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SELF-REGULATION IN INTERPERSONAL CONFLICTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF YOUNG ADULTS' EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

INTRODUCTION: *Early adulthood is characterized by complicated interpersonal relationships and emotional issues for effective self-management.*

OBJECTIVES: *The paper examines the life experiences of young adults and use of self-regulation tactics in solving interpersonal conflicts.*

METHODOLOGY: *In this study, qualitative approach was phenomenological. Semi-structured interviews were conducted from 12 participants (aged 20-29 years).*

RESULTS: *The results of current study with thematic analysis shows the patterns in emotional processing, coping strategies, and the influence of social environments in the development of regulatory behaviors. The research findings differentiate adaptive from maladaptive conflict resolution approaches. This study adds to the limited number of qualitative studies in Pakistan with a focus on young adult participants' in-depth accounts of their lived experiences regarding resolving interpersonal conflict such as through adjustment or maladjustment. Rather than providing direct interventions for improving emotional regulation and relational quality.*

RESULTS: *This study gives researchers and policymakers an important understanding of the emotional processes and regulatory strategies that inform future studies, policies, and contextually available options for enhancing emotional health and relational quality.*

Introduction

Interpersonal conflict is a normal component of social interactions, particularly during young adulthood, which is a period of rich social interactions and emotional development. Global research indicates that young adults are the highest population group experiencing stress in their interpersonal relationships as a result of changing roles and responsibilities in education, work and in their relationships (American Psychological Association, 2022). Research has revealed that many (60-70%) young adults often face conflicts in their close relationships that endanger their emotional and mental well-being (Aldao et al., 2010, Butler et al., 2013). Furthermore, a positive relationship exists between individuals' ability to regulate their emotions during conflicting situations and levels of anxiety, depression, and unhappiness in relationships (Lakey et al., 2011).

The transition to young adulthood is characterized by increasing independence and exploration of identity through the establishment of significant interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal relationships play a critical role in an individual's well—being and social cognition during early adulthood (Mesquita et al., 2015). Interpersonal conflict results in being emotionally charged, having different expectations, and constituting a potential threat to the future of the relationship and to the person's self-worth (Zaki et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2025). The way that individuals respond to interpersonal conflict may have significant effects on their relationships and their psychological well-being. Effective handling of interpersonal conflict requires regulating

emotional and behavioural reactions and coping with stress. This is known as self-regulation, which refers to a range of psychological processes through which people monitor, assess and modify their emotional and behavioural responses in relation to the context (Gross, 2003; Graziano, 2007).

Further, the processes of self-regulation are not isolated phenomena but occur in certain sociocultural context. Family, peer and sociocultural environment influence the self-regulation of emotion in the processes of expression, interpretation and management of emotions (Thompson et al., 2014; Patton et al., 2007). The cultural differences, for instance, between the collectivist culture in Pakistan and the individualist culture, can affect the behavior Then the selection of strategy to deal with conflicts becomes important (Taylor et al., 2025).

Research Objectives

These are following research objectives:

1. To understand young adults lived experiences and thoughts about interpersonal conflict arguing with its affects and their identity
2. To analyze young adults control their thoughts, feelings and actions while different conflict situations
3. To evaluate effects of social and interpersonal factors such as family and friends who can manage and deal with conflict.

Research Questions

These are following research Questions:

1. What is the meaning and understanding of the kinds of experiences young adults have in interpersonal conflict situations?

2. what is the process of self-regulating thoughts, feelings and behaviour in and after conflict.

3. What is the impact of social environments and relationships that have a positive influence on an individual to self-regulate their response to conflict?

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research is based on a qualitative phenomenological design. According to this design data collected in thick, rich and descriptive accounts of teachers' experiences and meanings the use of digital media to support students' emotional regulation. Teachers describe digital tools that enhance students' motivation and emotions as well as problems such as distractions, over-reliance on technology and classroom discipline. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed flexibility in gathering information. The interview protocol was based on 16 open-ended questions about different themes.

