

ROLE OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN MEDIATING PEER CONFLICT AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS: TOWARD AN INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

Emotional intelligence (EI), the ability to understand and regulate one's emotions and those of others, has been linked to healthier relationships. Yet, its role as a mediator in peer conflict within higher education has not received much theoretical attention. This paper revisits two main EI frameworks: Salovey and Mayer's (1997) Ability Model, which views EI as a set of cognitive-emotional skills, and Goleman's (1995) Mixed Model, which combines abilities with personality traits. It critically examines these models through the real experiences of peer conflict in university settings. Using theories of cognitive-emotional processing, affective neuroscience, cross-cultural psychology, and recent studies, the paper introduces the Emotionally Intelligent Peer Conflict Resolution Model (EIPCRM). This framework sees EI not as a fixed trait or a broad predictor of success, but as a dynamic system that connects interpersonal disagreements to either constructive or destructive results. By considering emotional processing within social, cultural, and biological contexts, the EIPCRM gives universities a practical, research-backed tool for counselling, peer mediation, residential life programs, and policy-making.

The review brings together findings from structural equation modelling studies Liu, and Zeng, (2025), Chang, (2025); Zayed, Omara, and Al Kitani, (2025), meta-analyses on EI and conflict (Schlaerth, A., Ensari, & Christian, 2013)), intervention research, and studies on cultural moderation (Gunkel et al., 2016). It argues that enhancing EI can change peer conflict from a source of stress into a chance for relationship repair and personal growth. The paper discusses implications for practice and suggests directions for future long-term and multi-method research.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, Peer conflict, Emotionally Intelligent Peer Conflict Resolution Model (EIPCRM).

Introduction

University life immerses students in a mix of intense peer relationships, including shared dorm rooms, group projects, late-night study sessions, and social circles filled with excitement and occasional friction. Conflict among peers is normal. It often arises as students navigate their identities, autonomy, academic pressures, and cultural differences. When managed well, these situations can lead to growth, deeper understanding, and stronger bonds. However, emotions can overwhelm the process: a misunderstood comment can turn into resentment, a small disagreement over tasks may cause weeks of silence, or cultural misunderstandings can lead to isolation. The emotional fallout can hurt mental health, academic performance, and feelings of belonging.

Imagine this: its 2 a.m. in a busy university residence hall. Two roommates, one from a culture that values harmony and the other from one that encourages direct expression, argue about whose turn it is to clean the shared kitchen. What starts as an annoyance quickly escalates. Voices increase. Accusations are exchanged. By morning, one student skips class to avoid the other, while the second complains to friends on social media. Their academic focus suffers. Sleep is lost. The feeling of safety in their own living space disappears.

Situations like this occur every day on campuses across the globe. Conflicts among peers are part of university life because students are trying to gain independence, develop new identities, handle heavy workloads, and navigate diverse social environments. A 2019 survey of U.S. undergraduates found that 90% experienced at least one conflict with another student in the past year, averaging 8.5 disputes per person (Morgan, as referenced in relevant institutional reports). Bullying and relational aggression add more complexity: 15% to 43% of students report being targeted by peers, and witnessing such behaviour is even more common (Marraccini et al., 2018). In many low- and middle-income areas, including parts of sub-Saharan Africa, where rapid urban growth and expanding higher education bring together students from different ethnic, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, these tensions are worsened by limited resources and cultural changes.

Unresolved conflicts do more than create uncomfortable encounters in hallways. They lead to higher levels of anxiety, depression, decreased academic involvement, and even thoughts about dropping out. When emotions run wild—anger seen as a personal attack, shame causing withdrawal, or fear of embarrassment stopping honest conversation—disagreements turn into deeper rifts. Traditional conflict-resolution methods in higher education often focus on behavioural strategies like negotiation scripts, mediation protocols, or disciplinary policies. While these approaches are useful, they often miss the emotional factors that drive behaviour. Students don't simply decide to cooperate or retaliate; they feel emotions first.

Emotional intelligence theory helps explain this issue. It shows how people perceive emotional signals in real time, understand them, manage their emotions, and channel feelings into constructive actions. Instead of seeing emotional intelligence as a vague skill related to well-

being, this review shows that it acts as a mediator—a psychological process that influences whether a peer disagreement turns hostile or leads to understanding and growth.

