but not mental illness like depression or anxiety. The cross-disciplinary research on interpersonal conflict of college students helps to address issues related to college students' self-appraisal and awareness of their conflict-solving skills, as well as their relationship with others. The field of study recognises the importance of developing an independent sense of self that is in concert with collective, interdependent, and collaborative relationships individuals have with others in their personal and professional lives. As such, the aim of this research study is to highlight strategies allowing students to construct a personal identity that is positively and meaningfully contribute to their interactions both in college and their future professional lives.

## **Chapter 2 Integrating Health and Education: A Cross-disciplinary Approach**

### ***Section 2.1 Introduction***

Education includes any experience that trains, disciplines, and shapes the mental and physical potentials of the maturing individual (Inchley and Currie, 2016). Higher education and mental wellness of students in particular is an important area for educators to study because students are still learning and developing at this stage of life. This chapter is going to explore how my research on the discipline of health and education falls into a cross-disciplinary study. The understanding of ‘disciplinarity’ refers to expertise in a subject area, including the understanding of methodology and the capacity to obtain, analyse, and employ specialized knowledge (Lattuca, 2003). One of the main reasons for my study is integrating two disciplines because it requires knowledge and experience from both disciplines (E.g., Health and Education) to look at interpersonal conflict of students in their college life.

By evidencing and reflecting the cross-disciplinary approach of my study, this chapter will address the characteristics and development of my cross-disciplinary research. As my study needs to offer evidence to the cross-disciplinary approach, this chapter will include a discussion on the three types of doctoral research programmes as an illustration to show how my research programme falls into the cross-disciplinary study. To strengthen the argument, this chapter includes a discussion on how some research programmes have confusion by misinterpreting the types of research programme without providing academic collaboration, research training and mentorship for an appropriate research outcome (For instance, a non-interdisciplinary research programme does not produce interdisciplinary research as an academic outcome). To resolve the issue, the ‘interchange labelling’ discussion helps to identify the cross-disciplinary elements that are needed to conduct the approach and support my cross-disciplinary path in facilitating my cross-disciplinary research. It also addresses the problem of how administrators, researchers and scholars should carefully select disciplinary terms when they design research and academic programmes by incorporating appropriate programme objective and curriculum that follow the academic consistency. The latter part of this chapter explores how my research specifically falls into the cross-disciplinary approach by reviewing researcher’s knowledge background, literature review from both disciplines, integrating the methodology of two disciplines, results that generate

from the study of interpersonal conflict of college students, recommendation that benefits students in their college life and challenges of the research as a cross-disciplinary study.

### ***Section 2.2 Locate the Field of Study in a Research***

The field of study in a research is critical because the researcher has to explain the discrete discipline for targeted audience to understand the research's objective. The purpose of a Doctoral research is often undertaken after a problem or opportunity has been identified (Grossman, 2009). By locating the field of study, the researcher should have a strong disciplinary focus and the scholar can reflect how the method, validity and scope of the research discipline are framed. In addition, the field of study allows researcher to consider the information requirement that is needed to begin the research and master 'how' and 'why' of a complex research study, from choosing appropriate approach to ensuring predictable outcomes in discrete discipline (Allan, 1996). Thus, locating the field of study (E.g, Higher Education) in an academic discipline helps the research to be successfully carried out in a unique methodological framework. Like Professor Paul Gibbs' study (Gibbs, 2011), he explained how scholars should enable the research environment of Higher Education as a field of study. However, not all problems can be solved by a discrete discipline, research students must learn to integrate and coordinate diverse approaches, methods, and perspectives. It has been an academic need for research that, by widening educational experiences and that a cross-disciplinary experience can both contextualize and enrich the disciplinary as an important requirement for students to participate to a research programme (Manathunga, Lant and Mellick, 2006).

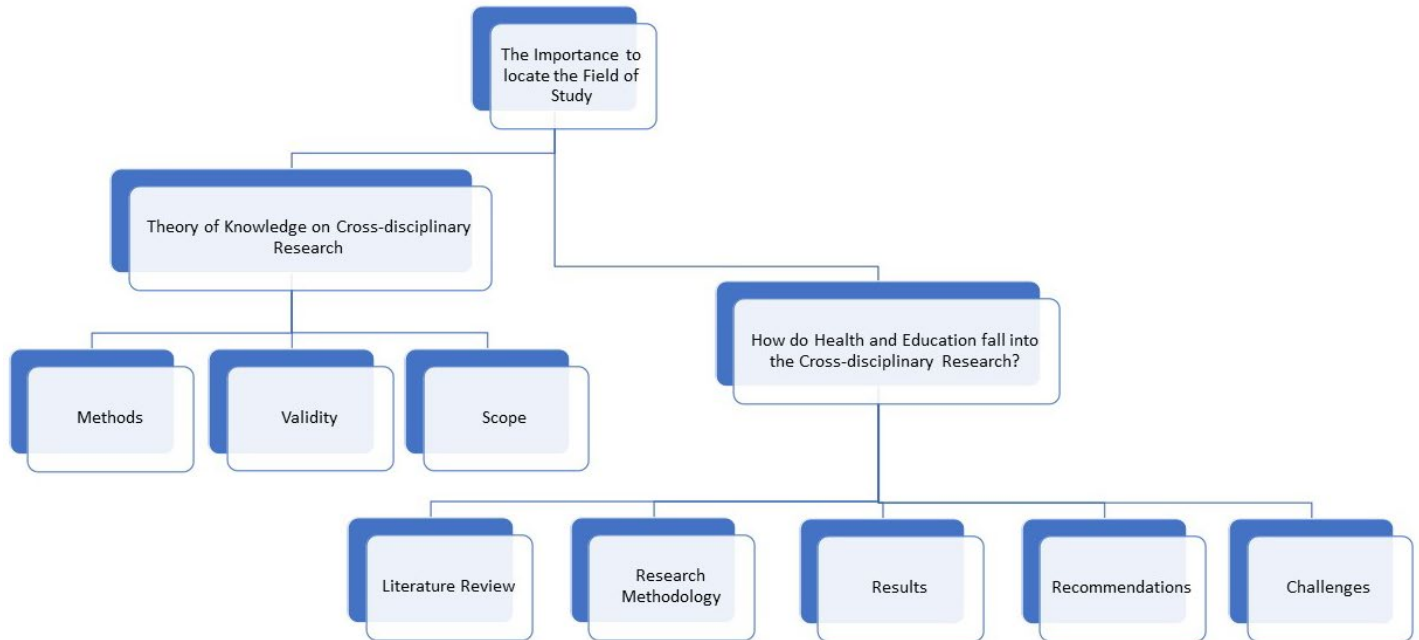
As illustrated in Figure 2.1, this chapter is going to discuss the knowledge of cross-disciplinary studies because many researchers use the word "interdisciplinarity" loosely to include cross-, multi- and interdisciplinary approaches. However, to clarify disciplinary research programmes, there should be some distinctions between the approaches on programme design and curriculum:

1. Learning the features of disciplinary programmes, it helps to explain how research outcome should be consistent to the design of the programme (For instance, only interdisciplinary research programme should lead to interdisciplinary research as an academic outcome).

2. In addition, by addressing the research context of my research, it illustrates how my research facilitates cross-disciplinary study on Health and Education in practice.

**Figure 2.1**

*The Field of Study and My Cross-disciplinary Approach*



***Section 2.3 Theory of Knowledge: Cross-disciplinary Study in a Research***

Is there a difference between cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary? The research paper of Stember (1991) clarified how important it is to advance the subject area of social sciences through the clarification of cross-disciplinary and other forms of disciplinary research. Her research offers the following overview of three different categories of disciplinarity:

- Cross-disciplinary: Brew (2008) defined that “researcher viewing one discipline from the perspective of another.” (p.424) For instance, mental wellness and college life is a cross-disciplinary field of study and a fundamental strategy across both disciplines can be developed to improve health and education outcomes.
- Interdisciplinary: Wei, Burnside and Che-Castaldo (2015) defined that “research that integrating knowledge and methods from different disciplines, using a real synthesis of

approaches.” (p.43) For instance, hospitality management would integrate studies in marketing and hospitality to help scholars to understand the relationship among marketing practices, the local economy, and standards and innovative practices of the hospitality industry.

- Multidisciplinary: Monk, Manning and Denman (2003) defined that “scholars from different disciplines working together, each drawing on their disciplinary knowledge.” (p.92) For instance, medical hospitals cannot function without the interaction of countless medical, psychological, legal, financial, and administrative disciplines. Firms cannot survive unless Human Resources, Operations, Research and Development, Finance, Sales and Marketing all work together.

Scholars like Pennington (2008) and Jackson (2005), have a common interpretation on how a cross-disciplinary approach should allow the interchange of knowledge and experience to stimulate innovative responses to complex research challenges. Hoffman & Axson (2017) explained that while a great deal of research of world-class quality will be confined to individual disciplines, there is an increasing recognition that many of the world’s greatest problems need to be tackled by teams of researchers pulled together from different disciplines. The notion of cross-disciplinary brings unique disciplinary excellence to tackling a major problem, and we, therefore, prefer the term “cross-disciplinary” rather than “inter-disciplinary” or “trans-disciplinary”. (p.89)

Furthermore, Jensenius (2012) argued that it is necessary to avoid the confusion and have a proper definition in an academic setting for researcher to apply unique methodology when selecting proper disciplinaries. I concur how he also argued these terms should not be used interchangeably. The more general term "multiple disciplinary" is suggested for when the nature of involvement of multiple disciplines is unknown or unspecified. While multiple disciplinary teamwork is appropriate for complex problems, it is not always necessary in every single project.

In the academic setting, many graduate schools aim to provide innovative, cross-disciplinary, and interdisciplinary programmes across a diverse range of schools and institutes. The table below are some examples from UK and other major countries that conduct cross-disciplinary research programmes:

**Table 2.1***Cross-disciplinary research programmes from UK and other major countries*

<b>Country</b>	<b>University</b>	<b>Programme</b>	<b>Cross-disciplinary Research Objective</b>
United Kingdom	University of Cardiff	School of Engineering	The school has established several units which involve doctoral students and research staffs from across departments. The research areas bring together expertise from a wide range of research groups so that doctoral students and staffs can contribute specialist knowledge to a key research field (Lozano, 2010).
United Kingdom	University of Edinburgh	School of Social Science	A joint doctoral research initiative with University of Copenhagen, with joint supervisors from both universities. The PhD projects deal with important problems and phenomena related to social science such as challenges of digitalization in various sectors, health and care, conflict and discrimination, misinformation, government and urban data, cybercrime and internet infrastructure, information technology markets (Heitor, 2015).



Canada	University of Toronto	Faculty of Engineering	<p>The faculty's cross-disciplinary programs office provides academic and administrative leadership to enhance cross-disciplinary educational services for their Engineering students. Research students can choose from a wide range of topics: robotics, bioengineering, artificial intelligence, business, environmental engineering and even music performance (Pfirman and Martin, 2010).</p>
United States of America	John Hopkins University	School of Medicine	<p>The cross disciplinary research programmes aim to provide students with focused, individualized training in the biomedical sciences and to facilitate interdisciplinary research training bridging biology, engineering, computer and data science, chemistry and medicine. John Hopkins University is home to deep research expertise, while clinical care and research at Johns Hopkins Medicine informs discovery of science across the university (Klein, 2009)</p>

Singapore	National University of Singapore (NUS)	NUS Graduate School	The National University of Singapore (NUS) is transforming its educational model to give students the flexibility to pursue programmes across disciplines. Cross-disciplinary Degree Programmes (CDPs) aim to effectively integrate complementary disciplines to equip students with the knowledge and skills to solve real-world problems. The graduate school pairs up complementary disciplines include economics and data science, computing and project management, as well as engineering and business (Fernando et al., 2020)
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As illustrated from the table above, universities have begun promoting Doctoral research programmes integrating different fields of study whereby academics could address social problems more effectively by looking at them from multiple perspectives. For instance, Moore (2005) describes one faculty of education in British Columbia, Canada as “home to four departments (Curriculum and Pedagogy, Educational and Counselling Psychology, and Special Education, Educational Studies, and Language and Literacy Education) and two schools (the School of Kinesiology and the Okanagan School of Education)” (p. 391). By integrating departments together, faculty enables the academic environment for further academic collaboration such as cross-disciplinary research.

Similarly, my study engaging in the cross-disciplinary research on health and education offers a great opportunity of integrating diverse perspectives and practices relevant to cultivating student life in an education setting (Hart, 2009). Hoffman & Axson (2017) explained that while a great deal of research of world-class quality will be confined to individual disciplines, there is an

increasing recognition that many of the world's greatest problems need to be tackled by teams of researchers pulled together from different disciplines. The notion of cross-disciplinary brings unique disciplinary excellence to tackling a major problem, and we, therefore, prefer the term "cross-disciplinary" rather than "inter-disciplinary" or "trans-disciplinary". (p.89) I agree that the use of term 'cross-disciplinary' seems more appropriate when researchers are having their research simply across different disciplines but not applying a synthesis of approach and methodologies from different disciplines.

Moreover, a research degree program in the field of education can be designed to create opportunities for cross-disciplinary research by concentrating on critical national and global problems in which education and human development play a significant role. However, not all the research programmes are equipped to position their research programmes with an interdisciplinary perspective (Eisenhart and DeHaan, 2005). There must be a value of consistency on Programme Objective, Programme Curriculum and Learning Outcome to enable the conditions for research students to achieve a quality Doctoral research degree on cross-disciplinary or interdisciplinary studies (Mitrany and Stokols 2005).

For Table 2.2, it is an illustration of the argument on how these disciplinary terms helps to clarify the distinction of the three types of disciplinarity in research (Thomas, Ciliska, Dobbins and Micucci, 2004). By evaluating the three types of disciplinarity in research programme from their paradigms (E.g., background, methods, validity, scope, and outcome), it aims to provide the knowledge to the disciplinary terms in research programme as there is a distinction on the uniqueness of the research programme's objectives, training and outcome that qualifies what disciplinary of the research programme is the student going to receive (Golde and Dore, 2001).

**Table 2.2***Three Types of Disciplinarity Doctoral Research*

	Traditional Doctoral Research	Cross-disciplinary Doctoral Research	Interdisciplinary Doctoral Research
Background	Traditional Doctoral Research Programme is for students to gain disciplinary knowledge within their selected programs or concentrations.	Cross-disciplinary Doctoral Research Programme is for students to have cross-disciplinary knowledge that is to focus on a critical problem related to the student's expertise in more than one discipline (Zimbardi and Myatt, 2014).	Interdisciplinary Doctoral Research Program is intended for students whose academic interest cross multiple academic disciplines (Borrego and Newswander, 2010).
Methods	Students have the expertise in one discipline, including the understanding of methodology and the capacity to obtain, analyse, and employ specialized knowledge.	Other than understanding of one's own discipline, students have to expand into a more diverse scientific community also provides the potential for network development and further collaboration. The programme is designed to foster the	Students have to involve in collaborative teamwork research involving multiple disciplines and use of multi-methods for an interdisciplinary integration (Teijlingen et al., 2019).

		methodological skills and conceptual understanding needed to systematically address complex and cross-disciplinary education issue (Curran et al., 2007)	
Validity	Students demonstrate the ability to examine a measure of the intended discipline (E.g., Design and Implementation for the discrete disciplinary research).	Students have the academic option to create their own individualized graduate program based on specific research interests. It allows students to bridge two or more academic disciplines. Students' experiences from being engaged in cross-disciplinary settings help to focus on sustainable development (Adams, 2010).	Students across faculties bring their disciplinary knowledge and work together in a variety of program elements, including hands-on project experience with external partners, to develop research and professional skills. Students will have to attend interdisciplinary lectures, workshops, and seminars (Newswander and Borrego, 2009).
Scope	Students have discrete disciplinary supervisory committee to support the student's research.	Students receive knowledge from Cross-disciplinary supervisory committee that is organized to	Students have interdisciplinarity training and knowledge of investigating an issue or problem that

		<p>foster cross-disciplinary coaching by the graduate school. There are themes such as education and inequality, human-technology collaboration, curriculum and instruction, education policy, comparative and international education, and human and organizational learning (Castro, 2019).</p>	<p>relies on contributions from several disciplines, and that may be taught or mentored by interdisciplinary supervisory committee in a collaborative manner (Kaufman and Brooks, 1996)</p>
Outcome	<p>The Doctoral research programme provides students the learning experience on a strong disciplinary focus (E.g., Doctor of Education, Doctor of Business Administration).</p>	<p>The Doctoral research programme provides students to develop the expertise in examining and assessing cross-disciplinary problems and their interaction with their broader social environments. (E.g., PhD in Education with a research focus on Technology) (Owen et al., 2019)</p>	<p>The Doctoral degree conferred is that of the home program, and the completion of the collaborative specialization that has been attained (E.g., PhD in History with specialization in Migration and Ethnic Relations) (Lattuca, 2001).</p>

The evaluation identified the features on the disciplinarity of doctoral research programmes, it helps to evidence and reflect how these features links with Stember (1991)'s perspective on cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary. Stember (1991) explained and later exemplified by Brew (2008) that the cross-disciplinary research is how the researcher views one discipline from the perspective of another. This definition corresponds with my study on mental wellness and college life as a cross-disciplinary field of study and applying a fundamental strategy across both disciplines where the research can be developed to improve health and education outcomes. For interdisciplinary research, Stember (1991) explained and later exemplified by Wei, Burnside and Che-Castaldo (2015) that research integrates knowledge and methods from different disciplines, using a real synthesis of approaches. I agree with this explanation that interdisciplinary research must possess a collaboration of knowledge from many disciplines. Only with the proper interdisciplinary mentorship, using a synthesis of approaches and methodologies, the doctoral student can achieve interdisciplinary research as an academic outcome. Otherwise, the outcome of the research programme can be misleading.

In short, by learning the features and disciplinarity elements from Table 2.2, cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary research programmes offer the opportunity to expand students' studies beyond discrete academic disciplines and design a cross-disciplinary programme of study that focuses across disciplines. In contrast, interdisciplinary studies, as illustrated from Table 2.2, the research programme has to designate a learning experience of investigating an issue or problem that relies on contributions from several disciplines, and that may be taught or mentored in a collaborative manner (Hénard and Roseveare, 2012). I concur that only interdisciplinary research to facilitate research student's collaborative opportunities across disciplines is possible for students to achieve an interdisciplinary research degree as an outcome (Holley, 2015).

#### ***Section 2.4 Collection of Studies on the Cross-Disciplinary Approach***

This section provides the collection of studies as examples to further examine the cross-disciplinary approach that is similar to my study on health and education. Ranganathan, Heise, Peterman, Roy and Hidrobo (2021) 's recent study on the cross-disciplinary of public health and economics is meant to solve complex problems such as intimate partner violence. Houghton,

Houstoun, Yates, Badley and Kneebone (2021)’s study argued “that collaborating with educators across disciplinary boundaries will strengthen educational practice and promote excellence in technology-enhanced teaching.” (p.131). It is an integration on the education discipline and technology discipline as examples to further examine the cross-disciplinary approach. Extended from Table 2.1 and Table 2.2, there are common features on the objective, scope, and outcome of these cross-disciplinary studies which shown in Table 2.3:

**Table 2.3**  
*Cross-disciplinary Study Examples*

	Public Health and Economics (Ranganathan et al., 2021)	Education and Technology (Houghton et al., 2021)
Objective	The objective of the research is to integrate two disciplines. By addressing the issue of violence of intimate partners, the research aims to look at how both disciplines can study the associate factors that leads to violence and provide resolution to the target group (E.g., intimate partners) from public health discipline and economics discipline.	By addressing the issue of remote learning on students, the research aims to look at how both disciplines can study the influential factors on remote learning and provide better solutions to the college students.
Scope	The scope of the research incorporating literature	The scope of the research incorporating literature



	readings, knowledge, and methodologies across Public Health and Economics.	readings, knowledge, and methodologies across Education and Technology.
Outcome	By collaborating the two disciplines, the outcome of the research benefits the intimate partners to learn some of the causes, impact, and resolutions of their violence. For the economics, a boarder perspective to look at what causes intimate partners violence (E.g., gender inequality in family and workplace, socio-economic status) and how the violence may have a negative impact to the socio-economic environment.	By collaborating the two disciplines, the outcome of the research benefits students and professors on teaching and learning using remote learning as virtual classroom delivery during the pandemic.

Ranganathan et al., 2021 ‘s recent study used a cross-disciplinary approach to look at intimate partner violence from two disciplines – Public Health and Economics. The study explained the cause of violence and how it is being studied by the discipline of Public Health from intrapersonal to the interpersonal level where it involves the experience of intimate partners to their emotions and mental wellness. In addition, the discipline of Economics looks at the impact of violence from the community health to the society level where it involves gender norms to gender discriminatory policies. The researchers of this cross-disciplinary study explained the efforts to understand and address intimate partner violence would benefit when the two disciplines integrated closely and combined the best practices of the two fields (Ranganathan et al., 2021).

The research (Ranganathan et al., 2021) argued that there are some theoretical differences that includes literatures, analytic approach and objective to understand violence. Public health scholars used a wide variety of behavioural and psychological factors to explain and predict the cause of violence and how it may create relationship issues of the intimate partners. For economics, scholars explored the evaluation of macro-economic forces, economic challenge and opportunities, legal and gender issues from violence. Forging this cross-disciplinary path, the research presents opportunities for scholars from both disciplines to join forces on the study of violence and its prevention. Integration of the two disciplines helps to develop collaborations. A broad approach from the collaborations would move toward including factors motivated by public health and economic model, but also learn from cases across the disciplines and methodologies. Like a research programme. this is a good example to explain the methodology and benefits from a cross-disciplinary approach of two disciplines. It allows scholars to recognize there can be common areas (E.g., Opportunities and Challenges) when two disciplines are identified and integrated to solve complex problems.

Another research is the cross-disciplinary study by Houghton et al., 2021 's study explained the transition to remote learning (Educational Technology) from two key perspectives on Education and Technology. The education perspective explained the importance of remote learning during the pandemic and the study address the need of students and challenges when implementing remote learning. The technology perspective explored the importance of privacy in remote learning and aim to optimize how the educational technology enhance the communication in the learning environment.

The authors Houghton et al argued that expanding the study in educational technology enhanced student's learning experience including cross disciplinary perspectives adds richness to the research. The cross-disciplinary study began by recognizing the challenges from traditional classroom teaching to remote education across many academic disciplines. There are common challenges in the four areas: a) understanding student's needs; b) correcting errors; c) reduced privacy and d) reduced spontaneity. In the methodology of the research, the authors explained the integration of literatures from different fields, addressing student's needs under education policy

and technological challenges (E.g., Privacy) and recommendations for educators to encourage further collaborative research across disciplinary boundaries in educational research.

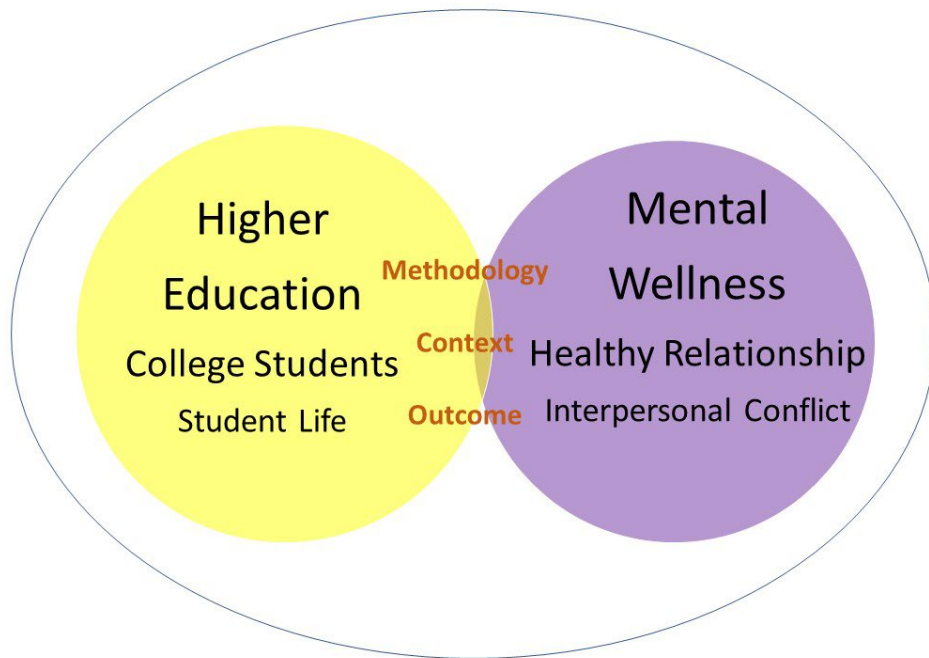
Although the pandemic has created serious threats to the learning community where many educators have to use variety of educational technology for students' remote learning that poses many challenges, the transition to remote teaching has also bring opportunities to colleges and universities to advance their teaching and learning strategies. The benefits of this study of using a cross-disciplinary approach on educational technology where educational innovation during this period will have a long-term impact. Educational technology will be used far more extensively moving forward with accompanying opportunities for educators to develop. This is a good example to understand the design of the cross-disciplinary approach that allows scholars to examine the teaching procedural knowledge, overcome learning barriers and embrace new ways of teaching and learning. By sharing insights from other educators from across disciplines who specialise in their application of knowledge, scholars provide valuable insights that benefits students and college administrators on remote learning.

### ***Section 2.5 How does my study on Health and Education fall into the Cross-disciplinary Approach?***

My cross-disciplinary study incorporates interpersonal conflict principles and research, with education components focusing on student life, the outcome of such research is beneficial to the health and mental wellness of students. College life is an important component of the higher education experience. Colleges and Universities' Student Affairs offices have long been the main source of support in terms of student relations, student life, and student development. Other than dealing with academic concerns, many universities also provide student wellness services, including individual counselling. Moreover, student affairs professionals have to deal with numerous student- and institution-related issues such as campus safety, student mental wellness, shrinking budgets, and declining enrolment. These concerns are a testimony to the profoundly dehumanizing culture neoliberalism plunged higher education in (Dawson, 2020). Figure 2.2 illustrates how cross-disciplinary research incorporating a discussion of methodology, context, and outcomes helps to view and integrate one discipline from the perspective of the other.

**Figure 2.2**

**Cross-disciplinary Framework of Mental Wellness and Higher Education**



Interpersonal conflict is an important area of study because learning to respond to and resolve conflicts can help students maintain better relationships with those, they meet throughout their college life, as well as with their family and future work colleagues. How individuals respond to (interpersonal) conflict depends on their family background, sense of values, and culture. Perceptions about conflict—whether it is something negative that needs to be avoided or something positive to be sought out—develop over students’ lifetime (Colbeck et al., 2000).

**Table 2.4***Forging My Cross-disciplinary Study Path*

<b>Cross-disciplinary Study on Interpersonal Conflict</b>	<b>Health Discipline</b>	<b>Education Discipline</b>	<b>Health and Education</b>
Knowledge and Experience	Myself as a Resident Fellow at the University. One of the responsibilities is to provide student consultations and ensure student discipline, as well as organizing different developmental programs in the college. Received Mental wellness First Aid Certificate by the Students Affair Office, University.	Researcher (my-self) has been in higher education over 12 years in teaching and programme administration.	Integration across the two disciplines to address the research problem.
Literature Review	Literatures from Conflict, Interpersonal relationship, Social	Literatures from Higher Education, College life, Residential college, and Student affairs	Strengthen the evidence by collaborating literatures across

	psychology and Mental wellness		the two key disciplines
Methodology	The study of interpersonal conflict of college students at the individual level (E.g., such as cause and consequence of interpersonal conflict of students in the college environment)	A broad perspective to look at the impact of interpersonal conflict of college students in the university and support from college to address related issues.	The design of the research drawing knowledge across both disciplines and the methodologies.
Results	My research propose culture is manifested determines the meaning of human relationship with conflict behaviour. The theoretical framework of my study presents a significant level of correlation between human relationships (interdependency) including communicating emotions	My research propose colleges and universities should be institutions for acquiring important skills like interpersonal conflict management skills. Interpersonal conflict in an educational setting has been characterised by incivility, verbal and physical aggression, and property destruction.	Interpersonal conflict management skills will help minimise the damage and reoccurrence of conflicts in college life

	(behavioural emotions) and conflict handling (conflict management style)—and conflict.		
Recommendations	My research suggests that students must take part in various peer-mediation and conflict resolution programmes that are offered by the college. Managing conflict and disagreements in a constructive manner is one of the most vital skills students should possess	My research suggests that the acts of violence and interpersonal conflict that students experience in their college life offer them a perfect opportunity to learn positive conflict management techniques. There is a need for college administrators and counsellors to continue to respond to such issues by providing school-based conflict resolution programmes which could help students learn how to approach interpersonal conflicts constructively	Recommendation for Students, College administrators and Counsellors in the aspect of College Life, and Mental Wellness in a cross-disciplinary approach
Challenges	Some students do not want to share or reflect the negative	Interpersonal conflict of college students is often overlooked by college	A traditional Doctoral research programme that is

	experience as this is consider as bad memories	administrators because it is not considered as a mental illness but only part of mental wellness	not designed or targeted for Interdisciplinary study
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Furthermore, the move towards cross-disciplinary research has made researchers recognise that the complexity of education-related issues could not be effectively addressed by one discipline alone (Belton & Priyadharshini, 2007). Researchers such as Jackson (2005) and Plano Clark (2005) talk about the importance of carrying out cross-disciplinary research in education, pointing to the inherent complexity of the field. As such, combining the disciplines of health and education leads to an extension of the field of education itself. Concepts of education and health are developed and linked, and a wide range of empirical studies to clarify pathways of linkage and explore implications. Fundamental educational expertise and skills, including reasoning ability, emotional self-regulation, and interactional abilities, are critical components of health. Moreover, education is a fundamental social determinant of health – an upstream cause of health. Cross-disciplinary programs that close gaps in educational outcomes between ethnic groups and it can collaborate to implement educational programs and policies for which systematic evidence indicates clear health education benefits. For example, Adelman & Taylor (1999) explained that cross-disciplinary research in the field of health and education is part of a university health education initiative that supports:

- a. the integration of practice education processes across health and human service programs,
- b. attends to common practice education issues,
- c. builds capacity for collaborative practice, and
- d. supports the development, implementation, and evaluation of interprofessional
- e. learning opportunities in practice

Putting it all together, my position on the research is that my cross-disciplinary study looks at the integration on the areas of interpersonal conflict as an important part of the mental wellness of college students. Although every experience has the potential to educate, educators that integrate college life with student’s conflict experience and their development is to impart specific conflict



management skills and mental wellness knowledge. For higher education, at the macro-level, the research explains and give recommendations to college administrators and counsellors in the aspect of college life, and mental wellness in a cross-disciplinary approach. Moreover, at the micro-level, my study using a cross-disciplinary approach provides an opportunity for the involved college students to reflect on and learn productive means of conflict management. The college students had the opportunity to re-think the following:

- d. their relationships with people,
- e. their ways of communicating emotions in conflict situations, and
- f. their conflict management style to develop a positive mindset towards effective conflict-handling behaviours.

In addition, my cross-disciplinary research on health and education is based on this model (Table 2.4) to shape my research methods. To strengthen the evidence, a summary of points on how my study applied the cross-disciplinary approach:

- Knowledge and Experience: Integration across the two disciplines to address the research problem. For instance, throughout the research, I integrated my work experience from higher education on communication with students and my knowledge on mental wellness (E.g., conflict management in their college life) as the foundation for this study.
- Literature Review: Strengthen the evidence by collaborating literatures across the two key disciplines. For the mental wellness discipline, a collection of literature reading on conflict, interpersonal relationship, culture and social psychology. For the higher education discipline, a collection of literature reading was incorporated and discussed together with college life, residential college and student affairs.
- Methodology: The design of the research drawing knowledge across both disciplines and the methodologies. Integrating the study on interpersonal conflicting of college students at a micro-level to study from student's communication behaviour and their conflict style. The boarder perspective on higher education to look at how conflict has impact on student's college life / student affairs.
- Results: Interpersonal conflict management skills will help minimise the damage and reoccurrence of conflicts in college life. One of the results is to propose culture is manifested determines the meaning of human relationship with conflict behaviour. The study of the

results presents a significant level of correlation between human relationships including communicating emotions and conflict handling. Incorporating the higher education discipline, my research further propose colleges should be the institutions for acquiring important skills like interpersonal conflict management.

- **Recommendations:** Suggestions for students, college administrators and counsellors in the aspect of college life, and mental wellness in a cross-disciplinary approach. At the individual level, my research suggests that students must take part in various peer-mediation and conflict resolution programmes that are offered by the college. Managing conflict and disagreements in a constructive manner is one of the most vital skills students should possess. Incorporating college life elements, my research proposes that college is the learning platform for acquiring important interpersonal communication skills and maintain health relationships with others for a better mental wellness.
- **Challenges:** At the individual level, some students do not want to share or reflect the negative experience as this is considered as their bad memories. Another challenge is to explain the importance of how interpersonal conflict of college students is often overlooked by college administrators because it is not considered as a mental illness but only part of mental wellness. The greatest challenge is to explain how a traditional doctoral research programme that is not designed or targeted for interdisciplinary research but managed to complete it as a cross-disciplinary study.

### ***Section 2.6 The Context of My Cross-disciplinary Study***

Integrating the health and higher education together may foster creative thinking about the cross-disciplinary connections between interpersonal conflict and student life and be a way of engaging students and deepening the understanding of the interpersonal conflict-related issues (Caruana & Ploner, 2010). Literature readings from mental wellness demonstrates the important role of factors that are often not included in education models of interpersonal conflict. It is important to consider the relevant dimensions for answering my specific research questions on health education. For example, acceptability of interpersonal conflict as part of mental wellness in the education model may be omitted as it is not treated as an illness. The omission may limit how college administrators provide resources and guidance to support students facing interpersonal

conflict in their college life. Education study aims to understand the impact that interpersonal conflict can cause to students in a broader perspective. This may include education policies and student affairs functions and other dimensions that may shape the impact of interpersonal conflict in the educational setting. A broader approach from the lens of education may move towards which motivated by the education models but also drawing knowledge from both disciplines and their methodologies.

Colleges and universities play a fundamental role in helping students improve their interpersonal communication and interaction skills in order to set the standard for happy, healthy relationships in their families and workplaces (Pianta et al., 2012). This research allowed me to provide some recommendations on how to help college and university students build and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships:

- Encourage students to get involved with student groups. By joining student organizations, students can have many opportunities to learn more about themselves, their goals, and their strengths. Students can also learn from others about how to handle certain situations, such as interpersonal conflict. Getting involved will give students a chance to meet new people with different values, lifestyles, and backgrounds. College is a place of new encounters and possibilities.
- Familiarise yourself with the developmental theories related to college students. First-year college students in their emerging adulthood years must make a very big adjustment when they start college. Showing empathy and understanding their need is critical when assisting them in their student life.
- Encourage students to resolve their own conflicts. Although conflict is inevitable, colleges nowadays offer a set of comprehensive resources to help students address disputes and other related problems. Students need to be prepared to prevent, manage, or resolve interpersonal conflicts without harming themselves or others. The aim is to empower students to successfully navigate the entire spectrum of interpersonal relationships. Whenever possible, students should be encouraged to handle conflict on their own or with the help of Student Affairs office resources.
- Encourage students to seek help in resolving conflicts when necessary. Help them learn to recognise emotional triggers and manage them in healthy ways, such as with mindful

activities, movement, or reflection. When conflicts do arise, provide students with the opportunity to resolve their issues together, with your help, through a peace-making process.

### ***Section 2.7 Conclusion***

Over the years, the terms of cross-disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and multi-disciplinary have been used rhetorically and interchangeably; however, understanding the differences between them is important to put them to the appropriate use (Huutoniemi, et al., 2010). Many researchers use the word "interdisciplinarity" loosely to include cross-, multi and interdisciplinary approaches. To avoid the misinterpretation, there has to be a clear distinction in the educational setting. In this chapter, my study identified the features of three types of research programmes to illustrate a better understanding how scholars should not misinterpret using the disciplinary terms for postgraduate research programme if the graduate school does not have the interdisciplinary academic curriculum, provides interdisciplinary training and mentorship and incorporating an interdisciplinary supervisor committee to support the outcome of these programmes. Perhaps only a cross-disciplinary study is applicable if the researcher can apply the integration of the two disciplines from his or her expertise without the collaboration of other researchers and academics in his or her doctoral study.

The college environment is a learning platform for students to gain the interpersonal conflict skills and understand how interpersonal relationship is important to them. When students consider the number of lifestyle changes that happen from high school graduate to an incoming college freshman, they are adapting to a new environment with hundreds of strangers and learning how to successfully live independently. (Rachal et al., 2007).

Eimers (2001) explained that in times of change, especially the extreme change that comes with starting college, everything in life seems to be spinning out of control. Their friends are moving all across the country, everyone is meeting new people and expanding their circles, and it is very easy to get caught up in the commotion of a new life in a new place. It is very easy to let past relationships fall through the cracks, especially with those who you used to see every day, but now have to make an effort to stay in contact with. It is the extent of that effort that can make or

break a relationship, especially in the college environment. When everyone is running in their own respective circles, it becomes increasingly difficult to make those circles cross paths. (p.375)

From my college life experience as a lecturer and resident fellow, I concur with Eimers' explanation on how college students face many new challenges in a new environment that they have to learn about academic achievement, management of time, interpersonal communication and preserve healthy relationship where they can move on in their four years of college life. Although students will need to cope with stress and struggle on relationships with others, this is part of their experiential learning in the college life. To learn about conflict management and resolution, the college administrators and school professionals will have to provide support along the way in this developmental process of students' mental wellness.

In conclusion, the cross-disciplinary study on health and education not only provides materials for further research in the education settings, but also contributes to integrating two disciplines to the research framework on interpersonal conflict. By understanding the issues related to the handling of interpersonal conflict, educators and counsellors can facilitate programmes and workshops that benefit all our students. It is hoped that this research will stimulate further cross-disciplinary works in the field of health and education.

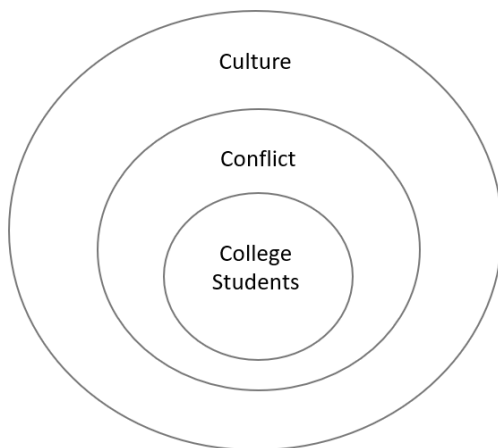
## Chapter 3 Literature Review

### *Section 3.1 Introduction*

This cross-disciplinary study on health and education explores the presence of conflict among students at a Hong Kong college, and it aims to facilitate the mental wellness management of interpersonal conflict in educational settings. Responding to the research questions, this chapter is devoted to a discussion of culture for a more constructive study perspective, mainly in the interpersonal conflict context. As shown in the following theoretical framework (Figure 3.1), I have organized this chapter into three main sections, which drove me towards an understanding of culture and conflict among college students. Thus, the way culture influences interpersonal conflict behaviour, with an introduction to the various definitions of culture, interpretation of conflict, and looking at what culture has to do with interpersonal conflict in an educational setting, will be discussed in the following sections.