Sample size and techniques

There are 12 female participants selected from a variety of educational levels, disciplines to gain a holistic view of the role of digital media about emotion regulation in classrooms. Participants were selected on the basis of their experience, frequent use of digital media in teaching and being open to sharing their classroom experiences. The sample size was small, as is typical of phenomenological studies, as the focus was not to represent the population statistically, but to explore the experiences of the participants.

Study Procedure

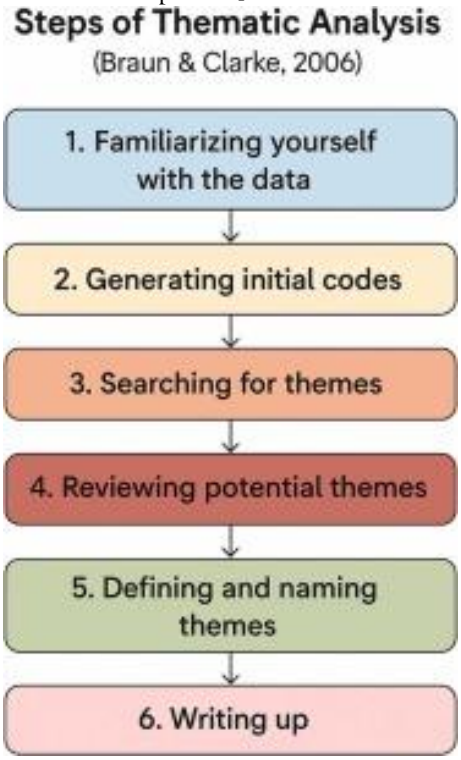
The data were examined using thematic analysis in line with the approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). This is an ideal approach for phenomenological research because it enables the researcher to interpret common meanings among participants while attending to the uniqueness of each participant. The data analysis involved a number of steps.

First, the researcher read the interview transcripts several times to familiarise herself with the data and to get a sense of the experience of participants. At this point, the researcher immersed herself in the data by recording initial reactions, recurring ideas, and emotional phrases. Second, significant text related to the research questions were coded. Codes included significant concepts like student engagement, emotional expression, distractions, teacher stress, motivation, and classroom management. Third, codes were consolidated into categories and developed into potential themes that captured patterns across responses. For example, themes may include digital media as an emotional motivator, technology as a classroom management tool, challenges of over-stimulation, and teacher adaptability. Fourth, the themes were checked, refined and reconciled against the original data to ensure they met internal

consistency and the research aims. Lastly, themes were defined, labelled, and written up in a narrative report, with quotations if deemed necessary. This process improved the trustworthiness and interpretive power of the results.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using inductive thematic analysis according to the six-step approach by Braun and Clarke (2006) that is a common and well-known procedure in research. The codes and themes are manually selected. Manual coding in qualitative analysis involves the researcher personally reviewing, assigning tags, and categorizing data. This method was adopted because of its flexibility, simplicity and compatibility with phenomenological research. It allows for the description and interpretation of qualitative data.



The results suggested that the respondents' experiences of interpersonal conflict and self-regulation are defined by five key themes that encompasses various aspects of emotional, cognitive, behavioural and social experiences. The themes are: Nature of the Conflict Experience, Personal Experiences and Context, Self-Regulation and Coping Strategies, Social and Interpersonal Influences. These themes are elaborated on in the discussion section below.

Theme 1: Nature of the Conflict Experience

This theme examines participants' understanding of interpersonal conflict and self-regulation, and their spontaneous emotions and thoughts during conflict. Interpersonal conflict was typically viewed as a disagreement with differences in opinions, expectations, or emotional needs. Self-regulation was typically defined as the control of emotional and behavioral reactions in these situations.

