

# Promoting self-awareness and conflict management skills in a multicultural setting

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**Background.** Currently, there is a limited perception of how undergraduate students deal with day-to-day conflict. Previous research focused on conflict resolution strategies, but there is a significant need to understand the nature of conflict as it relates to personality styles. The study formed part of the teaching of transferable and communication skills combined with a conflict resolution intervention in third-year radiography students.

**Objectives.** To promote self-awareness among students and help them to develop conflict management skills to prepare them for their future team-based professional roles.

**Methods.** The study adopted a mixed-method design, focusing on the qualitative results during the reflection period. The third-year radiography students were invited to participate in the study. Those who volunteered were provided with an information leaflet and informed consent document.

**Results.** The results indicated two main personality types among the 14 participants, where 30.8% reported as ESFJ (extroverted, sensing, feeling and judging) and 30.8% as ISFJ (introverted, sensing, feeling and judging). The qualitative results indicated that students experienced an increased awareness of their own and their co-students' personality types and consequently approached conflict management differently. Reference to sociocultural differences also surfaced.

**Conclusion.** The assessment process provided valuable insights into differences and cultural norms associated with personality traits. Results also highlighted the need for faculty awareness and focus relating to variations in personality, emotional needs and intrapersonal reflection.

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Personality traits and conflict management have attracted much interest in recent years,<sup>[1]</sup> which can be attributed to personality being a delicate conjoining of personal behaviour, thinking, emotion and attitude, where people react differently in similar situations.

In previous research,<sup>[2]</sup> it was stated that the student's perspective has an awareness gap in soft skills development. The study demonstrated that most students did not perceive what soft skills refer to; students did not regard a positive work attitude and passion as soft skills. Most of the students were aware that good communication is a transferable skill, important for clinical work and an essential factor of employment.<sup>[2,3]</sup>

Culture is considered as a strong opposing factor to current personality classification systems.

Culture refers to all beliefs, customs, art and traditions of a specific society.<sup>[4]</sup> Other Big Five studies proved that Asian cultures are more collectivist and less extroverted. Central Americans are more open minded than Europeans, who are more inclined to neuroticism. The two primary cultures focus on collectivism (social harmony and respect) and individualism (independence and personal achievement). Therefore, students from individualist cultures are more personally orientated than those from collectivist cultures, who are more socially orientated.<sup>[4]</sup> A typical field in personality research that lacks recognition is cross-cultural diversity.<sup>[5]</sup> As far back as 1936, many theorists noted that individuals have different value perceptions of their personality types when considering their cultural background.<sup>[2]</sup> In 2002, the American Psychological Association provided guidelines for multicultural education.<sup>[6]</sup> Both Freudian and cognitive theorists believe that personality theories are applied equally to all people,

but they need to bring sociocultural influence into personality theory development. The fundamental question that has to be addressed to allow the study of culture is: 'What should I know about your culture to understand you better?' A clear difference between emic and etic tasks should also be considered. Emic perspectives are familiar to a given culture, while etic tasks are common to most humans, regardless of their cultural background. Equivalence is another essential factor that should be addressed, as certain cultures perceive slow thinking as intelligence, whereas western belief focuses on quick review as a form of intelligence.<sup>[4]</sup> Cross-cultural research also focuses on an individual's flexibility to adapt to cultural differences and the artistic response of an individual from a more reserved or responsive cultural setting.

## Methods

This was a research study of sequential mixed-method design, with qualitative emphasis ( $n=45$  undergraduate students). Of the 45 students present at the introductory and recruitment stage, 14 provided consent for participation in the study. A convenient random sampling method was used during initial recruitment of participants. There was a mixed-method approach to the data collection of quantitative Myers-Briggs type indicator (MBTI) results and qualitative reflection assessments of students' perceptions and world views.

The mixed methodology included closed-ended questions from the MBTI for reflection studies, as well as qualitative views for participation and theme development. The quantitative data collection and analysis included the MBTI instrument to allow comparison within the sample

group with previous research studies. The qualitative data collection and analysis included interviews and self-reflections of study participants to allow development of themes for data analysis.<sup>[7,8]</sup>

## Results

Of the 14 participants, 75% agreed that their perception and conflict management methods had changed positively owing to increased self-awareness of their personality traits. All the participants reported a change in their own self-perception during the reflection period after using the MBTI tool. Two-thirds of the participants also confirmed a difference in how they approached other individuals since their own self-awareness of personality traits was heightened. This change was noted after the use of the MBTI tool; students had a 6-week self-reflection period in the clinical setting to determine if any changes regarding self-awareness were noted. All the participants confirmed that the MBTI would be beneficial for their future careers as practising radiographers.