#### **Figure 3.1**

*The basic framework of the literature review*



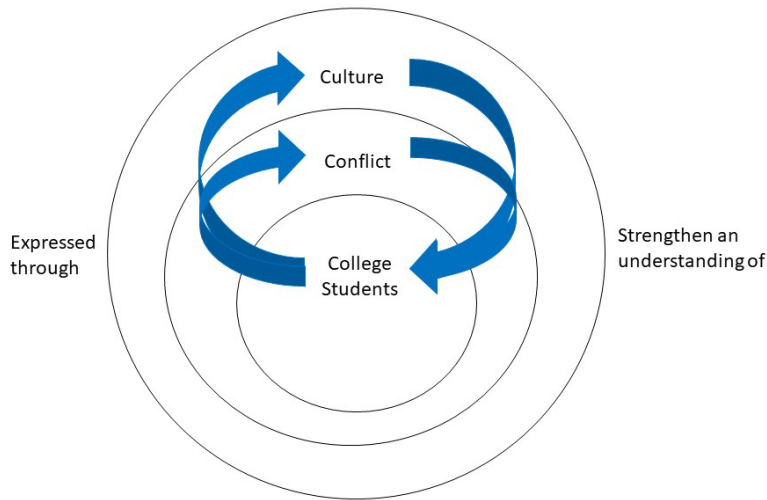
### ***Section 3.2 Methodology of the Literature Review***

The research asked a central question to unfold the conflict behaviour of college students through the study of culture and how these cultural norms shaped the formulation of interpersonal conflict management. The outcome was to propose a theoretical framework that shows how individuals can understand interpersonal conflict better through the lens of cultural factors, specifically in a collectivist cultural context. This chapter provides an overview of relevant literature that mainly focuses on collectivist culture about interpersonal conflict and identifies the research gaps, which shows the importance of taking cultural awareness and conflict management practices into consideration. The narrative approach of the literature readings provides a theoretical framework for presenting the research questions, building up the conceptual model, and collecting required data from participants (i.e., the college students) to verify the cultural context model and answer the research questions (Paré et al., 2015).

To synthesize the literature readings on culture and conflict, the study applied the narrative approach and thematic analysis to classify the attachment relationship of the three themes: (1) Culture, (2) Conflict, and (3) College Students. The extended framework (Figure 3.2) illustrates how the process of understanding student behaviour is strengthened through interpersonal conflict and how conflict behaviours are expressed through cultural norms. Retrospectively, the layers of the framework illustrate the notion of culture by which a culture coherently and cohesively inculcates cultural norms at each level of conflict behaviour expression of college students: (1) Interdependency, (2) Emotions, (3) Face Concept, (4) Conflict Management Style, (5) Interpersonal Relationship and (6) College Life. Thus, the research engaged in studying the aspects of the collectivist culture that allowed the above themes (Deutsch, 2000). In this research, the manifestation of culture determines the meaning for people (e.g., college students) of the conflict practices and represent the deeper, underlying level of culture.

**Figure 3.2**

*The extended theoretical framework of the literature review*



### ***Section 3.3 Cultural Context: Definitions of Culture***

The construct of culture is one of the building blocks of this study. Perhaps the study of culture has created confusion because of the involvement and interest of multiple disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology, in clarifying this topic (Schneider, 1988). Consequently, culture emerges as a highly complex concept with numerous definitions and conceptualizations (Lu, 2006). Like most abstract terms, the conceptualization as well as the operationalization of culture remains problematic and challenging (Silverthorne, 2005; Thomas 2008; Laungani, 2007). A broad definition of culture is that it is a “human-made part of the environment” (Triandis, 2002). For psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists, values are at the core of culture, and an emphasis on values is a cultural assessment within the anthropological tradition. Values, which are manifested at the individual and collective levels, are also emphasized as the building blocks of culture by authors in management (Hofstede, 2001).

Research by Maznevski (2002) analysed dimensions formerly measured at the cultural level at the individual level, and the scales they developed revealed consistent results with earlier studies (e.g., Hofstede, 1984; 2001). Similarly, in a recent study, Erez and Gati (2004) proposed a multi-level model of culture that represents the nested structure of culture from the most macro level and down to the representation of culture at the individual level. Fisher (2009) argued that the “link between the proposed theoretical level of culture and the operationalization, sampling and data analysis of



individual is always unclear”. Fisher (2009) further suggested a necessity for developing multi-level theories that address the linkage between phenomena at different levels. It is vital for researchers to answer whether their interest is to describe a collection of individuals or to describe collective phenomena (Fisher, 2009). This study corresponds with Fisher’s philosophy that culture is multi-dimensional. By adopting Fisher’s collective phenomena on multi-level theories, an extended framework has been introduced in this research (Figure 3.2), which is about the relationships among culture, conflict, and educational setting, with a focus on the collectivist culture context.

Culture is a group-level phenomenon, but it influences individuals’ perceptions, values, and behaviour as well (Lu et al., 2011). At the beginning of the 1980s, Hofstede’s study introduced the idea of individualistic and collectivist culture and has dominated it since by providing the first theoretical analysis of culture (Peterson, 2007). Hofstede offered “the integrative theory” by “providing a taxonomy of dimensions for understanding culture by linking the taxonomy to an established theory of social functions” (Peterson, 2007). Although the study of Hofstede was vital to the development of a cross-cultural theory of values, his study is argued to be data-driven without proposing an integrative and universal theory of values (Thomas, 2000). Some recent conceptualizations within the dimension paradigm are the “Globe Project” (with a focus on organizational behaviour), which is a large-scale project involving more than 160 researchers around the world (Castillo-Palacio et al., 2017). Like Hofstede’s study, the “Globe project” includes Hofstede’s dimensions (illustrated in Table 3.1) and human orientation. The project was perceived as a helpful update to Hofstede’s dimension (Parboteeah et al., 2005).

Much of the current cultural literature has been mainly addressing culture as a collection of cultural dimensions (Javidan et al., 2006). As culture is a complex phenomenon, various dimensions have been introduced by many researchers, and newer publications will be introduced in the future. Nonetheless, an important aspect of culture that has gained little attention in the literature is the “gestalt of cultures” (Javidan et al., 2006). Culture is not a single entity that we can measure without learning and applying the dimensions that are involved for examination. Although the cultural dimensions relationship is difficult to study, it helps to explain questions about culture and has important conflict management implications. For instance, the current literature on collectivist

culture and interpersonal conflict is mainly interpreted from the Western academic perspective, and perhaps they did not fully capture the collectivist cultural ideas. Furthermore, viewing conflictual issues through a lens that considers cultural factors is important, as there have been tremendous cultural shifts in values, lifestyle, and language globally. Current research asserts that in a world of globalization, perhaps we should understand cultures in diverse terms and refrain from a generalized representation of cultures in singular terms.

### ***Section 3.3.1 Cultural Dimensions and Descriptions***

Since the 1970s, culture has been a variable ignored in college studies, with a limited number of theoretical and descriptive culture studies (Aycan, 2006). Researchers and practitioners have overlooked the societal and cultural context of theories and practices (Hofstede, 2001). The emerging field of conflict management should consider the global dimension of the education setting. In an education setting, problems often emerge when the honeymoon period of a new school year wears off, and the midterm begins. As the workload intensifies and more engagement with different college activities occurs, the waitlist at counselling centres grows longer. Students' struggles with mental wellness are exacerbated by the conflict and anxiety of campus life.

Moreover, the research undertaken by Frost et al. (2012) found that safe and organized educational environments are critical for enhancing learning standards; a climate of safety along with order allows students to reach their full potential. Other than learning conflict management skills in college settings, it is also important for students to manage conflicts in real life because conflicts can also take place in the work environment (Chung, 2001). Thus, the presence of conflict amongst students may pose a negative influence on the attainment of institutional objectives and contribute to their negative emotional and social development. The ability to manage and resolve interpersonal conflicts among students in learning institutions has been linked to social development, good problem-solving skills, and emotional security (Gestwicki, 2013). Gonzalez-Mena (2012) concluded after carrying out a study in the United States that students can start to act as peace mediators as early as in their teenage years by addressing conflict within their own family through student counselling centres, schools, and neighbourhoods.

**Table 3.1***Cultural Dimensions and Description*

<b>Cultural Dimension</b>	<b>Description</b>
<i>Power distance (House et al., 1999, p.192)</i>	The degree to which members of an organization or society expect and agree that power should be unequally shared.
<i>Collectivism (House, et al., 1999, p.192; Hofstede, 1980, p.171)</i>	The degree to which organizational and societal institutional norms and practices encourage and reward collective distribution of resources and collective action. The extent to which people place importance to extended families or clans, which protect them in exchange for loyalty. The 'in-group' – 'out-group' difference is salient.
<i>Uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1980, p.140)</i>	The extent to which people in an organization or society considered uncertainty inherent in life as a continuous threat that must be fought. There is high avoidance of deviant and different persons and ideas.
<i>Femininity (Hofstede, 1980, p.205)</i>	The degree to which people in an organization or society values interpersonal harmony more than money and achievement; gender roles are fluid.
<i>Future orientation (House, et al., 1999, p.192)</i>	The degree to which individuals in organizations or societies engage in future-oriented behaviors such as planning, investing in the future, and delaying gratification.
<i>Performance orientation (House, et al., 1999, p.192)</i>	The extent to which an organization or society encourages and rewards group members for performance improvement and excellence.
<i>Assertiveness (House, et al., 1999, p.192)</i>	The degree to which individuals are assertive, confrontational and aggressive in their relationships with others.
<i>Gender Egalitarianism (House, et al., 1999, p.192)</i>	The degree to which a collective minimizes gender inequality.
<i>Humane Orientation (House, et al., 1999, p.192)</i>	The degree to which a collective encourages and rewards individuals for being fair, altruistic, generous, caring and kind to others.
<i>Universalism (Trompenaars, 1993, p.46)</i>	The extent to which an organization or society strives for consistency and uniform procedures, institutes formal ways of changing the way business is conducted, seeks fairness by treating all like cases in the same way.
<i>Specificity (Trompenaars, 1993, p.90)</i>	The degree to which private and business agendas are kept separated; clear, precise and detailed instructions are seen as assuring better compliance.
<i>Ascription (Trompenaars, 1993, p.105)</i>	The degree to which status is accorded on the basis of social class, family background, educational background, or titles, rather than merit or achievement.

*Note. Adapted from Aycan, Z. (2005). The interplay between cultural and institutional/structural contingencies in human resource management practices. The International Journal of Human Resource Management, 16(7), 1083-1119. Copyright by 2005 The International Journal of Human Resource Management*

Due to the increase in cross-cultural contact in the education setting because of globalization, the pervasive effect of culture on college students must be revealed to enhance our understanding of conflict management practices. To achieve this aim, first, we need a clear definition, which is challenging, as is how to measure it. It is argued that culture should be best expressed as “the interactions of values, attitudes and behavioural assumptions of a society” (Thomas, 2008). Despite the various definitions, reducing the analysis to the study of values (intangible) has provided much of our understanding of cultural variation (Thomas, 2008). Thus, culture can be described as a set of shared mental representations by a particular social group about the way things ought to be or how one should behave (Hofstede, 2007).

### ***Section 3.4 What is Interpersonal Conflict?***

Interpersonal conflicts cover a wide range of issues (Canary & Dainton, 2003). Individuals can choose different strategies to manage confrontations based on the circumstances. For instance, there is a tendency to speak in ways that might avoid hurting others or make them lose face in many collectivist or Asian societies because otherwise, the results could be demoralizing to others (Hinds & Bailey, 2003). Putnam and Wilson (1982) carried out a cross-cultural study that investigated conflicts and asked the study respondents to describe situations in which they were participants in a dispute or to think of a hypothetical case; researchers then measured the reaction with the Rahim Organizational Conflict Inventory–II (ROCI-II) scale (as per Rahim (1983)) or a related scale such as the Organizational Conflict Communication Instrument (OCCI; Putnam & Wilson, 1982). These scales are designed to measure five independent cultural dimensions of the different styles of handling interpersonal conflict (Table 3.2): Collaborating, Competing, Compromising, Accommodating, and Avoiding.

According to Rahim et al. (2018), conflict styles are patterned responses or clusters of behaviour that people use in conflict. The five styles show different levels of concern for self and others. The variety of styles and their impact on relationships help to expose the fundamental orientation to conflict, which is avoidance or engagement. Both avoidance and engagement are acceptable options in different scenarios. However, many believe that avoidance is the lack of overt conflict and exiting the relationship. For instance, a student of mine (Karen, pseudonym) once wrote a

description of avoidance in a self-reflection report. “I prefer not to confront with conflicts because it hurts people’s relationship. I do not know how to handle those problems and want to just run away.”

**Table 3.2**

*Five Conflict Management Styles*

Collaborating	Openly exchanging information and examining differences to reach a win-win solution
Competing	Forcing acceptance of a position whilst ignoring the needs of the other party
Compromising	Both parties surrendering something to reach a mutually acceptable solution
Accommodating	Diminishing differences and emphasising commonalities to satisfy the other party while sacrificing your own concerns
Avoiding	Sidestepping issues and not addressing conflicts

*Note. Adapted from Rahim, M. A., Psenicka, C., Nicolopoulos, A. G., & Antonioni, D. (2018). Relationships Of Leader Power To Subordinates’ Styles Of Handling Conflict and Organizational Commitment: A Comparison Between The US and Greece. In Current Topics in Management (pp. 187-204). Routledge. Copyright by 2018 Routledge.*

Whether avoidance is productive or destructive generally depends on the cultural context (Komarraju et al., 2008). In collectivist cultures, to avoid a conflict, people will tend to talk about how to heal wounds and solve the conflict in indirect ways. The individual is “more concerned with the group’s needs, goals (Feng, Chang and Holt, 2011). Thus, avoidance of conflict serves more complicated functions in collectivist cultures (e.g., Chinese and Japanese) such that avoidance represents “indirect working through”. The five styles will be further discussed in the next section – the cultural influence on conflict.

### ***Section 3.4.1 Cultural Influence on Conflict***

In this section, a discussion will be carried out on how culture influences conflict management. Smith et al. (2002) argued that cultural dimensions result in five ways to handle interpersonal conflicts (Table 3.2): collaborating, competing, compromising, accommodating, and avoiding. In communication behaviours, public self-consciousness, such as shyness and fearfulness, can give people the perception of avoidant behaviour in interpersonal conflict. Of the few studies carried out in relation to this area is one by Purohit and Simmers (2006), who examined the relationship between uncertainty avoidance and the decision to exhibit a unique conflict pattern. In response, studies such as Hofstede (2010) show that uncertainty avoidance is positively related to a dominating style for managing conflict and undoubtedly related to face-to-face conflict that makes it difficult to choose an appropriate conflict management style. In line with theoretical predictions, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) found that uncertainty avoidance is negatively related to integrating and certainly related to obliging as a conflict management style. Contrary to hypothesized expectations, Hofstede (2010) found a correlation between people who are not ready for intimate relationships and uncertainty avoidance in addition to the use of avoiding as a conflict-handling style. In contrast to expectations, Minkov (2007) observed that those from a culture that is more inclined towards uncertainty avoidance use problem solving for decisions much less regularly than those from a culture with less uncertainty avoidance. The findings of earlier research work taken together might be due to a small sample size of countries and have relied on statistics to determine whether a certain country has high or low levels of a specific cultural dimension (Smith et al., 2008).

Previous research has examined the context for the decision to use specific conflict-handling styles, and researchers have argued that individuals may avoid situations that are too challenging for them (Hofstede, 2010). Hofstede (2010) believed that those who are inclined to avoid uncertainty choose to resolve conflict by integrating and compromising because the desire for win-to-win situations, which will offer them some of the things that they need, will make the outcome of a deep conflict predictable, which, in turn, reduces uncertainty. The argument testifies to the points provided in Hofstede et al. (2010) for the need to recognize variations in conflict and in the parties involved in the process.

The results of conflicts can differ when the conflicts take place in different situations (Hofstede, 2010). Thus, those who score high on uncertainty avoidance might also wish to avoid conflict situations. This means that the ability to manage conflict will allow a better assessment of the compromise that is necessary to reach an acceptable response or answer. With reference to students, those who choose dominating styles of conflict management use confrontational and aggressive strategies and ignore the needs and expectations of the less dominating or more passive students (Minkov, 2011). The passive students would feel stressed and perceive the dominating students to be overly straightforward. A dominating conflict-handling style is probably more powerful in finding an answer if the reason for the conflict is less important to the alternative party, or if those who use a dominating conflict-handling style are more powerful, the dominant strategies offer a win/lose situation, which means that one party would benefit while the other would lose out. As a result, the party using competitive tactics will try to gain an advantage over the other (Hofstede, 2010). Thus, it is anticipated that those who exhibit high levels of uncertainty avoidance will not use a dominating conflict style.

Integrating different styles of conflict management, including problem-solving and change, will provide the right solutions that are ideal for the involved parties. Taylor (2010) supported the notion that obliging as a form of conflict management focuses on the commonalities of an event and the reduction of choices and differences so that conflict management occurs at the right place and time. Integrating and accommodating behaviours are focused strategies in conflict resolution, along with controlling and managing emotions. Taylor (2010) noted that the way to reach key objectives is to conform to common hopes and expectations, as in other types of celebratory events, such as first dates or wedding anniversaries, which might be otherwise taken for granted. Hofstede (2010) agreed that there is a compromising mode to address conflict. This compromising mode can be considered as a blended approach to cope with accounts of truth, in that each conflict event will then result in compromising something to find ways of handling issues in an acceptable manner that applies strategies of conflict management. Jordan and Troth (2004) carried out a study that recognizes emotional intelligence and culture-free dimensions as determinants in how individuals choose to deal with conflict styles when they are in a conflict. Thus, interpersonal conflicts are often perceived as personal attacks and, as a result, are frequently emotionally charged. Culturally based disturbances may heighten emotions, as asserted by Mukhtar and Habib (2010),

and then in the process, lead to a decrease in, for instance, job pleasure, or reduce motivation and overall performance (Coelho, 2011).

Hofstede and Minkov (2010) explained that popular and individual options of dealing with conflicts, especially those that are subculture precise, are premised on beliefs. They hypothesized an increase in linkage to culture-free dimensions with the general tendency that the character of a person prefers some conflict management styles over others. In the literature, several approaches that consider subcultures are provided to determine and measure the impact of a way of life on different outcomes towards conflict. Hofstede (1980; 2001) has been criticized for his bias, the problems with his cultural dimensions, and his neglect of differences in cultural understanding (Schwartz, 2007; Smith, 2008). Concepts that are related to the management of conflict prior to adopting certain ways of living are used in the literature to give relevance to the cultural dimensions of Hofstede on conflict resolution (e.g., college students) (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005) and conflict handling styles in unique contexts (Coelho, 2011). Then, to embed their evaluation into the framework of current studies and instil relevance to earlier studies into their evaluation, Soares et al. (2007) made use of the cultural dimensions of Hofstede for evaluating conflicts and the underlying resolution and conflict styles. Nevertheless, there are some criticisms around the use of cultural dimensions when gathering authentic primary data at the individual level, and thus Hofstede's scoring (2001) and use of the cultural dimensions (Hofstede et al., 2010) are no longer relied upon. The way of life – that is, the “collective programming of minds which distinguishes one group from any other” (Hofstede, 2001) – establishes the primary values and norms of a society. Thus, the concept of tradition per Hofstede (2001) consists of five cultural dimensions: individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and short-term versus long-term orientation to differentiate cultures (Minkov, 2011).

In terms of the collectivist culture, Leung (1988) provided a contrast of Chinese and American conflict styles. Using self-reporting data, he found that the Chinese are more likely to pursue a conflict with a non-acquaintance than an acquaintance if the issue is serious; that is, they would take a stranger to court. But Americans would be more likely than Chinese to take a friend to court if the situation warranted them to do so. Contrary to earlier research, a study by Lee and Rogan (1991) surprisingly found that Koreans are more confrontational than Americans. However, there



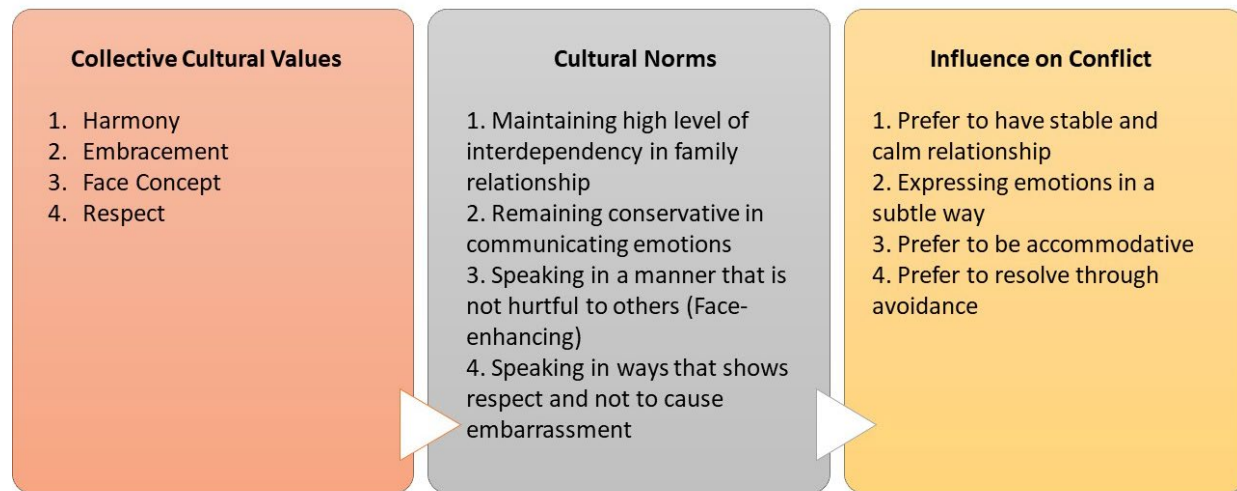
are still situations where avoiding is necessary. Lee (2011) found that the use of a non-confrontational style in Korea depends on the status of the other person and becomes more prevalent with the increasing power of the other party. The American participants in their study, however, did not change their behaviour based on the perceived power of the other party.

The participants in a study on Chinese American females by Hassan (2011) were found to use more direct controlling strategies. They assumed control over the conflict and persistently argued their point of view more so than the Caucasian females. The Caucasian females, on the other hand, adopted more solution-oriented conflict styles. The Chinese Americans predominantly use conflict strategies similar to those used by Caucasian men – they avoided or withdrew from relationship conflict and preferred to maintain silence about their differences or refrained from emphasizing them (McDaniel & Ota, 2017). Triandis et al. (2017) also concluded that during the management of interpersonal conflicts, students from collectivistic cultures appear to apply cultural styles that include approval seeking or shielding the group from individual interests. In short, these cross-cultural studies help to strengthen my understanding of how the collectivist culture serves complicated functions and definitions in this research.

The process of the literature review has given me a good opportunity to look at the notion of culture and specifically the influence of collectivist culture on conflict. To summarize the first part of the chapter, I designed the collectivist cultural context model (Figure 3.3) to illustrate the collective cultural context on interpersonal conflict. The formation of this lens model provides a framework for viewing how culture shapes conflict behaviours: (1) Interdependency, (2) Emotions, (3) Face Concept, and (4) Avoidance.

**Figure 3.3**

*Collectivist Cultural Context Model – Hong Kong Chinese Culture*



Thus, a collectivist conflict model aims to provide students and teachers with a more in-depth understanding of the importance of developing life skills. Johnson and Johnson (1996) claimed that students could improve their interpersonal conflict skills through mediation training workshops. Other important factors also emerged from their study, including the fact that conflict resolution shifts the responsibilities of the lecturers so that they can focus more on teaching and less on disciplinary actions in the college setting. In addition to enhancing the problem-solving, critical thinking, and listening skills of the students, interpersonal conflict management promotes co-existence in a multicultural environment. For instance, Worchel (2005) explained that cultural groups cannot co-exist without conflict and confrontation because regardless of the similarity of their beliefs, they are still different in their own values and beliefs.

Hammer (2015) noted that in collectivistic cultures, an avoidance style of managing conflict is often used to maintain relational harmony and reflects a deep concern for the self. Ting-Toomey and Dorjee (2018) found that Chinese and Taiwanese respondents in their study were highly avoidant compared to those from the United States, Korea, and Japan. Additionally, the Japanese, Taiwanese, and Chinese participants were more obliging than those from the United States and Korea. Similarly, Triandis (2018) observed that Japanese participants in their study were more likely to avoid confrontation with their close acquaintances and friends than Americans, and Trubisky et al. (1991) indicated that the Taiwanese participants in their study were more obliging,

integrating, compromising, and avoiding when compared to the American participants. Wang et al. (2018) found that the Hong Kong Chinese tend to compromise with avoiding as the next most preferred conflict style. Their finding concurs with that of Tang and Kirkbride (2001); that is, Hong Kong Chinese students very much prefer to avoid confrontation and instead compromise, but British students in Hong Kong tend to be much more assertive. Nonassertive students may deny themselves and inhibit their expression of feelings and open striving for goals. Assertive people enhance the self, work toward achieving desired goals, and are expressive (Welzel and Dalton, 2017). The assertive person can be competitive without berating, ridiculing, or damaging other individuals.

Despite these differences, it is important to recognize that culture is not the only factor that influences how people approach conflict or behave when they disagree. Research suggests that approaches to conflict might be part of biological makeup (Barkhi and Hartwick, 2004). As such, the outcomes of the above studies have resulted in the conclusion that collectivists are likely to embrace non-confrontational styles, whereas individualists are likely to adopt confrontational ones (Ting-Toomey et al., 2000).

Furthermore, Fischer (2009) reiterated that the literature shows culture establishes conflict management strategies and explains why control practices are extra effective if they match the cultural values. If the conflict management practices are not consistent with cultural values, feelings of discomfort and uncertainty emerge, and the concerned parties are less motivated to behave nicely (Schwartz, 2007; Smith, 2008). Conflict coping strategies are used that comply with cultural values and adhere to cultural norms (Schwartz, 2007; Smith, 2008). If a person does not act on the shared conventional expectations and preferred practices and cultural requirements, s/he might experience events that trigger more conflict (Schwartz, 2007; Smith, 2008). Other researchers (Schaubroeck & Lam, 2002) believe that an individual will decide on his or her own conflict style that parallels his/her cultural values. Some studies, like Hofstede (2006), are critical of the related research results, particularly the verbal exchange patterns in intercultural interactions that show culturally dominant behaviour based on how a person has adapted to the ways of life. Furthermore, studies such as Smith et al. (2008) focus on the options in conflict-handling styles, and the applied conflict handling

method parallels cultural identity and personal values (which are linked to Hofstede's cultural dimensions (2001) and conflict resolution styles).

In short, cultural influence greatly affects how individuals handle conflict, and cultural values are major contributors to this influence. The fact is that culture influences the issues that cause fights as well as appropriate and inappropriate ways of dealing with conflict. However, conflict does not have to destroy relationships. In the literature, many researchers have concluded that people from a collectivist culture are more accommodating in handling interpersonal conflict, as their core cultural values are to ensure peace and harmony. Nevertheless, a generalization of cultural groups can result from the lack of awareness of differences at the individual level. The publications on culture, cultural values, and their context show how cultural norms are followed and how they influence communication behaviours. Moreover, there are different ways to manage conflict in interpersonal conflict. The way that each individual deals with conflict is a matter of personal choice. S/he can choose to follow unproductive patterns or take more constructive approaches. Conflict can be therefore negatively managed, and the outcome is damaged relationships with others. On the other hand, individuals can also choose to be constructive, behave positively, or monitor their negative self, and reduce pettiness, the need to be in control and unreasonable expectations. Considering possible solutions that cater to both parties and individuals is one of the ways of addressing interpersonal conflicts.

### ***Section 3.4.2 Conflict and Interdependency***

As individuals are so inherently different, a lack of disputes usually indicates the absence of meaningful interaction when there is a lack of mutual understanding. However, conflicts are neither good nor bad, but how disputes that result from conflict are addressed determines if they are beneficial or destructive (Deutsch & Coleman, 2000).

Regardless of whether the differences are real or subjective, feelings of adversity provoke conflict, which can cause further damage, but on the flip side, they also incite creativity, as well as social change for the better (Kriesberg, 1998). It is imperative to understand the fundamentals of conflict for the most productive results and reduce the most destructive outcomes. In the following section

of the literature review, a discussion will ensue on how interdependency is related to conflict, and some of the origins of conflicts along with the means for addressing existing conflicts will be elaborated.

According to Cahn and Abigail (2014), and Folger et al. (2013), conflict emerges when people:

- are interdependent (they are significantly reliant on each other in some form or manner), and the actions of one individual or individuals affects the other individual(s).
- mutually understand the incompatibility of their goals; that is, when the needs of one individual or party are met, those of the other individual or party may be forfeited. For instance, a football team player wants his/her team members to have more training sessions, but others on the team do not have this desire; and
- perceive those others are inhibiting their desire to meet their personal needs. For instance, when there are two students who are living in the same dorm and one of them would like to study for an exam, but his/her roommate wants to listen to loud music. The achievement of the goal of one person will discourage that of the other person.

One of the implications of the concept of interdependency is that when there is high interdependency, the number of problems around a conflict and impacted by the conflict and the exchanges around conflict management among the concerned individuals all tend to be more severe. Thus, there is a correlation between the amount of interdependence and the magnitude of the conflict. From this perspective, learning how to effectively manage conflicts arising from interpersonal disagreements is an important goal (Cahn & Abigail, 2014; Folger et al., 2013). Additionally, conflict is inevitable when there is interdependency. All interpersonal interactions (classmates, lovers, friends, sisters, brothers, or parents) are characterized by interdependency. For instance, at the start of a college semester, students form friendships even though they are not well acquainted with each other, and thus the depth and breadth of their relationships are superficial, implying low interdependency. As the frequency of their interactions increases, they

begin to work on assignments and attend various college activities together, and so the amount of interdependency and potential for conflict both increases.

Sanson and Bretherton (2001) asserted that the use of a particular conflict style is a strategic decision based on the possibility that the technique will succeed in a particular scenario. This perspective proposes that the concern of students about their own outcomes versus outcomes of their peers will differ depending on the contextual characteristics of the conflict. The dual concern model suggests that when students prioritize their own interests but are also very mindful of the interests of their peers, they are likely to participate in problem resolution and apply an integrating (collaborating) style. Collaborating encompasses the willingness to share information openly, tackle differences constructively, and apply all means necessary to reach a mutually acceptable solution (Langner & Winter, 2001). The literature on conflict, such as Bordia (2016), Hauser (2017), and Khan (2015), propose that this conflict handling style is given much preference over others since it is likely to produce win-win solutions.

### ***Section 3.4.3 Communicating Emotions***

The expression of feelings is based on emotions, which contribute to meaningful relationships, but is often difficult to describe (Thompson et al., 2008). Emotions allow one to cope with conflict but may require compromising, which demands the ability to control and change one's feelings (Hofstede, 2006). Therefore, to express feelings and emotions, one must have the ability not only to control one's own feelings but also remain sensitive to the feelings of others to differentiate amongst the different emotions and then apply the information to guide one's actions and behaviours (Hofstede, 2010). Thus, the stages involved are appraisal and expression of emotions – self-appraisal of emotions, appraisal of emotions of others and of the prevalent emotions in the emotional appraisal of others, and regulation of emotions – understanding the laws of emotions along with the use of such emotions for overall conduct (Minkov & Blagoev, 2011).

National culture also affects how individuals handle their emotions and therefore conflicts. That is, how emotions are communicated affects how different conflicts are handled. Cultural variations affect emotional expressions (Triandis, 2004), the accuracy of emotion interpretation (House et al.,

2004), and regulate feelings (Hofstede, 2001). Some cultures tend to involve emotions more than others (Minkov & Blagoev, 2011). Often, interpersonal conflict scenarios elicit negative feelings of anger and distrust, which lead to deviant conduct (Hofstede, 2010) even when high emotional intelligence is prevalent or when an individual is highly sensitized to his/her own feelings and the feelings of others. Nevertheless, emotional intelligence can reduce interpersonal conflicts, as those who are more emotionally intelligent are better at regulating their feelings and capable of reducing the chances of conflict and maybe even resolve the issues that pertain to a conflict (Hofstede, 2006). Triandis (2004) showed that emotionally sensitive individuals are more proficient in managing threats and in a better state of mind in dire situations. Current meta-analytic evidence indicates that individuals with high emotional intelligence can manage warfare more constructively (Triandis, 2004; Smith, 2004). Hofstede et al. (2010) showed that those with high emotional intelligence could resolve conflicts more productively than those with low emotional intelligence, as well as having the ability to pinpoint and resolve conflicts.

Nevertheless, emotional intelligence is more or less governed by culture. Minkov and Blagoev (2011) provided an empirical view of the culturally based dimensions of emotional intelligence proposed by Hofstede (2010). These culturally based dimensions of emotional intelligence are found in countries that are predominantly collectivist and uncertainty-avoiding with a long-term orientation (Minkov and Blagoev, 2011). On the other hand, current studies have focused on single factors that contribute to emotional intelligence and not on the concept of emotional intelligence in general. Hofstede and McCrae (2004) contributed to the literature on the effects of subcultures on emotional intelligence through a discussion that concluded on the influence of the psychological functioning of subcultures on student lifestyle. They indicated that psychological strategies are culturally grounded as cultural ideals and requirements that influence behaviours, and therewith provide options for a particular conduct that is considered suitable in a society (Minkov & Blagoev, 2011). Based on extensive empirical evidence, Hofstede (2005) suggested that cultural values have effects on attitudes, perceptions, and the cognitive scheme, along with emotional intelligence, thus serving as mediators of conduct and influencing behaviour (Minkov & Blagoev, 2011). In line with these theoretical ideas, this study agrees that the national way of life influences how minds work, and thereby, emotional intelligence in conflict situations. Emotional intelligence has been considered a mediator in conventional techniques of conflict management with impacts on dealing

with warfare (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004). Furthermore, the influence of the cultural dimensions in Hofstede (2001) has been widely applied in different concepts, such as individualism versus collectivism, which might be associated with the expression of emotions – individuals in individualistic cultures show emotions more so than those in collectivistic cultures, as the former encourage free expression of feelings (Brewer & Venaik, 2012).

Moreover, individualistic cultures encourage uniqueness, and consequently, open communication of feelings is normalized and even endorsed (Venaik & Brewer, 2013). At the same time, those in individualistic cultures may not have the best capability of managing their own negative feelings (Witte, 2012). Nevertheless, the capability to manage one's emotions may require the ability to strongly control them, which is already ingrained in those in a collectivist society (Minkov, 2007). In addition, the laws of emotions can play a significant role in facilitating collective social order. Collectivism is associated with emotional intelligence, as uncertainty avoidance affects the expression of feelings (Brewer & Venaik, 2012). Cultures that excessively avoid uncertainty are not particularly expressive cultures (Minkov, 2007). Avoiding uncertainty is an opportunity in such cultures (Hofstede, 2001), as they can refrain from involvement in any future uncertainties (Minkov, 2007), thus suggesting an advantageous relationship that links uncertainty avoidance with emotional intelligence. These long-term orientation cultures focus on constructing better relationships as they are looking towards the future (Hofstede, 2001).

As emotions are suppressed in long-term orientation cultures (Ailon, 2008), relationships should last for a long time. That is, feelings do not need to be demonstrated with the purpose of pleasing others, for instance, remembering celebratory events, such as birthdays and anniversaries, for the sole reason of the fear of damaging relationships. In certain situations, negative emotions in principle can be suppressed to refrain from negatively affecting long-term relationships (Brewer & Venaik, 2012). Ailon (2008) suggested that individuals in long-term orientation cultures invest effort and time to understand the feelings of others and their own personal feelings and then amend and use their feelings to enjoy future relationships, respectively. That is, long-term orientation includes the value of emotional intelligence. In general, the role of emotional intelligence has been examined in conflict management patterns (Ailon, 2008). On the flip side, individuals with low emotional intelligence battle with recognizing the different forms of conflict and their impacts



(Hofstede, 2010; Minkov, 2007), as they have less awareness of their own emotions and control over them (Brewer & Venaik, 2012) and thus have poor conflict management skills. As Hofstede (2010) suggested, higher emotional intelligence is related to better conflict management and the ability to pinpoint and resolve conflicts. Brewer and Venaik (2012) stated that conflict-handling styles are related to the emotional intelligence of students, and those who have higher emotional intelligence are capable of understanding, manipulating, and utilizing the emotions of other students. These highly emotional intelligent students are more likely to choose good conflict management practices.

There is also the cognitive component of conflict. The dynamics of conflicts often involve disagreements with others and emotions. Researchers, such as Hammer (2015), emphasize that one of the primary characteristics of most human beings is the ability to disagree. Disagreement is defined as the mismatched expectations between individuals due to cultural influence. Individuals who disagree may perceive incompatibility between their values and beliefs. However, disagreement also brings out emotional responses (Smith, 2004). According to Hammer (2015), parties involved in a conflict experience antagonistic emotional reaction toward each other due to their disagreement and the perceived threats associated with the conflict. The conflict model in Hammer (2015) is based on a cognitive and affective component – disagreement – and the negative emotional reactions to disagreement (Suanet & Van de Vyver, 2009). Influenced by culture, people will choose to communicate in a direct or indirect way in disagreements and exhibit different levels of emotionally restrained behaviours. Again, a direct conflict style is often associated with individualistic cultures, while an indirect conflict style is associated with collectivistic cultures. The former tends to address conflict through assertiveness, and such people readily express their emotions and hold personal accountability in high esteem (Uhrich & Benkenstein, 2012). The latter tend to be emotionally restrained and protect the in-group. Other cultural factors that impact interpersonal conflict also include large and small power distance, as individuals in those societies manage conflict differently. For instance, children in a small power distance society, which highly values obedience, are less likely to challenge their parents. That is, personal traits would include characteristics that may or may not be directly linked to culture but are somehow embedded in them. Another example is that people in any culture experience anxiety, which could lead to different levels of avoidance during conflict (Van Oudenhoven & Van der Zee, 2002). ‘Face’ also

contributes to how conflict is managed, as discussed above. Self-concern or concern for others affects how one would approach and manage conflict.