The participant defined conflict as "*when two people don't see eye to eye and it becomes emotional and self-regulation is how you control yourself in that situation*" *(Participant 2)*. This demonstrates a simple but effective understanding of both these concepts. Participants explained that specific experiences of conflict involved emotionally charged situations with close friends, family members or partners. These could be the result of miscommunication, unmet expectations, or misunderstanding.

During situations, participants' reactions were intense and emotional. For example, one participant said, *"I get breathless and feel angry and tense, just wanting to respond immediately" (Participant*

Code	Illustrative Quote
Understanding conflict	*"When two people don't see eye to eye and it becomes emotional..."* (Participant 2)
Self-regulation	*"...self-regulation is how you control yourself in that situation."* (Participant 2)
Anger and tension	*"I get breathless and feel angry and tense, just wanting to respond immediately."* (Participant 6)
Confusion	*"In that moment, I feel confused, I can't think straight."* (Participant 9)

6). Another participant described, *"In that moment, I feel confused, I can't think straight" (Participant 9)*. These results suggest that interpersonal conflict experiences are emotionally intense and cognitively confusing experiences with emotional reactions taking precedence over cognitive processing.

Theme 2: Personal Experiences and Context

This theme emphasizes the place and people involved in conflicts and their impact on emotional responses. The most common places for conflicts to occur were family, friendships, and romantic relationships, with family conflict occurring most often due to the needs for frequent interaction and the authority structure in the family. One participant said, *"I have most of my conflicts with my family, particularly my parents, because we have different expectations" (Participant 11)*. This highlights the influence of hierarchical and generational dynamics on conflict.

Relational context also impacted on emotional reactions. Emotional responses were greater in close relationships. For instance, *"If it is someone close to me, it affects me more; I am more emotional about it" (Participant 5)*. Conversely, participants reported conflicts with less significant people were less challenging. So, emotional closeness enhances the experience and consequences of conflict. In short, this theme highlights that experiencing interpersonal conflict is not a homogeneous experience but is influenced by situational factors and relational contexts, such as emotional closeness and power imbalance.

Subtheme	Codes	Interpretation
Conflict settings	Family conflicts	Conflicts occur most frequently within family relationships.
	Friendships	Disagreements arise among close friends.
	Romantic relationships	Romantic partners are common sources of interpersonal conflict.
Family dynamics	Different expectations	Generational differences contribute to disagreements.
	Parental authority	Family hierarchy influences conflict experiences.
	Frequent interaction	Regular contact increases opportunities for conflict.

Emotional closeness	Close relationships	Greater emotional attachment intensifies conflict experiences.
	Emotional investment	Strong personal bonds increase emotional reactions.
	Personal significance	Conflicts with valued individuals have a greater emotional impact.
Situational influences	Less significant relationships	Conflicts with acquaintances evoke weaker emotional responses.
Power imbalance	Unequal authority shapes the nature of conflict.	Power imbalance
Relational context	The type of relationship influences emotional and behavioral responses.	Relational context

Theme 3: Coping and Self-regulation

This theme reflects participants' strategies for managing their emotional and behavioural responses to interpersonal conflict. Participants described using a mix of behavioral, cognitive and emotional strategies. Some of these strategies involved distancing, such as *"Sometimes I walk out of the room to cool off before I speak" (Participant 1).* This suggests the use of exposure management to control arousal.

Distraction was also common. For instance, one participant reported, *"I listen to music or go for a walk to take my mind off things" (Participant 7).* These techniques allowed participants to temporarily distract themselves from their distress. Other participants used cognitive strategies such as reappraisal and taking the perspective of others. One participant said, *"I try to think about the situation differently, like maybe the other person didn't intend to mean it like that" (Participant 8).* This is a way of having a less hostile appraisal of the situation. However, participants also indicated that their responses varied. As one participant explained, *"I can talk to my friends but usually remain silent with family members" (Participant 4).* This theme underscores that self-regulation is a dynamic and context-specific endeavour, with both adaptive and context-bound strategies.

