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EFFECT OF PEER MEDIATION IN RESOLVING CONFLICT BETWEEN COLLEGE STUDENTS[†]

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ABSTRACT

Mediation is a non-adversarial method of resolving conflict through the use of a trained third party in a structured process. This study measured college students' perception of satisfaction/resolution of conflicts with and without the presence of a trained peer mediator. Subjects wrote "scripts" of a recent conflict in which they were involved. Subjects also completed pertinence and intensity ratings of conflict areas on a Likert-type questionnaire. Conflict areas were limited to commonly experienced issues such as broken promises, annoyance, and illegitimate demands. Using the results, thirty-two subjects were paired and assigned scenarios to role play in conflict dyads. In experimental group dyads, mediators used a conflict resolution process that explores disputants' perceptions and feelings, checks for understanding, and generates solutions. The control group attempted resolution of the conflict without assistance; mediators were present as observers only. Subjects then completed a satisfaction/resolution survey. Compared to the control group, subjects in the experimental group were more satisfied with the outcome ($p < 0.05$). In the pertinence and intensity of conflict categories measure, a gender main effect was observed for annoyance, criticism, and feeling ignored, with women rating these as more intense.

INTRODUCTION

Conflicts left unresolved may be energy draining, lead to lesser productivity, greater stress levels, physical symptoms or violent behavior. Conflict is inevitable, but may be handled productively or poorly (Deutsch, 1993). Incorporating trained peers to aid communication between disputants, peer mediation programs are based on a foundation of applied conflict resolution (Stomfay-Stitz, 1994). Mediation is a non-adversarial method of resolving conflicts through the use of a trained third party in a structured process.

Mediation programs are reported to improve skill levels in problem solving, verbal communication, critical thinking and listening for both mediators and disputants (Trevaskis, 1994). While peer counseling programs existing on college campuses report success, including personal and vocational growth for participants (Punchkoff, 1990), specific programs in peer mediation on the college level are not readily found. "As of October 1985, Beeler (1986) reported only 23 institutions of higher education providing mediation services for students." (Hayes and Bologh, 1990). Hayes and Bologh (1990) suggest that the adversarial court-like style favored by enforcing strict conduct codes on college campuses tends to suppress conflict rather than change attitudes or foster understanding. They contend that educational features in mediation are more consistent with the developmental philosophy of student affairs and the mission statements of most universities.

Evaluations of peer mediation programs are generally limited to data on numbers of disputes reportedly settled (Lam, 1988; Johnson, et al., 1992), comparisons of numbers of aggressive incidents (McCormick, 1988), or self reports from participants (Gentry & Benenson, 1993). These studies are most often conducted without control groups or random assignment. Further empirical study and expanded instrumentation for program evaluation will clarify benefits to students. The current study measured college students' perception of satisfaction/resolution of conflicts with and without the presence of a trained peer mediator.

METHODS

Experimental Design: An experimental between-subjects design was used by randomly assigning subjects to one of two groups. Forty-two subjects completed pertinence and intensity ratings on conflict areas on a Likert-type questionnaire indicating which scenarios were most like their personal experiences and rating the intensity of their opinion/feeling. Areas of conflicts were limited to commonly experienced issues: broken promises, annoyance, illegitimate demands, criticism and feeling ignored. Subjects wrote journals of a recent conflict in which they were involved. This review of personal experience served to add immediacy and depth to the conflict being mediated. Based on questionnaire results, from the initial forty-two subjects, thirty-two subjects who shared similar experience, but possible opposing

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views were chosen, paired, and assigned scenarios to role-play in conflict dyads. To create investment and realism, subjects were assigned to role-play a stance in the most personally relevant conflict scenario possible.

As dyads prepared for the conflict session, they were given expanded scenarios from which to operate and asked to behave in the manner that would seem most likely under the circumstances listed. While staying within the general scope of the scenarios, subjects were encouraged to incorporate personal experience, values and beliefs in the discussions of the conflict.

Participants: Subjects were drawn from volunteers from General Psychology classes in a mid-sized university in the upper Midwest. Thirty women and twelve men participated as subjects and received course credit for their participation. In the subset of participants used in the conflict dyads, twenty women and twelve men completed Satisfaction/Resolution surveys.

Participants in a campus peer counseling program at the same university were offered training as peer mediators (4) and served as mediators in the experimental group sessions and as observers in the control group. They also offered to mediate for any control group dyads wanting assistance after the experiment was complete. Training of mediators consisted of two and one-half hours of instruction in

conflict resolution presented by a university professor, community peer mediation leaders and the investigator, and an additional two hours of role playing practice in peer mediation.

Instrumentation and Procedure: Peer mediators confined their input in conflict sessions to procedures presented in their training. This training used of a process adapted from the "Checklist for Mediation" developed by the American Bar Association (Trevaski, 1994). Conflict scenarios were composed along the lines of previously completed studies (Miller, 1991). Sessions were video taped and two raters scored each mediators' conflict sessions in terms of their adherence to training standards. These scores were compared for inter-rater reliability.

The independent variable was manipulated by the presence of a peer mediator (treatment) or an "observer only" (control). In experimental group dyads, trained mediators used the conflict resolution process which explores disputants perceptions and feelings, checks for understanding and generates solutions. The control group attempted to resolve conflict without assistance; mediators were present as "observers only" to avoid a confound created by a witness to the conflict resolution session. Subjects then completed a satisfaction/resolution survey.

Table 1. Effect of gender on relative intensities of conflict categories.