While cooperation benefits all parties in any culture, it is more commonly found in groups who are working together to attain shared goals. As discussed earlier, cooperation with other people can allow individuals to attain goals that they are unable to reach by themselves. However, the process of cooperation itself may not always be smooth. Sometimes, group members may find that their ideas are incompatible, which produces negative results or unconstructive communication behaviour. When the group members work against each other and produce negative results, conflict may occur due to disagreement and verbal aggression (De Dreu, 2010). Conflict is indeed an interpersonal communication matter that can escalate from simple mistrust, spiralling into anger, and then to actions that are designed to harm others. Group communication is somewhat influenced by cultural norms and behaviours. These include factors such as the degree of individualism or collectivism and whether the group members view themselves as competitive or cooperative (Wang et al., 2009). Also, it is important whether they trust each other or consider their relationship as intimate and close.

#### ***Section 3.4.4 Face-enhancing and Face-detracting***

To explain how culture influences interpersonal conflict, Ting-Toomey and Kurogi (1998) used a theory called the face negotiation theory, which was developed in Ting-Toomey (1988). Ting-Toomey (1988) identified 'face' as the favourable social impression that a person wants others to have of him or her. The concept of face also explains how people of different cultures manage conflict. Face is experiencing a sense of favourable self-worth or self-image during communication situations (Leong, 2007). Face is an emotional extension of the self-concept. It is a universal concept; that is, people in all cultures have a sense of face, but the specific meanings of face may vary across cultures. According to the face negotiation theory, all cultures try to maintain and negotiate face in virtually all communication situations (Linds, 2002). However, individualistic cultures have a greater concern for self-face and less concern for the face of others, as opposed to collectivistic cultures, which are equally as concerned about the face of others. The concept of face becomes particularly significant in situations where uncertainty is high, as in conflict situations where the character of the individuals might be called into question (Lustig & Koester, 2009).

Cross-cultural research has shown that individualists tend to prefer face work that defends the self-face or confronts the face of others (Straus, 2004). Collectivists tend to prefer strategies that save the face of others, such as avoiding conflict, seeking a third party for mediation, or giving in to other people. Collectivists also prefer “mutual-face work”, such as attempting to solve problems through the mediation of a third party, having a private discussion or apologizing. The concept of face has been discussed earlier and has special relevance for interpersonal conflict. Face-detracting strategies in conflict situations include those that attack either a person’s positive or negative face (Kotler & Keller, 2012). For instance, criticism of a person’s contribution to a relationship or demand for a person’s time are attacks on his/her autonomy. Another face-detracting strategy is to blame. Instead of focusing on finding a solution to the problem, some try to blame the problem on another person. Whether or not there is any truth when blaming happens, it is generally unproductive for at least two reasons (Nicholls, 2011). First, blaming diverts attention away from the problem and thus the potential solution. Secondly, blaming creates resentment that is likely to be met with resentment. The conflict then may worsen into personal attacks, thus rendering the relationship even worse off before the conflict is ever addressed.

Face-enhancing approaches, such as a pat on the back or a sincere smile, support and confirm positive face, and involve helping the other person maintain a positive image or the image that s/he is competent and trustworthy, able, and good. Even when you get what you want – say, in a bargaining situation – it is a good idea to help the other person maintain a positive face because future conflicts will be less likely to occur (Oliver & Myers, 1999). A negative face is the desire to avoid intrusion (Kotler & Keller, 2012). To enhance a negative face, one should make few demands, respect the time of the other person, give others space, especially in times of stress, avoid inappropriate touching, and show respect for the viewpoints of others. Thus, the collectivist cultural context model (Figure 3.3) helps to explain how conflict components such as the face-enhancing concept are much expressed through the cultural influence on interpersonal conflict. The model lens helps to show that the face concept is extremely important to support the other’s face and avoid all costs the loss of face of the others. This means an individual would avoid pinning down an opponent or attempting to prove him or her wrong.

### ***Section 3.5 Effects of Interpersonal Conflict on Relationships***

College students learn how to manage conflict and improve their relationship with peers, family, college administrators and such development can be critical throughout their college life (Hirsch and Barton, 2011). The first half of the literature review has covered aspects on cultural influence, independency, emotions, and the face concept that explored some of the key influential factors on interpersonal conflict. The second half of this chapter will discuss literature readings that focus on the effects of interpersonal conflict on relationship as it associates to the dimensions of my cross-disciplinary study that incorporates interpersonal conflict principles, with education components focusing on college life and mental wellness of students.

In the educational environment, one critical outcome from resolving conflict is to maintain healthy interpersonal relationships with others (Lake and Billingsley, 2000). A constructive way of resolving interpersonal conflict can help people understand the concerns of others and maintain a positive relationship (Yarnell and Neff, 2013). Otherwise, conflict can damage a relationship. Thus, it is useful to examine the impacts of communication behaviour on conflict for a healthy interpersonal relationship. College students have many opportunities to meet many new people in their new college life. Learning new things about people is about constructing new healthy relationships with others, and students will have to learn how to maintain such relationships.

The connection between health and education has been influential in a cross-disciplinary study for the benefits of students (Cardarelli, 2009). In addition, the learning environment of college students on conflict and maintaining interpersonal relationship is often not limited to a classroom setting. Student's experience in college life provides important clues about the quality of educational experience (Krause and Coates, 2008). To have a better understanding of the dimensions between interpersonal conflict on relationships, this section included a figure to illustrate the connections (Beva et al., 2012). Figure 3.4 illustrates how to manage interpersonal conflict by aiming to preserve existing relationship and building new relationship. In order to preserve and maintain relationship, there are a few dimensions to address such as (a) power and gender; (b) communication technology; (c) cultural identity and (d) emotional intelligence

**Figure 3.4**

*The Connection on Dimensions of Interpersonal Conflict and Relationship*



The management of interpersonal conflict can directly affect how students create healthy relationships and preserve relations with others in their college lives. Constructive conflicts, which can improve understanding or improve professional skills, are pivotal in development as a student, and college is the perfect breeding ground for this type of growth (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009). As long as the conflict and the student parties involved are determined to solve the problem, it can only improve the skills and understanding of the students for further communication (Adrian-Taylor, Noels, & Tischler, 2007). The literature review in this section focuses on factors associated with how students may be influenced when they maintain healthy relationships as an important outcome when resolving interpersonal conflict.

Unlike other animals, humans have developed a sophisticated language system to construct relationships with each other. For instance, we tell stories to our children, give instructions to our colleagues, and argue on the phone with our partners. All of these basic communication skills enable the development and continuation of healthy interpersonal relationships. It is a basic instinct to establish friendships, as humans are inherently social (Mongeau & Henningsen, 2008). College students need their peers and friends when living among others in a new college or university environment to feel connected (Nicpon et al, 2006). Through communication and sometimes

conflict, students develop relationships with others. Research by DeChurch & Marks (2001) on interpersonal communication shows that preserving interpersonal relationships significantly contributes to physical and mental wellness. They explained that there is a concern on increasing financial difficulties and outside pressures may affect student mental wellness and academic performance. The communication on relationship that is needed for students to assist them on mental wellness and wellness after college entry, the extent to which adverse life experiences contribute to any increases, and the impact of conflict, anxiety and depression on academic performance (DeChurch and Marks, 2001).

Through collective cultural lens, the teachings of Confucianism on interpersonal conflict and relationships help students understand the ways that relationships are perceived in East Asian cultures, compared to Western cultures (Leung, Koch and Lu, 2002). In view of the limitations of mainstream Western philosophy on handling conflict, the necessity of Eastern philosophy such as Confucianism helps to explain the development of collectivist students in college life in the context of interpersonal relationship (Tang, 2008). The Confucian cultural heritage and Western individualism assist college students to handle interpersonal conflicts; and the mental wellness implications of various conflict management practices originating from the cultural traditions of Confucianism (Leung, Koch and Lu, 2002).

Confucianism is one of the major principles in the Asian culture that permeates daily ethics and values. Unlike many of the Western approaches to ethics that stress free choice and equality, Confucianism prescribes a set of rituals and conventional social habits to facilitate appropriate and ethical acts. Many of the Western approaches put individuals on a pedestal, but Confucianism prescribes social rituals designed so that the natural world, social institutions, and humans all flourish interdependently (Lin, 2010). Yum (1998) stated that the Confucian relationships in the Chinese culture are very much influenced and guided by four principles: “(a) humanism, treating others as one wishes to be treated; (b) faithfulness, loyalty rather personal interest or profit; (c) propriety, social decorum and etiquette; and (d) wisdom.”

The communication patterns of relational partners need to be mindful of the differences in many factors: for instance, one’s status when interacting with others (Yum, 1998). The reason is that

many East Asian cultures adhere to clear-cut social hierarchies that dictate whether one is higher or lower on the rungs. This is less prevalent in Western cultures. Another difference between relationships in the East and West is that in many of the former, there is a clear difference between those who belong to a certain group versus those who do not belong. In-groups are generally associated with desirable qualities such as loyalty, honesty, or trustworthiness, while out-groups are labelled with undesirable qualities such as arrogance, bitterness, or strangeness (Jandt, 2007). Naturally, these differences have implications in initial communication interactions.

The value of Confucianism leads collective college students to associate and identify with relatively few very cohesive groups (Wu & Rubin, 2000). Moreover, affiliations within groups have longevity, perhaps even lasting for a lifetime (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003). Law (2009) also noted that the Confucian emphasis on relationship, faithfulness, and loyalty results in the blurring of personal relationships, and it teaches the avoidance of conflict because its negative aspects. It

- may increase negative feelings when students inflict pain on others
- may close students off from others when they try to avoid a genuine dialogue
- may lead to further conflict, hurt, and resentment when students want to win an argument.

### ***Section 3.5.1 Communication for Maintaining Relationship***

College life is like a roller-coaster ride because students will face many new challenges and people in a new environment where they learn to communicate with people they like and dislike (Moir, 2013). The use of language will help students maintain or damage relationship in their college life. The phrases and words that are used daily are often part of the history and society of a specific ethnic group. Languages and words are a good reflection and expression of our daily communication, as they influence our communication for maintain relationship (Ihtiyar & Fauziah, 2015).

For instance, the Chinese language used nowadays originated from images and objects in ancient Chinese society, which are highly symbolic of Chinese culture. Culture has influenced language that is used daily, just like it has influenced communication behaviour (Cortazzi and Jin, 1996).

Gradually, some of our cultural values are embedded into our language and consequently produce some of the cultural principles on how to maintain relationship. Studies like those by Kramsch (1993) and Cazden (2001) have argued that how college students need to understand and recognize acceptable and appropriate ways to use language in daily communication for healthy relationship.

Interpersonal communication is part of the expression of who we are as college students, communities, and nations. Culture, the dynamic social systems and shared patterns of behaviour, beliefs, attitudes, and values (Lee and Ciftci, 2014), provides the environment in which language develops and even influences how language is used and interpreted. A good example of interpersonal communication behaviour in how college students can manage conflict and forge healthy relationships is speaking and listening. Speaking and listening effectively is difficult because of the inevitable differences in interpersonal communication systems between the speaker and listener (Drussell, 2012). Since each student has a unique set of experiences, the meaning system of each student will differ from others. When the speaker and listener come from different cultures, the differences are much more pronounced (Shenkar, 2001). When students of different cultures work together, it is especially important to understand the ways in which cultural differences can influence listening. Even when the speaker and listener speak the same language, they communicate with different meanings and values. In many classrooms throughout the United States, there is a wide range of different accents. Students whose native language is a tonal one, such as Chinese (in which the differences in pitch signify different meanings), may speak English with variations in pitch that might puzzle others. Those whose native language is Japanese may have trouble pronouncing l from r, as the Japanese do not include this distinction. The native language acts as a filter and influences the accent of the second language (Ybarra et al., 2008).

Thus, no two students speak the same language. Students of the same language will, at the very least, convey different meanings for the same terms because they have had different experiences. College students who have different native languages and may have learned English as a second language will demonstrate even greater differences in conveying meaning. Translations without understanding the underlying story can never fully capture the meaning in other languages (Gifford, 2007). If the meaning for the word “*house*” was learned in a culture in which everyone lived in their own house with large plots of surrounding land, then communicating with someone who understands “*house*” as a neighbourhood with high-rise tenements will be difficult. Although both



will hear the same word, the meaning that they ascribe to the term will be drastically different (Wolvin and Coakley, 2000).

In a college or university environment, it is very easy to slip into what is called passive listening, in which student absorbs very little information from what is being said (Gross, 2007). Students can learn the value of listening—those students who pay the most attention are called active listeners (Howard, 2015). Developing good listening strategies will help any student understand and utilize important information, which helps them both in the classroom and beyond it. Applying effective listening, especially in an educational environment, a student needs to learn to accommodate the different meanings conveyed by the speakers (students, professors, administrators, or parents) even if they are speaking the same language (Gifford, 2007).

Furthermore, by incorporating effective listening in our interpersonal communication skills and avoiding the negative side of a conflict, college students can also communicate empathy to preserve relationships in college life. Empathy is the feeling what another person feels from that person's point of view without losing one's own identity (MacDonald & Price, 2019). The practice of empathy enables college students to understand what another person is experiencing. Research by Jiang et al. (2021) shows that female college students are perceived as more empathic and engaged in more empathic communication than men do. Empathy is best expressed as thinking empathy and feeling empathy (Bellafiore, 2005). Ding and Song (2017) have a few suggestions for how college students can communicate their feeling and thinking empathy more effectively:

- Students learn to make clear of what they are trying to understand but not to judge or criticize.
- Students learn to focus their attention on expressing involvement through facial expressions and gestures.
- Students learn to focus on and reflect to the speaker the feelings that he or she is expressing.
- Students learn to focus on self-disclosures to communicate his or her understanding.
- Students learn to address mixed messages to foster a genuine and honest dialogue.

Another example on effective listening, college students with stronger listening skills do not just retain more information, but they are also less likely to feel unprepared and frustrated in class (Fedesco, 2015). Additionally, improved listening skills can lead to improved self-efficacy, or a student's belief that they can succeed in class. This means that college students who develop better listening skills are more likely to feel confident, comfortable, and prepared to succeed in college (Battell, 2006). College students who listen pick up more knowledge to reflect on and think critically about before they respond (Groom, 2005).

The importance of active listening also branches into social-emotional development of students. Active listening promotes mindful thinking, which can reduce anxiety and depression in students (McNaughton et al., 2008). It can also help students build relationships because as they engage themselves in conversation, their peers are more likely to view them as open and interested (Jones, Bodie and Hughes, 2019). And finally, practicing active listening can promote empathy—a skill that can enrich a student's life both in and outside of the classroom. For student's mental wellness (Edwards-Groves and Davidson, 2020):

- Greater ability to communicate
- Faster second language acquisition
- Lower levels of frustration, anxiety, and depression
- Improved relationship skills
- Stronger sense of empathy

Relationships can become strained not only because of hurtful language but also due to unresolved or poorly resolved conflict (Greenberg et al., 2010). Students may be at odds with each other or with their families over money, use of alcohol or drugs, where to continue their education, and time spent with each family member. According to Adrian-Taylor et al. (2007), having to deal with such difficulties can be painful and yet, it is relatively common. Students in higher education must explore ways to handle interpersonal conflict and communicate with others to maintain good relationships. For the purpose of this study, these relationships can be defined as follows (Bingimlas, 2009):

- Friendship: It is a mutually productive and positive interpersonal relationship between two persons. Friendships develop in stages and over time—from being strangers to becoming

close friends. Both parties can learn a variety of values from a friendship.

- Family relationship is often defined by the roles of family members:
  - ☞ The members understand the roles each of them serves in the family.
  - ☞ The members realise that each person has specific responsibilities in the relationship.
  - ☞ The members have an interactional past and an anticipated future together.
  - ☞ The members generally live together.

The college years are a time of transition for most students as they navigate new relationships on campus and try to maintain relationships with friends and family back home. Sometimes the biggest challenges for a healthy relationship, whether it is with a roommate, a romantic partner, a family member, or even a professor, are different in communication styles and unclear expectations. Many college students do not know how to tackle conflict and, in the end, resort to avoiding it or choose violence to resolve it (Straus, 2004). Other students can only deal with conflict by blaming and accusing others. Unfortunately, while expressing negative feelings may seem easy, managing them so that they do not damage the relationship is rather difficult. As a result, students may suppress or fail to communicate negative feelings out of fear of offending the other person or making the relationship worse (Bower, 1992).

### ***Section 3.5.2 Effects of Power Distance***

Power is only found in our relationships with others. For instance, to look at the importance of the power dimension in a relationship, DeVito and DeVito (2007) suggested that understanding this aspect of communication allows us to consider how individuals influence and are influenced by others. Those with power over others only have such power to the extent that the other individuals perceive them to have the power, and conversely, people have power over others only to the extent that they are perceived to have the ability to influence or control behaviour (Matsumoto, Yoo and Nakagawa, 2008). Power relations shift constantly, and an awareness of these shifts results in better communicators but, more importantly, a better understanding of relationships with other people and more effective management of these relationships (DeVito, 2011).

Studying the power distance between male students and female students helps us to understand conflict and the perceived power in people's communication behaviour (Zhang, Q. (2005). This difference is also associated with our diversity in cultural values. For example, in many Asian countries, men have greater power over the family because it is a traditional practice to obey and respect the father's decision (Pye and Pye, 2009). The concept of power has a significant influence on how college students behave to obey a parent's decision (very often the father) in their daily life. The conflict behaviour may come from the disagreement of both parties on how the parental decision is imposed on these young people (college students).

Cultures that are characterized by high power distance have an assumed power and wealth distribution inequality (Hofstede, 2001). Equality, as well as opportunities for students, are considered vital in low power distance cultures, whilst hierarchical variations in social relationships are anticipated in high power distance cultures (Hofstede, 2010). Related to conflict in the context of students, it is anticipated that individuals with higher power distance are much more likely to choose conflict handling patterns that allow them to maintain distance in social interactions (Hofstede, 2010). At the heart of conflict resolution is the importance of cooperation and balance. To obtain a resolution between the positions of two conflicting parties, the conflict management styles rely on someone to take the initiative to negotiate, which is not always common in high power distance cultures (Hofstede, 2010).

Students with high power distance are more likely to use conflict avoidance as compared to those with low power distance (Hofstede, 2010). Thus, a dominating style towards conflict is characterized by exerting control, having little tolerance for alternative views, as well as competitiveness, and a substitute for uncooperative behaviour to satisfy individual desires in conflict (Kirkman et al., 2006). Individuals with higher power distance and orientation are assumed to support inequality and feel uncomfortable in collaborative efforts. Indeed, power distance increases the option for a student to adopt avoiding and dominating conflict styles and reduce alternatives that compromise their conflict-handling style. Some studies have tested the relationship between power distance and specific conflict coping patterns. Purohit and Simmers (2007) showed that power distance is positively associated with a dominating style of handling conflict and conflict coping strategies for resolution management. Hofstede et al. (2010) found that power distance is

related to obliging conflict-handling styles to resolve conflict but negatively related to integrating conflict-handling style right from the beginning of managing the conflict and the manner of resolution. Besides, Minkov (2011) found an effective relationship between power distance and conflict assessment style. The findings of existing studies are also considered and found to be contradictory, which might be explained by using studies with secondary sources to show the necessity of conflict management among students who respect the relevance and genuine adaptability of cultural dimensions.

### ***Section 3.5.3 Influence of Gender Roles***

A research study on gender, conflict and interpersonal relationship suggested that the differences in how the two sexes handle conflict are relatively small and sometimes different from the stereotypical pictures of aggressive men and passive women (Gayle et al., 2001). People may think that there are greater differences between males and females in their ways of handling conflicts than there actually are (Allen, 1998). People who assume that male college students are aggressive and female college students are accommodating may notice that behaviour that fits these stereotypes. On the other hand, behaviour which doesn't fit these stereotypes (accommodating men, pushy women) goes unnoticed. While male students and female students do have characteristically different conflict styles, the reasons may have little to do with gender. The situation at hand has a greater influence on shaping the way a person handles conflict than gender (Cupach & Canary, 1997).

Studies by Minkov and Blagoev (2011) examined the influence of masculinity and femininity on character alternatives for unique conflict management styles. Minkov and Blagoev (2011) also observed courting as well as obliging in feminine behaviours, while integrating conflict resolution was related to both masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, Hofstede (2006) observed that bad dating was related to masculinity and the dominating style; however, there was no big effect for the opposite of the other conflict-handling styles. Minkov (2011) observed that female college students tend to choose an integrating style of conflict resolution. Male college student roles of fulfilment, manipulation, and energy were reinforced in masculine cultures. Although greater emphasis is positioned on soft elements in feminine culture, such as cooperation as well as modesty (Hofstede,

2001), in a masculine culture, college students have the inclination to be more self-confident, forceful, and robust (Hofstede, 2001). In the context of conflict managing patterns, the researcher would anticipate a preference for the ones handling the patterns with dominant characteristics of the cultural value and size. More masculine culture is less likely to prefer an unassertive conflict method (Schwartz & Bardi, 2001). Humans with a more masculine cultural orientation are less likely to prefer an alternative cooperative pattern that includes compromising and conflict integration (Hofstede, 2010). Students from a more masculine culture are much less likely to choose a warding off style and will discover solutions to conflict and could strive to ensure that their personal wishes are met promptly (Hofstede, 2006).

According to Chung's (2001) research about gender and conflict among college students, there is a significant gender difference in interpersonal conflict. Chung's findings show male college students are more apt to withdraw from a conflict situation than female college students. Similarly, Rahman and Witenstein (2014) argued that this may be due to the fact that male students become more psychologically and physiologically aroused during conflict than women do, and they may try to distance themselves and withdraw from the conflict to prevent hostilities and resentments from festering. Female students want to get closer to the conflict; they may want to talk about it and resolve it (p.38).

In short, most of the research has demonstrated that there are great influences of gender on conflict due to the cultural dimension. Indeed, there are some small but measurable differences between the two sexes. However, although male college students and female college students may have characteristically different conflict styles, the individual style of each communication—regardless of gender—and the nature of stabilizing the relationship are more important than gender in shaping the way he or she handles conflict.

#### ***Section 3.5.4 Effects of Communication Technology***

The impact of the use of information communication technology on college students maintaining positive relationships and avoiding conflict is important in college life. Due to the pandemic, the influence of technology in interpersonal relationships has been dramatically increasing. As affected

by the pandemic, the number of college students using the internet for Zoom classes and social networking has made it increasingly easy and interesting to meet new friends, keep in touch with old friends, and engage with the rest of the world (Serhan, 2020).

When college students develop relationships on the internet, they begin to share their network of other communicators, and the chance for interpersonal conflict will also increase because there will be more engagement with others. Research by Lantz-Deaton and Golubeva (2020) has found that online student workgroups have been found to be more task-oriented and more efficient than face-to-face groups. Online groups also provide a sense of belonging that may once have thought possible only through face-to-face interactions. However, studies by Ahmed, Shehata and Hassanien (2020) have shown that online engagement or online discussion may not be as rational, as students will have their own views and objectives.

There is conflicting research evidence (Islim & Sevim Cirak, 2017) on the value of electronic communication in maintaining relationships. In one study (Lattie et al., 2019), the researchers found that 50 percent of college students claimed that email strengthened their family relationships, and 64 percent of college students claimed that it improved their connection with friends. Related to this is the finding that the students seem to experience significantly less social isolation than those who don't use email. Only 6 percent of college students noted that they felt socially isolated, while 15 percent of the nonusers' reported feelings of social isolation (Raney, 2020). One reasonable conclusion is that for some of the college students that use email or the internet to strengthen social connections with friends and family, but for other college students, the internet substitutes poorly for face-to-face social interactions and connections (Lee et al., 2011).

The intent of the communication in an educational activity goes beyond just information exchange (Roberts, 2000). In some cases, it is important or desirable for college students to become aware of others as people and be able to more readily empathize and understand the people with whom they are communicating because students want to create and maintain healthy relationship in their college life. In situations such as this, it is important to understand some aspects about social presence theory. Aragon, S. R. (2003) explained social presence as the salience of another person in a mediated environment. Others have extended this definition. Tu and McIsaac (2002) defines social presence as the degree to which a person is perceived to be real

in a mediated environment. In the context of educational activities, salience is the degree to which the communicators recognize that they are communicating with another human being and not with the technology that is between them. Garrison, Cleveland-Innes and Fung (2010) have explained social presence “...as the ability of students to project themselves socially and affectively into a community of inquiry.”

The degree of social presence in a communications activity in the college environment may have a number of different impacts on the participant’s perception, appreciation, participation, or level of satisfaction (Richardson, 2001). When college students do not feel they are recognized with respect, or in which their input does not seem to be valued may result in a reduced motivation to participate. Because of this, it is important to use richer communications media in situations where it is desirable to have the participants more strongly identify with each other (Tu and McIsaac, 2002). However, richer media sometimes bring with them certain constraints or problems that must be considered before they are used. These include increased time spent in the activity and sometimes a higher level of technology or support is required (Richardson, 2001).

While digital footprint potentially threatens us all, college students in particular seem to get stung by it (Van Brunt, 2012). Part of being young has always been showing off their individuality, resisting authority, acting out and being involved in all kinds of youthful indiscretions, (usually fairly benign), that peers and friends might remember fleetingly days later, but usually never hang around to visit anyone much longer (Yan, 2010).

Now cell phone cameras that take still pictures as well as video, and also a wide variety of palm-sized digital devices for capturing the same, abound. Everything students do these days seems to end up in pictures or video, and once up online, the threat of seeing mistakes or humiliations replayed over and over again (Twenge, 2017). Some students may say this just helps them develop a “thick skin” early on in life, and that the older generation just doesn’t understand that their whole world is online (Sabella., Patchin and Hinduja, 2013).

The truth is that most college students, in general, are pretty careless about their privacy because they believe they do not have much to hide. They think they are alright with being very open, until something happens that turns around to bite them. Beyond embarrassment with family and



peers, and the fear of being found out by parents and teachers, digital footprint is also a threat to college, athletic, scholarship and job prospects, privacy, and even relationships (Casey, Goodyear and Armour, 2017).

All types of relationships in the college environment, including romantic and between friends, form a complex process influenced by many factors (Wilcox et al., 2005). Among others, the pace of life and technological development can affect relationships differently, depending on the circumstances. The use of technology can positively and negatively affect relationships between people, facilitate communication, or suppress social activity (Chan, 2014). With other aspects of life, there must be a balance, a middle ground between use and abuse. Perhaps compliance with specific rules can limit the harmful effects of the college life on relationships.

In short, the internet, smartphones, social networks, and other technologies have become an integral part of college life and, judging by the speed of their development, their influence on student life will significantly increase (Siau and Wang, 2018). There is a need to consider and analyze the interpersonal conflict associated with new forms of communication like having online classes. In this regard, it is necessary to reduce the adverse impact of technology on our behaviour and interpersonal relationship while making the most out of the positive aspects of rapid technology development.

### ***Section 3.5.5 Importance of Cultural Identity***

The cultural identities of college students are constructed from their experiences in society. The social institution (college or university) reinforces the cultivation of the cultural identity of the students. When students explore their true inner essence, they will come to a sense of knowingness of who they really are (Kaufman and Feldman, 2004). In this way, they can obtain a sense of belonging in terms of culture identity, as well as a sense of self-recognition and acceptance from their country and society (Yuan & Fang, 2016).

Furthermore, according to Minkov (2010), personal choices for dealing with conflicts, especially those that are subculture precise, are linked to cultural dimensions. Students' cultural dimensions and identities are linked with ethnic groups because of race, social class, and religion (Jones, 2009).

These categories are some of the social constructions of culture; they provide a sense of cultural identity. For college students to enhance interpersonal communication and preserve relationships, teachers can use college resources to create learning environments that recognize the cultural contributions of students in a multicultural environment (Dabbagh and Kitsantas, 2012).

Educators can assist students to discover and share their cultural identities through writing projects that focus on their cultural heritage. The resulting writing can trigger other training sessions that incorporate students' knowledge of cross-cultural stereotyping and effective communication. By developing lessons that highlight students' cultures and experiences, the college administrators or educators can actively engage students in learning. An awareness of the cultural identity of the student affects how well the student will interact with the teacher, how well the student will interact with his or her peers, and how the student views his or her acceptance within the cultural group and within the college environment (Campbell 2004).

In the higher education environment, interactions are predicated on whether an individual's needs are met. Professors can meet students' needs by modelling a concerned attitude for the well-being of students and by creating a caring environment where students feel valued and appreciated. For example, a professor may set the tone for a caring classroom environment by including students' viewpoints in the development of classroom rules or responsibilities. College administrators may show care and concern for students by expressing an interest in their daily or extracurricular activities. In turn, students should respond positively to educators who understand the cultural dynamics of the classroom. Students will strive to build a respectful rapport with the teacher because they feel that the teacher genuinely cares about them.

In addition, Fischer (2009)'s study reiterated that the idea of understanding culture in a conflict management setup has been used in the literature to provide an explanation for why control practices are extra efficient with recognition of student life consequences if these practices match the cultural values of the students (Fischer, 2009). If the communication behaviours are not constant with the cultural values of a student, the students feel dissatisfied and uncomfortable and are, for this reason, less stimulated to act nicely (Schwartz, 2007; Smith, 2008). Moreover, adopting good judgment, the researcher relied on individuals to choose conflict coping styles that permit these

individuals to behave in a manner that is constant with their cultural values and respective cultural identity (Schwartz, 2007; Smith, 2008). If a person does not act on shared expectations of tradition and preferred practices and cultural requirements, this person might experience uncomfortable events that trigger more conflict (Schwartz, 2007; Smith, 2008). Research shows that students choose conflict styles that are consistent with their cultural values. Some studies showed that cross-cultural interaction allows a person to adapt their culturally dominant behaviour (Smith, Peterson and Thomas, 2008).

### ***Section 3.5.6 Impact of Emotional Intelligence***

‘Emotional Intelligence’ is considered as an important trait for students to attain success inside and outside the classroom. Emotional intelligence in students helps them become more confident students as they can develop proficient communication skills (Walsh-Portillo, 2011), creating a college environment that is conducive to handling themselves and their emotions efficiently, which enables them to perform better in the classroom. Not only the emotionally intelligent college students are able to connect more with their peers, friends, classmates, they can also better understand themselves (Teranishi, 2007).

**Figure 3.5**

*Emotional Intelligence Domains and Competencies*

SELF-AWARENESS	SELF-MANAGEMENT	SOCIAL AWARENESS	RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT
Emotional self-awareness	Emotional self-control	Empathy	Influence
	Adaptability		Coach and mentor
	Achievement orientation	Organizational awareness	Conflict management
	Positive outlook		Teamwork
			Inspirational leadership

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*Note. Adapted from Goleman, D., & Boyatzis, R. (2017). Emotional intelligence has 12 elements. Which do you need to work on? Harvard Business Review, 84(2), 1-5. Copyright by 2017 Harvard Business Review*

Emotional intelligence performs a critical role in coping. With positive solutions for struggle, it also requires compromises based on the ability to apprehend and alter feelings (Holinka, 2015). The emotional intelligence of students serves as an ability to screen one's own and others' feelings, to discriminate amongst them, and to apply information to guide one's questioning and action (Hofstede, 2010). Having an awareness of one's own emotions goes a long way in understanding how one's moods can impact others. Also, with emotional intelligence, students will be able to know others' feelings too.

Frequently, the interpersonal conflict conditions of students in college life often arouse poor feelings consisting of anger, distrust, and deviant conduct (Hofstede, 2010), even as emotional intelligence is related to the recognition and controlling of personal and others' feelings. Thus, the latter can play vast positions in lowering interpersonal conflicts, as emotionally intelligent students are competent to regulate their feelings and use their capability to lessen the conflict happening and

may even be able to resolve the struggles pertaining to the conflict. Triandis (2004) showed that emotionally sensible students are more proficient at managing threats and controlling their reactions in difficult situations, which can also be of extensive importance in school and work associated conflict situations. Current meta-analytic evidence indicates that individuals with high emotional intelligence are able to manage conflict more constructively (Triandis, 2004; Smith, 2004).

In the college environment, emotional intelligence helps students understand and express themselves effectively, relate to others, and cope with daily pressures in a positive way. Research (Forsyth et al., 2020) shows that these types of interpersonal communication skills are essential for success in college and the workplace, when students graduate. It is important for college students to explore how emotional intelligence can help them to succeed by being more adaptable and building better team connections. Thus, emotional intelligence leverages the relationship between stress and mental wellness.

Furthermore, cultural identity affects the students' conflict-handling style, and emotional intelligence affects students' means of handling struggle, but emotional intelligence is also stimulated by culture. Feelings are also regulated to specific expansions into the unique cultures (Hofstede, 2001), and a few cultures tend to apply emotions greater than others (Minkov and Blagoev, 2011). All these components make contributions to the examination of culture that influences emotional intelligence.

### ***Section 3.5.7 Influences of Cultural Perception***

In this section, the influential factors that correlate culture with perceptions issues will be discussed, as they have an important role in conflict. Public self-concept is the image that one thinks that others have of him/her (the image presented to others in social interactions), and perception is the process of becoming more aware of interpreting and evaluating people (Chiu & Kosinski, 1994). Culture provides different perceptions on many social values like what is pretty and what is valuable, which are also part of our public self and understanding of the self. Research studies by Sebastian and Ryan (2018) have shown that large differences exist with respect to the social perception of attractiveness within cultures as well as between them.

Culture can also change the extent to which physical aspects are related to life outcomes and psychological well-being. Langlois et al. (2000) found that more attractive American students report better treatment by others and more positive psychological well-being than those who report that they are less attractive. However, standards of attractiveness are also culturally specific (Anderson et al., 2008).

Perception affects daily conflict behaviour because it is associated with culture, which instils a variety of beliefs, values, and attitudes in students to serve as benchmarks against which individuals measure themselves. Feelings and thoughts about one's strengths and weaknesses, abilities and limitations, and aspirations and worldview can affect how conflict is handled. Culture influences the issues that people argue about as well as perceived appropriate ways to handle conflict. Parents, teachers, and the media instil a culture in us through a variety of beliefs, values, and attitudes about goals (how individuals define goals and how people should achieve goals). Culture also influences religion and personal ethics for work and at home. These teachings provide benchmarks through which self-assessments can be made. For instance, achieving what is defined as success will contribute to a positive self-concept (Chiu & Kosinski, 1994). Perceived failure to achieve what one's culture promotes (for example, arguing with parents or peers about not being in a permanent relationship when individuals are 40 years old) might contribute to a negative self-concept.

With reference to the specific preferences for conflict handling patterns, it is argued that long-term orientation is related to conflict-handling styles that offer implausible outcomes for students who remain in conflict for long periods (Hofstede, 2001). Indeed, some may relish taking part in such interpersonal conflict to release their stress and shift their responsibilities to others. Conflict may have a positive influence on bonding in interpersonal relationships, which sometimes require a commitment for the long term to have more impact (Hofstede, 2010; Minkov, 2011). In terms of evaluation, if specific conflicts are not properly resolved (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005), they may cause long, terrible outcomes (Minkov, 2011). If interpersonal conflict is determined by the strategies that the students use, it could create negative outcomes from the conflict resolution and result in poor resolutions. Students will mainly cater to their own self-interests and adhere to the use of the cultural dimensions and values presented in Hofstede (2010).

In short, research has demonstrated that the impact of cultural dimensions on conflict has significant influences on behaviour, power, and perception. Indeed, some small but measurable differences are found based on power. However, although masculinity and femininity may have characteristically different conflict behaviours, the individual style of each communication session – regardless of gender – and the nature of the relationship are more important than power in shaping the way that a man or woman handles conflict because they experience the world differently based on how culture applies to their social thoughts and communication behaviours in society.

### ***Section 3.5.8 Summary***

In conclusion, research on interpersonal conflict incorporating relationship elements helps to address issues related to college students' self-appraisal and awareness of their conflict-solving skills, as well as their relationship with others. The field recognises the importance of developing an independent sense of self that is in concert with collective, interdependent, and collaborative relationships individuals have with others in their personal and professional lives. As such, the aim of this research study is to highlight strategies allowing students to construct a personal identity that is positively and meaningfully contribute to their interactions both in college and their future professional lives.

Furthermore, managing interpersonal conflict is part of the college students' mental wellness development seeking for healthy relationships. In this section, the discussion of related literature readings such as cultural identity in college life, the impact of technology on communication of college students and residential college as a learning platform has shared insights on how students should have acquired interpersonal communication skills to better manage conflict for a better college life. The accumulated experience and knowledge allow students to understand the importance of dealing difficult issues in the college environment. The experience will be valuable to college students as they learn to anticipate that challenges will always be there with other individual or groups of people. In the four years of college or university, students learn how to handle conflict as a mean of healthy relationship which is part of a survival skills for their future in preserving relationship with friends, family, and the workplace.

Whether talking about failed relationships in the education environment or terrorist attacks of the country, the ignorance of what is going on has become a habit and prevents any attempt to stop the unfolding harm. What triggers conflict can be a complicated process, every influential factor is not something that we want to avoid. By minimizing the level of conflict and considering the value of positive relationship can help students to achieve a greater success in their academic achievement and preserve a memorable friendship.

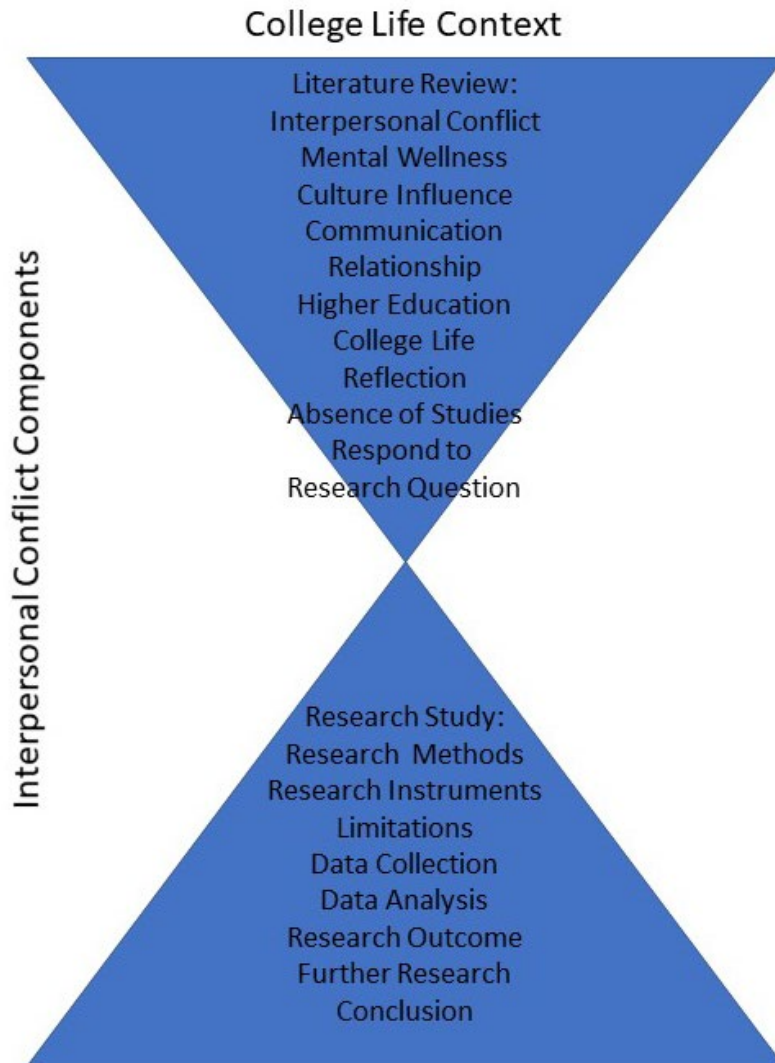
### ***Section 3.6 The Hourglass Diagram***

As I open the next chapter of the methodological paradigm of the study, I designed an hourglass diagram to illustrate the overall framework. This diagram helps to identify the different layers of this study from the big picture of culture to how it focuses on addressing the interpersonal conflict of college students. The diagram below (Figure 3.6) unfolds this research study by reflecting the related literature readings on culture and the interpersonal conflict components to address the question, what does culture has to do with interpersonal conflict in an education setting? The second part of the hourglass diagram helps to introduce a theoretical framework on the enactment of a construct between interpersonal conflict and the participants (college students) in a thematic analysis of qualitative research. The diagram also helps to guide how the study presents a dynamic and often cyclical process of stages in the development of relationship in the process of interpersonal conflict to mental wellness and relationship, emerging from the data.