Subtheme	Codes	Interpretation
Behavioural coping strategies	Walking away from conflict	Temporarily leaving the situation to reduce emotional arousal.
	Taking a break	Creating distance before responding to avoid impulsive reactions.
	Cooling off	Allowing emotions to settle before engaging in discussion.

Distraction strategies	Listening to music	Using enjoyable activities to divert attention from distress.
	Going for a walk	Physical activity helps reduce emotional tension and stress.
Cognitive self-regulation	Cognitive reappraisal	Reinterpreting the situation in a more balanced and less threatening way.
	Perspective-taking	Considering the other person's intentions and viewpoint.
Remaining silent with family	Adjusting coping strategies according to the relationship context.	Remaining silent with family
Flexible coping	Self-regulation strategies vary depending on the interpersonal situation.	Flexible coping

Theme 4: Social and Interpersonal Influences

This theme highlights the influence of social and interpersonal factors in regulating emotions and responding to conflicts. The presence of and reactions from others were reported to help and impede regulation. For example, "*When someone listens to me and is calm, I feel like I have more control, but if they are angry, then I lose control*" *(Participant 10)*. This is an example of the interactive nature of regulation. Social support was a key element in conflict resolution. The participant said, "*When I get into conflict, I talk to a friend to get a better perspective*" *(Participant 3)*. This highlights co-regulation of emotions.

Familial factors were also mentioned by participants. For instance, "*I think I'm influenced by how my parents deal with conflict - I try to avoid an argument*" (Participant 12). This indicates that conflict styles are acquired through social learning. Furthermore, participants noted they acquired strategies from others, such as their friends and family. This suggests that self-regulation is something that occurs not only within individuals, but also with social learning and interactions.

Subtheme	Codes	Interpretation
Influence of others' emotional responses	Calm communication	Calm responses from others promote emotional regulation.

	Angry reactions	Others' anger increases emotional dysregulation.
	Interpersonal influence	Emotional responses are shaped by the behaviour of others during conflict.
Social support and co-regulation	Talking to friends	Seeking support helps manage emotions and resolve conflict.
	Emotional support	Trusted individuals provide comfort and reassurance.
	Perspective seeking	Friends help participants gain a balanced understanding of the situation.
Family influence and social learning	Parental conflict style	Parents serve as models for conflict management behaviours.
	Avoiding arguments	Conflict avoidance is learned through family experiences.
	Learning from family	Self-regulation strategies develop through family interactions.

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	Learning from friends	Peers also contribute to the development of coping strategies.
Social development of self-regulation	Social learning	Emotion regulation skills are acquired by observing others.
Interpersonal interactions	Self-regulation develops through ongoing social experiences.	Interpersonal interactions

Theme 5: Interpretation and Reflection

This theme focuses on how participants make sense of and learn from their conflict experiences. Conflict experiences prompted self-reflection and change in participants. One participant said, *"I think about it later and think about what I did wrong and how I can change next time" (Participant 6).* Participants used reflection to understand their emotional reactions and gain self-understanding. For example, *"I know that I get easily triggered when I feel disrespected, so I try to manage this reaction" (Participant 3).*

Participants also reported how conflict is a valuable learning opportunity and helps them grow. One participant explained, *"I learn a lot about myself and others in conflict situations" (Participant 8).* Critically, participants reported their reactions change. As one participant said, *"I used to respond immediately, but now I try to think through my response" (Participant 1).* This theme illustrates the importance of reflection and interpretation in turning conflict experiences into learning opportunities for emotional growth and self-regulation.

Subtheme	Codes	Interpretation
Self-reflection after conflict	Reflecting on actions	Participants evaluate their behaviour after conflict.
	Identifying personal mistakes	Reflection helps recognize areas for improvement.
	Learning from experience	Conflict serves as an opportunity for self-improvement.