Recent research supports this view. Liu et al. (2025) used structural equation modelling with 369 Chinese university students and found that emotional intelligence positively affected both conflict resolution skills and life satisfaction, with a sense of belonging as an important mediator. In simpler terms, students who were skilled at reading and managing emotions were better at resolving conflicts, which helped them feel more connected to their school and more satisfied with their lives. Similarly, Zayed et al. (2025) conducted a multi-group SEM study across Oman, Kuwait, and Jordan, showing that emotional intelligence was directly related to psychological well-being and indirectly lessened psychological stress—trends particularly relevant in high-stress university settings where peer conflict often triggers distress.

Cross-culturally, the situation is complex. Gunkel, M., Schlaegel, C., and Taras, V. (2016) showed that cultural values like collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance influence how emotional intelligence translates into conflict-handling preferences, such as integrating, compromising, or avoiding. In many African and Asian cultures, for example, maintaining harmony may be more important than asserting individual needs. Yet without enough emotional intelligence, this preference can result in repressed resentment instead of real resolution.

This paper has three goals. First, it re-evaluates the Ability and Mixed Models of emotional intelligence through the lens of university peer conflict, highlighting their strengths and cultural limitations. Second, it incorporates insights from affective neuroscience, emotion regulation theory, and cultural psychology to introduce the EIPCRM—an original, multi-layered framework designed for higher education. Third, it offers practical suggestions for counselling centres, residence life, faculty development, and institutional policies. By the end, readers should view emotional intelligence as a practical, culturally aware way to create healthier campus communities.

The stakes are high. Today's university students face significant mental health challenges. Over 60% meet the criteria for at least one mental health issue in recent years (Abrams, 2022). Peer conflict is both a symptom and a factor in this crisis. Teaching students emotionally intelligent conflict skills is not a luxury. It is a necessary responsibility for institutions that care about overall student success.

Emotional Intelligence and Interpersonal Functioning in Contemporary University Contexts
In the last decade, research has exploded to clarify how emotional intelligence (EI) affects university life. EI is not just a nice addition. It is a strong predictor of relationship skills, academic adjustment, and psychological resilience.

According to Liu et al. (2025), their structural model showed clear positive links from EI to life satisfaction ($\beta = 0.32$) and from conflict resolution skills to life satisfaction ($\beta = 0.27$). A sense of belonging played a role in both connections. Students who could notice a roommate's frustration or a group member's anxiety were more empathetic and less defensive. This encouraged inclusion and helped reduce the loneliness that can come with the stress of transition.

In Arab university settings, Zayed et al. (2025) found that EI was a strong predictor of well-being across samples from Oman, Kuwait, and Jordan. Well-being helped buffer distress, though the patterns varied by country, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive interventions. Odame and Pandey (2025) studied part-time executive students in Ghana and India. They reported that EI skills, like self-awareness, self-management, motivation, and empathy, significantly predicted better conflict management styles. Culture played a role in this relationship. Ghanaian participants generally scored higher on EI, likely reflecting cultural values that emphasize emotional awareness.

Meta-analytic evidence supports these findings. Schlaerth et al. (2013) reviewed studies on EI and constructive conflict management. They found a consistent positive link, especially when EI was assessed as a skill rather than through self-report. More recent reviews of EI training programs for university students show small to moderate benefits on emotional regulation and relationship outcomes (Asiedu, 2025 dissertation synthesis).

These findings are important because university peer conflict rarely involves just ideas. It is full of emotions: the sting of feeling unfairly graded in a group, the anxiety over cultural missteps, the shame of public disagreement. Students with higher EI assess these situations more accurately, manage their physiological arousal better, and choose collaborative responses. Those with lower EI often resort to avoidance, aggression, or overthinking. These patterns lead to poorer adjustment (Núñez et al., 2023).

However, significant gaps still exist. Most studies are cross-sectional, which limits causal inferences. Few studies explicitly model EI as a mediator between conflict exposure and outcomes. Additionally, cultural diversity is often underrepresented, and much research focuses on Western contexts. This framework aims to address these gaps by synthesizing current evidence into a process-oriented, context-sensitive model.

Re-examining the Ability Perspective

Salovey and Mayer's Ability Model (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Mayer et al., 2016) defines EI as four interrelated cognitive skills:

- (1) Accurately perceiving emotions in oneself and others,
- (2) Using emotions to aid thinking,
- (3) Understanding emotional meanings and shifts,
- (4) Managing emotions to reach goals.

In peer conflict, these abilities function both sequentially and interactively. A student notices a teammate's tense jaw and curt tone during a group meeting (perception). She recognizes that anxiety, not hostility, is at play because she remembers similar patterns from past collaborations (understanding). Instead of snapping back, she suggests a quick break to allow emotions to settle

and for creative problem-solving to continue (management). This turns the disagreement into a productive discussion.