**Figure 3.6**

*Hourglass Diagram: the flow of study on the Interpersonal Conflict Components (vertical axis) from the College Life Context (horizontal axis)*



### ***Section 3.7 Reflection on Literature Readings***

Understanding social behaviours during communication has great impacts on society because communication gives meaning and creates the reality of society. As sociologist Luckmann observed, “Communication has come to mean all things to all men” (Luckmann, 1993). Clearly, the literature review of both discipline (E.g., Health and Education) shows that interpersonal conflict can be

understood as part of the social-psychological process that involves managing communication behaviours and is very much affected by cultural norms. The social psychological perspective of communication indicates that the major cultural components include but are not limited to values, language, conflict styles, interdependency, perception, and emotions. These components guide interaction, and accordingly, changes in the cultural context affect language, behaviour, and perception. All these elements vary in parallel with many factors depending on the specific culture, which influences how conflicts are handled. Conflict comes in many forms and does not necessarily lead to catastrophe. Based on the literature review, I have identified cultural norms and used a schematic of a cultural context to illustrate how culture impacts interpersonal conflict. The assumptions that Hofstede made around culture are perhaps short-sighted. His analyses mostly focus on cultural values and cross-cultural communication. They cannot be extended to consider the interpersonal conflict of college students, which therefore provides the impetus for my study. However, criticisms around his works on culture also contribute to my work in providing a better understanding of the importance of cultural norms and behaviour of individuals from data collection to analysis.

Although I do not totally agree with Hofstede's assumptions on culture, it is still beneficial to conduct this research by recognizing his insufficiency so that this research study could avoid the generalization of culture but consider individuals in any ethnic group. As such, I will examine how participants behave and respond to interpersonal conflict to determine whether the outcomes are associated with any of the aspects of a collectivist culture. To avoid stereotyping of specific cultures or generalization of my data, I have communicated with my participants on an individual basis for data collection. By doing so, I learn from their experiences and reflections in the process and how they have handled their interpersonal conflicts. Thus, I can gauge their behaviours, perceptions and values for any associated similarities or differences with the characteristics that resonate with the Hong Kong Chinese culture, which is collectivist in nature. By associating their similarities and differences with a specific culture, the research findings can provide a better understanding of their behaviour to determine if there are any common or uncommon practices considering their collectivist culture. This framework strengthens this study in providing a better understanding of the methods used to obtain insights into conflict and how culture affects communication that leads to different degrees of conflict. The collectivist cultural context model (Figure 3.3) illustrates the

collectivist cultural contexts that affect the communication behaviours that influence conflict management. In the literature, the consensus is that disagreements are either avoided, or the other party is accommodated when a disagreement arises, thus resulting in considerable face-saving. In a collectivist culture, individuals do not necessarily confront others assertively and directly because this can be considered rude and provocative. For example, seniors in a collectivist culture are treated with respect, and there is little desire to have confrontations with them, as this could be seen as a sign of disrespect. Therefore, avoiding conflicts minimizes or prevents confrontations in this case.

The literature review shows that even though society accommodates social diversity by recognizing different ethnic groups, stereotyping of social and ethnic groups is still found in many academic works. The generalization of the cultural findings is often misleading and understanding interpersonal conflict might be affected by other influential factors. In this study, I use an hourglass diagram (Figure 3.6) to illustrate how the research positions itself in this study from the perspective of social-psychological communication and identify several cultural dimensions that influence interpersonal conflict management. The bottom part of the figure shows the research method, means of data collection, data analysis, and the outcomes of this study that could further contribute to the literature academically and society in general. After a thorough reading of the literature, a central theme has been found whenever individuals of different cultures come together and interact, they are surrounded by a whole host of different value orientations, cultural expectations, verbal and nonverbal routines, perceptual experiences, and different group memberships, all of which often led to communication problems and conflicts. Cultural values are intangible and sometimes difficult to observe. However, cultural values can be understood through ritual and communication behaviours at the individual or group level. Values are often expressed through verbal and non-verbal communication (Derks et al., 2008). However, individualists approach conflict differently in comparison to collectivists (Rudy & Grusec, 2001). The former tends to adopt an outcome-oriented approach to address interpersonal conflict (Ting-Toomey, 2005; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005) and emphasize the importance of asserting self-identity and accomplishing perceived tangible outcomes or goals while the latter adopts a process-oriented approach and focuses on face.

The literature discussed here has provided solid background information on the topic, and while there are many publications that discuss cultural diversity during communication and conflict, few

have provided recommendations to the study participants on ways to resolve the related problems. Scholars have attempted to understand the cultural context by generalizing behaviours to address communication and conflictual issues. Since these studies do not intend to resolve the problems, they neither help nor guide the target population. Without understanding their interpersonal communication behaviour and providing applicable ways to resolve conflict, Hong Kong college students will not be able to improve their mental wellness wellbeing.

One of the main objectives of this study is to identify the characteristics of the interpersonal conflict behaviour of Hong Kong students and their values and beliefs at the individual level. Since I have met the participants individually and reviewed their self-reflection reports, stereotyping will be greatly reduced, as the data are individually based. Their self-reflections also provide them with another opportunity to reflect on their experiences and how they can resolve their interpersonal conflicts better. The literature on culture, communication, and conflict also contributes to meeting the objectives of this study in that the studies provide the means for a critical assessment of the conflict management strategies of college students in Hong Kong, including conflict behaviour that arises from interactions, the influential factors, and the outcomes. Also, the methods for the conflict processing of the college students based on interpersonal communication are categorized and evaluated.

### ***Section 3.8 The Absence of Studies on Conflict in Collective Culture***

This study on conflict management in an educational setting is significant in various ways. The objective is to examine the extent to which interpersonal conflict management amongst students may be addressed as a procedure through which individuals are taught new, non-violent means to identify and resolve conflicts. Consequently, the study intends to provide the means for establishing ground rules, creating common goals amongst the concerned parties, deliberating on possible solutions, discussing recommended approaches in the literature for solutions, and listening. For instance, the study offers ways to achieve effective conflict management through decision-making, consensus, mediation, and negotiation, which also serve to improve the learning environment. Palmer et al. (2012) stated that a good educational community needs a healthy and constructive environment so that students can grow and learn.

Moreover, in social science research, it is important to produce scientific outcomes in which the obtained knowledge can be transferred to other areas for further research work. The research work should be sustainable and address behaviors in society. A framework is used in this research to discuss how different factors influence social behavior and the critical role of conflict in interpersonal communication. Conflicts are a part of life, and the communication behaviors used to address conflicts can either improve or damage interpersonal relationships (Chua, 2012). Thus, conflict will be discussed as an issue through cultural context, which contributes to understanding the reasons behind certain types of behavior and how we attempt to make sense of our social world (Dumont et al., 2010). In doing so, this study will further knowledge based on the conflict experiences of Hong Kong students. Moreover, if a similar pattern should develop or certain phenomena emerge from the experiences of a good number of the study participants, other researchers can use the information to further related studies on societal conflict (Claeson, 2014).

The absence of studies in non-Western contexts has led to this study, which focuses on college students in Hong Kong, and addresses the research gap in the literature with a novel perspective. My educational goal is also to carry out further studies based on the results of this research work on the cultural aspects of student behaviour with a focus on interpersonal conflict in diversity education, as there have been new opportunities with research funds on student affairs at my current university. Tertiary education itself is a social experience that also involves human behaviours and interactions among students, teachers, and other staff members. It is important to explore the different social psychological processes in an education setting. I believe that it is also important to provide psychological (emotional) support to students, teachers, and other staff members, so further studies with an education perspective can also benefit all of them, as well as the community itself. That is, if students learn and master conflict management skills, they can better manage conflict and violence when the need arises, as these are not only part of their college experience or experiential learning but essential when they enter the workforce after graduation.

To address the research gap, this study offers a theoretical framework that provides a collectivist model to outline the characteristics of collectivist cultural norms that can be applied to manage interpersonal conflict. The outcome of this study is critical because colleges will be able to develop more applicable policies to address conflictual issues, and educators can strategize better to manage

challenging situations infused with conflict. The critical review of the literature readings enables this research to correspond to the series of research goals explained in chapter 3:

- Describe and evaluate the conflict process as it unfolds from the interpersonal conflict which was carried out among college students in Hong Kong.
- Critically assess the impact of Hong Kong college students' conflict management strategies, including their conflict behaviour that arises from interactions and cultural factors and determines the outcomes.
- Speculate on a framework that can be applied through the insights from data into practical and implications for managing interpersonal conflict.

### ***Section 3.9 What does Culture have to do with Interpersonal Conflict in an Education Setting?***

Globalization has led to the necessity of studying cross-cultural theory as a central variable, and research has started to take up this challenge only in the past two decades (Gelfand et al., 2006). With the rise of Asia and increased engagement of international institutions, both researchers and practitioners realized adaptation of interpersonal conflict management evolved in the highly developed Western cultural context may not be effective and appropriate in another socio-cultural context (Aycan et al., 2000).

This research project on conflict management or other types of negative social behaviours in an educational setting can also help researchers to understand the cultural diversity and mental wellness behind conflicts in colleges in a diversified environment and how to mentor students to better handle conflicts. This insight not only applies to policies but also to psychological counselling services staff in student affairs, who can enhance and facilitate counselling services to meet the needs of students in terms of self-awareness, mental wellness wellbeing, personal growth, interpersonal relationships, emotional management, and college life, which will enable a better fit in a diverse educational environment. To facilitate inclusiveness, educators and students both need to learn about equality and sensitivity – that is, how to treat others as equals and view different cultures and behaviours with the same respect accorded to their own.

## **Chapter 4: Research Methodology**

### ***Section 4.1 Introduction***

The chapter gives an overview of my research methodology applying the cross-disciplinary approach on health and education to the study of conflict. The chapter addresses the integrative practices of the two fields, while offering relevant disciplinary insights. Following on from the preceding discussion on the relationship of conflict, cultural elements, education settings, Chapter 4 provides a detailed explanation of the research methodology and study design used to gather the relevant data and answer the study's research questions. Given that college students have a higher chance of experiencing interpersonal conflict and anxiety in new environments such as colleges or universities, a student-centred approach study may help to "crack the code" and promote better mental wellness among students. Investigating collectivist cultural norms from a cultural perspective will allow a better understanding of how Hong Kong college students behave in interpersonal conflict situations.

Integrating mental wellness within higher education is capable of improving the experience of college life for students. The data collected for this study involves several elements from both fields. As part of the research data collection process, in the description of the conflicts section, participants' demographic data, such as the academic year and faculty, were collected. Such information allowed for a fundamental understanding of participants' academic backgrounds. Information pertaining to the students' interdependency and relationship with others was also obtained from self-reflection reports and face-to-face interviews. In addition, data regarding the parties involved in the conflict, its reasons, the conflict resolution strategies used, and the outcome were collected for analysis.

Employing the cross-disciplinary approach in my research enabled me to draw knowledge from both mental wellness and higher education and to function as a practitioner within the educational setting. As a result, the collected data has the potential of generating better support for students and providing universities with workable recommendations on how to design and develop student well-being programmes in the future. The following methods of data collection and analysis were used:

- Face-to-face interviews with the participants and self-reflection reports: A data-

triangulation approach was applied to examine the data and identify emerging patterns through themes and sub-themes. The self-reflection reports and interviews were designed to gather information on:

- a. students' profile, academic background, and their relationship to others
  - b. students' reflections on conflict management amongst college students and their peers, and
  - c. their conflict management within the college during interpersonal communication.
- Coding and thematic maps to recognise data patterns and determine the links and relationships between students and other individuals: The study used observations and continuous reflections to analyse the data. This illuminated how trust can be potentially developed and relationships built through the process of interpersonal conflict. Furthermore, the cross-disciplinary element of health and education helped explain changing schema patterns of interdependency, emotions, and conflict management which initiate conflict. The research also revealed a novel construct whereby students' identities are rooted in trust and a connection with people they love, interpersonal communication, and a sense of worthiness.

Applying cross-disciplinary approach to the study of conflict, this chapter focuses on the research methodology deployed. The chapter discusses the research paradigm and philosophies related to the content of this study. The chapter, therefore, begins with a discussion of the four building blocks of this qualitative research: narrative approach, interpretivism, thematic analysis, and data triangulation. Figure 4.1 illustrates and reflects some of the fundamental elements that are needed for this qualitative research, and it illustrates to the linear organization of this chapter explaining the methods applied:

- Narrative Approach – the approach centralizes the participants' subjective experience (E.g., conflict experience of college students) and provides a contemporaneous self-awareness (Rossiter, 1999).
- Interpretivism – the method focusses on the meanings that people bring to situations and behaviour (E.g., conflict management and outcome) and the ways that they use this to interpret the world (Davids and Waghid, 2021).
- Data Triangulation – more than one method of data collection for verification to ensure data

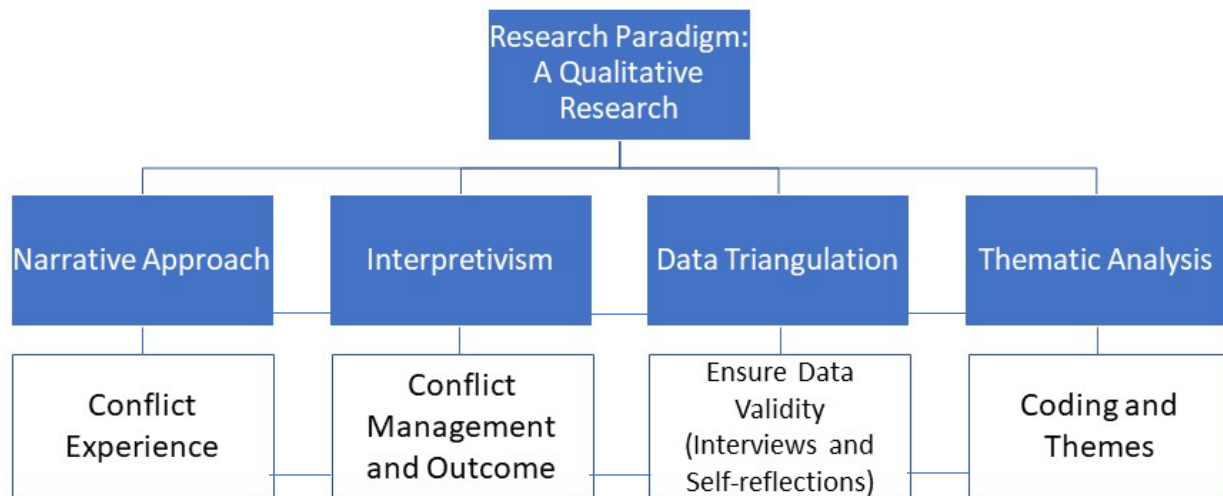


validity (Hussein, 2009).

- Thematic Analysis – a qualitative method for analysing data (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018).

**Figure 4.1**

*A Qualitative Research Design Framework*



#### ***Section 4.2 Research Paradigm: A Narrative Approach***

Research paradigms can be understood as worldviews or individual beliefs (Morgan, 2007). A narrative research paradigm investigates how human beings experience the world, with narrative researchers collecting stories and writing narratives of experience (Gudmundsdottir, 2001). As a narrative approach focuses on worldviews about knowledge issues such as culture and conflict, the approach is an appropriate way to learn about the conflict experience of participants that shape a cultural context. This study also aims at answering “how” and “why” questions (Frankel & Devers, 2000) such as the following: How does culture influence the interpersonal conflict behaviour? Why is the collective cultural lens important with regards to interpersonal conflict among college students?

Since case study designs serve an explanatory purpose, they are useful for finding answers to “how” and “why” questions. Qualitative case studies are preferred when examining current events over which the investigator has little control, and they can help researchers describe the complex social setting experiences of individuals (Flick, 2002).

In this particular case study, the self-reflection reports and interviews were designed to gather information on a) the “how” and “why” of conflict management amongst college students and their peers and b) their conflict management within the college during interpersonal communication. Therefore, I analysed the self-reflection reports and interviewed each participant in person to gain a better understanding of their conflict experiences.

### ***Section 4.2.1 A Qualitative Research Study***

Correspond to Chapter 2 on the definition of cross-disciplinary study, the design of my qualitative research drawing knowledge across both disciplines and the methodologies.:

- The study of interpersonal conflict of college students at the individual level (E.g., such as cause and consequence of interpersonal conflict of students in the college environment)
- A macro perspective to look at the impact of interpersonal conflict of college students in the college, support from college and address related mental wellness issues.

According to Bryman’s (2015) description of the differences between quantitative and qualitative research (Table 4.1), researchers who use quantitative methods tend to apply statistical results to provide broad, overall insights on a range of issues, while those who use qualitative methods offer richer insights by examining the feelings and thoughts of individuals. “Bryman likens the role of quantitative investigators to being in the driver’s seat. In qualitative research, the perspective of those who are studied (i.e., what they consider to be significant) comprises the study orientation, with the investigator taking a back seat. Another difference Bryman describes relates to is the depth of involvement between the researcher and the participants. In quantitative research, researchers have little involvement with their subjects, and in some cases—such as when the research is based on mailed questionnaires or surveys—there is no contact with the participants at all. Arguably this lack of a relationship with the subjects is desirable because objectivity might be compromised if there is excessive involvement with a study’s participants. On the other hand, qualitative researchers seek intimacy with their subjects so that the researchers can understand the world through the perspective of their subjects, which is important in this study to engage with my participants on the study of culture and conflict.

Quantitative researchers typically have a defined research question in mind that they then seek to answer by using specific research instruments. In other words, the theoretical work precedes the collection of data. However, in qualitative research, the concepts and theoretical elaboration emerge from the data collected. Sometimes quantitative research is depicted as presenting a static image of social reality, with an emphasis on the relationships between the different dimensions of that reality. For example, there are changes and connections between different events over time. Qualitative research, on the other hand, is often depicted as the examination of the unfolding of events over time and the relationships between the actions of participants in certain social settings. Furthermore, whereas quantitative research is typically highly structured so that the researcher can precisely examine the study's focal concepts and issues, qualitative research is loosely structured, which increases the possibility of finding meaning within the data collected. Moreover, qualitative methods enable researchers to obtain in-depth information from the study participants and thereby derive decisive conclusions about the research findings (Anderson, 2012).

**Table 4.1**

*Quantitative Vs. Qualitative Research*

Quantitative Analysis	Qualitative Analysis
Numbers	Words
Point of view of researcher	Points of view of participants
Researcher remains distant from subjects	Researcher is intimate with subjects
Theory testing	Theory emergent
Static	Process
Structured	Unstructured
Generalization	Contextual understanding
Hard, reliable data	Rich, deep data
Macro	Micro
Behaviour	Meaning
Artificial settings	Natural settings

*Note. Adapted from Bryman, A. (2015). Social research methods. Oxford university press.*

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**Section 4.2.2 Research Philosophy: Interpretivism**

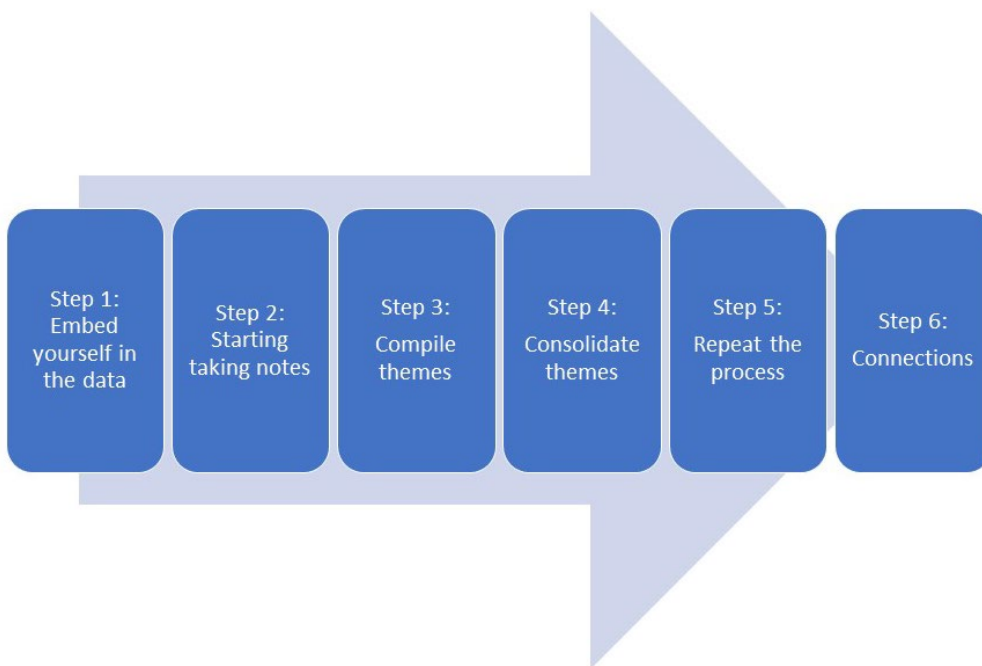
An interpretive approach relies heavily on naturalistic methods such as interviewing and observing participants and analysing any existing text relevant to the research. These methods ensure an adequate dialogue between the researcher and subjects of the study (i.e., those with whom I interact) to construct a meaningful reality in a collaborative manner. In addition, interpretivism focuses on unravelling the patterns of subjective understanding (Roth & Mehta, 2002).

Smith and Osborn (2015) explained that the interpretive approach which looks at the transcripts of participants are usually qualitatively analysed, because interpretivism is about understanding the meaning that the participant attributes to their lived experience. When analysing the data, Smith (2003) exemplified that the researcher needs to engage in an interpretative relationship with

the transcript, as it centralizes to understanding the content and complexity of the meanings rather than measuring the frequency (Eatough and Smith, 2008). Following transcription of the face-to-face interviews, each transcript was re-read to engage with the content and to gain familiarity with the data. Data from the qualitative reflective questions were analysed as a volume of recurring themes. Figure 4.2 illustrates the notion of interpretivism to guide the data collection process (E.g., interviews).

### Figure 4.2

#### *Six Steps of the Interpretive Method*



*Note. Adapted from Smith, J. A. (2011). Evaluating the contribution of interpretative phenomenological analysis. Health psychology review, 5(1), 9-27.*

Smith (2011) explained that the interpretative approach analysis involves six steps:

Step 1: Reread the transcripts to have a better understanding of the data transcribed

Step 2: Begin to take notes while review the transcripts, code all the information

Step 3: Use the codes to compile themes

Step 4: Consolidate the themes into categories

Step 5: Repeat the process

Step 6: Identify connections across cases

Furthermore, there are two intellectual traditions of interpretivism, namely phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. The former is the way that researchers make sense of the world around them. The latter is when researchers interpret the actions of others with whom they interact (Saunders et al., 2009). Moreover, interpretivism is an approach for studying social life that is mainly based on the assumption that the meaning of human actions is intrinsic to those actions (Schwandt, 2001).

**Table 4.2**

*Positivism vs. Interpretivism*

<b>Positivism</b>	<b>Interpretivism</b>
Person (researcher) and reality are separate	Person (researcher) and reality are inseparable (life-world)
Objective reality exists beyond the human mind	Knowledge of the world is intentionally constituted through a person's lived experience
Research object has inherent qualities that exist independently of the researcher	Research object is interpreted in light of meaning structure of person's (researcher's) lived experience
Statistics, content analysis	Hermeneutics, phenomenology, etc.
Correspondence theory of truth: on-to-one mapping between research statements and reality	Truth as intentional fulfillment: interpretations of research object match lived experience of object
Certainty: data truly measures reality	Defensible knowledge claims
Replicability: research results can be reproduced	Interpretive awareness: researchers recognize and address implications of their subjectivity

*Note.* Adapted from Schwandt, T. A. (2001). *Dictionary of qualitative research*. Sage. Copyright 2001 by Sage.

The two major research methods for social science subjects are positivism and interpretivism (Table 4.2). “To address the study objectives on culture and conflict and answer the core research question, an interpretive approach can be used. This could help widen the research scope so as to address the issues of influence and impact and ask the relevant “how” and “why” questions.” In

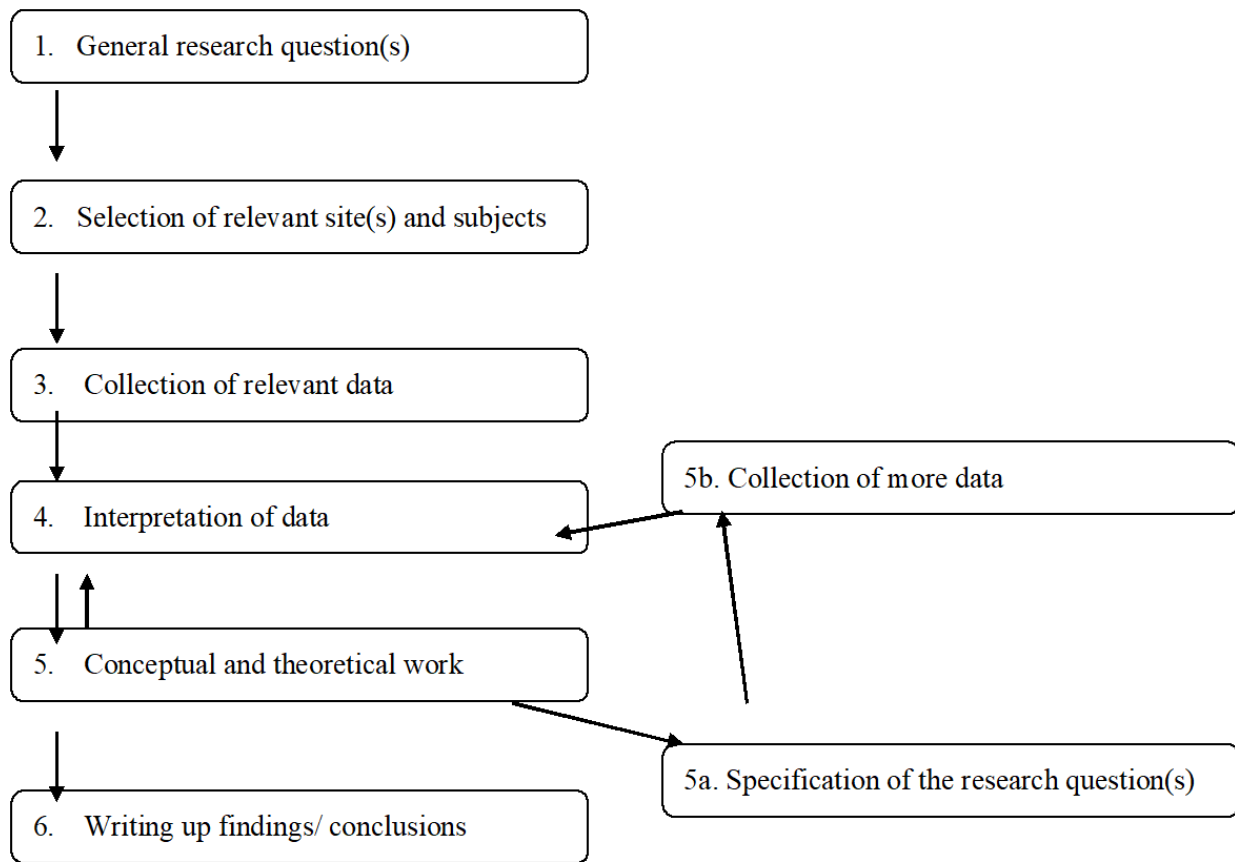
this approach, interviews and observations can be transcribed into written text for analysis (Patton, 2005). The focus on interpretivism is to gain insight into the participants' lives so as to develop an empathetic understanding of why they act the way they do (Arnett, 2007). By applying an interpretive approach in this study, a researcher could use a qualitative method to interact closely with the participants on an extremely sensitive subject (i.e., interpersonal conflict). On the other hand, applying a positivist approach would involve using quantitative methods and allowing the researcher to remain detached from the participants, as if in a scientific experiment (Keyton, 2005). After comparing the two approaches, an interpretive approach was selected as this would elucidate a better comprehension of the conflict resolution strategies used amongst Hong Kong college students and help unfold the understanding of interpersonal conflict.

Year 1 and 2 Communication students from one of the colleges in Hong Kong were invited to take part in the study. Theoretical sampling allowed themes to emerge, be explored, and be better understood through the constant comparative method. The process (i.e., the interpersonal conflict management of college students) was first broken down into steps or categories, then coded and recoded. During this stage, memos were written to discuss the ideas around the data and categories. These memos were later explored and generalised for broader explanations. Finally, several key interrelated dimensions associated with cultural influences on interpersonal conflict were identified. These included values, language, conflict styles, interdependency, the public-self, perception, and power. Based on these key influential dimensions of mental wellness, a theory was produced, postulating that dimensions that are closely interrelated to culture will affect conflict management behaviour.

An outline of the main steps of the qualitative research work in this study on the cultural influences of conflict is shown in Figure 4.3

**Figure 4.3**

*Flow Chart of Study*



*Note. Adapted from Bryman, A. (2015). Social research methods. Oxford university press.*

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### ***Section 4.2.3 Self-Reflection Reports and Interviews***

In total, 168 Year 1 and 2 Hong Kong college students of a communication course were contacted to participate in the study. 36 students provided consent and were accepted without the need to meet any further criteria. Of the 36 students, 24 students have dropped out because of personal reasons. (12 students emailed me informing that they did not have time to participate, and the other 12 students were too busy with their assignments). The high drop-out rates may have been related to the lack of tangible rewards offered or to participants not fully understanding how taking part in the study might improve self-awareness in interpersonal communication. The



challenges surrounding this part of the data collection process is further illustrated in Figure 4.4. Of the remaining 12 students, they all completed an interview. The interviews took place in a multi-purpose room on campus and—to better bond with the students—were conducted in Cantonese, a Chinese dialect and the Hong Kong students used in daily life. By interviewing the students in their mother tongue, it was hoped a rapport and empathy would be created, which would allow me to learn more about their experience with the sensitive issue of interpersonal conflict. The interviews were audio-recorded with a digital recorder and then transcribed by me. Afterwards, I translated the Cantonese dialogue back into English.

Having collected the data, the next stage was to search for themes by conducting coding; that is, finding all the possible codes and broadening them into themes. I then read the transcribed data multiple times to ensure their quality and accuracy. As such, this type of data immersion was part of my coding process to find repeating patterns in the data. Next, I examined the responses of each individual self-reflection report and then grouped together those that had similar elements of interpersonal conflict. Different codes were also combined under the same themes.

#### ***Section 4.2.4 Data Collection Process***

The data were primarily collected through face-to-face interviews and self-reflection reports. The former were about 30 to 40 minutes in length and were carried out one by one and face to face. Invitations were sent through Microsoft Outlook, and upon acceptance, the interview date was recorded on the recipient's electronic calendar. I followed up with the participant to remind him/her of the interview date and ensured that the interview environment was conducive to a successful interview in which the participants would feel at ease and be honest when sharing their views.

Researchers argue that data management and data analysis are integrally related (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Huberman & Miles, 1994; Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Therefore, this was taken into consideration and the following main concerns of data management and data analysis were identified:

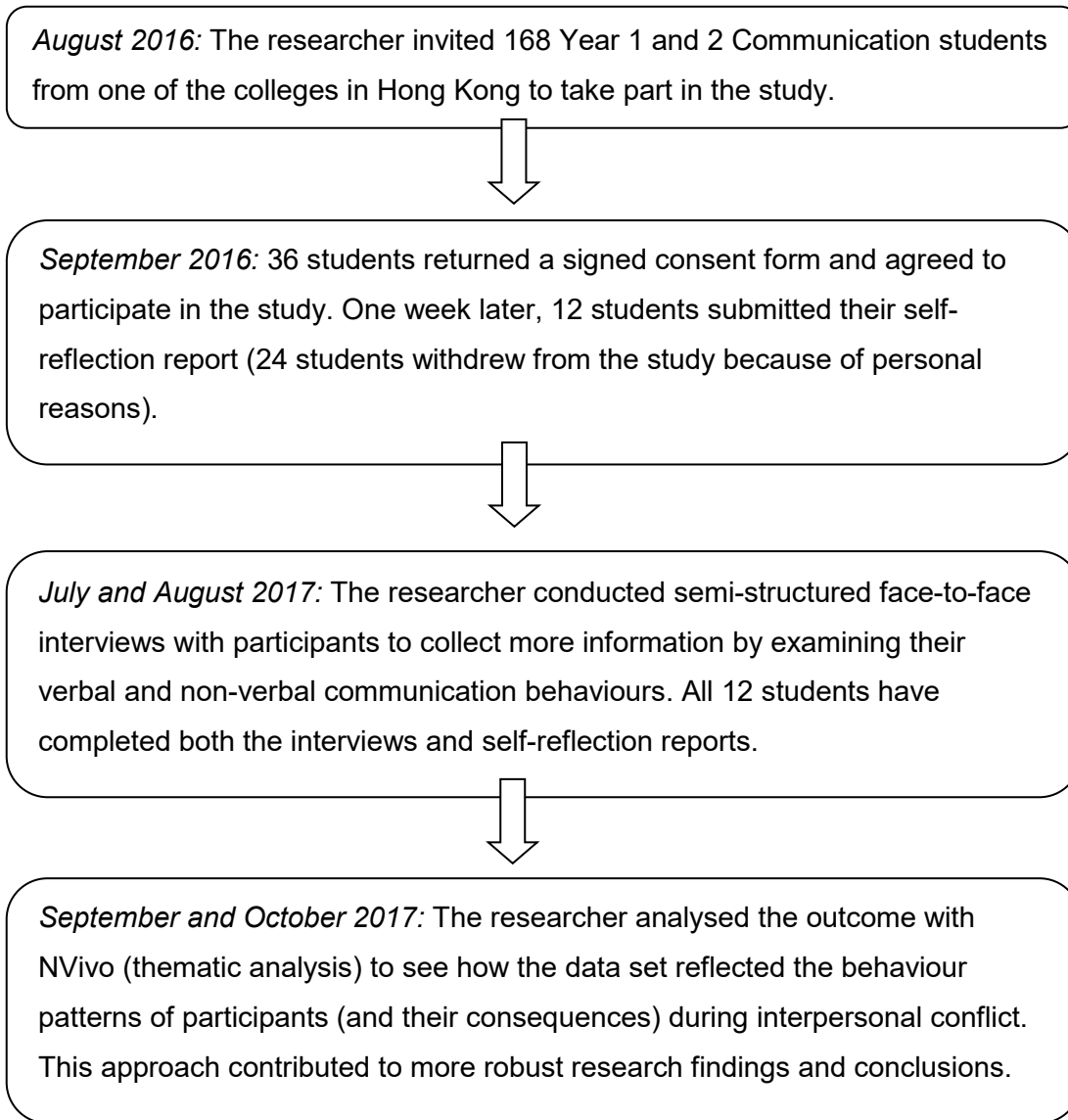
- the availability of a system that ensures high-quality accessibility to the data,

- documentation of any analysis that is carried out, and
- retention and protection of data and related analysis of documents after the study has been completed

My research work involved both qualitative and quantitative analysis. The interviews were transcribed, with field notes inputted and analysed using NVivo software. Further details about NVivo are provided later in the thematic analysis section. For the quantitative content analysis, the information was thoroughly checked to ensure there were no outliers and that redundant responses were minimised in the outputs. According to Bryman (2011), quantitative content analysis is the study of documents and communication artefacts, and these can include text. Bryman also points out that social scientists use content analysis to examine communication patterns in a replicable and systematic manner. Furthermore, when analysing social phenomena, one of its key advantages is its non-invasive nature, in contrast to the simulation of social experiences (Bryman, 2011). Therefore, my quantitative content analysis involved classifying data from the ethnographic interviews into common topics, using NVivo to present my findings in frequency distribution charts and tables. The data collection timeline is illustrated in Figure 4.4.

## Figure 4.4

### *Data Collection Timeline*



This research study proposed two main research objectives to advance the extant literature on interpersonal conflict: 1) to analyse the interpersonal conflicts of college students with reference to the Hong Kong context and 2) to examine how culture influences interpersonal conflict. Although the Hong Kong context incorporates the collective Chinese culture, the geographical limitations of this study meant that data collection only focused on Hong Kong.

#### ***Section 4.2.5 Data Collection: Interviews, Keywords, and Coding***

In quantitative research, the approach is structured to maximise the reliability and validity of the measurement of key concepts. Moreover, the researcher has a clearly specified set of research questions that are to be investigated, and the structured interview is designed to answer these questions. In contrast, the emphasis of qualitative research is on greater generality in the formulation of the initial research ideas and is based on the interviewees' perspectives.

There are primarily three types of interviews in qualitative research: unstructured, structured, and semi-structured (Table 4.5). Unstructured interviews may entail just a single question that the interviewer asks, and the participants simply respond to points that seem worth responding to. These interviews are similar to a conversation. Structured interviews are tightly scripted, often like a questionnaire. Semi-structured interviews, on the other hand, normally involve a list of questions for the participants, but the interview process is flexible. After considering the different types of interviews, semi-structured interviews were used in this research. Semi-structured interview questions can reflect the awareness of individuals in how they understand the world (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003). By using such questions, researchers like myself seek to approach the world from the perspective of the study subjects, which can be accomplished by modifying the language of the drafted questions or by asking spontaneous questions that arise from the interview process itself. In addition, semi-structured questions can generate extremely rich qualitative data (Kinoti, 1998).

As mentioned earlier, the aim of my cross-disciplinary study on health and education was to examine interpersonal conflict in college life. To achieve this aim, I decided to interview the students in my college about their interpersonal conflict experiences, their reflections about the experiences, how they managed the conflict, and the consequences or outcomes of that conflict. Establishing rapport and empathy are important when discussing a sensitive subject. Thus, I used semi-structured interviews in my study. This allowed me to conduct the research I wanted to do without restricting or narrowing the response of my interviewees.