Conflict Types [†]	Gender [‡]		Total [‡]	Significant Difference
	Female	Male		
1.	4.6 ± 2.5	4.2 ± 3.4	4.5 ± 2.7	No
2.	4.4 ± 2.6	3.5 ± 2.3	4.2 ± 2.6	No
3.	4.8 ± 2.7	3.9 ± 3.3	4.5 ± 2.9	No
4.	2.5 ± 2.8	3.2 ± 3.0	2.6 ± 2.8	No
5.	6.8 ± 2.0	3.9 ± 2.0	6.1 ± 2.4	Yes
6.	5.8 ± 3.3	3.4 ± 2.3	5.2 ± 3.3	Yes
7.	4.8 ± 2.6	4.0 ± 2.0	4.6 ± 2.5	No
8.	5.1 ± 3.1	3.8 ± 3.5	4.8 ± 3.1	No
9.	4.9 ± 2.8	3.0 ± 2.9	4.5 ± 2.3	Yes
10.	5.0 ± 2.6	3.6 ± 3.1	4.7 ± 2.8	No

[†] Conflict types:

1. A friend broke a promise to me,
2. I was unable to follow through on a commitment to a friend.
3. Someone was asking me to do something unreasonable.
4. I asked someone to help me out in a way they thought was unreasonable
5. A friend has an annoying habit that is getting on my nerves.
6. Someone thinks I should change something about me that I think is "just the way I am"
7. A friend criticized me in a way that I thought was unfair.
8. A friend got upset when I gave an opinion or honest feedback.
9. I felt left out or ignored by a friend.
10. A friend felt left out or ignored by me.

[‡] Values represent means ± standard deviations.

RESULTS

Analysis of the conflict categories was conducted through the use of a one way ANOVA to check for significance within the rating of intensity of the conflict categories and quasi independent variable of gender. A gender main effect was observed for annoyance $F(2,42) = 17.01$, criticism $F(2,42) = 5.18$, and feeling ignored $F(2,42) = 3.88$ with women rating these conflicts as more intense.

The conflict scripts written by subjects about a past experience were analyzed qualitatively and categorized on a nominal scale. In the subsample ($n = 33$), subjects reported sixteen incidents of conflicts with peers, four of which were roommates and six that involved members of the opposite sex or dating issues (for example, a close friend begins dating, leaving less time for the friendship). Seven conflict situations involved current romantic relationships and six involved family members with these equally divided between parents and siblings. Four reported threats, fear and/or physical assault (12%), and three reported alcohol use as a factor in the conflict (9%).

After preparing a frequency distribution of responses in each of the satisfaction/resolution categories for the experimental and control groups, the mean scores of responses were computed. The standard deviation of scores were obtained and a *t*-test

for independent measures was applied at an alpha level of $p < 0.05$. All differences were significant beyond $p < 0.05$ level (Table 2). In addition, results indicated that subjects found the scenarios both realistic and relevant $t(30) = 1.81$, $t(30) = -0.30$ and that the mediators were perceived as effective.

DISCUSSION

These inferential results indicate that the participation of peer mediators had a positive impact on the perceived satisfaction/resolution levels of college students involved in conflict, particularly in the areas of communication of feelings, resolution of the conflict and generating ideas of what could be done differently. Analysis of the types of conflict experienced by college students shows that peer relationships (dating, roommate and friendships) are most common, with another 18% of subjects reporting family conflict. It is of concern that although no overt cues of threats, fear or physical violence in the materials were presented, 12% spontaneously reported inclusion of these elements in conflicts they had experienced. If materials had cued subjects to recall and include this information, or perhaps if more men had participated in the study, these percentages might be substantially higher.

Table 2. Outcomes of Conflict Sessions: Satisfaction/Resolution.

Statement [†]	Group [‡]		t - Test	Significance [§]
	Experimental	Control		
1. Express	4.50 ± 0.51	3.80 ± 1.00	2.48	*
2. Feeling	1.50 ± 0.51	2.80 ± 0.89	3.42	**
3. Perspective	4.30 ± 0.60	3.60 ± 1.10	2.12	*
4. Solutions	1.90 ± 0.80	2.80 ± 1.10	2.53	*
5. Resolution	1.40 ± 0.50	2.50 ± 1.20	3.43	**
6. Differently	4.30 ± 0.50	3.40 ± 1.10	3.34	**
7. Realistic	3.80 ± 0.86	3.00 ± 1.40	1.81	ns
8. Relevant	2.80 ± 1.20	2.90 ± 1.10	0.30	ns
9. Effective	4.30 ± 0.60	¶		

[†] Statements:

1. I am satisfied that I had a chance to express my side of this dispute.
2. I am not satisfied that the other person understood what I was feeling.
3. I am satisfied that the other person understood my perspective of what happened.
4. I feel that there were very few workable solutions generated by our discussion.
5. I feel that this conflict is not resolved.
6. The discussion helped me see what I could do differently in the future.
7. The conflict session seemed realistic to me.
8. The conflict scenario was not relevant to my life.
9. I felt that the mediator was effective.

[‡] Values represent means standard deviations.

[¶] No mediation took place in control group.

[§] ** = $t(30) = p < 0.01$; * = $t(30) = p < 0.05$; ns = not significant.

Conflicts being experienced by college students are of a level that is serious and should be managed to avoid escalation. Equipping students with life skills to deal more effectively with conflict would seem an appropriate goal of university systems. Peer mediation programs may be an inexpensive and effective way to incorporate skill building at an elemental and relevant level. The simple techniques of peer mediated conflict can be internalized and transferred to other areas of students' lives once exposure in a structured setting alerts them to the potential benefits. Practice in identifying and relaying feelings and generating solutions to problems has value regardless of the context. Students reported satisfaction with the tools and process used in this pilot-level study. The limited external validity of this study could be tested through further study extending to actual conflicts between college students being mediated. Follow up to determine if resolution of conflict was enduring could also be pursued.

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