The strength of the model lies in its connection to affective neuroscience. Effective regulation engages areas in the prefrontal cortex to control threat responses driven by the amygdala (Buhle et al., 2014). Still, the Ability Model sometimes receives criticism for being too detached. It explains how processing should happen, but it offers less guidance on motivation or visible behaviours in real-world disputes. University students, who juggle sleep deprivation, financial worries, and identity exploration, need clarity and motivational support.

Emotional Intelligence as a Mediating Mechanism

Mediation occurs when a variable explains the “how” or “why” of a relationship (Baron & Kenny, 1986; modern bootstrapping approaches). Here, peer conflict (antecedent) impacts academic and psychological adjustment (outcome) through EI processes.

When conflict arises, such as a heated discussion over project leadership, students with low EI might feel increased arousal, assume hostility, and react impulsively. This can lead to broken relationships and disengagement. In contrast, high EI students can recognize the emotions involved and reframe the situation (“She’s stressed about the deadline, not attacking me”). They manage their reactions and respond with empathy. The same situation produces different outcomes. Liu et al. (2025) and Zayed et al. (2025) provide empirical support for these indirect connections through belonging and well-being.

Revisiting the Competency Perspective

Goleman’s (1995) Mixed Model breaks emotional intelligence (EI) into five areas: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. This framework is both behavioural and developmental; people can learn these skills through practice. In situations of peer conflict at university, empathy helps with understanding different perspectives; self-regulation avoids hasty reactions; social skills support productive conversations.

The model is popular in practice; many campus workshops use it. However, it overlaps with personality traits, like Big Five conscientiousness, making it difficult to measure precisely. Also, its focus on expressive emotional styles may not fit well with cultures that prioritize restraint (Gunkel et al., 2016).

Neurocognitive Dimensions of Emotional Mediation

Affective neuroscience adds a biological perspective. When facing interpersonal threats, the amygdala becomes active, causing fight-or-flight responses. Certain parts of the prefrontal cortex (dorsolateral, ventromedial) help individuals with high EI manage their impulses and reassess situations (Martin, 2016). The release of oxytocin during successful displays of empathy and repair builds trust. These processes help explain why EI training lowers physiological stress during conflict simulations.

Cultural Moderation of Emotional Processes

Emotional display rules, norms around saving face, and different relational philosophies (like Ubuntu, (South Africa) Omoluabi (Yoruba), and Onye aghalaNwanneya (Igbo) from Nigeria, West African. Many African cultures practice respect for the elderly; some are intense, while some are mild, which allows the emphasis on directness, just like in Western contexts. This affects how EI functions. A Nigerian student might choose indirect language or proverbs to keep peace, while a German student might see silence as agreement. Even those with high EI can make mistakes without cultural understanding. The Emotionally Intelligent Peer Conflict Resolution Model (EIPCRM) includes cultural awareness as a key stage.

The Emotionally Intelligent Peer Conflict Resolution Model (EIPCRM)

The EIPCRM combines the strengths of both EI traditions into a five-stage, ongoing process suited to university peer relationships:

1. Emotional Cue Detection and Contextual Interpretation – Accurate perception along with awareness of the situation (like recognizing cultural background).
2. Cognitive-Affective Appraisal – Understanding what emotions arise and why; reassessing intentions.
3. Regulatory Modulation of Arousal – Self-regulation methods (like controlled breathing or reframing) based on neuroscience.
4. Empathic Relational Engagement – Understanding others’ perspectives and fostering open dialogue.
5. Culturally Attuned Reconciliation Behaviour – Actions to repair relationships that respect cultural norms (such as Ubuntu-inspired community-focused solutions).

This model is flexible: the stages repeat as new information comes in. It can be taught through role-plays, reflective journaling, and peer mediation training.