**Table 4.3**

*Qualitative Interview Methods*

Type of interview	Content
Unstructured	Not directed by a script. Rich but not replicable.
Structured	Tightly scripted, often like a questionnaire
Semi-structured	Guided by a script but interesting issues can be explored more in depth. Can provide a good balance between richness and replicability.

*Note. Adapted from Adams, W. C. (2015). Conducting semi-structured interviews. Handbook of practical program evaluation, 4, 492-505.*

As an example of this approach, Ireland and Berg (2008) conducted semi-structured interviews to draw out details of the lives and professional work experiences of 12 women, all of whom began working in parole or corrections between 1960 and 2001. The interviews focused on various aspects of the women’s experiences working in a largely male-dominated occupation and how they perceived the respect shown to them (or not) by their male counterparts and the parolees. The flexibility of the semi-structured interviews allowed the interviewers to ask a series of regularly structured questions—which permitted comparisons across interviews—and to pursue areas spontaneously initiated by the interviewee. This approach resulted in a much more textured set of accounts from participants, which may not have been possible by only asking structured questions.

Careful design of the self-reflection reports was also critical because it could affect the data collected. Therefore, I avoided questions that would elicit short answers and instead designed a framework through which the students could reflect and elaborate on their conflict experiences. This decision was especially vital because my aim was to find connected themes and ideas for analysis purposes.

There were several reasons why I opted for self-reflection reports. According to Finlay & Gough (2003), reflective practices are a synthesis of reflection, self-awareness, and critical thinking. Moreover, the philosophical roots of reflective practices are found in phenomenology (which focuses on lived experiences and personal consciousness) and critical theory (which facilitates the

development of critical consciousness towards emancipation and resistance towards oppression). In addition, Hocking (2006) stated that using reflection to resolve conflict is a good strategy for re-thinking the best solution to a conflict. Also, the reflective process helped me collect large volumes of descriptive data and potentially encouraged the participants to re-think their conflict management and conflict outcomes. In other words, this process offered the participants a learning opportunity. Moreover, in the field of education, it is common for students and teachers to participate in reflective practices as part of the learning process.

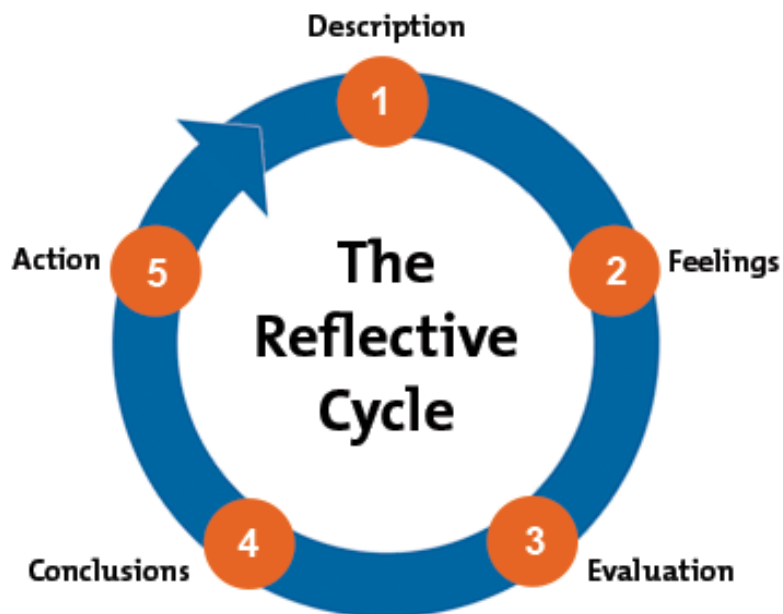
### ***Section 4.3 Reflective Cycle and Questions***

Schon (1983) introduced the concept of reflective cycles and Gibbs (1999) further developed this in the Gibbs' Reflective Cycle: a model which helps people to learn from their own experiences. According to Gibbs (1994), reflecting on experiences can help people deal with issues better in the future. Consequently, I decided to apply the cycle to help the participants make sense of the situations surrounding their interpersonal conflict so that they could understand what they had done and what they could do to improve the situation in the future.

As illustrated in Figure 4.5, there are five stages in the Gibbs' Reflective Cycle. These stages comprise the following: 1) describing the situation by responding to when, where, who, and what types of questions; 2) discussing feelings (thoughts and feelings); 3) evaluating the good or bad, that is, what worked and what did not work; 4) drawing conclusions by coming up with alternatives or options; and 5) taking action to address similar situations in the future.

**Figure 4.5**

*The Gibbs' Reflective Cycle*



*Note. Adapted from Markkanen, P., Välimäki, M., Anttila, M., & Kuuskorpi, M. (2020). A reflective cycle: Understanding challenging situations in a school setting. Educational Research, 62(1), 46-62*

To facilitate the reflective process based on the Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, the following questions were asked:

### **Stage 1: Description**

Tell me about your conflict experience:

1. When and where did it happen?
2. Who else was there?
3. What happened?
4. What did you do?
5. What happened as a result?

## **Stage 2: Feelings**

Tell me about your feelings:

1. How did you feel before the situation took place?
2. How do you feel other people felt during the situation?
3. How did you feel after the situation happened?
4. How do you feel about the situation now?

## **Stage 3: Evaluation**

Tell me what went wrong/right:

1. What was positive about the situation?
2. What was negative?
3. What didn't go so well?

## **Stages 4 and 5: Conclusions and actions**

1. How could this have been a more positive experience?
2. If you were to face the same situation again, what would you do differently?
3. What skills do you think you need to develop so that you can handle this type of situation better?

Next, I further refined the questions to make them more applicable to reflections on interpersonal conflict. Figure 4.6 illustrates how my modification of the Gibbs' Reflective Cycle helped participants reflect on interpersonal conflict so that I could have a more complete picture of the situation and thus perform a more in-depth analysis of their self-reflections.



**Figure 4.6**

*Modified Gibbs' Reflective Model*



To facilitate a student approach, the model used in this research study first examined the different themes and descriptions and then explored the interpersonal conflicts of the participants at the micro-level so that their stories could be understood individually and not generalised. This reflective model provided information that allowed an understanding of the experiences and behaviours. Consequently, I was able to analyse the data in a way similar to “seeing through the eyes of the people being studied” (Charmaz, 2006). This was accomplished as follows: 1) knowing who was involved in the conflict and 2) when and how they were connected (relationship), 3) how the interpersonal conflict started, 4) what conflict management strategy was used, and 5) what the consequences of the conflict were. The reflective framework is, therefore, divided into the following four components based on an improved understanding of how reflection can benefit an individual’s ability to manage conflict:

- **Introduction:** Tell me about yourself (e.g., what are your interests and personality traits, and so on).
- **Conflict description:** Describe a recent interpersonal conflict with a friend, classmate, or family member. Talk about the context, including the setting, what was said and how, your relationship, as well as when and why the exchange happened.
- **Possible cause(s) of the conflict:** Based on your perspective, what are some of the possible cause(s) for the interpersonal conflict?
- **Self-reflection on communication skills:** How did you handle or resolve the conflict? Include self-reflection on your interpersonal communication skills and explain how you could have avoided, handled, or resolved the interpersonal conflict.

The first component is intended to solicit some general information about the participant. The second asks about the participant's recent conflict. The third enquires about who initiated the conflict and the fourth about the strategies the participant could use to resolve interpersonal conflicts.

This study used convenience sampling to recruit the participants from a cohort of communication studies students at a college in Hong Kong. This type of sampling relies on available subjects (i.e., those who are easily accessible), and it is, therefore, fairly common for college or university professors to invite their students to participate in research projects. For this study, the selection criteria were as follows: Students had to be between 18 and 20 years old and attend a college. However, students' personal background and the length of time spent at the college were not important. Convenience sampling is an excellent means of obtaining preliminary information for some of the research questions at a low cost and in a timely manner (Bryman, 2008).

#### ***Section 4.4 The Importance of Research Ethics***

Ethics has been one of the critical aspects for researchers to recognize the ethical implications and learn how to avoid unethical practices. Research Ethics has been more complicated because methods of data collection and analysing have become more sophisticated. Researchers needs to become more concern on various ethical issues that includes consent, privacy, confidentiality of data and issue of harm (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004).

### ***Section 4.4.1 Ethical Framework***

The Ethical Framework by Middlesex University has been set out by the University Ethics Committee, which oversees all aspects of ethical matters at the university and reports to the Assurance Committee. For an ethical practice, the university aims to operating in every area to ensure the highest possible standards of decision-making and accountability. The Ethics Policy Framework acts as a guidance that reflects the role and responsibilities of the University Ethics Committee, the guiding principles and values, and the system of governance. The Middlesex University ethical framework stated that the university maintains a reputation for integrity that includes compliance with laws and regulations and its contractual obligations.

Moreover, Middlesex University (2019) explained how the university ethics committee has focus on a set of core behavioural values that all staffs and students should demonstrate in all the activities they conduct:

- **Honesty and Integrity** – Shaw and Satalkar (2018) explained that ‘Honesty and Integrity’ are the fundamental ethical values of any academics. All stakeholders want to be able to trust the university by having the value of honesty and integrity. For the core behavioural values to be developed and maintained of the university, it is part of the corporate governance system that ensures not only legal compliance but positive ethical values. Middlesex University (2019) stated that in order for the University Ethics Committee to fulfil its remit, all faculties and services should have established mechanisms to undertake ethical scrutiny. In faculties, there is a requirement to have the facility to scrutinise ethical matters with regard to research, practice and teaching, and report on these matters to the University Ethics Committee. by having trust is the cornerstone of the integrity which stakeholders such as the employees, students and the local community demand from the university. As a result, an educational institution with a strong corporate governance system and a high level of integrity would be able to satisfy a diverse set of needs from different stakeholders of the university.
- **Mutual Support** – Williamson and Haigney (2009) exemplified that mutual support is an important team competency allows teams to be more effective by supporting one another. All staffs and students can, and should, engage in mutual support. Mutual support contributes to important team outcomes. Teams who engage in mutual support are more

effective. That is, they make fewer errors, help each other out, can correct their own issues, can redistribute tasks so work is completed effectively and efficiently, and are more resilient.

- Personal Commitment- Middlesex University (2019) stated that the university aims to understand people's needs and to see things from our stakeholder's perspectives. It's important for the university to seek and listen to others' feedback, show them that we care and deliver what we say we will. From a stakeholder's perspective, this value reflects that even though the interests of the various stakeholders may be diverse, they become congruent when it addresses issues related to corporate governance. Each stakeholder group expects the university to act in a way that is not only meeting the legal standard but also reinforces their ethical commitment (Bond, 2012).
- Responsibility and Fairness - The values of responsibility and fairness are excellent characteristics of all the members of the university. It is through these positive ethical values that the university can feel comfortable that they are having a positive impact with their relationship with their stakeholders (Brody, Gluck and Aragon, 2000).

For my doctoral research, the Education Ethics Sub-Committee of Middlesex University London approved the research proposal, and the study could commence. After receiving the Sub-Committee's consent, my study followed the ethical principles of the university that I pledged:

- to respect participant confidentiality and privacy when collecting data.
- to remain unbiased in terms of tribal affiliation, race, and gender
- that the study's research findings would not be manipulated in my favour; and
- to ensure high levels of transparency that would allow other parties to validate the study's findings without the need for any changes.

#### ***Section 4.4.2 Debriefing the Subjects***

For qualitative research, it is common for researcher to notice participant's emotions and body language when conducting face-to-face interview or focus group. If the study is about a personal topic (E.g., Interpersonal Conflict), researcher needs to ensure that the data collection process is not going to cause harm to participants. Debriefing the subjects and to determine if participants

need any support or further explanations for questions is important to ensure the participants are ready and comfortable during the interview process. If participants are emotionally not unstable, there should be a safe procedure for participants to withdraw from the interview and the data collection process. Researchers can take follow-up communications to ensure the participant is safe and refer the case to college counsellors for further diagnosis if necessary (Miller, Gluck Jr and Wendler, 2008):

- To ensure the quality of the debriefing, researcher needs to secure participant's email address at the beginning of the study.
- The researcher should have a debriefing page stating how participants can get in touch with the researcher for any questions or concern.
- The researcher needs to provide his or her email address at the beginning of the interview and inform the participants that they can contact them during and after the interviews or if the participants have to discontinue the interview because of personal reasons.

#### ***Section 4.4.3 Informed Consent***

Hardicre (2014) suggested that informed consent refers to the knowing consent of participants provided by the researcher that participants have the freedom to choose their right of participation on a voluntary basis. The contribution should represent the interest of the participants that are free of any control or manipulation. A major part of the informed consent are the informed consent statements. These written statements are dated and signed by the researcher and participant as an assurance as part of the data collection process. Followed all these good practices of informed consent, I explained the nature of the research to participants and how to the data that I collected. All these informed consent documents must be organized and placed in a safe location with password. All these consent documents should be safely disposed when the research has been completed as it contains personal information.

#### ***Section 4.4.4 Safeguarding Confidentiality***

Researchers or investigators like me should have professional obligation to assure the confidentiality made to participants. Fein and Kulik (2011) explained that confidentiality is how the researcher or investigator has the knowledge to take active action on how to safeguard

participant's identity. Researcher should understand that all the communications in the data collection process should be kept with strict confidentiality. Any topics or clues that can identify the participants shall be considered and removed so that this is part of the assurance that the research can protect the identity of the participants. Goredema-Braid (2010) explained that it maybe common for researchers to maintain a list with real names of people and places for an easy maintenance of the data. Such a list may be useful for the consistency and validity of data. However, researcher like myself needs to ensure all the possible actions to safeguard our research reputations (E.g., not to disclose information collected to the public) being reliable in the academic field.

#### ***Section 4.4.5 Securing the Data***

I understand the importance of protecting the data that I collected from the participants. To make sure that the researcher is in control of the data, he or she must take extra precautions not to disclose data because of careless handling. I believe precaution should be a guiding value for researchers against accidental disclosure because it is not simply how about researcher handles data or where he stores but the value that researchers recognize and be able to apply. Smythe and Murray (2000) explained that researchers believe a good strategy is important to protect research information. However, the guiding principle for researcher to take necessary precautions to ensure the handling of information are conducted in ways that protect subject confidentiality is the ethical research issue to be focus.

#### ***Section 4.4.6 Careful Research Design***

Kaiser (2009) explained, during the design stage, researcher can consider all the actions and consequences concerning safeguarding participant's identities and the information collected. I agree with Kaiser's explanation that unethical research behaviours happen mostly due to careless research design. A key aspect of my study is on interpersonal conflict and it's a sensitive subject. I need to observe participant's behaviour (E.g., College Students) in the data collection process. For the ethical research, I want to ensure their behaviour is not altered because of the sensitive subject. Furthermore, I will need to observe their psychological state of the students because there will be situations participants need to think of some unhappy moments from the past. The researcher will need fundamental mental-wellness knowledge and skills to encounter difficult

circumstances. Researchers like me will follow up with the participants to ensure they are not harmed or affected because of the interviews or information collected.

#### ***Section 4.4.7 Research Design: Maintain Ethical Standard and Procedures***

I designed my research and data collection methods to ensure that all the detailed ethical requirements were met for the university's research ethics committee. Also, this research adopted the British Educational Research Association's Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2011). Before I began my data collection, all the ethical and safety issues were addressed. Moreover, mutual consent between the participants and me was needed for the validity and trustworthiness of this qualitative data collection process.

1. I explained to the participants the purpose of this research.
2. I explained to the participants that there are no right or wrong answers, but the research is only to collect their experience.
3. I explained to the participants that taking part in the research is voluntary. If a student did not want to participate, they did not have to give a reason, and there was no pressure if participants decided to change their minds. Participants could pull out of the discussion at any time. If students chose not to participate or pulled out during the discussion, it would not affect their grades in the college/ university.
4. I explained to the participants that all the information they gave me would be handled in strict confidence and used for this study only. The data would be collected and stored following the Data Protection Act and disposed of securely. The information would only be used in a way that prevented participants from being identified individually. School authorities would not be able to link any information provided to the participants. However, I would have to inform management if:
  - a. Something participants had said led me to believe that either their health and safety or the health and safety of others around them is at immediate risk.
  - b. Something participants had said led me to believe that there is a threat to participants or the people around them.
5. I asked the participants to think about the information that I explained to them and then carefully read the information sheet to ask me questions or things they were unsure about.

If participants agreed to take part, they would have to sign the consent form. I further explained that the consent form was not used to identify them. It would be filed separately from all other information.

6. I explained to the participants that if students felt upset after the discussion and needed help dealing with their feelings, it was very important that the participants could talk to the school counsellor or me right away.
7. I also provided student development services psychological counselling contact to participants if they wanted another individual to talk to.
8. In case of any risk, I would stop the research project and inform my principal and secondary supervisor accordingly.

For the qualitative approach of the study, self-reflection reports and face to face interviews were used as the key tools for my data collection. With the course leader's approval and participants' consent, I collected participants' self-reflection reports from the communication course. This self-report/learning reflection was part of their course assessments so students wrote it with the expectation that it may be seen by others. I have been given permission to and access by the students themselves to view their self-reflection reports by the student themselves and while this work is an assignment. As I was not the programme leader anymore, I was not the marker of the assignments so there was no conflict of interests/ blurred boundaries. The first part of the report required students to describe the interpersonal conflict with their friend or classmate or family member happened recently. The second part of the report required students to analyse the possible causes of the interpersonal conflict. The last part of the report required students to have a self-reflection on their communication skills and explain how to handle and resolve a forementioned interpersonal conflict.

For a more in-depth analysis, I conducted face to face interviews with the participants. Face to face interviews provided an opportunity for disclosure among similar others in a setting where participants were validated. For example, in the context of school bullying, targeted students often find themselves in situations where they experience lack of voice and feelings of isolation. Use of face-to-face interviews to study interpersonal conflict therefore served as both an efficacious and ethical venue for collecting data. I was aware of the inside researcher issue.



Therefore, to avoid this, I did not select my own students as participants in this research project. All these face-to-face interviews were confidential and would not reveal information about any individuals that will get them identified. Also, not allowing myself to get drawn into discussing and debating issues that relate to the management of the college for example. In addition, I would not allow participants to use the interviews as a counselling session.

With the permission of the school/ the course leader and participants' consent, I began to collect students' data. For the first part, I collected participants' self-reflection as a preliminary analysis. For the second part, I arranged face-to face interviews with participants for further investigation. Whilst participants were not my students, I would still mitigate against insider research issues through reflective ethical practice, respect for others and their dignity and values. All the participants' contacts provided by the course leader with the participants' consent. Students were recruited by using letter of introduction to invite them to participate in this research. The course leader would help to distribute the letters in class.

The type of data I collected was mainly qualitative. With the school's approval and participants' consent, I collected the self-reflection reports using my personal notebook. For the face-to-face interviews, I conducted them in school meeting rooms where it was safe, comfortable and less interruption. All my notes and data were kept in my personal notebook as well, separate folder and file locked with password. I anonymized the names when recording and in transcribing. All information were treated in strictest confidentiality.

I asked specific questions that is only related to the research project and all the questions (before distribution) were reviewed by my supervisors and the school administrators. I recognized the importance on the privacy of participants and to maintain confidentiality of data in order to start with this research. Therefore, I stressed to every participant that they must read their consent form carefully to understand what this research is about, their obligation to this research and what data would be collected from them. Also, I considered the sensitivity of the information collected and the protections offered to the subjects. All the information were treated in strict confidentiality (separate folder and files locked with a password). All the data are stored securely and separately from the research data and will be destroyed after the study to avoid any risk of

confidentiality being. In case of any psychological issues or distress from the participants, I advised participants to withdrawal from the research and see the school counsellors immediately.

#### ***Section 4.4.8 Ethics Procedures Undertaken for This Study***

The data collection began in August 2016. I explained to the communication students about the consent form and assured them that their participation was strictly on a voluntary basis. The students were told that taking part in the study would not affect their grades and that all the information they provided would be kept strictly confidential. They were made aware that they were not obligated to answer any question that made them uncomfortable and could withdraw from the study at any time. Once it was clear the students did not have any questions, I started to hand out the consent forms and informed the students they had 15 minutes to read through them carefully. Of the 168 students, 36 signed and returned the form, thereby agreeing to participate in the study. The remaining 132 students did not return the consent forms. As a result, the 36 students who signed the forms were invited to participate in the study without the need to meet any further selection criteria.

After finishing the selection process, I emailed each participant individually and asked them to send me their self-reflection reports within a timeframe of one week. In total, 12 participants submitted their reports (see chapter 5 for the research instruments) which were studied and used for the qualitative analysis. I decided to use self-reflection reports because I wanted to gain a deeper insight into the participants' experiences, and feelings when faced with interpersonal conflict. When it came to the face-to-face interviews, I opted for a semi-structured interview as it would allow me to collect more data and, therefore, obtain a better understanding of the participants' behaviours in interpersonal conflict situations. My decision to interview each participant in person was borne out of a belief that a researcher should have a close interaction with a study's participants to understand their stories and gain useful information.

#### ***Section 4.4.9 Summary of Research Ethics***

In short, the section points out how research ethics is significant when researcher designs their study that is not harmful for participants and to protect the information collected. Researchers like me then conducted fieldwork (E.g., face-to-face interviews) collected personal information

from participants is a process where we are using individual's data for our own benefits. Thus, it is extremely important to have a professional mindset that researchers or investigators should be careful in the research design stage. The ethical framework suggested by the Middlesex University Ethics Committee stated there should be some guiding values for our research ethics such as Honesty, Integrity, Mutual Support, Personal Commitment and Responsibility. I concur with these guiding values and apply it in my study. In practices, researchers should think and rethink the process so the data collection process should not disclose participant's identity, safeguard the data as valuable assets and follow-up communications with the participants to ensure they are well and not affected from the data collection process.

#### ***Section 4.5 Language Translation***

Since the data were collected mainly from Cantonese-speaking, Hong Kong Chinese students, the issue of translation had to be considered. As I have a Master of Arts in Communication, it provided me the knowledge to do the Cantonese-to-English translations and so ensure the language equivalence. Moreover, the fact that the self-reflection reports were written in English helped to reduce the implicit bias resulting from the interviews being held in Cantonese.

#### ***Section 4.6 Triangulation in Research***

Triangulation in research represents multiple datasets, methods, theories from different disciplines. The notion of triangulation is used largely to describe multiple data collection techniques during the data collection process or data triangulation (construct data through multiple sources) to investigate the same research question. Flick (2004) explained that triangulation method has a critical feature that it is not simply combining all the different types of data together but to relate them to ensure there is a validity of the information collected. Researchers often use triangulation method for a more holistic perspective on a specific research question. Triangulation is also helpful for researchers to enhance credibility, a comprehensive view and validity of their study.

**Table 4.4**

*Three Important Dimensions of Triangulation in Research*

Dimensions	Definition	Applying it Research
Credibility	Credibility is about how confident you can be that your findings reflect reality. The more the data sets agree with each other, the more credible the research results will be (Patton, 1999).	It's important to gather high-quality data for rigorous research. When researchers have data from only one source, perhaps it is difficult to say whether the data are trustworthy. It allows the researcher to cross-check the data collected. If data from multiple sources line up, researchers can be more certain of their credibility (Patton, 1999).
Comprehensive Prospect	For a comprehensive prospect, triangulation helps researcher to get a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Oliver-Hoyo and Allen, 2006).	When researchers or investigators rely on only one data source, methodology, they may risk bias in their research. Observer bias may occur when there's only one source of data. If researchers only apply one methodology which means researchers may disadvantaged by the inherent flaws and limitations of that method (Oliver-Hoyo and Allen, 2006). When researchers apply

		triangulation approach to capture the complexity of real-world phenomena, it is important to use various data sources, theories, and methodologies. Researchers can gain insights into the research problem from multiple perspectives and levels (Renz, Carrington and Badger, 2018).
Validity	Validity is about how accurately a method measures what it's supposed to measure (Hammersley, 2008).	Researchers can enhance the validity of their research through triangulation. Since each method has its own strengths and weaknesses, researchers can combine complementary methods that address their limitations (Hammersley, 2008).

Triangulation is a model for research that requires researchers to have the knowledge in multiple methods. It's a research strategy that can help you enhance the validity and credibility of your findings. Although triangulation is mainly used in qualitative research, it is also commonly applied in quantitative research. If researchers decided on mixed methods research, they would need to use methodological triangulation. This, this is useful for researchers to utilize the quantitative and qualitative techniques of the triangulation model to address the purpose of the study.

**Table 4.5**

*Use of Triangulation in Research Methodology*

Qualitative Research Example	For instance, researchers may conduct in-depth interviews with different groups of stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, and children.
Quantitative Research Example	For instance, researchers may run an eye-tracking experiment and involve a number of researchers in analysing the data.
Mixed Methods research Example	For instance, researchers may conduct a quantitative survey, followed by a few (qualitative) structured interviews.

*Note. Adapted from Hussein, A. (2009). The use of triangulation in social sciences research. Journal of comparative social work, 4(1), 106-117.*

Furthermore, researchers often associate to qualitative research applying single technique to observe participants. In social sciences study, some qualitative researchers use methods like observation, photographic techniques, historical analysis, document and textual analysis, etc. Olsen, Haralambos and Holborn (2004) explained that for the interest of triangulation approach, there is no need to exclude quantitative data gathering techniques for a qualitative study.

***Section 4.6.1 Data Triangulation***

In social sciences research, it is common to have more than one data source to ensure data validity. Triangulating multiple data sources can also help to enhance a study's transferability and generalisability (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). In this study, data triangulation involved face-to-face interviews and self-reflection reports. Using these two methods together is known to allow for cross-validation of observations (Denzin, 2006). The data triangulation process used for the purpose of this study helped to compare, contrast, and analyse patterns of thought and behaviour of the participants. The data triangulation also shed light on relationships and the "reality" of participants' experiences.

The collected data was able to highlight the "turning point" influencing the likelihood of the participants continuing or resolving the interpersonal conflict. As for the analysis outcome and the use of NVivo, the research was expected to demonstrate how data such as words,

expressions, and communication behaviour reflect the participants' behaviour pattern—and its consequences—in interpersonal conflict situations. These was able to contribute to more robust research findings and conclusions.

#### ***Section 4.7 Thematic Analysis: Coding and Themes***

I believe that it is the best to do the coding myself. Being the interviewer, I am familiar with my transcripts. This would help me in my coding process where I would have to categorise codes in relation to the constructs that I explored. An "external" individual to produce or check the coding would not do a better job. Furthermore, my literature review already provided me a good understanding of the constructs under investigation which the external member does not have. This would factor in my coding process.

I believe that it is appropriate for me to produce and check the coding myself and do not to use an external individual for this process. Also, I do not believe to have coding to be outsourced whether this is inductive or deductive coding. The researcher is an instrument of the research. Researcher should make the coding from his or her approach. Software like NVivo has come up for qualitative data analysis including various levels of coding, however it cannot replace the researcher's unique approach.

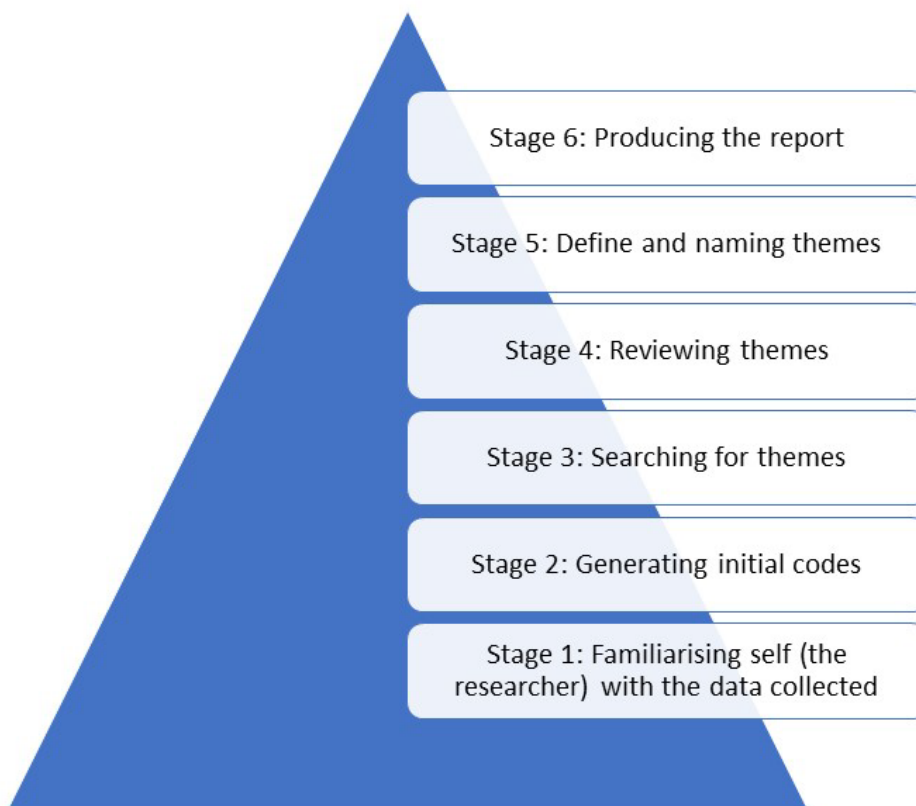
In qualitative research, researcher like me often code ourselves, decisions are shaped by our understanding of the research question, our understanding of the empirical object and the theoretical background pertinent to the research. Our experience with the interview to be coded and other interviews, and our previous coding. All this is personal, which means that it cannot be fully formalised and transmitted to external coders. Therefore, having external coders to create or check depends on how important these personalised aspects of the study are in the project at hand. For my research topic on interpersonal conflict management, I believe that by revealing personal data to an external individual may go against the concept of confidentiality, and that is considered important for research ethics.

The data collected through the interviews was transcribed and proofread multiple times to ensure quality and accuracy. This process allowed me to gain familiarity with the data, as well as identify patterns and develop themes for analysis. The immersive nature of the coding process

helped me spot repeated patterns in the data. The next step involved searching for all the possible codes and broadening them so that they could become themes or combining different codes under the same theme. Figure 4.7 below outlines the step that research uses in the thematic analysis process.

**Figure 4.7**

*Six Stages of Thematic Analysis*



*Note. Adapted from Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative research in psychology, 3(2), 77-101.*

Braun and Clarke (2006) explained that there are six stages on thematic analysis. To further explain the analysis process, please find the corresponding description below:

Stage 1: Researcher needs to transcribe the data and read (re-read) for initial ideas.



Stage 2: Researcher needs to code the prominent features of the data (across the data set) systematically.

Stage 3: Researcher needs to collate the code into potential themes and gather all the data that is relevant.

Stage 4: Researcher needs to check if themes work in relations to the data set and coded extracts. It is necessary to generate a thematic map of the analysis.

Stage 5: Researcher needs to continue the analysis to refine the themes of the experience.

Stage 6: For the final analysis, the researcher needs to direct the analysis back to the research questions with compelling extract examples.

Following Braun and Clarke (2006)'s explanation on thematic analysis, thematic maps were developed to support the generation of themes. These maps (Appendix 4) helped me to recognise the data patterns and determine the links and relationships between them. Data with similar meaning were assigned the same code or grouped under the same theme. These were then put together so that the data with a particular code could be examined and understood as a whole. The coded data were subsequently re-examined and arranged into broader themes or categories as recommended by Balls (2009). (Balls, 2009). To refine these themes, the data were checked several times to determine whether the data sets formed a coherent pattern and whether the themes accurately reflected the contents of the data set as a whole.

Thematic analysis is the most common form of data analysis in qualitative research. This form of analysis is performed through a multi-phase coding process. According to Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), coding involves interpretive techniques to organise data obtained from research participants and provides the means for the interpretation, analysis, and summary of the data. A thorough analysis of the coded data brings out its meaning and essence. The thematic analysis in this study was performed with NVivo software. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis (QDA) computer software package produced by QSR International. It has been designed for qualitative researchers working with very rich text-based and/or multimedia information, where deep levels of analysis on small or large volumes of data are required (QSR International, 2015). The software can facilitate classifying, sorting, and arranging information, examining relationships in the data, and combining analysis with processes such as linking and shaping. The

use of NVivo to code the transcripts allowed me to look for emerging and relevant themes, as well as organise and analyse the collected raw data.

The interview-based qualitative research in this study helped to identify the key themes. Once the transcriptions were completed, I began examining the responses of each questionnaire and grouped those that had similar elements of interpersonal conflict. This allowed me to identify emergent trends. I used pen and paper along with NVivo throughout the data collection process and was able to extract consistent themes, which I discussed with my supervisor and from which I developed ideas for further analysis. The process of analysing the data collected or obtained from the participants was carried out and synthesised in accordance with the themes observed during the research phase and from the literature review. Connecting and interrelating the emerging themes involved analysing the data by examining the correlations or associations between the study dimensions (both dependent and independent) to draw a meaningful summary of the data supporting the general results and outcomes of the study (Kothari, 2005). This research used open, axial, and selective coding to achieve the research goals of this study, as they provide opportunities for me to immerse themselves in the data. Applying open, axial and selective coding, the process promotes thematic integration and organizational strength, which enables me to be reflective. Each stage of the coding process progressively integrates the emergent themes acquired during the data collection process and continually refines the themes for a meaningful understanding. The three stages of coding (open, axial, and selective) will be further illustrated in the following sections.

Twelve students submitted their self-reflection reports on conflict resolution. Reflection is often used in the study of health and mental wellness, to help participants to be honest to themselves about the situation and emotional state they are in (Koshy et al., 2017). The reports provided an opportunity for participants to reflect their feelings towards specific incidents in which they had been involved. The research can have a better understanding of the participants' feeling and experience from their reflection. In the data collection stage, I interviewed the participants to observe their verbal and non-verbal behaviours. Seeing as English was not their first language, I decided it would be more productive to allow the participants to speak in their mother tongue. Twelve participants were, therefore, interviewed while the remaining 24 were, for different reasons, excluded.

Next, I compiled the self-reflection reports and transcribed the interviews. I took notes to review my findings and used NVivo to carry out the thematic analysis and run word queries to generate keywords from the reflections. It is essential to take notes and review the themes and codes, which can be helpful in data analysis (Gibbs, 2008). Therefore, I reviewed the themes extracted from the transcripts—essential for determining the participants’ understanding of incidents—and created three categories labelled as “People Involved in Conflict,” “Causes and Reasons of Conflict,” and “Consequences of (and Actions Following) Conflict”. A research framework illustrating how the three themes were connected was subsequently constructed. The categories helped to highlight the mutually relative elements such as the participants’ behaviour and attitude.

The next stage of this study consisted of further investigating the results of the thematic analysis of the self-reflection reports and interviews. I identified keywords and then systematically searched the corpus of the text to find all instances of each word. Every time I found a word, I copied it with its immediate context. Themes were identified by physically sorting the examples into groups with similar meanings. Overall, conflicts proved to be some of the most challenging situations handle. The participants attributed both positive and negative traits to conflict, and all had parents who appeared to be rigid and difficult to communicate with. Some of the participants’ peers and friends could also be described as “set in their ways.” These observations are similar to the findings that emerged from the thematic analysis.

The data collected from the self-reflection reports and interviews were also compared during the thematic analysis stage. As far as similarities are concerned, my analysis revealed that many students used an accommodating communication style to deal with conflict or prevent it from happening. Asian college students tend to believe that they should maintain peace and harmony in relationships—something which is likely to be part of their embedded values. Naturally, conflict can still occur, but for Asian students, “guanxi” (i.e., relationship) is important. Moreover, I noticed that the participants avoided confrontation, probably because they believed it was their moral duty to maintain good relationships regardless of ethnicity or social background (Naudé & Buttle, 2000).

Another observation I was able to make was that many of the participants did not realise they were just one of the parties of a two-way communication. Hence, they are part of their own conflict. This is critical because they had an actual role to play in the communication process and in resolving the issue together with the other party. It may be that what is needed is better self-awareness in order to develop healthy relationships with other people. However, in a collectivist culture like the Chinese one, group cohesiveness is of great importance and necessary in daily life. As the bond within the group is very strong, collectivists have a greater need for effective conflict management or interpersonal communication management skills so that they can get along with others. At the same time, the participants of the study need to know how to evaluate their own feelings and behaviours—something which is an integral part of self-awareness

Finally, from the interviews, I noted that the participants talked about their problems and difficulties as a way of managing conflict. The students were willing to reflect on their stories and expressed their feelings about the conflict occurrence. I was able to have genuine discussions about the participants' experiences and feelings, although some started to feel guilty and embarrassed after rethinking the incidents conflict, they had been part of. This research project's achievement lies in its ability to contribute to knowledge in the area of culture and conflict. The collected data can add to the understanding of how cultural awareness can lead to conflict resolution in collectivist cultures.

#### ***Section 4.7.1 Analysis—Coding***

Coding is an interpretive act and a process of transitioning between collecting data and then analysing it. In this study, I wrote memos while compiling the self-reflection reports and transcribing the interviews. Memos in the form of notes allowed me to theorise about the codes—and the relationships between them—when writing them down. What follows are some examples of the memos I took when compiling and analysing the data.

(September 9, 2016)

The participants felt that it's difficult to control their emotions during a conflict. That's because they don't want their relationship to go bad, so they try to keep their opinions to themselves in order to avoid any hard feelings. Sometimes they'll change topics or avoid

certain topics so that there are no confrontations. These strategies were described as coping mechanisms to address their interpersonal conflicts.

(September 10, 2016)

Most of the participants feel that conflict is a complicated matter. They get angry and upset when they experience conflict. Sometimes, they may argue and criticise others to try to win the argument. However, afterwards they feel that this hurts their relationship, and it is not what they want.

(September 12, 2016)

During the interviews, most of the participants appeared to be calm and willing to share their experiences. They felt comfortable enough to reflect on the conflicts that took place. They also felt relieved to have the opportunity to talk with me and think back to how the conflict happened.

(September 12, 2016)

I noticed that time after time, time constraints are an issue during the interviews. Nine out of the total 12 interviewees mentioned that they are busy and have so many activities every day and are so tired. When they go home at the end of the day, they just want to rest.

(September 15, 2016)

The interviewees did not suggest other places to meet, so this meant that everyone was receptive to meeting on campus for the interviews. This shows their willingness to accommodate me and therefore avoid conflict. I feel like this is how they deal with interpersonal conflict.

(October 2, 2016)

The interviewee today appeared to be self-centred. S/he did not talk much about the other person's issues and how she can solve or minimise the differences.

(October 3, 2016)

There is a lot of anger when the interviewees feel that their parents or friends don't understand them. In the self-reflection reports, I frequently see more expressed emotions from the students. They are more willing to write about how they feel.

(October 6, 2016)

While I was interviewing a student this morning, I noticed that the student likes to use the words "could not" and "fair." I also noticed that two others also used "could not" several times.