Emotional self-awareness	Recognising emotional triggers	Participants identify situations that provoke strong emotional reactions.
	Self-awareness	Increased understanding of personal emotions and behaviours.
	Managing emotional triggers	Awareness supports better emotional regulation in future conflicts.
Personal growth through conflict	Learning about oneself	Conflict enhances self-understanding and personal insight.
	Understanding others	Conflict improves empathy and awareness of others' perspectives.
	Emotional growth	Experiences contribute to emotional maturity and resilience.
Behavioural change over time	Thinking before responding	Participants become more deliberate in their responses.
Reduced impulsivity	Reflection leads to improved self-control.	Reduced impulsivity
Improved self-regulation	Individuals adapt their behaviour based on previous conflict experiences.	Improved self-regulation

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Discussion

This study examined young Pakistani adults' experience of interpersonal conflict and the regulation of their emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses in the context of sociocultural influences (Steinberg et al., 2010). Results show that interpersonal conflict is not simply a contextual difference of opinion but an emotional, subjective event with cognitive appraisal, relational intimacy and cultural scripts playing a central role. The young adults in the study frequently reported experiencing intense emotions including anger, hurt, and frustration; physiological arousal; and transient cognitive impairment (inability to think clearly) during conflict. This is consistent with the developmental view that emotion is more reactive in early adulthood because of ongoing refinement of

cognitive appraisal processes (Braun and Clarke, 2006)..

In the case of emotion regulation, participants employed several coping techniques, depending on the circumstances. The strategies used by people include reappraisal, disengagement, distraction and problem-focused to reduce the intensity of negative feelings. However, some of the other emotions regulation strategies used by participants were emotional suppression, avoidance, and rumination (Murray et al., 2024).

Implications

There are many potential implications of the findings from the current study for practice in psychology, education and research. In particular, the results of the study suggest that emotional self-regulation skills should be part of all forms of therapy. The mental health program at post-secondary institutions and daily living skills training to improve the ability of young adults to effectively manage conflict in all types of interpersonal relationships. Family relationships and social support have an impact on young adults manage conflicts, the present study suggests that interventions should also provide awareness of family relationships and support from peers. Additionally, the findings of the current study demonstrate that culturally appropriate emotion-regulation interventions need to be designed to reflect the collectivist culture that characterizes Pakistan. The present study also provides a basis for future qualitative and quantitative research about how young adults manage conflict in different cultures and about how they use emotional self-regulation to manage their emotions in a conference or meeting with many other participants from other cultures.

Recommendations

According to the results, the authors recommend that educational institutions and mental health professionals develop programs to help improve the emotional self-regulation skills and the ability to resolve interpersonal conflict for young adults. There should be an emphasis on building programs that provide workshops on skills such as cognitive reappraisal, emotional awareness, communication and creating healthy coping strategies. Family members should be educated on supportive conflict-management techniques since family relationships have a large effect on emotional self-regulation. Also, future studies should attempt to use larger and more diverse samples including people with different age groups, educational degrees, and geographical locations in Pakistan to increase the ability to generalize the results across populations. Finally, longitudinal studies and mixed method research should be used to study how emotional self-regulation strategies develop over time and impact relationship outcomes.

Limitations

The study had several limitations. Firstly, only 12 young adults participated. Second, the data were collected from subjects from a particular sociocultural environment in Pakistan. Therefore, the results may not apply to other cultures or communities. Third, participants answered questions in interviews, so the data may be subject to recall bias and social desirability bias. Lastly, the study was qualitative and exploratory. It sought to understand the lived experience of young adults with limited causal links and generalization compared to the general population of young adults.

Conclusion

The study discussed Young adults' perceptions and the way of handle conflicts and regulate themselves in terms of their emotional, psychological and behavioural responses in the Pakistani sociocultural context. The adoption of positive emotion regulation strategies, including cognitive reappraisal, assisted with emotion regulation and conflict resolution, negative strategies such as avoidance, emotion suppression and rumination were prevalent, and especially with respect to family issues.

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