All 14 participants had a perceived increased awareness of their fellow class members' traits and personality differences after using the MBTI tool during the 6-week self-reflection period. This information was gained through online feedback forms using open-ended questions, which provided insight in their perceptions related to the use of the MBTI. They also gained insight into managing their own emotions. Furthermore, however, there was a realisation that participants' moral values and cultural differences were not comprehensively addressed by the MBTI assessment.

The lecturer (research) held an informal panel discussion to promote conflict management skills after increased self-awareness during the MBTI assessment reflection period. The age group of the participants was 18 - 20 years during the second year of undergraduate study in radiography of health care sciences.

The discussion led to rich discussions and some thought-provoking topics among the participants. It was evident that the process of self-awareness and self-identification had occurred after the MBTI intervention period. Although the participants were culturally diverse, a commonality among all was the preference towards small, specific, intimate conversations instead of larger groups conversing on general topics. During the session, the participants also voiced the realisation that, despite their cultural differences, they have certain commonalities that could in future allow fostering and improvement of communication, and decrease conflict among their peers.

The methodological assumption related to the study was limited to undergraduate students' perceptions and views, as they comprise various cultural and sociodemographic backgrounds. The study aimed to provide insight into the healthcare science students' partaking in radiography, as no recent studies have focused on the particular student setting.

## Discussion

This study's initial philosophical assumption was pragmatism with implementation of the MBTI assessment and following an outcome assessment when shown in the clinical work setting. The ontological assumption, paired with this thought, was that conflict is perceived to be masked by a person's perceptions and that social context affects a student's perceptions of self. An initial note was made of cultural diversity, which affects psychological and epistemological beliefs. The epistemological beliefs associated with this study comprised a gap in transferable skills, perception and development among participants. The definition of self also lacks

thought of emotional intelligence and self-identity in participants, but it was perceived to add value to future relationships and work interventions.<sup>[3]</sup>

The study's primary outcome was obtained, i.e. to implement the use of the MBTI tool in a group of students, allow a self-reflection process, promote conflict resolution and use this method for future transferable skills development in radiography students.

A secondary outcome, which was not expected during the initial research planning and layout, was the rich data related to cultural traits. This proved to be an opposing factor to the current personality classification systems. Further literature on this aspect found during the initial results is discussed below.

Considering the additional information acquired during the qualitative phase of the current study, other research studies were assessed to determine if cultural values do play a contradicting role to personality traits. Previous research questioned the extent to which the main level of personality affects culture.

This process is termed enculturation, which affects every aspect of a society a person lives in. Enculturation gives rise to the belief that cultures promote certain personality types. Individuals tend to adapt their inner traits to serve society's acceptance, approval and status within a group.

There are four cultural factors that affect personality:

- Religion remains the most decisive influence regarding all systems of culture. The understanding of a person's culture relates to a better understanding of essential traits and social movements.
- Race and ethnicity - there are reported to be 37 different races. Therefore, the term ethnicity is now more widely accepted, as it refers to common factors such as nationality, culture or language. A regular problem in this context is ethnocentrism, where a person believes their culture has the correct beliefs or practices compared with those of other cultures.
- Genders are a distinct cultural divider, as certain behaviours or patterns are typically assigned to specific gender types.
- Ageing and transitioning into old age could also lead to personality changes - from active mastery at a young age to passive skill through adaptation.

## Conclusion

After the qualitative phase of self-reflection and consolidation in the clinical setting, it was discovered, however, that the study did not address a clear opposing factor of personality traits, i.e. cultural diversity.

In the South African (SA) context, this opens a new debate regarding the influence of cultural and social background and its role regarding personality traits. The age-old debate of nature v. nurture still prevails and needs further investigation in this setting.

An SA study, including 930 African participants, revealed that the MBTI assessment might not be valid in cultures where group interest overrides individualist interests due to collectivist values affecting a person's identity. The MBTI tool was initially developed and tested on western populations; thus, multicultural diversity was not previously accounted for in original MBTI testing.<sup>[9]</sup>

The current study, although in a known multicultural group of participants, also did not account for the diversity in MBTI output - therefore the need for our next cycle of research to pose the same question.

Based on the study's findings, it is evident that a uniquely SA context in cross-cultural diversity requires an adapted approach to the MBTI

assessment and its associated results. However, the study proves the need for active self-awareness and soft skills techniques to promote reflective practitioners in the clinical setting. Future research will focus on anthropology and its role in personality traits to improve the measurement and assessment methods described in this study.

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