Since a vast amount of data was generated, my coding method had to reduce its volume and break the text down into meaningful parts. This process consisted of three cycles of coding: open, axial, and selective coding.

#### ***Section 4.7.2 First Cycle of Coding***

***Open and Inductive Coding.*** The first cycle of coding in this study involved using open and inductive coding. This process required me to code each line of the reports and transcripts. I started by transcribing the interviews and observation notes in my notebook. Inductive coding—used to derive meaning from text—required me to break down the text in the self-reflection reports, interview transcripts, and observation reports into passages, quotes, and words. I manually reviewed the text and highlighted some of the more important words, phrases, and paragraphs. As part of the inductive reasoning and theorising, I used intuition to determine which parts of text felt similar and needed to be grouped together.

I also applied an iterative process—a systematic approach that involves carrying out a sequence of tasks in a repetitive and recursive manner. I used NVivo to help organise and analyse the collected raw data, which I had already translated from Chinese (Cantonese) into English. I imported the text into NVivo and employed heading styles to organise the students' responses. Using NVivo to code the transcripts allowed me to look for relevant themes. I selected the fragments of the text that were of interest to the study, placed them into nodes, and then compiled a list of the nodes. I revisited the list often to see the connections. In addition, I

compared the responses from the reports and interviews based on attributes, such as the words used to describe the conflicts. Table 5.1 shows the summarised results.

### ***Section 4.8 Conclusion***

Chapter 4 concluded the discussion on the research paradigms and philosophies that can enhance our understanding of the development of research strategies used. In order to strengthen the research paradigm of this study, I applied a qualitative approach based on four building blocks: 1) narrative approach, 2) interpretivism, 3) thematic analysis, and 4) data triangulation. By using a qualitative data collection method and triangulating the results (e.g., semi-structured interviews and self-reflection documents), I expected greater reliability when addressing the themes of this study.

The cross-disciplinary approach of the literature review highlighted a need to carry out a study to investigate how Hong Kong Chinese students manage interpersonal conflict depending on cultural dimensions. Many existing studies are based on the Western context, and there is a lack of knowledge of how culturally motivated student behaviour contributes to the causes and consequences of conflict. The chapter also discussed the way in which the themes regarding students' understanding of conflict were identified. To meet ethical requirements, I liaised with the college in my study and the course coordinators to discuss how I would approach potential participants. This was very important because the research topic explored in this study is sensitive and may evoke negative feelings and memories in the respondents when asked to discuss their experience with conflict. The participants, therefore, had to have a thorough understanding of the contents of the consent form and the topic before they participated in the study. As a result, for research work to be ethical, consideration had to be given to the feelings and emotions of the participants during the overall observation work. As the primary researcher, I carried out all the research work and conducted the interviews—all taking place in a quiet room on the main campus of the college.

Throughout the data collection process, the study followed research ethics guidelines so as to minimise any negative repercussions to the study participants and take responsibility for all the consequences that might arise during the study. I made sure that none of the participants

experienced any pressure and all took part voluntarily in the study. I informed them that all the information collected from the interviews would be kept confidential and only accessed by me. In addition, I made it clear that the information would be used solely to support the study and not for any other purposes. Finally, anonymity was ensured to protect the identity of the participants. In order to eliminate the potential risk of the participants facing any negative consequences as a result of participating in the study, pseudonyms were used instead of real names.



## **Chapter 5: Results**

### ***Section 5.1 Introduction***

The purpose of data gathering was to collect descriptions of participants' experiences that would shape my analysis. To enhance data credibility, the data were collected using the triangulation method from two sources, namely interviews and self-reflections. Chapter 4 discusses the collected data, provides basic demographic information on the participants, and details the coding process. The first half of the chapter focuses on the interview data, while the second half outlines the self-reflection report data, as well as basic demographic data. In line with the findings of the literature review in Chapter 3, the data presented in this chapter focuses on 1) the basic background of the research participants along with their descriptions of the conflict, 2) the level of interdependency associated with the individual they had conflict with, 3) the emotions and behaviour displayed during the conflict, and 4) conflict management style with a focus on compromise and avoidance.

Participants were from different faculties, which resulted in a good mix of students. Five Year 1 students and seven Year 2 students participated in the study. When it comes to gender, one of the reasons why fewer males than females participated in the study may be that men see reflection as a significant sign of weakness (Sloan, Gough, & Conner, 2010). Thus, male students may not want to disclose negative experiences. Although gender may play a part in how individuals respond to conflict, this study does not explore the gender vis-à-vis communication issues as gender is a vast area of investigation is not directly linked with the focus of my research (i.e., culture and conflict). Future studies, however, may wish to address the issue of gender in interpersonal conflict.

While searching the text to code the participants' attributes and emotions, I asked myself the following questions to maintain focus and used Questions 7, 8, and 9 alerted me to my assumptions, biases, and values/belief system, respectively:

1. What were the students doing or trying to achieve?
2. How did they do this? What was their approach? What was their plan?
3. How did the students describe what was happening?

4. What did they assume?
5. What do I see? What can I learn from my notes?
6. Why did I include certain notes?
7. What did I not expect?
8. What did I find interesting?
9. What made me feel uneasy or upset?

### ***Section 5.2 Data from Face-to-Face Interviews***

Many participants often talked about their parents, possibly due to a high level of interdependency. In a collective culture like that of Hong Kong, college students tend to live with their parents throughout their college years or even until they marry. This is in stark contrast with many Western cultures, where young people prefer independence and want to live and work on their own (Nielsen, Mushin, Tomaselli, & Whiten, 2014). The co-habiting of parents and young adult children may be seen as more likely to result in conflict since the two sides have different expectations even as they are forced to share the same living space and possessions, and the children continue to be closely connected to their parents in daily life.

#### **Interview with Jackson (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: Can you tell me who's involved in the conflict?

Jackson: My father. He doesn't understand what I want.

Researcher: Do you talk to your father often?

Jackson: Not really.

Researcher: How did you solve the conflict?

Jackson: My dad was upset with me because of my GPA. He has high expectations for me in my schoolwork. We had an argument and didn't talk for a while, but we finally calmed down and listened to each other.

Researcher: How did you feel after things calmed down?

Jackson: Much better and we were more willing to listen to each other after I told him about my new part-time job.

Understanding the relationship between those involved in a conflict can help a researcher determine the level of interdependency that may have led to the conflictual situation in the first place. For instance, Jackson may not have fully understood that a conflict involves at least two people and that they both have a part to play in it. The interviewees who attributed the conflict to their parents often described the negative aspects of the relationship they had with them. A very common means of handling a conflict is avoidance, which can be described as an unproductive approach because walking away from a conflict to avoid confrontation does not solve the problem (Angus et al., 2017). In this study, many of the participants (e.g., Jackson and Kevin) did not want to damage their interpersonal relationships and preferred instead to communicate peacefully and respectfully. This suggested that the use of avoidance in dealing with conflicts is accepted in the collective context. Therefore, the theme that emerged from the interview with Jackson was the need for trust and honesty in relationships

#### **Interview with Kevin (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: Can you tell me who's involved in the conflict?

Kevin: My mother. I didn't talk to her for about a week because she never listens to what I say.

Researcher: Do you have a good relationship with her?

Kevin: Yes, I love my mum.

Researcher: Tell me about the disagreement.

Kevin: I had an argument with my mum because of my habits. I've been a burden to my mum, and recently she argued with me about the same issue [her impulse buying and excessive shopping]. My mother told me several times that I should consider my spending habits and not waste money on unnecessary things because she wants to save money and buy a home. But I didn't stop.

Researcher: How did you approach the argument?

Kevin: My mother asked me to compromise and stop shopping and only buy necessities so that we can buy our own house. And I am compromising so that we will be better off.

Compromise happens when two parties agree to make concessions, as was the case for Kevin. The mother of Kevin hoped that her child would understand the importance of purchasing an apartment and compromise by refraining from impulse buying. In the end, Kevin and his mother mutually agreed that the son could do some shopping with a limited budget each time. In this way, reaching a compromise can give some satisfaction to both parties and is a good option when a partial benefit is better than nothing.

### **Interview with Julia (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: So, who's involved in the conflict?

Julia: The cheerleading team. I'm so disappointed with them.

Researcher: Why disappointed?

Julia: I told them that we should practise more but they didn't listen to me, and we lost the game.

Researcher: How did you solve the conflict?

Julia: We [the cheerleading team] lost the match because a team member was absent. We argued for a long time, but she still did not admit that it was her fault. So, we asked her to never play on the team again.

Researcher: How did you feel? Did you give her a chance to explain her absence?

Julia: I did. The match was the only thing I cared about.

Julia was not aware that other team members might have also been disappointed with the absent teammate. In order to maintain healthy relationships, a strong sense of self-awareness in interpersonal communication, as well as a willingness to listen to others and note their feedback is essential (Alberts, 2018). Hence, the theme emerging from the interview with Julia was a deficiency of mutual understanding.

Personality differences and incompatible ideas or opinions among friends can cause conflicts (Böhm, Rusch, & Baron, 2018). Julia understood that friendship was important but believed that having arguments with friends occurred due to personality differences. Personality and competence are influential factors in conflict management strategies. For example, shyness may

lead to conflict avoidance and Julia regretted her actions as there could have been a different outcome from the conflict.

### **Interview with Karina (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: How did you show your disagreement with the direction or ideas suggested by the other party?

Karina: I argued with a classmate because he went ahead and submitted a group assignment that was plagiarised.

Researcher: Tell me more about the issue.

Karina: We had a group assignment that we were working on together with my classmates. We divided the assignment among ourselves so that everyone in the group could make contributions. We ran the contents of the entire project through a plagiarism software and found that that classmate's part was plagiarised. So, I asked him to redo it, but he refused. We argued about this and now we're not talking to each other. Later, I forced him to redo the work. He had no choice but to start all over again.

It is important to note how Karina talked about the other individual involved in the conflict to understand their relationship. This helped me see how Karina perceived the other individual and the relationship they had. Both parties would benefit from a more open communication approach—perhaps an open dialogue—that could help them clear the misunderstanding, put a stop to the conflict, and avoid further worsening the situation. However, if a problem cannot be fully resolved, a compromise should be reached so that everybody involved feels that they are treated fairly. The interview also revealed that some interviewees compromised to manage their interpersonal conflict. The theme emerging from the interview with Karina was one of violating trust and a lack of responsibility.

### **Interview with Jenny (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: Who is that you had a conflict with?

Jenny: My elder sister. I don't know why but I always have to take care of her.

Researcher: How's your relationship with her?

Jenny: Sometimes we argue because she always uses my stuff.

The individual with Jenny had a conflict was someone closely connected to her. The conflict could therefore affect the health of their relationship. It can be presumed that that conflict happens more frequently between those who live together due to a higher level of interdependency and because all parties have rights and responsibilities in the relationship. The information collected for this study is important because it clearly demonstrates how belonging to a group, coupled with cultural factors, dictates how conflict might be perceived. Canary and Dainton (2003) defined relationship maintenance as something which involves behaviours that are important for maintaining positive interpersonal relationships. Conflict management depends not only on the individuals' conflict resolving skills but also on how they wish to maintain their relationship, and this may lead to different consequences. Thus, the theme emerging from the conversation with Jenny was that of relationship.

Lewicki and Bunker (1996) argued that when people violate relationship rules or responsibilities, conflict may happen and damage the relationship if it is not properly resolved. However, the data in this study indicates that not all relationships deteriorate as a result of conflict. Instead of focusing on conflict resolution, the interviewees preferred to focus on relationship maintenance. Although the chances of conflict are higher for Hong Kong students due to their daily interactions, relationship maintenance might be of greater importance to them because they value cultural norms and relationships with their loved ones, even if their interests may not be the same.

The social network of a college student has his/her relationship to different categories of people. College students have relationships with family members (parents, siblings, grandparents, and other relatives) which evolve throughout their lives. A college student is more interdependent with those who are intimate or essential to them, like best friends or parents, than with other individuals with whom they have relationships. A high level of interdependency means that both parties need to maintain the relationship. If either person—especially the one at the receiving end in a conflict—senses a lack of trust on people, they may face difficulties in solving the conflictual issue. In other words, it can be said that conflict is associated with the level of interdependency and that the level of trust between the two sides plays a crucial part in resolving

the conflict. When someone trusts us, they perceive us as trustworthy, dependable, and reliable (Carvalho & Gabriel, 2006).

Judging from the descriptions provided, half of the interviewees appeared to be harbouring negative emotions towards conflict. However, no cases of conflict leading to violence were recorded in this study. By looking into their descriptions and categorizing them based on the model of emotions suggested by Plutchik (2001), we can see that many of the interviewees' emotions towards conflict can be classified as unpleasant. The lack of trust described by the interviewees may be due to lack of understanding, feeling discouraged, or scared—all capable of inhibiting further engagement in conflict resolution (Curşeu & Schrujjer, 2010). Typically, people experience more conflict with their loved ones because they have common needs, live together, and share possessions, making mutual trust an influential factor in interpersonal conflict. Lack of trust and jealousy can cause conflicts. Moreover, lack of time, different values, and issues relating to personal space or distance are among the reasons that can lead to unfavourable outcomes when dealing with interpersonal conflict (Boschma, 2005).

### ***Section 5.2.1 Causes and Reasons of Conflict***

There can be many reasons why interpersonal conflict happens. In this study, participants listed several factors causing the occurrence of conflict. These included school activities, verbal insults, a difference of opinion, breaking promises, jealousy, disclosing one's secrets, and telling lies (see F). One of the most frequently cited reasons was a difference of opinion. The students reported struggling with others about their holiday plans, whether to share possessions, or even which movie to see.

Interpersonal conflict is inevitable in any relationship where there is some level of interdependency (i.e., connectedness, interrelatedness), and where the parties recognise incompatibility between the positions they have taken on an issue (Putnam, 2006). Therefore, it is important to look at the causes of conflict. To many, conflict is damaging because it reveals our negative self—our pettiness, need to be in control, and unreasonable expectations. There are many underlying causes that can lead to conflict. Violation of expectations is often found to be

the cause of conflict in families where all members have rights and responsibilities (Haggard, 2017).

### **Interview with Peter (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: What happened?

Peter: I didn't meet my mum's expectations.

Researcher: Can you tell me a bit more?

Peter: My mum expects me to get into a better university.

Peter illustrates that when needs and desires are incompatible, conflicts take place. This, in turn, leads to avoidance of communication and physical avoidance because of the involved parties' inability to meet the needs and desires of the other person. Thus, both in Peter and Tom, they used avoidance to deal with conflict or even to communicate. Another avoidance strategy employed by some of the respondents is refraining from negotiation, whereby conflict is seen as something to be avoided and left to time to be solved. Therefore, Tom chose to stop communicating and negotiating with his father.

### **Interview with Tom (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: Can you tell me what happened?

Tom: I always ignore him [his father] and just do the things that I want to do.

Researcher: Why is that?

Tom: Not sure. I just don't want to be controlled by others and I do not have time to deal with all those problems.

Time was another factor considered to affect communication. Tom and Janice believed that lack of time caused difficulties in communication or limited it. However, social media or instant messaging could be used to easily maintain contact with peers and family members (Ruths & Pfeffer, 2014). Although technology may not be the best way to maintain intimacy, it is still a good tool for maintaining contact with family and friends. Moreover, time is an influential factor in many Asian metropolises because employees there tend to work long hours or do overtime (Ollus, 2016). Commitment to the company is an embedded value of collectivist culture where



company loyalty is a way of showing that one is a good staff member. However, the imbalance of work and personal life, as well as the limited amount of time family members or partners spend together, can be damaging to a relationship, as expressed by Janice. Thus, the theme emerging from the interview with Janice was a concern about time.

#### **Interview with Janice (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: What's the problem about?

Janice: I go to school from 9 am to 6 pm and work at night. How would I still have time to listen to others [her boyfriend]?

Researcher: Have you tried to overcome this with your boyfriend together?

Janice: Not really, maybe... I should really talk to him...

Uncertainties about the level of commitment, jealousy, and violation of expectations between couples and romantic partners can also be the causes of conflict in intimate relationships (Harris, 2003). Jealousy and lack of commitment are often fatal to a relationship. Jealousy is not restricted to gender, culture, or socioeconomic levels, and it has substantial negative impacts on interpersonal communication and conflict management when improperly handled (Bendixen, Kennair, & Buss, 2015). Furthermore, many Asian couples will adopt an accommodating conflict-handling style. Since a collective culture emphasises and values peace and harmony, confrontation is avoided. Consequently, couples or romantic partners will likely adopt an accommodating conflict management style. For example, Kate decided to accommodate her boyfriend by changing her behaviour. One of the reasons individuals sometimes conform is that they feel more comfortable being just like other people. In collectivist societies, conforming has no negative implications. As a result, people may be more willing to admit that they conform because doing so is seen as a good thing.

#### **Interview with Kate (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: Can you tell me about the conflict?

Kate: My boyfriend didn't let me hang out with other guys and we had an argument.

Researcher: Can you tell me how you solved the problem?

Kate: I told him [her ex-boyfriend] many times I need more freedom, but he said, “You already have a lot of freedom.” He didn’t understand what I meant, but I just tried to go along with whatever he said.

Researcher: Did you try to talk to him again if he didn’t understand you?

Kate: It would be useless, and we would just keep arguing.

Wendy, meanwhile, felt betrayed because her friends had reported her for plagiarism to their teacher. However, this only provides understanding from one viewpoint. To avoid damage to the relationship, friends should work towards a potential solution that stabilises the relationship and prevents hostility.

### **Interview with Wendy (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: What is the conflict about?

Wendy: She [her best friend at college] betrayed me. She told the teacher that I copied her assignment, but that’s not really the truth.

Researcher: Can you tell me more about what happened?

Wendy: She lent me her assignment and I got some ideas from it. That’s all.

In this section, I examined some of the causes of conflict amongst the study participants. The strong bonds between the college students and their peers or family members influence their communication behaviour due to their inherent interdependency. Since each role has responsibilities within the family, the expectations of each family member can be demanding. When the participants cannot tolerate or accept violations of their expectations, negative feelings ensue, which leads to unfavourable outcomes.

My analysis indicated that the respondents prefer to avoid conflict and compromise—their primary means of conflict management—but sometimes dominate and withdraw. These students prefer different conflict management styles as the Hong Kong cultural norms for conflict resolution have already been instilled in them. According to Markus and Lin (1999), such college students prefer to avoid expressing their opinions and place relationships above their own self-interest.

The literature suggests Hong Kong students prefer to avoid making a scene and are more likely to prefer unassertive strategies; a similar pattern is seen among the Hong Kong college students in this study. The participants appear to focus on the suppression of opinions and indirect assertion depending on the nature of the conflict, a phenomenon described in Moss and Wilson (2010). The same is true of students who like to assert themselves more indirectly when facing a conflict of opinion with peers. Therefore, Hong Kong students have unique cultural preferences for conflict strategies, and the same applies to how these students approach the *use* of these conflict strategies.

In this section, I also examined conflict situations stemming from opposing desires or opinions. Examining such situations is important because strong interpersonal skills and good relationships with classmates arguably determine whether participants are accommodating and compromise or collaborate when the need arises. As Mischel (2004) indicated, these situational (or external) factors are significant since human behaviour cannot be understood without taking them into consideration. This study highlights several instances where situational factors are found, such as when respondents have different opinions or there is competition for resources. An example of such situational factors is expressed by Maggie.

#### **Interview with Maggie (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: How did you show your disagreement with the direction or ideas suggested by the other party?

Maggie: I interrupted my boyfriend when he was lying.

Researcher: Tell me more about the situation.

Maggie: I wanted my boyfriend to help me, and I needed to borrow his car, but he told me that the car had been in a serious accident earlier. But this was a lie because I had seen the car the previous night. It was parked in their home compound. So, when my boyfriend lied to me, I interrupted him.

Researcher: How did you resolve the situation?

Maggie: I told her that if he did not want to lend me his car, he could have simply told me the truth rather than lie to me. But he still defended himself. So, I just walked away.

As reflected by the interview with Maggie, interruption (i.e., dominating) is normally one of the most difficult behaviours to control when resolving a conflict. People generally feel a need to interrupt another person when they believe they are lying.

Sometimes demands can be accommodated to preserve a relationship even if the individual does not particularly want to be accommodating. For example, Irene accommodated her father's demands by using a cooperative and unassertive approach. This approach was useful since the respondent was able to preserve her relationship with her father. However, the underlying issues were not addressed.

### **Interview with Irene (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: How did you show your disagreement with the direction or ideas suggested by the other party?

Irene: I opposed my father indirectly because I think that he is being so selfish.

Researcher: Tell me more about the situation.

Irene: I have a selfish dad. He argues with my mother all the time. But this time around, I indirectly opposed him when he told me to turn off the air conditioner in my grandma's room because he says it's a waste of energy. My grandma is old, and I can't understand how my dad can enjoy the air conditioner himself in his room but not allow my grandma to use it as well. I find my dad very selfish and sometimes annoying. Sorry, I don't respect him, and so I hold a grudge against him because he is not a good person. I indirectly oppose him by just mumbling when I have to talk to him and never tell him anything. Any time he wants me to do something, I just do it, but I don't openly talk to him about anything.

Researcher: How do you resolve the issues?

Irene: I just do what he wants to let things go.

Although the relationship was preserved, this situation was also risky because the respondent still held a grudge against her father. In Chinese culture, holding grudges is normally frowned upon. Indeed, there is a saying in Hong Kong that goes, "It does not matter; it is in the past." In other

words, lingering on the past is not considered healthy and should not be used as ammunition in conflict.

### ***Section 5.2.2 Interpretation of the Interview Data***

Some individuals may believe there has to be a winner and a loser in a conflict situation. In other words, they may think that since goals can be incompatible, someone will win, and someone must lose in the conflict. However, this does not have to be the case if the conflict is managed effectively. To handle conflict constructively, individuals need to consider conflict management strategies and other influential factors as conflict outcomes can be both positive and negative (Behfar et al., 2008). The literature shows that different conflict management strategies can lead to different possible outcomes. For a constructive way of handling the conflict, she might have applied another strategy such as compromising or collaborating to avoid polarization and thereby find a middle ground (Callanan, Benzing, & Perri, 2006). These alternative strategies can help initiate a mutual agreement and reduce the strain on communication, which in turn provides room for further negotiation.

As exemplified in the interviews, emotions are also influenced by culture. These emotions often involve mental evaluations, cultural rules, and beliefs (LeVine, 2018). The literature has explored the impact of various cultural norms when expressing emotions and feelings that could influence interpersonal conflict. Findings suggest the culture instilled in an individual during childhood and the culture that this individual is situated in provides a framework to express feelings and interpret the emotions of others. For example, my former classmate once gave a lecture in Shanghai to a group of Chinese college students. The students listened politely but did not make comments or ask questions after the lecture. My classmate thought that perhaps they were bored. Later, my classmate learned that the Chinese students were showing respect by being quiet. In other words, culture influences how feelings are interpreted (Hong et al., 2000). Tradition also feeds cultural values that contribute to beliefs and communication style. Confucianism has infiltrated every aspect of life in China, including the three fundamental principles of morality: benevolence, rituals, and yin/yang (i.e., finding middle ground) (Yao, 2000). Historically, Confucians were primarily interested in speech as an ethical issue, believing that proper use of language kept society orderly and moral (Bell, 2010). Even today, a person

with high moral standards is expected to be ethical in speech and action, knows his/her audience, and use language appropriately. Thus, according to Confucian principles of speech, interviewee needs to know that although there might be common practices among those who have the same cultural background, there will still be individual differences that can influence their communication behaviour due to their social background.

Verbal messages play a significant role in daily life and communication. Healthy verbal communication can foster good relationships, the creation of identities, and the accomplishment of everyday tasks. However, mixed messages can influence communication behaviour. When this happens, the result can be conflict situations.

The face-to-face interviews, therefore, provide meaningful data sets for this research study. In general, the similarities of emerging themes such as “lack of trust,” “lack of understanding,” “self-centred thinking,” and “limited time” suggest the participants acknowledge the importance of a good education. Examining similarities in the contents of the data sets is fundamental to the coding process (Gentner & Markman, 1994). By contrast, an interesting pattern emerged among the data from the self-reflection reports and those from the interviews. In particular, the participants agreed that they could easily avoid problems because they did not need to address the issue(s) of disagreement. However, they also understood that this was not how one should deal with communication issues. They noted that communication should be an active process with genuine dialogue whereby individuals state their own needs and wants. In doing so, disagreements can be reduced, and the focus will return to the source of the problem itself. In the interviews, some of the participants did not specifically share how they resolved the conflict or perhaps they never thought of doing so when conflict occurred. In many of the interviews, the participants blamed the other person for the conflict. Very often, they lacked self-awareness in an argument, so they shifted the responsibility to the other party. Some participants in the interviews failed to talk about their own actions or dialogue because when I asked, “How did you solve the conflict?” many were surprised and did not realise that they were part of the conflict or somehow responsible for it. Therefore, these findings suggest that the interviewees did not want to overtly engage in conflict as it may have significantly affected their relationship.

### *Section 5.3 Data from Self-Reflections and Interviews*

I coded the data for each participant separately. Next, I compared the codes to identify related keywords, repeated words, and similarities and differences in the explanations for why things happened. Because the study explored the reasons for the conflict and how it was managed, I also coded the sequence of events for each interpersonal conflict.

According to the self-reflection reports, participants' descriptions of the events were as follows:

Jackson: He [his father] said he will cut off my credit card. I wish he'd pay attention to something that is more important to me.

Kevin: I was not being respected. She kept yelling at me. I already said to her [his mother] that I would work harder next time.

Peter: I felt sad when people do not understand me. I love my mum but sometimes she was so hard to talk to.

Tom: My father divorced my mother because of another woman. I was so angry, and I argued with him for being so selfish.

Irene: I was too exhausted to talk to him [her father]. Sometimes, I felt hopeless on him.

Jenny: My older sister thinks I am too independent to care about what she thinks. I have my life too and I cannot just listen to her all the time.

Julia: I was so upset that I could not sleep. I felt she [her teammate] was responsible for what happened.

Wendy: We were best friends before she had a new boyfriend. I felt so lonely sometimes. I kind of inflicted my pain on her.

Kate: I had my things to do too. I could not just accompany him [her boyfriend] all the time.

Maggie: I felt foolish, but I was exhausted. I did not want to deal with all the issues.

Janice: He was my first love and cheated on me with another girl.

Karina: I told them [her classmate] I was responsible for my part only. They had to contribute equally to the group project.

These descriptions of interpersonal conflict helped me understand how conflict is typically approached by Hong Kong college students. Conflict descriptions from the interviews and self-reflection reports revealed a recurring pattern: Interpersonal conflict was a negative experience. This pattern was particularly true when participants in the self-reflection reports and interviews mainly expressed feeling “sad,” “angry” and “threatened,” either directly or indirectly (Table 5.1). Furthermore, many of the descriptions of their conflicts appeared associated with who was responsible for violating expectations.



**Table 5.1***Participants' Description of the Conflict*

Pseudonym	Year	Faculty	Self-reflection report data	Interview data
Jackson (male)	2	Social Sciences	Felt threatened	Things are bad for both sides
Kevin (male)	2	Business	Started with a complaint	Anger
Peter (male)	1	Business	Made him feel sad	A bad experience
Tom (male)	1	Arts	Other party was irresponsible	Communication difficulties
Irene (female)	1	Business	Everyone wants control	Feeling uncertain
Jenny (female)	2	Arts	A bad incident started the conflict	Trying to gain a better understanding of other people
Julia (female)	2	Arts	Bad feelings	Conflicts are not easy to manage
Wendy (female)	2	Business	Caused everyone to be unhappy	Feeling tired
Kate (female)	1	Social Sciences	Others are too demanding	Trying to meet others' expectations was not easy
Maggie (female)	1	Business	Lack of understanding of others	Feeling discouraged

Janice (female)	1	Business	Other party is selfish	Feeling scared
Karina (female)	1	Arts	Inability to reach mutual consensus	Communication problems

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My coding approach was also based on grammatical and affective methods. The grammatical method of attribute coding identified essential information about the participants, such as their demographics. The affective method labelled participants' experiences according to their emotions and values (previously illustrated in Table 5.1). With the grammatical method, I looked for text pertaining to the research site (a college in Hong Kong) and the participants (the college students) in terms of their attributes and demographics. In other words, I started with the people involved (Table 5.2).

According to the self-reflection reports, participants' responses about the individual they had had the conflict with were as follows:

Jackson: I love my father, but he was always busy. And I had to work and study.

Kevin: My mother was so rude all the time. We just can't talk genuinely.

Peter: I am not sure whether it was me or my mum. I find it hard to communicate and understand her.

Tom: The conflict was with my father. I do not live with him anymore.

Irene: I already tried my best on him [her father].

Jenny: My sister always wanted to control me. I am mature enough to make my own decisions.

Julia: She [her teammate] really disappointed me and the team because she did not show up.

Wendy: The conflict was between me and my best friend. I was angry that she didn't talk to me anymore when she started dating.

Kate: He [her boyfriend] was so annoying. I told him I need time for my studies and part-time job.

Maggie: I did not even know he [her boyfriend] was going out with another girl. My friend saw him with another girl. I felt so stupid.

Janice: We had an argument. He was lying to me all the time that he had a girlfriend already. I felt like he was a stranger, and I was afraid to see him again.

Karina: It was about a group project that we had in Sociology. One of the students was supposed to be the leader of the group but he failed to be one. We were in a mess.

**Table 5.2***People Involved in the Conflict*

Pseudonym	Year	Faculty	Relationship	Interdependency
Jackson (male)	2	Social Sciences	Self and father	High
Kevin (male)	2	Business	Self and mother	High
Peter (male)	1	Business	Self and mother	High
Tom (male)	1	Arts	Self and father	High
Irene (female)	1	Business	Self and father	High
Jenny (female)	2	Arts	Self and sister	High
Julia (female)	2	Arts	Self and friend	Moderate
Wendy (female)	2	Business	Self and friend	Moderate
Kate (female)	1	Social Sciences	Self and boyfriend	Moderate
Maggie (female)	1	Business	Self and boyfriend	Moderate
Janice (female)	1	Business	Self and boyfriend	Moderate
Karina (female)	1	Arts	Self and classmate	Moderate

*Note.* Details about the relationships and levels of interdependency were obtained from both the self-reflection reports and the interviews.

For the affective method, I first searched for words that reflected the feelings of the students towards conflict and conflict management in their interpersonal relationships. I then looked for text that reflected the values, attitudes, and beliefs regarding conflict management in their interpersonal communication. In other words, I examined the context of the conflict, followed by their conflict resolution strategy, and finally the consequences of the conflict (Table 5.3).

According to the self-reflection reports, participants' responses on how they resolved conflict and the resultant outcome(s) were as follows:

Jackson: We will have breakfast or dinner together once a week.

Kevin: My mother agreed to be less subjective, and I promised to be more patient with her.

Peter: We tried to be less emotional... It is still hard to talk to her [his mother].

Tom: He's old now. I think it's kind of hard for him to change. I will just try my best to talk to him sometimes...

Irene: I apologised and promised I would meet with them once a week. I also told them I would reply to their emails or text messages within the day.

Jenny: I know she [her sister] cares about me so much. I will try to listen to her if I can.

Julia: We are still friends, but we never talked about that incident again. Perhaps it is better not to mention it again...

Wendy: We still go out as a group from time to time, but we are not like best friends anymore.

Kate: We talked and agreed to schedule our time better. After a few months, we decided to break up because my feelings for him changed...

Maggie: He said he would not see her again and I promised to care about his feelings more. But the relationship only lasted for a few more months. We are friends now.

Janice: I tried to escape from the relationship. After the incident, I rarely saw him again. I do not want to think about him. I will only look at his Facebook and Instagram pictures.

Karina: I told the team leader [her classmate] I could help by taking the lead and getting a good mark. She was persuaded and we successfully completed the project.

**Table 5.3***Conflict Strategy and Consequences*

Pseudonym	People involved	Conflict resolution strategy	Conflict outcome
Jackson (male)	Self and father	Compromising	All parties reached a compromise.
Kevin (male)	Self and mother	Compromising	The issue has been resolved.
Peter (male)	Self and mother	Avoiding	They avoided each other for a while.
Tom (male)	Self and father	Accommodating	Things are better now between father and son.
Irene (female)	Self and father	Compromising	Settled the conflict.
Jenny (female)	Self and sister	Accommodating	Relationship is fine now.
Julia (female)	Self and friend	Avoiding	Still good friends.
Wendy (female)	Self and friend	Avoiding	Still friends.
Kate (female)	Self and boyfriend	Compromising	Broke up.
Maggie (female)	Self and boyfriend	Compromising	Friends now (not dating).
Janice (female)	Self and boyfriend	Avoiding	Rarely see each other.
Karina (female)	Self and classmate	Collaborating	Good friends now.

*Note.* Details about the conflict outcome were obtained from both the self-reflection reports and the interviews.

### ***Section 5.3.1 Second Cycle of Coding***

***Axial coding.*** Following the open coding, I interpreted sections of text with similarities and differences and then named them (see Table 5.4). Next, I compared these sections against each other using axial coding in an attempt to find relationships among the different open codes.

***Similarities.*** Several participants mentioned how time had been a concern they needed to talk about because they were busy with their own agendas. Indeed, half of the participants seemed stressed because of their heavy work and study loads. In the self-reflection reports, they mentioned several times that they did not care and just did not have the time to listen and worry about other things at present. Participants seem to be self-centred when describing their conflictual issues in terms of “my father did this” or “my friend did that,” thereby shifting their responsibilities onto others. Therefore, it is not difficult to see how participants forgot they were part of the conflict yet felt “sad,” “disappointed,” “threatened,” and “angry” The lack of consideration for others ignited these negative feelings and indirectly inflicted pain on others.

***Differences.*** It was interesting to learn how some participants described “avoiding” the issue because they did not want to create a conflict and deliberately tried to change the topic of conversation. Participants mentioned how they sometimes felt that “to avoid” or “to compromise” was a better conflict resolution management strategy because many of the problems could not be perfectly resolved.

**Table 5.4***Similarities and Differences in the Reasons for and Management of the Conflict*

Pseudonym	Reason for conflict	How conflict was managed	Similarities	Differences
Jackson (male)	Responsibility issues	Self-disclosure	– Time – Self-centred	– Avoid bringing up the problem
Kevin (male)	Lack of trust	Identified the problems	– Feelings of sadness and anger	– The problem cannot be resolved
Peter (male)	Different expectations	Did not bring up issue again	– Lack of consideration for others	– Not a communication issue
Tom (male)	Lack of trust	Spending more time with parents	– How conversations are carried out	
Irene (female)	Lack of trust	Explained clearly what had happened	– Having no energy to deal with the issue	
Jenny (female)	Responsibility issues	Understanding each other	– Feeling disappointed	
Julia (female)	Friendship issues	Talked more about their feelings		
Wendy (female)	Lack of trust	Not sure but still friends. More or less avoided the issue.		
Kate (female)	Incompatibility	Never saw each other again		
Maggie (female)	Lack of trust	See each other as good friends but not as intimate relationship partners		



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Janice (female)	Lack of trust	See each other occasionally in a group
Karina (female)	Personality differences	Hang out quite often and understand each other better after extensive talk

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### ***Section 5.3.2 Third Cycle of Coding***

***Selective coding.*** First, I identified relationships among the codes and categories by re-reading the text and validating them. Next, I identified the most important and common domains and sub-domains, using these to form my theory.

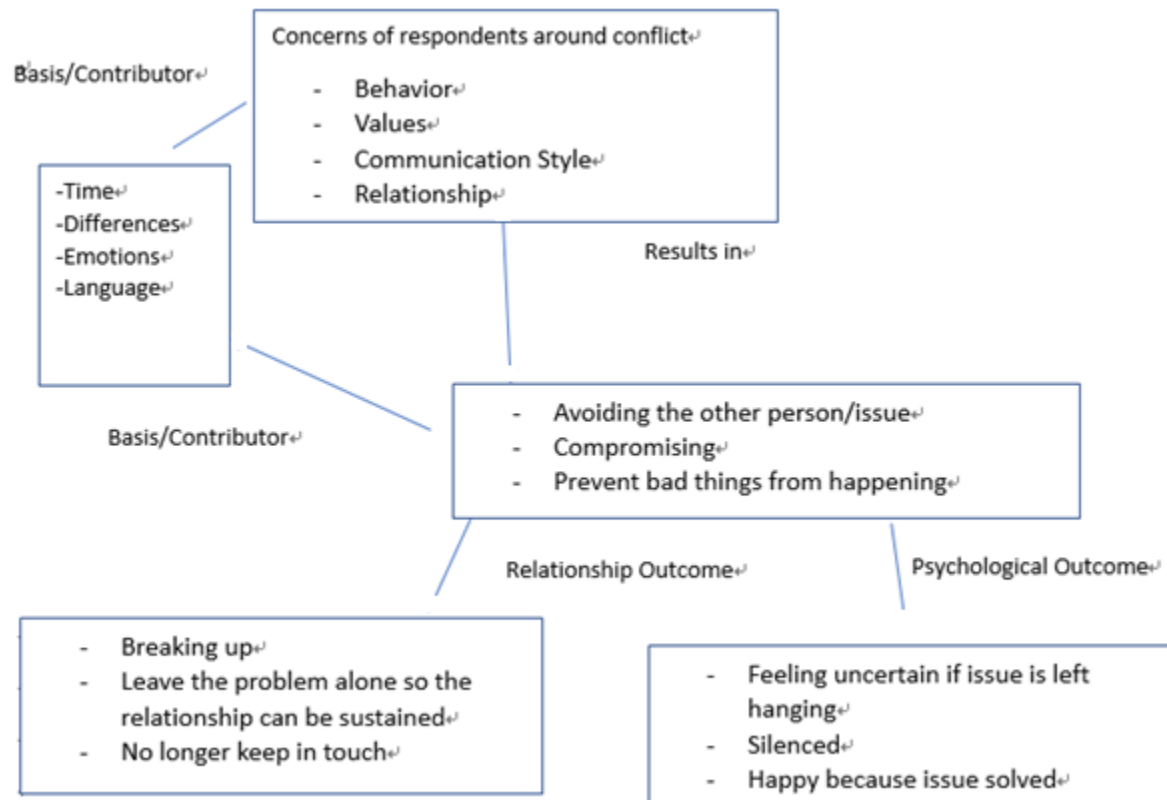
This third cycle of coding (or selective coding) allowed me to filter the most salient parts of my data and focus on them to generate themes. Thus, the coded data were re-examined and arranged into broader themes or categories. To derive the global or core theme of each group of organised themes, I summarised the participants' main claims, arguments, and assumptions (see Figure 5.1).

The keywords used in coding the self-reflections and interviews were extracted from the data themselves. From the database, I identified a number of important topics. Exploring these topics from the data, I primarily looked for how the conflictual experiences affected the participants. Words such as "sad," "frustrated," "loneliness," and "uncertain" frequently appeared in their descriptions of conflict. These words were coded to analyse the conflict's initial impact on the college students.