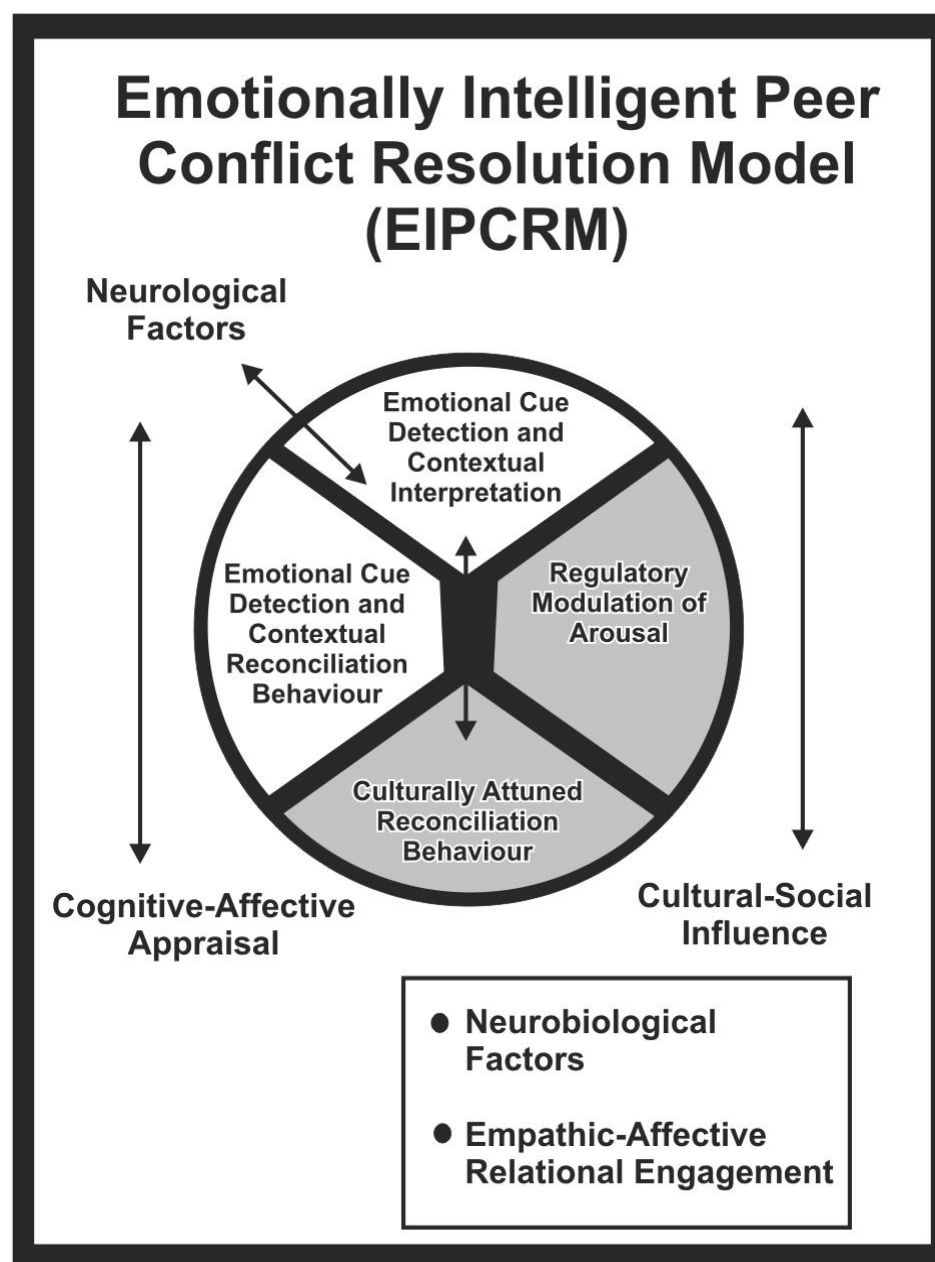
Implications for Higher Education

Counselling centres can include EIPCRM modules in their workshops. Residence halls could offer “Emotionally Intelligent Roommate” training for new students. Faculty members can demonstrate the stages in debriefs after group work. Restorative justice programs can shift their focus from punishment to healing. Institutions in diverse regions (like universities in Lagos) should adjust their examples to fit local customs.

Integration with Recent Empirical Evidence

This framework connects with the findings of Liu et al. (2025), Zayed et al. (2025), and Odame and Pandey (2025), as well as intervention studies that show the positive effects of EI training. It helps advance the field from looking at correlations to understanding underlying mechanisms.

The Emotionally Intelligent Peer Conflict Resolution Model (EIPCRM)



Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research

In redefining Emotional Intelligence (EI) as a key player in navigating conflicts, the Emotional Intelligence and Conflict Resolution Model (EIPCRM) offers a thoughtful, human-centre approach that resonates with diverse cultural backgrounds. This model tackles one of the long-standing challenges in higher education head-on.

Looking ahead, it would be great to see future research embrace a variety of methodologies, like longitudinal studies and mixed methods, while also considering a wide range of global populations. This way, we can truly assess and refine the model. By implementing interventions

grounded in EIP, we can make meaningful strides in conflict resolution and emotional understanding in educational settings.

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