Types of outcomes fell into two categories: psychological outcomes and relationship outcomes. Words such as "uncertain," "hurt," and "not talking anymore" revealed the participants' pain regarding the outcome and associated memories of the conflictual experience. These codes were therefore used when analysing the self-reflections and interviews. The words "breaking," "still okay," and "no longer in touch" appeared in both sources. These keywords and codes surfaced naturally from the interviews and self-reflections to unfold key questions about how the conflict impacted the college students.

**Figure 5.1**

*Coding in This Research Project*



**Section 5.4 Themes**

The themes generated had to be broad enough to take the ideas in the text into consideration. To refine the themes and ensure that the data formed a coherent pattern, I checked the data repeatedly. Both the interviews and reflection reports contained the following eight domains: “communication style,” “behaviour,” “values,” “relationship,” “time,” “difference,” “emotions,” and “language.”

In my cross-disciplinary research, the coding process corresponds to the research objective and theory development of interpersonal conflict. In the three stages of coding (inductive, axial, and selective), each stage of the coding process progressively integrates the emergent themes. When the coding process refines the themes, it reveals the attributional, emotional, and value elements for me to understand the participants’ stories. For instance, ‘expectation’ is one of the critical components of effective conflict management, and as an example, it is a core value of

interpersonal communication. An example of an emotional element is the ‘frustration’ that the participant and the other individuals cannot control their feelings and inflict psychological pain on the other. Another example is the ‘lack of trust’ as an attributional element of participants. It is believed that the participants make judgements about the causes of their own behaviour and the behaviour of others to gain ‘trust.’

I proceeded to establish three themes as “People involved in the conflict,” “Causes of and concerns about the conflict,” and “Outcomes of the conflict and resultant actions.” Next, I verified that the basic organising and global themes were all reflected in the data and that the data supported these three themes or otherwise ensured the thematic networks. I then returned to the original text and interpreted the text by reading the text through the lenses of these three themes.

The thematic analysis allowed me to identify additional emerging themes about the reasons for and emotions experienced during the conflict:

- Uncertainty over commitment, jealousy, violation of expectations
- Violations of friendship rules and difficulties in shared activities
- Incompatible ideas or opinions
- Issues of responsibility and coordination

A theoretical research framework based on a collectivist model was subsequently used. The framework took into consideration the collectivist cultural norms found in interpersonal conflict management and illustrated how the three overarching themes of “People involved in the conflict,” “Causes of and concerns about the conflict,” and “Outcomes of the conflict and resultant actions” were interrelated.

#### ***Section 5.4.1 Further Interpretation on Themes, Subthemes and Coding***

To strengthen the interpretation of themes, subthemes and coding that derived from the data set in this chapter, this section is going to focus on the understanding of themes and subthemes in the thematic analysis for my cross-disciplinary study on health and education, this is to examine interpersonal conflict of students in their college life. The themes and codes were drawn out from the interview and self-reflection reports used to analyse the data are show in Table 5.5. By

reviewing the themes, the themes were broken down into two to three subthemes as there were too much information was being filtered into one theme.

**Table 5.5**

*Themes, Subthemes and Coding*

<b>Theme 1: People Involved</b>	<b>Theme 2: Conflict Causes</b>	<b>Theme 3: Conflict Styles</b>
<b>Subtheme 1: Relationship Issues</b>	<b>Subtheme 1: Responsibility Issues</b>	<b>Subtheme 1: Compromising</b>
Codes: -Not respected -Do not want to damage the relationship -No time -Hard to talk to her Afraid to lose a friend	Codes: -Pressure -Too angry -Too many things to handle	Codes: -Just listen to them -Nothing to say -Difficult to see who's fault -Waste of effort -Do not want to waste time -At least there are things we can work out
<b>Subtheme 2: Parent's Control</b>	<b>Subtheme 2: Lack of Trust</b>	<b>Subtheme 2: Avoid the Issue</b>
Codes: -Don't want to be controlled -Want to be alone -Do what I enjoy -Feels annoyed	Codes: -Not believing in each other -Not listening -No communication	Codes: -Do not want to argue anymore -Want to runaway -Threatened
	<b>Subtheme 3: Different Expectations</b>	
	Codes: -Disappointment -Not Fair	

## **Theme 1: People Involved**

Integrated data from face-to-face interviews and self-reflection reports, participants expressed their opinions on their conflict experience. The issue of interpersonal relationship has always been complicated as there are many influential dimensions. When it comes to this study on conflict, participants have been sharing who they had conflict with. It is important for the researcher to know the context of the story and often the participants reflect more than just the person involved but also the background of the issue and some other related element of the participants' experience in their stories. The data set was split into two subthemes: relationship's issue and parent's control

### **Subtheme 1: Relationship Issues**

The data showed that some participants felt not being respected by others in their relationships. They felt that they were blamed for some reasons. Some of the participants had concern on how they did not want to damage their relationship because they still want to maintain a healthy relationship. For instance, there were participants told that their roommates (themselves) in the college did not want the relationship to turn too bad as they were still seeing each other everyday. Other participants said that they did not want to turn too bad with their project groupmates because they still had their projects to complete in a limited time. Participants also commented that it was useless to continue the argument and they did not want to lose a friend or the people they care.

### **Subtheme 2: Parent's Control**

The next subtheme emerged from the data was parent's control on participants. Some of the college students shared how they felt annoyed by parent's control on many aspects such as their academic achievement, part-time jobs and even free time. Participants felt that college life is the stage that they learn to make their own decisions without parent's intervention. One of the reasons on such conflict can be the value of collectivist culture on how parent's role has a great influence on student's development. A few participants also mentioned how they wanted to enjoy their college life instead of following parent's suggested path.

## **Theme 2: Conflict Causes**

The theme was coded 'conflict causes' as the data set supported this description. Every participant was asked about what the cause was. Interestingly, many participants shared that they had realized that they were part of the conflict and only a few of them felt that they were not supposed to be in the conflict. The data was categorized into three subthemes: responsibility issues, lack of trust, and different expectations.

### **Subtheme 1: Responsibility Issues**

The first subtheme in this category was 'responsibility issues'. There are many new responsibilities for college students as they are starting a new life experience. The data showed that some participants faced challenges to cope with the new environments and responsibility is one of them. A few participants reflected that there were too many things to handle that made them stressful such as assignments, project meetings, interest groups, part-time jobs, cleaning responsibilities and other social gatherings. Participants mentioned that they felt this may create more conflict with other individuals because of the pressure to do it well or complete the task.

### **Subtheme 2: Lack of Trust**

The next subtheme in this category was 'lack of trust'. A number of participants explained that there is a lack of trust when there is jealousy or uncertainty on commitment. Participants mentioned that it would be difficult to regain the trust to solve the conflict as this is more or less a psychological factor. A few participants explained that when they do not trust the individual anymore. It is almost possible for them to listen and to accept what the person has to say because it is associated with the integrity of the person.

### **Subtheme 3: Different Expectations**

The last subtheme that evolved from the data was 'different expectations'. Many participants commented that different expectations are a very common issue. A few participants said that it depends on how wide the difference in expectations is. If it is not difficult to accept the difference, they do not want to damage the relationship so that it turns bad and it may lead to a conflict. They may accommodate the difference.

### **Theme 3: Conflict Styles**

The third theme was coded as ‘conflict styles. Many participants expressed that they did have the skills and knowledge to conflict management. Majority of the participants just want to settle the issue in a constructive way. Although many participants would know not know about the conflict outcomes, a few of them insisted that they had done nothing wrong, and they should not be blamed.

#### **Subtheme 1: Compromising**

The first subtheme emerged in this category was ‘compromising’ as one of the basic approaches in conflict. Many participants responded that they felt it’s a waste of time if nothing can be compromised. Many participants explained that this is one of the main reasons the participants may end the argument and just compromise and see if they can work out together on some of the compromised issues.

#### **Subtheme 2: Avoid the Issue**

The second subtheme evolved in this category was ‘avoid the issue’. Some participants explained that the other person they had conflict with have little consideration on the problem. However, a few participants said that they would rather avoid the negative feeling from conflict and to avoid the problem. They explained that they did not want to close off the other person because they were afraid of hurting the relationship and may cause resentment.

### ***Section 5.5 Further Interpretation of the Two Data Sources***

For the purposes of this study, it was also important to consider how people become involved in conflict. People experience the world within relationships, and in turn, these relationships influence all communication and vice versa. Therefore, relationships also provide the basis for the outcomes of conflict resolution. When observing conflict, researchers need to thoroughly understand participants’ perceptions of how others see them in conflict situations.

During the interviews, students associated their conflict situations with someone significant in their life, such as close friends, family members, or parents. I chose to look at the individuals involved in the conflict from the students’ perspective because it allowed me to identify how



they perceived others in the development of their relationship and the roles involved (Leary & Jongman-Sereno, 2014). To conduct further analysis, I categorised each relationship according to its level of interdependency. In this study, the interdependency level of eight students was categorised as high because their conflictual issues were with their parents. Parent-children's relationships are by nature more interdependent. Consequently, the breadth and depth of conflict in these relationships are much more pronounced because hundreds of issues can be argued and fought about every day (Hocker & Wilmot, 2007). Closer ties lead to higher levels of involvement and individuals are much more eager to express their concerns and emotions in such relationships. However, the interdependency of friends and classmates are moderate because they have a less interdependent relationship, and thus, the breadth and depth of conflict are also moderate.

**Table 5.6**

*Relationship and Level of Interdependency*

Relationship	Level of interdependency	Number of respondents ( $N = 12$ )
Parent	High	5
Sibling	High	1
Partner	High	3
Friend	Moderate	2
Classmate	Moderate	1

As part of the thematic analysis process, I extracted data from the transcripts and reflection reports. By triangulating the data, I was able to verify the data's consistency. First, it was important to see how the students talked about the individuals involved in their conflict, as subsequently, I could understand the relationship of the people involved. From the self-reflections, an interesting pattern emerged: Many of the interpersonal conflicts involved parents. Parent-child communication is fundamentally important because it is usually one's first contact with another person. Understanding this helps a researcher learn how participants view such conflictual relationships. Furthermore, parents were perhaps the most important person in the participants' lives because they had selected them as a focus of reflection.

If the participants can learn to deal with interpersonal conflict effectively, they will understand that the outcome of conflict can also be positive. Knowing this can help them—and the other parties involved—reduce the severity of the conflict or keep aggression to a minimal level. As mentioned, both parties may reach a mutual understanding of how to resolve issues in their communication strategies. The word “because” was used quite often in the interviews. I believe that this pointed to a causal linkage in the mind of the participants. Indeed, many of the participants felt interpersonal conflict had occurred because others did not understand them or disagreed with them. This perception resulted in negative feelings, which led to conflictual outcomes.

I also used NVivo to identify the participants’ 20 most frequently used words (Table 5.7). This helped me understand which terms conveyed connotative or denotative meanings. As shown in the table, some of the words reflected how the participants’ felt about their interpersonal conflicts. Among these, “conflict” and “communication” were the two most frequent which was not surprising as both were directly related to this project. However, it was interesting to see other frequently used words like “trust,” “disagree,” and “think.” This part of the analysis, therefore, revealed how the participants felt. It also highlighted their need for trust during a disagreement and the importance of calming down and thinking of ways to resolve problems together.

**Table 5.7***The 20 Most Frequently Used Words*

Word	Count	Weighted percentage (%)
Conflict	240	1.54
Communication	164	2.04
Trust	161	0.88
Disagree	152	1.28
Think	133	0.81
Sad	127	1.48
Want	127	1.22
Talk	125	1.37
Know	112	1.01
Feel	112	0.85
Understand	98	0.78
Father	90	0.86
Way	87	0.86
Friends	86	1.05
Believe	85	1.08
Problem	81	0.94
Time	78	0.98
Fair	78	0.79
People	69	0.88
Relationship	63	0.80

### ***Section 5.6 Summary***

This chapter consisted of findings arising from qualitative data collected through semi-structured interviews and self-reflection reports. The data unfolded the causes, relationships, and behaviours of interpersonal conflict reflected through collective culture characteristics. Various factors such as interdependency, emotions, and conflict management style played an important role in culture and conflict. These factors led to different outcomes of interpersonal conflict—an important finding for the development of student affairs and conflict management programmes. It was also a very interesting research experience for me personally as my students were self-disclosing many other parts of their lives. The topic of conflict can be sensitive for college students, especially when sharing such details with one's teacher. However, I was in a good position to collect the data from the students as they already knew me well through academic consultations, study trips, and extracurricular activities. To ensure students felt less vulnerable during the data collection process, I reserved a study room on campus to conduct the interviews privately within a safe and comfortable environment. Doing so, allowed me to collect meaningful data. Using content analysis to understand this data, I found that the students preferred to avoid conflicts in order not to damage their relationship, especially with loved ones (i.e., in high interdependency relationships).

The findings revealed an influential behaviour in conflict management: trust. Few in the literature have discussed trust and interdependency, but the lack of trust during conflict can be a great drawback in the conflict resolution process. This is important to educators, especially those who handle student affairs. When students do not trust their counsellors or social workers, it can be difficult to start the counselling process. It is also possible that when there is no mutual trust, students tend to doubt the counsellor or social worker can help, especially when the topic is related to a sensitive issue.

In analysing the content, yet another interesting pattern emerged from the self-reflection reports and interviews. This pattern showed that participants mostly thought of their parents and family members when discussing interpersonal conflict. The finding was revealing as most of the participants referred to parents or siblings as problematic people, with only some referring to partners, friends, and classmates in the same way. My findings also showed that the participants

were more emotionally expressive during the interviews and understood that they made no attempts to control their emotions when conflicts took place. Given that such an approach may damage the relationship (Zillmann, 2003), perhaps the participants could consider making attempts to manage their emotions as part of their mental wellness well-being. It was also evident that the participants wanted to share more of their experiences with conflicts or overall life experiences during the face-to-face interviews. In the interviews and self-reflection reports, however, there were several reoccurring issues among the interviewees. That is, the participants repeatedly shared a number of terms (Table 5.6), which caught my attention during the analysis process.

In the self-reflection reports, many participants repeatedly mentioned time constraints as something which limited interpersonal communication and acted as barriers to maintaining good relationships with others. For example, they mentioned being busy and involved in many activities every day. The self-reflections also gave the impression that participants tended to be self-oriented in their interpersonal communication, which is related to a lack of empathy towards other people. Indeed, many participants preferred to be left alone in peace and quiet when involved in interpersonal conflict. This is not ideal as although the outcome of a conflict can be sad, it is still a communication process where people can learn to understand each other and improve their relationship.

In the face-to-face interviews, the participants showed a similar concern about time constraints, being engaged in many daily activities, and the resulting lack of energy to deal with interpersonal conflict. Participants focused on difficulties in communicating with others, such as limited time, excessive schoolwork, or others not listening or understanding them. The participants also indicated that the outcomes of conflict could be sad and sometimes disappointing. Furthermore, during the conflict process, they sometimes felt that they were treated unfairly. This is understandable because when people communicate, they always take it for granted that the other person understands their motives and goals. The participants also felt that others were either not considerate enough or misunderstood them, both of which added to the conflict. One possible reason for this misperception is that Hong Kong people tend to be more reserved during conversations. For instance, as members of a collective culture, they tend to avoid showing their

true feelings through facial expressions and prefer to use neutral terms (Amid, 2008). As such, they are taught to avoid being extreme when communicating with one another. Consequently, being neutral is considered a virtue.

The findings also revealed an interesting contradiction. As previously mentioned, in the self-reflection reports, some of the participants focused on their parents and their relationship with them. This was because many of the conflicts and disagreements were related to their parents. Also, during the interviews, some of the respondents considered “moving out” from their parental home due to the difficult relationships. Interestingly, however, they chose to accommodate the situation because they were financially unable to move out and liked the fact their parents were taking care of them. This seemed quite contradictory because the participants—who were college students, not children—did not want to be controlled but at the same time wanted to be coddled.

In the self-reflection reports and interviews, I found that some of the participants were more accommodating and tried to avoid conflict. Although self-disclosure is found in almost all cultures as a means of developing relationships, cultural norms and values govern the degree to which it is acceptable in interpersonal relationships (Valsiner, 2007).

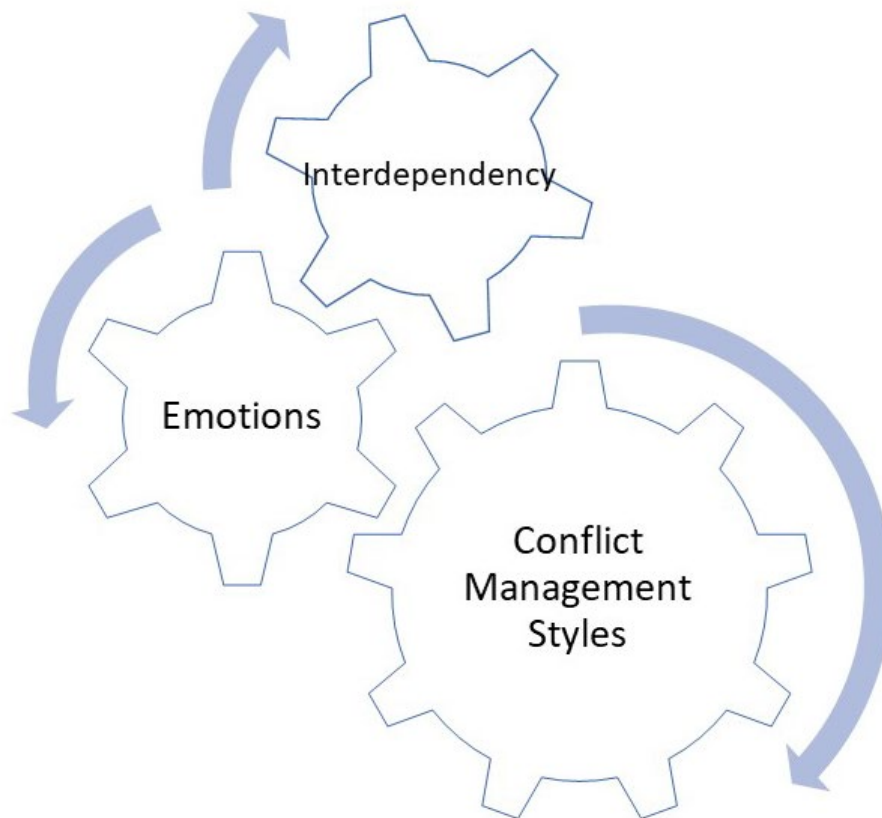
## Chapter 6: Discussion and Recommendations

### *Section 6.1 Introduction*

The cross-disciplinary research findings illustrate how collective culture is expressed through conflict and how interpersonal communication elements influence conflict behaviours of college students. The present chapter aims to identify and present the research findings' theoretical contribution. In addition, the chapter provides recommendations to the how college administrators and counsellors can better support students in a holistic perspective through general education and support health and mental wellness with a focus on conflict management and interpersonal relationship at both the college and individual level.

### **Figure 6.1**

*An Integrated Theoretical Framework of the Three Themes*



## ***Section 6.2 Theoretical Contribution***

The findings of this study provide insights on how cultural norms (i.e., collectivist culture) affect student behaviour vis-à-vis conflict. Figure 6.1 presents the three integrated and interrelated themes of the study: interdependency, emotions, and conflict management style. This study proposes that the way culture is manifested determines the meaning of human relationship with conflict behaviour. The theoretical framework (Figure 6.1) demonstrates a significant level of correlation between human relationships (interdependency)—including communicating emotions (behavioural emotions) and conflict handling (conflict management style)—and conflict. Since relationships are important to humans, the violation that comes from expressing negative emotions and lack of empathy can have a negative impact. For many people affinity with others is of great importance (Sprecher & Fehr, 2006). Therefore, the present study, with its focus on interpersonal conflict and the ways of managing it, is noteworthy because managing conflict constructively is of the essence in relationships (Cupach, Canary, & Spitzberg, 2009).

Mental wellness well-being and overall happiness improve with the use of a constructive process of conflict management. When people experience conflict, much of their energy is spent managing their emotions and generating strategies to address the conflict. They may feel fearful, angry, resentful, hopeless, and stressed. Family relationships are an essential part of life, especially in collectivist cultures. The family environment is responsible for the socialisation process and is therefore linked with whether one adopts a constructive or destructive way of handling conflict, which—in turn—may carry over directly into workplace relationships in later life (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). People develop expectations of how conflict should or should not be handled based on what they have learnt about human relationships. This study provides an opportunity for the involved students to reflect on and learn productive means of conflict management. The students had the opportunity to re-think their 1) relationships with people, 2) ways of communicating emotions in conflict situations, and 3) conflict management to develop a positive mindset towards effective conflict-handling behaviours. Although these students understood they needed to change their behaviour, there is still much work that needs to be done overall for the rest of the student population.



### ***Section 6.3 Recommendation for College Life and Mental Wellness of Students***

Interpersonal conflict in an educational setting has been characterised by incivility, verbal and physical aggression, and property destruction (Rohner & Saia, 2019). College counsellors have been responding to such issues by providing school-based conflict resolution programmes which could help students learn how to approach interpersonal conflicts constructively. An essential part of the theoretical contribution of my study is the creation of a framework applicable to the collectivist cultural environment of the college counselling programme, which could help address college students' mental wellness issues, specifically relating to interpersonal conflict. The study findings not only provide a better knowledge support to my services to student life but also allow me to provide recommendations to higher education institutions on how to design and develop future wellbeing programmes, focusing in particular on the student mental wellness issue. The following recommendations are presented according to each of the three main themes arising from the data analysis:

- **Interdependency.** Here are some recommendations divided according to themes. In a collectivist culture where the level of interdependency is usually higher, there is a higher chance of conflict. This is due to the fact that people in such cultures are very concerned about those around them. To prevent conflict from affecting students' lives, Hong Kong college mental wellness programmes should educate the students about the impact interdependency can have on the ways conflict is handled, as this is key to building and preserving positive relationships. Attitudes to and ways of addressing conflict are influenced by culture, especially beliefs and values related to conflict is influenced by the culture of the participants, especially by their beliefs and values about conflict. Many of the participants in this study failed to realise that interpersonal conflict and whether it can be resolved requires both parties to be mutually open and candid, especially when it involves someone close to them (i.e., with whom they have a high level of interdependency). Students in my study will need to build trust and respect for one another in order to maintain positive relationships. By being open about one's experiences of conflict and accepting feedback from others, individuals can develop a relationship in which most of the information they share becomes a legitimate source of discussion and mutual

- understanding (David & Fahey, 2000).
- **Emotions.** By highlighting the emotions associated with communicating conflict and examining conflict resolution cases. Positive emotions help students rethink the language they can use to avoid shifting the responsibility or blaming the other person. To improve the accuracy of the attributions in interpersonal communication, communication techniques such as checking perceived emotions, listening actively, and giving feedback can be used. These techniques can help students ensure that they have correctly interpreted the words, actions, or indeed intentions of the other person. They can choose to display unproductive behaviour or choose a more constructive approach.
  - **Conflict Management Style.** It is generally believed collaboration in addressing conflict is a preferable approach, which is why students should be taught about different conflict style outcomes. A workshop on conflict styles involving role-plays should be incorporated into the curriculum to ensure that instruction is provided in a practical way. Gbadamosi et al. (2014) explained that experiential learning happens when there are changes in skills, knowledge, feelings, or judgement resulting from involvement in an event or activity over a period of time. Consequently, training should allow adequate time for the students to master conflict management techniques.

The three recommendations outlined thus far, colleges could play an important role on increasing the awareness of conflict and conflict resolution skills because these would help validate personal values and identity, promote personal growth, increase social status, and build interpersonal insights (Rahim, 1999). In other words, colleges could facilitate the development and growth of adolescents and students. Indeed, Rusbult and Van Lange (2003) stated that colleges and universities should be institutions for acquiring important skills like interpersonal conflict management skills. The acts of violence and interpersonal conflict that students experience in their college life offer them a perfect opportunity to learn positive conflict management techniques. To such ends, students can take part in various peer-mediation and conflict resolution programmes that are offered by the college. Managing conflict and

disagreements in a constructive manner is one of the most vital skills students should possess. Such skills will help minimise the damage and reoccurrence of interpersonal conflicts in college life. As observed by DeChurch et al. (2013), student attitudes can be positively transformed through conflict resolution training, problem-solving workshops, and consultative meetings at the communal levels, as well as by creating dispute resolution systems that take into consideration the norms and cultures of the individuals involved.

#### **Section 6.4 Cross-Disciplinary Research: A Holistic Perspective on Conflict Resolution**

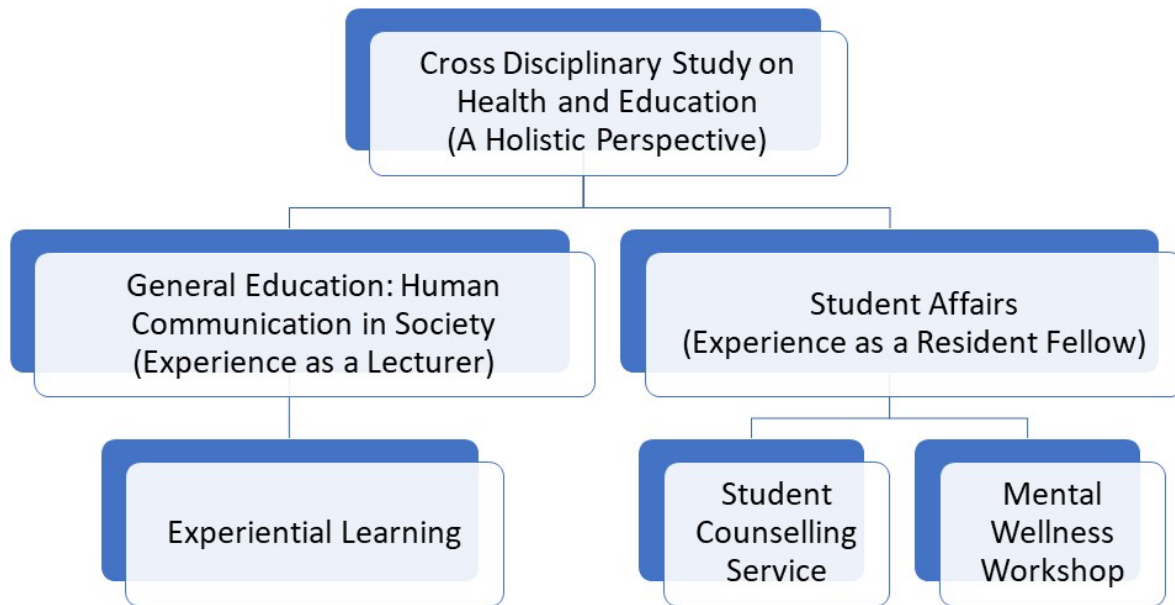
My cross-disciplinary research integrated the health and education disciplines to examine students' conflicts in college life. Cross-disciplinary study not only improves the quality of this research but also provides an impact on addressing the concept of interpersonal conflict in college life. From the outcome of this study and my work experience on student affairs, I believe college administrators and educators often need cross-disciplinary knowledge to review solutions for conflicts that are holistic in the context of education. One of the key reasons to learn from students is that educators like me and many others value students' learning experience in college life. Learning about students' conflictual issues, understanding how their conflict may lead to relationship issues, and incorporating all these related elements allow the college to provide a better designed mental-wellness initiative and support to students.

Conflict is a complex concept involving multiple dimensions. Capturing the complex nature of college students' mental wellness to learn about conflict helps deliver better support to students during their college lives. It allows students to rethink and reflect on their conflict experiences. College is part of the social institutions that bring students to learn about social norms. Other than academic achievements, another function of college is to guide how students behave in a competitive environment with social boundaries. For instance, students may want to learn to survive in an environment recognizing inequalities that may cause tension. This desire for appropriate behaviour helps explain how complicated it can be for students to address interpersonal conflict and manage relationships.

The philosophy of holistic education is how education providers emphasize a student's growth, including intellectual, social, and emotional development. Arguelles et al. (2003) explained that holistic education is an essential component of college life for students to understand human relationships and experiences of conforming or resisting conflictual issues and be part of growing up during college. To support my cross-disciplinary study on health and education (Figure 6.2), this section will further explain the outcome of this study in a cross-disciplinary framework that shows the importance of college education as part of the holistic educational process for students. Applying experiential learning theory in general education provides experiential learning experiences to college students to learn about conflict resolution and communication skills. The latter part of the section focuses on discussing mental wellness initiatives in the college environment to provide students with social, health and mental wellness development.

The education we provide to young adults incorporates the skills they need to adapt to society and the world in which they live. High school education can broaden students' horizons, making them aware of the conditioning influences around them and encouraging them to think independently. The transition from high school to post-secondary education extended the scope and function of education to a higher level where students can learn to develop themselves for a personal change (e.g., conflict management) before entering the workforce in a more challenging environment.

**Figure 6.2**  
*A Holistic Perspective of the Cross-disciplinary Study*



### ***Section 6.4.1 Experiential Learning in Higher Education***

Experiential learning is a significant component of holistic education (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). All the adventurous experiences in college life are major sources of learning and development for students. My cross-disciplinary research began by investigating students' reflection on their conflict through a discussion on how college as a learning environment for students has provided knowledge on experiential learning in higher education.

Experiential learning theory inspired me to extend this approach and develop a general education course in college that can facilitate such experiential learning for students to learn communication skills (e.g., conflict management) and apply the resolution skills from experiential learning.

For a cross-disciplinary approach in health and education, it is vital to integrate the two disciplines by benefiting college students through learning conflict resolution skills and helping students to recognize the importance of human relationships. Thus, I designed a general education course, 'Human Communication in Society for undergraduate students.' The course 'Human Communication in Society' as a general education course is designed to equip students

with an interdisciplinary perspective on communication and enhance their competency to communicate in different contexts (including interpersonal, organizational, and societal). The design of the course is an overview of the key areas that underpin the study and practice of the communication field. Besides a general introduction to human communication theories, the course also provides students with an introduction to communication principles and practices. The intended learning outcomes of the course are that students should be able to:

1. Demonstrate knowledge of the key area of study and human communication practices (e.g., conflict management skills) field.
2. Apply relevant communication theories and perspectives to interpret daily life situations.

In the design of the course and application of experiential learning theory, the weekly topics of the 'Human communication in society' course include:

- Week 1: What are interpersonal communication and interpersonal relationship? – focuses on the nature of communication and fundamental concepts.
- Week 2: Communication Theories – introduces the stages of relationship and how relationship works.
- Week 3: Verbal Communication – focuses on the verbal message system and provides guidelines to students to improve their communication language with accuracy, effectiveness, and logic.
- Week 4: Non-verbal Communication – explains the importance of non-verbal communication and examines the influence of culture on non-verbal behaviours.
- Week 5: Effective Listening – discusses the process of listening, barriers to listening, and effective listening styles.
- Week 6: The “Self” in Communication – covers topics including self-concept and self-awareness, and principles of perception.
- Week 7: Communication in Organizations – focuses on communication in the workplace, especially in maintaining interpersonal relationships in the organization.
- Week 8: Interpersonal Conflict and Conflict Management – explains the concept of conflict, the stages of conflict resolution, and how individuals can apply strategies for

effective conflict management.

- Week 9: Emotional Messages – covers the principles of emotion and skills for both expressing emotions and learning to respond to others' emotions.
- Week 10: Organizational Culture and Communication – introduces the concept of organizational culture and understanding of how culture affects individuals (e.g., conformity and groupthink); How bad behaviours can turn into a culture (e.g., normalization of deviance).
- Week 11: Technology and Communication – explains the dimensions of information communication technology and possible problems using communication technology.
- Week 12: Communication Ethics – introduces the four ethical perspectives that include Utilitarianism, Deontology, Social justice, and Dialogic ethics. This unit also covers the ethics of whistleblowing and the possible harm of whistleblowing.

Four areas in course design can be applied to learning design in the development of such a general education course (Giac et al., 2017):

- Discovering – The student's first experience of learning the concept. To gain new knowledge, this discovery can come from watching a video, attending training, reading a book, or interacting with the people around us. This step is for students to feel and discover the concept because it's all about learning something new; it's the start of the cycle and where learning begins (Fatt, 2000). For instance, a reference book on interpersonal conflict may help students understand what conflict is about.
- Planning – Students must watch and plan ways to apply that knowledge. The watching and planning involve reflecting on the learning experience, reviewing what's missing, and planning how to integrate new concepts in the real world. The planning process can be implemented into a course by processing and debriefing after introducing a new concept (Armstrong & Parsa-Parsi, 2005). This process gives students the space to synthesize their knowledge and create a plan of action. For instance, a case study on interpersonal conflict may help students plan how they should think and react if this happens to them.

- Application – This is a practical process that helps learning “stick” and shows students where their knowledge gaps are. This phenomenon of application exposing blind spots is known as The Illusion of Explanatory Depth (Mills & Keil, 2004). In learning development, an impactful application phase is perhaps the most critical part of the entire process: it’s where the rubber hits the road for students (McLeod, 2017). This phase can be an excellent opportunity to allow students to fail in a controlled environment through scenario learning or another form of immersive learning. For instance, roleplay in given conflictual scenarios for students to apply what they learnt to act and resolve conflict can help them to learn from each other. Some students who understood the lesson may demonstrate their learning in their roleplays. Some others may not understand well enough to show an effective resolution.
- Reflection – Students reflect on their learning to generate new ideas or modifications to what they’ve learned from their initial experience. In the reflection stage, the student reflects on their application experience and figures out where they need to grow before starting the cycle again (Gogus & Ertek, 2016). Reflection can occur in an unstructured and independent way by encouraging students to spend time thinking alone, in a structured and independent way through journaling about an experience, or in a structured and social way through coaching or debriefing discussions. For instance, a self-reflection assignment on conflict management can help students to apply concepts they learnt and to rethink if there are things, students can improve to resolve the conflict.

I believe that students benefit from engaging with learning in multiple ways, and the best way to learn something is to have a holistic, well-rounded learning experience. For instance, the experience of a group project is a good opportunity for students to learn about teamwork: when it works and when it does not work. Sometimes being part of the team brings a sense of togetherness and accomplishment, but when a shared identity is lacking, and there is interpersonal competition among the members, conflict and poor outcomes are more likely to happen.



I recommended three approaches (i.e., Conceptual Approach, Skills Approach, and Integrated Approach) so that the course can provide a meaningful learning experience about human communication knowledge and practical skills to students.

### **Concept-based Teaching and Learning in General Education**

The conceptual approach focuses on concepts, theories, and principles. It is suitable for the course objective for students to learn about human communication concepts. The conceptual approach is also appropriate and often expected at higher education levels that prioritize conceptual learning over the development of practical skills (Hadjerrouit, 2009).

For this human communication adopting the conceptual approach, students are expected to study, retain, and recall specific information and understand theoretical explanations. Underlying this approach is the assumption that knowledge translates into action. Thus, it is assumed that students will become more competent in their communication practices like conflict management by learning about communication principles and theory.

This approach requires a lecturer like me to present and explain information, research findings, and theories. Typically, lecturers will have to break materials down into component parts, each of which is explained individually and then related back to the overall topic of discussion. For instance, in teaching attachment styles, I can begin by defining attachment styles and discussing research on their relevance to human relationships. Furthermore, I can discuss each of the four attachment styles in some depth, focusing on the verbal and nonverbal components of the styles. As a lecturer, I can provide examples to clarify concepts and summarize supporting research. Student learning could be assessed by their ability to define attachment styles and recognize communication behaviours associated with developing and embodying each style.

Class discussions are the predominant methods of teaching when a conceptual approach is employed (Erickson, 2002). Activities and exercises play a subordinate role in learning. Activities are used to enhance conceptual understanding rather than personal application and skill development.

I believe the teachings may also extend the course's coverage by elaborating on topics they consider especially important. The conceptual approach to learning also invites research by students. Lecturers can increase students' knowledge by allowing students to assign themselves topics for individual term papers or group projects. At the end of the group projects, students will be asked to do a short reflection on some of the issues during the group project and how they overcome their differences.

### **Guided Practice and Application**

A second approach can be favoured by social science lecturers like me of an introductory communication course that concentrates chiefly on behaviours and behavioural change. The skills approach emphasizes practicing and applying effective interpersonal, small group, and public communication behaviours. This pedagogical approach assumes that understanding theory, research, principles, and concepts doesn't guarantee effective personal action (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Thus, attention to conceptual material is limited to what is necessary to develop effective communication behaviour.

Many approaches to public speaking are skills-based, requiring students to demonstrate their learning and ability through performance. A skills approach to teaching emphasizes learning effective communication behaviours and incorporating them into personal behavioural repertoires. For instance, to teach the unit on effective listening, a lecturer would highlight essential listening skills and provide opportunities for students to practice effective listening skills through roleplays and other "hands-on" experiences.

Activities, exercises, and performances play a prominent role in the skills approach for students to learn (Wright, 2011). These skills approaches can probably guide students to become proficient communication skills by giving them opportunities to practice the skills with professional guidance and feedback from the lecturer. Discussion of activities subordinates' attention to conceptual understanding in favour of emphasizing particular communication behaviours and their effects. Student learning is assessed by competence in enacting particular communication or resolution skills.

## **Taking an Integrated Approach for Students to Think and Reflect**

Teaching can integrate conceptual and skill emphases to design courses like ‘Human Communication in Society’. Students are expected to understand theories, research, and concepts and develop effective communication skills. Applying this approach assumes that conceptual learning is essential to but not the same as effective practice (Fink, 2013). In other words, conceptual understanding doesn’t automatically translate into improved behaviours.

Lecturers who favour the integrated approach may rely on inductive or deductive teaching strategies. The inductive method first immerses students in communication activities and then guides them to see how particular theories, concepts, and principles apply to those concrete situations (Prince & Felder, 2006). The deductive approach begins by explaining theories, principles, and concepts and then encourages students to apply those in real practical communication situations (Cheng, 2019).

By embedding mental-wellness elements in the course, class discussions, activities, performances, and written assignments can support teaching from the integrated approach. Many lecturers can engage the class in discussions on some days and reserve other days for exercises that allow students to apply conceptual material to learn conflict management and communication skills.

Another option is that lecturers can blend activities and lecture-discussions in single meetings of classes. Lecturers can also use an integrated approach for one section of a course while focusing more heavily on concepts or practical skills in another, such as conflict resolution skills.

### ***Section 6.4.2 Mental Wellness Initiative in Higher Education***

Cross-disciplinary research is critical for solving complex problems like students’ mental wellness in higher education because it involves more than one discipline of knowledge to examine the topic. Given the benefits of cross-disciplinary research, there can be a greater combined understanding of the importance of mental wellness initiatives in higher education.

Mental wellness initiatives recognize the importance of the psychological state of individuals by providing support for their mental health (Elmore, 2014). In higher education, students' mental health and wellness have been a constant focus for student affairs and a challenge for college administrators. I have worked as a resident fellow to assist the College Master and the Dean of Students on several mental wellness initiatives for some years at the university.

The Office of Student Affairs has consistently worked to improve the development of college students. However, one of the challenges that the university that I worked in has seen is unprecedented numbers of students in need and an increase in the severity of concerns over the last several years. This increase occurred before the pandemic, but the last several years have caused an even more significant increase in challenges for students to adjust to university life.

Other than the implementation of a 'human communication in society' course in general education for undergraduate students, student affairs is another major facility that contributes to mental health and wellness initiatives. There are several mental health and wellness initiatives within student affairs that the university developed for preventive measures.

### **Counselling Service for Students**

The counselling service for students has been one of the critical facilities in student affairs for not just mental wellness but on the overall development of college students (Reavley et al., 2012). Counselling in colleges and universities is a great way for college administrators, counsellors, or fellows to respond to students' emotions. Many factors and scenarios can shape students' thoughts and behaviours. To avoid the wrong impression that the counselling service is just for students with mental illness, I always tried to educate students to come to me for a casual talk. Students always prefer a listener that can guide them instead of instructing them what to do. For instance, I had a student who did not do well in her English course, and she did not attend classes. Her English teacher contacted me about the situation. I invited the student to my office to see how I could help her. She was a bit reluctant to talk, as she was a bit embarrassed that she was not doing too well academically. Instead of asking direct questions about her grades, I asked her some general questions to see whether she was enjoying her college life. From there, she told

me a story about how she was struggling to fit into the new environment and some of her family issues. I always aim for constructive communication with my students in my counselling service. Using the right communication skills can enhance the quality of the counselling service (Buultjens & Robinson, 2011):

- Not to instruct, reprimand or blame the student for their action because I want to develop trust with the students so that they are more comfortable sharing their problems.
- Let the student see that revealing feelings is not a sign of weakness. Have the students express their emotions so that I can respond to their feelings and see what resolution I can provide.
- Use active listening to show my willingness to know about the student's problems. Be non-judgmental and empathize with the students to feel with them, to see the problems as they see them. This approach helps to fully understand the student's meaning and enhance trust and the relationship.

As a resident fellow in student affairs, I lived in the college with the students, organized activities, and supported them when needed. I would regularly help facilitate academic tutorials, seminars, and other meaningful experiential learning opportunities/activities for students, and I had to provide pastoral care to individual students. The counselling service is set up to assist students in working through these psychological reactions and provide opportunities to enhance their growth and development. One of the key goals in the counselling service is to empower them to cope with their problems, facilitating their adjustment to college life and assisting them in making healthy life changes.

### **Buddies Support Program**

Social skills are an essential source of interpersonal liking. Social skills are combined aptitudes that help college students to interact effectively with others. The buddies' support program aims to allow students to have peers to develop friendship, develop their social skills, and take care of each other (Ferris et al., 2007). Students can learn how to build relationships and trust through engagement with others. I initiated this program for year one students (freshmen) in the college as part of learning the social skills needed in their college life. From my experience, some

students can be reluctant to seek help when needed. It would be helpful for peers to act as listeners to care about their friends. If the issues needed further help, I would provide further assistance to students (Hardman & Clark, 2006).

- **Social Perception:** College students must learn about and understand others by recognizing the other student's feelings and intentions. Interpersonal communication and interactions are skills that help college students to develop effective, positive relationships with others.
- **Interpersonal Influence:** Family and close friends significantly influence students' behaviour and decisions. If friendship can help each other to love and care about others, it is better for students to get peer support, as the buddies are learning about and supporting each other.
- **Social adaptability:** During the four years of college life, there are many situations that students need to handle with a wide range of people. A student's social skills can be further developed to deal with difficult situations like disagreements with others or how to manage when there is a different perception on projects and the need for collaboration.
- **Expressiveness:** Emotion is part of our human communication. Students are always encouraged to show their emotions openly if it is not causing any trouble for other people. Students expressing their emotions can help to relieve their unhappiness. Sharing their emotions with their buddies helps to strengthen their friendship, and they can mentally support each other.

### **Health Promotion, Mental Wellness Workshops and Activities**

Another responsibility of the resident fellow is to organize mental wellness workshops as part of the university mental wellness initiative. The purpose of a health and mental wellness workshop is to provide opportunities to college students to learn about mindfulness techniques dealing with interpersonal conflict, managing stress, self-care ideas, and how to reduce burnout on their

academic work. Other mental wellness workshop topics include frustration, anxiety, self-doubt, sadness, hopelessness, and anger. It is important for resident fellows to meet with students to enhance their self-understanding and personal development.

- Student Development and Quality of Life – Student development has always been one of the key objects of college life. An essential theme of the workshop is to help students adjust their lifestyle from high school to college, including time management, student responsibilities, study plan, college activities, and interest groups. Students may face stress and conflict with the challenges they face, but it is important to learn to cope with challenges and leverage all the difficulties to have a good quality college life. Besides workshops focusing on mental wellness, I organized ‘Health Living’ workshops for students. The World Health Organization (WHO) defined the meaning of ‘Healthy Living’ for humanity and set up a framework for schools on how to implement healthy living (WHO, 2008). The aim of such workshops is for students to understand ‘Healthy Living’ and be able to identify college and personal activities that can help them practice this competency in their college lives. The framework includes:
  1. Nutrition (healthy diet) – Workshops to promote a balanced healthy diet (e.g., Calories, Cholesterol and Vitamins); I let students learn about their eating habits and have them consider that a healthy diet is essential to their wellness.
  2. Healthy lifestyle (mental) – A healthy lifestyle helps maintain reasonable body weight and healthy bones and muscles. It also reduces stress, depression, and anxiety and promotes psychological well-being.
  3. Health and Chronic disease (promotion) – I let students understand how healthy exercise improves cardio function and reduces the risk of developing many chronic illnesses.
  4. Exercise – I organized sport activities to educate students about the duration and intensity of physical activity for good health. I also let students know the appropriate level of physical activity that can benefit them.
- Health and Mental Wellness Promotion – Resident fellows like me, must provide a fundamental understanding of mental health and wellness to college students. Through

workshops and health promotion, students can learn the fundamentals of mental wellness and benefit from speakers and other student representatives sharing their own experiences on how students can handle related issues when they feel powerless in coping with problems, such as interpersonal conflicts, trauma, situational stress, grief, and loss. I believe it is important for me, counsellors, and college administrators to create a shared language where we can communicate with the students – to think from their perspective on what may be some of the challenges or difficulties in their college life. By learning from the students, we can design a better promotion program to suit their needs. For instance, I will arrange evening walks for students where a group of twenty students, including myself, simply jog and chat together at one of the parks close to the campus. It helps promote health, and we can just relax and enjoy simple healthy exercise together.

- Social, Cultural and Emotional Learning – A major part of the mental wellness initiative is to support college students’ social and emotional development. By learning social skills, cultural elements, and managing emotions, students can learn how to build healthy relationships and solve interpersonal issues in their college life (Dusenbury & Weissberg, 2018). When students understand the socio-cultural ingredients, they can apply skills in a student-centred environment at the college, lectures, and the family setting (Reicher, 2010). For the cultural elements, I provided workshops that focused on students’ learning:
  1. Be aware of cultural differences – students learn to recognize that there is a difference among cultures due to values, behaviour, and language.
  2. Be flexible and open to change – Students can learn that there are various types of people with whom they will work in college life. Students can learn how to be accommodative to embrace the difference in an educational environment.
  3. Be sensitive to verbal and non-verbal behaviour – Students can learn how people in different cultures use different appeals (i.e., the words that move or convince people) to meet the values of the audience. It aims to let students know that there are slight differences in non-verbal behaviour in different cultures.
  4. Do not stereotype people – Students can learn the importance of being sensitive to differences among individuals within a culture.



- The interpersonal communication training provides skills that may also involve communication outside of the educational setting, including people from their part-time jobs, friends in their neighbourhood, and their parents. The communication training can foster students to recognize self-awareness for a better self-management that arrives at better relationships with people at home, at work or in a student's friendship circle (Frederiksen et al., 2016). Communication training helps build a fundamental skill for college students to become more comfortable in various social relationships. It's a prevention skill to avoid destructive communication and learn the social norms and expectations that help students to navigate social situations (Cohen, 2004):
  1. Students can learn, listen to others, and notice their feedback. Communication skills will be helpful for students to maintain healthy relationships with others.
  2. Students can increase their open self by revealing themselves to others. This step will help students and their friends understand their characteristics to improve their communication and relationships.
  3. Students can seek out information about themselves to reduce their blind self. Students can find out more about their own strengths and weaknesses. Doing so helps strengthen their self-concept and how they ought to communicate with others.
  4. Students can learn to have dialogues with themselves through journal writing, meditation, and contemplation. This is an intrapersonal communication skill for students to think about and reflect on their experiences in daily life. It helps them set a personal goal, and meditation is an excellent way to release stress.

### **Service Learning**

Service learning is part of experiential learning in the form of out-of-classroom community service experiences/projects by engaging with the community. The location may be the broader community outside the university or embedded in co-curricular activities. In these learning experiences, college students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs. They reflect on the service activity to better understand course content and gain a broader appreciation of the discipline and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. Here are the reflections on the service experiential programs I coordinated:

### **Reflection on the Hong Kong Museum of History Tour:**

On behalf of the college, I organised an experiential learning trip to Hong Kong from Macau. I led 20 students to the Hong Kong Museum of History and City University of Hong Kong.

The students explored the vast “Silk Road” trade networks by visiting the “Miles upon Miles: World Heritage along the Silk Road” exhibition in the Hong Kong Museum of History. A guided tour, complemented by the multimedia programme and interactive elements along the route, showed and re-enacted the profound impact of the Silk Road on the Eurasian people. The idea of carrying more than just merchandise but also knowledge, cultures, and beliefs inspired and led the group to a further discussion on the current “Belt and Road” initiatives.

After learning from the ancient trade route, the group was then guided to the City University of Hong Kong, where they were given a talk on “Innovation and Entrepreneurship” and another talk on “3D printing technology.” The group also had a chance to visit the 3D printing lab. The talks taught students more than just to be innovative but also how to support students from their projects to a feasible business plan. The students experienced how to conduct 3D printing, a common way to make a prototype for a new product design.

This trip enabled students to learn from the history of the ‘Silk Road’ and the success stories from the City University of Hong Kong. It stimulated and laid a foundation for a further discussion on the relationships between “Belt and Road” initiatives and innovation.

### **Reflection on the Hong Kong Monetary Authority Tour:**

A second activity that I organized was the Global Perspective Experiential Study Trip. The study trip aimed at letting our students learn and experience the financial industry, electronic commerce, and logistic development of reputable organizations in Hong Kong. The one-day trip visited the Hong Kong Monetary Authority and HKTV Mall (an online shopping platform).

Our group of students was very enthusiastic about learning about the financial system of Hong Kong, as it is one of the greatest world financial centres. This was a great opportunity for students to experience the industry through the Hong Kong Monetary Authority (HKMA), and they were given a guided tour on the historical development of Hong Kong’s financial system.

The tour also showed us the fascinating development of the new dollar notes. The visitor centre of HKMA has interactive games where students can learn about the financial history of Hong Kong and HKMA in an enjoyable way.

In the afternoon, our group went to the Hong Kong Television Network Limited. The company provides the biggest HK online shopping platform, and their corporate communication representatives gave us a talk on the latest trend of online shopping in Hong Kong. After the presentation, we had a tour to see the large logistic operation of how they use sophisticated machines to categorize their goods and deliver them to their customers. Students asked many questions on big data and their company's competitive advantage. The tour was impressive and a great experience for our students to understand the complicated logistic operation.

### **Reflection on the Singapore Leadership Experiential Tour:**

This six-day Singapore Leadership Experiential Tour is a fruitful experience for our student leaders and me. It's exciting to have such an opportunity to visit three prestigious Singapore institutions. The college master, students, and I got to meet their senior management and student leaders to understand their practices of running student affairs and residential colleges, which is beneficial to our student leaders and myself, especially in the field of student affairs. For the tour, we successfully completed the following objectives:

1. To expand the knowledge and practical skills of leadership for our House Association from a global perspective.
2. To enhance their language capability, especially in English presentation and communication skills in Singapore (e.g., student sharing sessions and activities with local students).
3. To inspire students to carry out students' leadership and future service projects in Asia or Greater China.

At the same time, I observed some weaknesses of our college students in their presentation skills and use of English. We can arrange English presentation skills workshops in the future to enhance their overall presentation communication skills.

In terms of improvement of the tour, I planned to design more ‘practical’ services for students to participate in so they can have greater involvement in experiential learning tours. The six-day tour aimed at letting our House Association learn the best practices of student government from prestigious institutions overseas; this experience not only enriches the RC competencies in cultural engagement, leadership, and service but also citizenship with global perspectives. To enhance college competencies in this training tour, my students and I met with the delegates from the National University of Singapore, Singapore Management University (SMU), and LaSalle College of the Arts. Our student leaders enjoyed a comprehensive learning experience in Singapore.

During the visit, student leaders introduced our university and our college system. Singapore students were excited to know about the rapid development of our university. Student leaders exchanged their knowledge and shared their experiences in a pleasant atmosphere. During SMU’s visit, Ms. Devi from the Centre of Social Responsibility gave us an excellent presentation on their community services programme organized by their student leaders. House Association president, Mr. Toby Lam, said, “Our student leaders found the Singapore training tour has broadened our understanding of leadership and community services. The tour inspired us on the management of future activities and services”.

### ***Section 6.5 Summary of the Cross-disciplinary Research for a Holistic Perspective***

The outcome of this cross-disciplinary research has integrated the two disciplines for a holistic understanding of the interpersonal conflict of students in their college life. This approach not only maximizes the quality and benefit of this study but also contributes to the awareness of conflict as part of the health and mental wellness in college students’ social development.

As a practitioner in higher education and my research towards a cross-disciplinary framework, a holistic perspective on this study is necessary to identify interrelated competencies to understand the interpersonal conflict of students in their college life. Through a holistic perspective, it also helps to address the initiatives that have been designed to support students’ mental and social development through general education and student affairs activities where students can gain an

equitable learning experience. The holistic perspective helps to illustrate a complete picture of the interpersonal conflict of college students from the integration of the two disciplines. The general education course, Human Communication in Society, provides college students with the opportunity to acquire a vast aspect of communication knowledge (e.g., conflict management skills) that students can apply in their college lives to develop trust and construct healthy interpersonal relationships. Every stage of the communication process will influence the effectiveness of their conflict resolution and relationships. Their choices of communication or conflict will lead to an outcome. Students will have to learn and experience whether it is the conflict outcome they intend. The general education course also provides ethical knowledge in social development, teaching students the ability to conduct moral reasoning. This learning helps students to develop personal responsibility for their actions. Some ethical concepts, like ‘fairness’, ‘transparent’, and ‘the truth’, can help guide students in their social development and conflict resolution. It is important for students to experience some of the conflictual issues themselves and learn how to respond so that they can progress and make better decisions in their college lives.

Experiential learning in higher education lets college students learn by doing with deep engagement in the learning process, which is one of the best ways to learn, try, think, and reflect. Well-planned, supervised and assessed experiential learning programs can stimulate academic inquiry by promoting interdisciplinary learning, civic engagement, career development, cultural awareness, leadership, and other professional and intellectual skills. Kolb (2014) stated that learning that is considered “experiential” contains all the following elements:

1. Reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis.
2. Opportunities for students to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for the results.
3. Opportunities for students to engage intellectually, creatively, emotionally, socially, or physically.
4. A designed learning experience that includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes, and successes.

By applying experiential learning concepts in higher education for students to benefit in two disciplines (i.e., Health and Education), I designed a general education course for year one and year two students to learn and experience the importance of human communication in society. The twelve-week course not only provides the fundamental knowledge on communication and relationship, but also assignments, activities, and roleplays for students to apply their skills in real life (e.g., Conflict resolution skills). As a resident fellow, I focused on student affairs, where I implemented the buddies program, health and mental wellness workshops, service learning, and communication training for college students to develop relationships with peers and improve their behaviour and decisions in their college lives.

The student affairs office aims to enhance student health, mental wellness, and social development in higher education. Fellows like me facilitate student learning outside the classroom through programs, service learning, and other opportunities designed to challenge students' beliefs. The learning experience can be applied to college education, first-year experience programs, and student discipline. By having student involvement, fellows can design programs and services that stimulate students' motivation in their learning. Some objectives for student affairs in higher education include:

- Promoting student engagement and involvement
- Supporting students in developing skills and competencies
- Developing students 'health and wellness knowledge, awareness, and social behaviours
- Assisting students in developing skills that allow them to engage in authentic, ethical connections.

As a fellow, I understand student affairs' fundamental objective is to provide holistic development for college students. Moreover, health and mental wellness issues in higher education are a significant aspect of student affairs in how the college or university cultivates the campus to promote and support students' health and mental wellness. The counselling service on the campus is a good way to assist students in handling stress, conflictual issues, emotional problems, and other mental wellness issues. However, the counselling service is often a passive response. Unless the students want to seek support from counsellors or fellows, it may be

difficult for the professionals to realize if the students need help or not. Thus, college activities, training, and workshops are other supports where fellows like me can organise activities together with students and provide related communication training and wellness workshops for them. Group activities can benefit students, as many first-year students find college life lonely. To break the loneliness, interacting with other students in activities can be part of the experiential learning on communication and relationship. From group activities, fellows can understand how students adapt to college life. By listening to students' stories and learning from their experiences in lectures and other related activities, fellows can better know some of their difficulties. By identifying some of the student's problems, fellows can provide suggestions to the students to learn what to do in the future. Unlike counselling services, training and workshops on communication, conflict management, mental wellness are for students to gain practical skills in their daily lives.

In conclusion, the complexity of the college experience has always been a profound learning environment for students. The experiential learning theory has been an educational construction approach for students to think, learn, and experience the concepts through higher education. By applying this learning theory, I designed general education course, mental wellness workshop, health and sport activities, service-learning experiential tours, and interpersonal communication trainings for college students to cultivate their social development for building relationships and learning how to communicate better with others (a critical part of conflict resolution) in their college life. All these insights from this cross-disciplinary study yield a greater implication for further cross-disciplinary collaborative research projects that connect researchers and scholars from different fields to other areas and disciplines. A cross-disciplinary collaboration can be added to widen the scope of the topic and further enhance the quality of this research.

## **Chapter 7: Limitations of the Research Study**

The study identifies several circumstances and situations that hindered the research process. The following is a discussion of some of those challenges and limitations.

### ***Section 7.1 Study Limitations and Risks***

Reliability involves validating the study findings to ensure they are consistent and robust by comparing them across similar research findings or research studies. Suggested by Kothari (2005), I made efforts to avoid any personal bias when interpreting the answers, used a semi-structured set of questions for the interviews, and analysed the data carefully. Consistency was established by tasking all of the respondents with self-reflection reports. Finally, direct observation was carried out to enhance the reliability of the data.

According to Kothari (2005), validity is premised on whether the study internally and externally measures the intended constructs in the research. One of the ways of doing so is to use triangulation to test the internal validity of the research work. Ensuring the validity of the data collected from the field involved counter checking the contents of self-reflection reports with the information from the interviews. If they showed similarities, the data had internal validity. As for external validity, the applicability of the results is usually determined by applying them to different targets or a wider population rather than focusing on the primary target—provided that the internal validity holds. Nevertheless, this is a qualitative study based on the input of students from one college in Hong Kong, and therefore it is not possible to generalise the findings beyond this population. Table 7.1 provides the details on the limitations of this study and the remedies for minimising their effects. The limitations were addressed by narrowing the study scope and focusing only on Communication students at a Hong Kong college as the target population. Moreover, the students were provided clear explanations on how understanding conflict resolution could help them in their daily interpersonal communication. The schedule of the interviews was set in a way that would minimise geographical differences and allow time for discussion after the interviews. Since misunderstandings and misinterpretations are common and cultural and geographical biases are to be expected, the project details and benefits regarding conflict resolution were clearly explained to all of the involved parties.



**Table 7.1***Limitations and Remedies*

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Limitation	Remedy
Short time frame	Limited the study scope by only focusing on Communications students at a Hong Kong college as the target population
Some individuals declined to take part in the study	Explained clearly to students how understanding interpersonal conflict resolution can help them in their daily communication
Geographical differences in the sample	Interview schedules were accommodated, allowing for further discussion to take place at the end of the study.
Inconsistent responses	This could not be avoided as misunderstandings and misinterpretations are common. Since the study only considers one city, cultural and geographical biases are expected.
Lack of cooperation from some of the staff members	Project details and benefits from this research on conflict resolution were explained clearly to all of the related parties.
Language	Students in Hong Kong generally speak Cantonese in their daily lives. To enhance validity, the participants were asked to complete self-reflection reports in English.

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## **Chapter 8: Conclusion and Timeline**

### ***Section 8.1 Conclusion***

By exploring the influence of culture on interpersonal conflict, my primary objective in this cross-disciplinary study was to critically assess the conflicts that Hong Kong college students experience and their conflict management style. This allowed me to identify the factors that contribute to effective communication behaviour and conflict management. The cross disciplinary research study addressed several topics under ‘Health’ and ‘Education’ associated with cultural influence that included—but were not limited to—interdependency, emotions, and conflict management styles. The cross-disciplinary model presented in Chapter two and three postulated that the influential dimensions of mental wellness were closely related to collectivist culture and affect conflict management behaviour. The study applied the narrative approach and thematic analysis to classify the attachment relationship of the following three main themes: culture, conflict, and college students.

The extended framework in Chapter 6 illustrates the ways in which Hong Kong college students’ behaviour is strengthened through interpersonal conflict and how conflict behaviours are expressed through collectivist culture in college life. Thus, the research engaged in studying the aspects of the collectivist culture that revealed the above themes. In this research, the manifestation of culture determines the meaning of conflict practices for people (e.g., Hong Kong college students) and represents the deeper, underlying level of culture.

To unfold the multiple layers of a culture one belongs to can be challenging. Self-reflection therefore gives students the opportunity to revisit the events that have led to the interpersonal conflict and the resultant consequences. By revisiting the events, the students can gain a deeper understanding on how to better manage conflict situations and achieve positive outcomes. The data sets discussed in this study illuminate how the behaviour of the participants falls into five individual styles of conflict management. The study found that avoidance is an extremely common strategy among the respondents. However, whether avoidance is productive or damaging generally depends on the cultural context and an understanding of destructive conflict (Komarraju, Dollinger, & Lovell, 2008). To effectively manage interpersonal conflict, it preserves a balance between humility and pride and shame and honour in communication. Also,

it saves the face of the other individual through informal means of inquiry before an irrevocably face-losing situation arises. In addition, it “gives face” to the other individual by offering them more options and freedom to negotiate, avoiding excessive verbal expressions, and learning how to manage conflicts by effectively reading implicit and nonverbal messages. Furthermore, it respects the needs of the other individual. Relationships are a critical component of interpersonal conflict. Most human relationships move back and forth between varying degrees of interdependence. Moreover, relationship and interdependence precede other issues in conflict. In fact, these negotiations over interdependence permeate most conflicts throughout the course of a relationship and are never completely concluded (Canevello & Crocker, 2010). It is therefore helpful to address the issue of interdependence in ongoing, highly important relationships. In more transient and less salient relationships, interdependence may be more superficial. This research study provides the grounds to examine and acknowledge the importance of collective cultural context in which a conflict is situated. As conflict is pervasive in social relationships, there is a need to identify the possible sources of interpersonal conflict and understand the potential role of communications in resolving these conflicts. This study shows the responses of the participants to situations that are mostly inevitable in student college life. Changing one’s usual behaviours and learning requires challenging one’s most deeply held values and beliefs (Raelin, 2001). A conflict resolution mindset is the most effective way to address the problems in a conflict, the process is not just a set of techniques. If individuals are to survive and thrive, working together is not an option but a necessity.

Consequently, learning to collaborate in relationships will have a much wider impact on well-being (Finlay & Gough, 2008). In a collectivist culture, everyone is connected, and they must balance their need for personal autonomy with that for interdependence. No one set of principles will work all the time to prevent conflicts. If enough individuals are willing to genuinely connect to others, the shared hopes of humanity can be realised. In order to find creative solutions, therefore, outcomes of conflict must be given serious consideration.

Finally, the study provides insights into the factors and philosophies that contribute towards college students understanding the causes and consequences of interpersonal conflict. Moreover, the outcomes of this study not only provide material for further research in education settings,

but also contribute to the literature on interpersonal conflict. By understanding issues related to the handling of interpersonal conflict, educators and counsellors can facilitate general education course and student development programmes and communication workshops that benefit all our students.

### ***Section 8.2 Dissertation Timeline***

Table 8.1 contains information on the timeline of the dissertation.

**Table 8.1**

#### *Dissertation Timeline*

<b>Task</b>	<b>Milestone</b>
Draft Proposal to Supervisor	July 2015
Submit Proposal	September 2015
Obtain Ethics Approval	November 2015
Data Collection	August 2016 – August 2017
PhD Transfer	May 2017
Data Analysis	August – October 2017
Review Findings with Supervisor	October 2017 – June 2018
Review Draft Final Report with Supervisor	March 2019
Submit Final Report to Supervisor	September 2019
Viva	April 2020

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## **Appendix 1 – Conflict Management Styles**

### **Integrating**

- I try to investigate an issue with my peers to find a mutually acceptable solution
- I try to integrate my ideas with those of my peers to jointly arrive at a decision
- I try to work with my peers to find solutions to a problem that would satisfy both of us
- I exchange accurate information with my peers to solve a problem together
- I try to bring all of the concerns out in the open so that the issues can be resolved in the best possible way
- I collaborate with my peers to come up with decisions that are acceptable to all of us
- I try to work with my peers for a proper understanding of a problem

### **Avoiding**

- I try to avoid being “put on the spot” and try to keep my negative feelings about my peers to myself
- I usually avoid openly discussing different views with my peers
- I try to stay away from disagreements with my peers
- I avoid meeting my peers
- I try to keep my different views to myself in order to prevent hard feelings of my peers
- I try to avoid unpleasant exchanges with my peers

### **Dominating**

- I use my influence to get my ideas accepted
- I use my authority to sway a decision in my favour
- I use my expertise to sway a decision in my favour
- I am generally firm in pursuing my side of the issue
- I sometimes use my power to win a competitive situation

### **Obliging**

- I generally try to satisfy the needs of my peers
- I usually accommodate the wishes of my peers
- I give in to the wishes of my peers

- I usually give concessions to my peers
- I often go along with the suggestions of my peers
- I try to meet the expectations of my peers

### **Compromising**

- I try to find a middle ground to resolve a deadlock
- I usually propose meeting halfway as a compromise
- I negotiate with my peers to reach a compromise
- I “give and take” so that a compromise can be made

## **Appendix 2. Background Information of University of Macau and Residential College**

As student populations increase in number and diversity, the issue of appreciating cultural differences among students has come to the forefront and should be given attention. Residential colleges (RCs) provide a convenient and useful platform for residential staff to carry out diversity education and help address diversity issues in student life. The Cheong Kun Lun College (CKLC) at the University of Macau (UM) has tentatively initiated some programs to commence diversity education. Some progress has been made, but more work needs to be done. Diversity education is expected to result in changing mindsets and behaviour, yet the lack of proven research tools for assessment remains a challenging issue.

The CKLC, which is named after the donor, Mr Cheong Kun Lun, was established in the summer of 2016 and is the most recent addition to the RC system on the UM campus. As the CKLC is still in its infancy and the institutional culture is taking shape, the following describes the activities at the CKLC that are part of its attempts to implement diversity education. Note that at the beginning, much of the efforts focused on the envisaged and practised what the CKLC had, rather than the common practices of the RC system at the UM. Therefore, it is anticipated that incorporating ‘diversity education’ into the mission, language, and RC life will enable both the staff and students to work in synergy to practice ‘diversity’ (Rainey & Kolb, 1995).

Since the handover of Macau back to China in 1999, higher education in Macau has progressed rapidly under the leadership of the Macau Special Administrative Region Government with support from the central government in Beijing. The number of higher education institutions has also increased from just a few in the early days to the current ten. Four of them are public, and six are private, with a total teaching staff of over 2,000 and a student population of over 30,000 enrolled in 268 programs at various levels. In addition, 15 overseas institutions were approved in 2015 to offer 40 tertiary educational programs.

The UM has experienced similar expansions and changes. In 1999, the UM enrolled 2,865 full-time students, among whom 539 were master program and doctoral students. In 2005, that number doubled to 5,500. The number has again doubled in 2018 to reach a total of 10,000.

Along with an increase in the student population is a change in the student profile. A much higher percentage of Macau high school graduates now have access to post-secondary education. At the same time, students who are admitted into college today have much larger differences in college preparedness than was the case in the past. More female students and students from diverse cultural origins and economically disadvantaged families are now able to attend college. Higher education is no longer regarded as a privilege of the elite, and its predominant purpose is no longer mostly to prepare students for professions. There are now more adult college students than ever before, and student life has become more complex, as they need to cope with the competing demands of part-time work, classes, and other campus roles and activities. Students have more responsibilities, commitments, and communities off-campus.

There is no better preparation for diversity education than learning about other cultures through activities that help to recognize diversity. As the student body of the CKLC is mainly composed of local students (75%) and Mainland Chinese students (23%), the key issue for diversity education at the CKLC is determining how to help these two cohorts of students become amicable, so as to build positive and trusting relationships among them. To this end, the CKLC has found, based on experience, that it is best to place students from different backgrounds together and allow them to work on projects together and become better acquainted. Time spent together will contribute to establishing familiarity among students. The freshmen orientation week and ice-breaking activities during the first week of the first semester encourage and allow students to communicate openly with those from other cultures. At the orientation, the students learn to integrate. They take part in all kinds of activities (regardless of ethnic origins) such as tug-of-war, hand painting and barbecuing near the beach. By watching documentaries and movies (mostly in English), the students learn more about other cultures. By organizing various fun activities like kin-ball and archery, they start conversations and form 'closer' relationships with those of other cultural backgrounds (Nieto, 1992). When they start to converse, they also listen to each other with empathy.

Experiential tours to China and Singapore are another opportunity to implement 'diversity education' in intercultural communication in which the students interchange among themselves. Leaving the campus and travelling to the communities (and countries) where other students live

can greatly increase their awareness and sensitivity to other cultures. The CKLC encourages students, especially local students, to visit different regions in China to witness the substantial changes that are taking place across the nation and appreciate the social environment in which most Mainland Chinese students have spent their childhood. Likewise, the Mainland Chinese students are encouraged to visit the different districts of Macau to increase their appreciation of the uniqueness of the city, which embraces both the West and the East. As a result, both the local and Mainland Chinese students have a better understanding of each other's cultural and social backgrounds.

Moreover, cultural sharing sessions provided by exchange students can give insights that reduce stereotyping and allow the audience to see the cultural differences. This is the case with the international exchange students at the UM. For example, two Japanese exchange students talked about Japanese festivals and origami. The student audience enjoyed the talk and learnt how to fold origami. At the end of the session, they formed an instant message group for further contact. The college also invited the American exchange students to elaborate on the American culture in general and the American education system in particular, which gave the rest of the students a better understanding of the differences in education systems. In another cultural talk, a student from Namibia talked about his native African culture with the rest of the students, which opened their eyes and minds. Such activities not only help the students understand different cultures but also motivate them to practice cross-cultural communication (Kulik & Roberson, 2008).

Sports are also part of healthy living at the RCs at the UM. They are good for bonding, as playing sports requires participation and cooperation. The UM has quite a few sports clubs and athlete teams, such as basketball, cheerleading, badminton, table tennis, football, and bowling club teams, and many more. Moreover, the main goal of all of these teams is to enjoy the sport and be a team player. When the students are on the field or in a competition, there are no differences among them. Students are not only part of the college but also a part of the sports team. Cooking competitions are another teamwork activity through which the students can learn to be creative by designing menus, shopping for ingredients, and cooking together. They enjoy the cooking activity because they not only consider it as a competitive event but also a chance to share food together. The UM music band was recently established in early October 2018 and performed in spring 2019. All these

group activities engage both local and non-local students together. They embrace diversity and appreciate the contributions of the different members. As one student puts it, “acceptance, friendship, and treasured moments with other students are the best parts of my college life”.

Halloween is another cultural event that is very popular among the students. Although Halloween is a Western event, Halloween Night is somewhat mysterious and fun for many of the students. The CKLC House Association (HA) designed a haunted house that is decorated by students who work together as a team for this fun-filled occasion at the UM. Another celebration is the Mid-Autumn Festival, which is a traditional Chinese holiday. The students design lanterns and bake mooncakes in addition to taking part in the many colourful stage performances. Such festival celebrations have brought the students together as a united body, promoting group cohesion and bonding at the UM (Cross, 2004).

The CKLC provides a good mix of facilities for a diverse college life. As students have different backgrounds and interests, the CKLC endeavours to install facilities that would help them to advance their interests and enjoy their college life. The CKLC has facilities such as a grand piano, music room, stage for performance, movies room, mini-library, outdoor badminton court, ping pong table, dancing room and two gym rooms. These facilities are available to all, and students can fully take part and access them for their own enjoyment.



### **Appendix 3. Extract from Student Interviews**

In this section, extracts of the interviews and their interpretation are provided. In the extracts, the students describe the conflict, the other party of the conflict, how the conflict was managed, and how they resolved the conflict.

#### **Interview with Jackson (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: Can you tell me who's involved in the conflict?

Jackson: My father. He doesn't understand what I want.

Researcher: Do you talk to your father often?

Jackson: Not really.

Researcher: How did you solve the conflict?

Jackson: My dad was upset with me because of my GPA. He has high expectations for me in my schoolwork. We had an argument and didn't talk for a while, but we finally calmed down and listened to each other.

Researcher: How did you feel after things calmed down?

Jackson: Much better and we were more willing to listen to each other after I told him about my new part-time job.

#### **Interview with Kevin (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: Can you tell me who's involved in the conflict?

Kevin: My mother. I didn't talk to her for about a week because she never listens to what I say.

Researcher: Do you have a good relationship with her?

Kevin: Yes, I love my mum.

Researcher: Tell me about the disagreement.

Kevin: I had an argument with my mum because of my habits. I've been a burden to my mum, and recently she argued with me about the same issue [her impulse buying and excessive shopping]. My mother told me several times that I should consider my spending habits and not waste money on unnecessary things because she wants to save money and buy a home. But I didn't stop.

Researcher: How did you approach the argument?

Kevin: My mother asked me to compromise and stop shopping and only buy necessities so that we can buy our own house. And I am compromising so that we will be better off.

### **Interview with Julia (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: So, who's involved in the conflict?

Julia: The cheerleading team. I'm so disappointed with them.

Researcher: Why disappointed?

Julia: I told them that we should practise more but they didn't listen to me, and we lost the game.

Researcher: How did you solve the conflict?

Julia: We [the cheerleading team] lost the match because a team member was absent. We argued for a long time, but she still did not admit that it was her fault. So, we asked her to never play on the team again.

Researcher: How did you feel? Did you give her a chance to explain her absence?

Julia: I did. The match was the only thing I cared about.

### **Interview with Karina (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: How did you show your disagreement with the direction or ideas suggested by the other party?

Karina: I argued with a classmate because he went ahead and submitted a group assignment that was plagiarised.

Researcher: Tell me more about the issue.

Karina: We had a group assignment that we were working on together with my classmates. We divided the assignment among ourselves so that everyone in the group could make contributions. We ran the contents of the entire project through a plagiarism software and found that that classmate's part was plagiarised. So, I asked him to redo it, but he refused. We argued about this and now we're not talking to each other. Later, I forced him to redo the work. He had no choice but to start all over again.

### **Interview with Jenny (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: Who is that you had a conflict with?

Jenny: My elder sister. I don't know why but I always have to take care of her.

Researcher: How's your relationship with her?

Jenny: Sometimes we argue because she always uses my stuff.

### **Interview with Peter (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: What happened?

Peter: I didn't meet my mum's expectations.

Researcher: Can you tell me a bit more?

Peter: My mum expects me to get into a better university.

### **Interview with Tom (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: Can you tell me what happened?

Tom: I always ignore him [his father] and just do the things that I want to do.

Researcher: Why is that?

Tom: Not sure. I just don't want to be controlled by others and I do not have time to deal with all those problems.

### **Interview with Janice (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: What's the problem about?

Janice: I go to school from 9 am to 6 pm and work at night. How would I still have time to listen to others [her boyfriend]?

Researcher: Have you tried to overcome this with your boyfriend together?

Janice: Not really, maybe... I should really talk to him...

### **Interview with Kate (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: Can you tell me about the conflict?

Kate: My boyfriend didn't let me hang out with other guys and we had an argument.

Researcher: Can you tell me how you solved the problem?

Kate: I told him [her ex-boyfriend] many times I need more freedom, but he said, "You already have a lot of freedom." He didn't understand what I meant, but I just tried to go along with whatever he said.

Researcher: Did you try to talk to him again if he didn't understand you?

Kate: It would be useless, and we would just keep arguing.

### **Interview with Wendy (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: What is the conflict about?

Wendy: She [her best friend at college] betrayed me. She told the teacher that I copied her assignment, but that's not really the truth.

Researcher: Can you tell me more about what happened?

Wendy: She lent me her assignment and I got some ideas from it. That's all.

### **Interview with Maggie (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: How did you show your disagreement with the direction or ideas suggested by the other party?

Maggie: I interrupted my boyfriend when he was lying.

Researcher: Tell me more about the situation.

Maggie: I wanted my boyfriend to help me, and I needed to borrow his car, but he told me that the car had been in a serious accident earlier. But this was a lie because I had seen the car the previous night. It was parked in their home compound. So, when my boyfriend lied to me, I interrupted him.

Researcher: How did you resolve the situation?

Maggie: I told her that if he did not want to lend me his car, he could have simply told me the truth rather than lie to me. But he still defended himself. So, I just walked away.

### **Interview with Irene (Pseudonym)**

Researcher: How did you show your disagreement with the direction or ideas suggested by the other party?

Irene: I opposed my father indirectly because I think that he is being so selfish.

Researcher: Tell me more about the situation.

Irene: I have a selfish dad. He argues with my mother all the time. But this time around, I indirectly opposed him when he told me to turn off the air conditioner in my grandma's room because he says it's a waste of energy. My grandma is old, and I can't understand how my dad can enjoy the air conditioner himself in his room but not allow my grandma to use it as well. I

find my dad very selfish and sometimes annoying. Sorry, I don't respect him, and so I hold a grudge against him because he is not a good person. I indirectly oppose him by just mumbling when I have to talk to him and never tell him anything. Any time he wants me to do something, I just do it, but I don't openly talk to him about anything.

Researcher: How do you resolve the issues?

Irene: I just do what he wants to let things go.

#### ***Appendix 4 Thematic Map***

The map shows different negative feelings when participants have a disagreement with the related parties, which influence the outcome of the interpersonal conflict.

