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The Impact of Conflict Situations on Subjective Well-being and the Moderating Role of Thought Suppression

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Abstract: This study investigates the influence of conflict situations on subjective well-being and the moderating role of thought suppression. A questionnaire survey was conducted among adults in Lanzhou City using the Relationship Conflict Scale, Subjective Well-Being Scale, and White Bear Suppression Inventory. A total of 220 questionnaires were collected, with one invalid response excluded based on completion time, yielding 219 valid questionnaires (effective rate: 99.55%). Data were analyzed using SPSS. Results revealed: (1) A significant correlation between conflict situations and subjective well-being (ps<0.001); (2) Conflict situations negatively predicted subjective well-being (β = -0.225, t = -4.412, p<0.001); (3) Thought suppression partially moderated the effect of conflict situations on subjective well-being (β = -0.869, t = -3.098, p<0.01). Higher levels of conflict situations were associated with lower subjective well-being, but thought suppression alleviated the negative impact of conflicts. The findings suggest that employing thought suppression strategies appropriately in unavoidable conflict situations can mitigate adverse effects, enhance subjective well-being, improve adaptive capacity, and foster mental health by balancing psychological conflicts.

1. Introduction

Research on subjective well-being (SWB) originated in the United States in the 1950s. Within the field of positive psychology, SWB is regarded as a core psychological indicator of quality of life, reflecting an individual's perception and evaluation of the gap between their current life circumstances and ideal states [1,2]. Subjective well-being is proposed to consist of both cognitive appraisals of life and emotional experiences, encompassing affective responses to life events and judgments of life satisfaction [3]. In psychology, SWB specifically refers to an individual's holistic self-referential evaluation of their quality of life.

Current research on SWB focuses primarily on exploring its underlying mechanisms. A meta-analysis by Ren Jie revealed that personal factors such as gender, marital status, age, and pre-retirement occupation exert minimal influence on SWB [4]. Conversely, Niu Kaining found through meta-analysis that friendship quality among adolescents positively correlates with SWB [5]. Individual SWB is susceptible to cognitive and affective influences. Studies indicate that college students' mental health levels positively predict SWB, whereas psychological disorders hinder its development [6]. Additionally, participation in physical activities is associated with enhanced SWB

[7]. However, challenges or conflict situations in these domains may adversely affect SWB.

Since the early 20th century, the concept of conflict has permeated nearly all branches of modern psychology. Many researchers define motivational opposition as the coexistence of incompatible values within an individual's belief system, leading to cognitive collisions and conflicts [8]. Rapid societal transformations and intensified competitive pressures have complicated emotional experiences and structures, increasing the likelihood of conflict situations [4]. Conflict situations influence individuals' cognition and decision-making across various dimensions [9]. Empirical evidence demonstrates that conflicts trigger negative emotions: subjectively, conflict stimuli heighten self-reported negative affect, accelerate recognition of negative emotional cues, and bias interpretations of ambiguous stimuli toward negativity. Physiologically, conflicts correlate with increased corrugator muscle activity and heightened sympathetic nervous system arousal. Behaviorally, individuals exhibit avoidance tendencies toward high-conflict tasks. These findings suggest that conflict processing is inseparable from emotional processing, with conflict rooted in affective mechanisms [10].

Existing studies have extensively explored conflict types such as parental conflict, work-family conflict, interpersonal conflict, and value conflicts. Research preliminarily indicates that conflict situations elevate perceived stress, anxiety, psychological tension, and burnout while diminishing well-being, thereby negatively impacting mental health [8].

When confronted with conflicts, individuals often habitually employ thought suppression as an emotion regulation strategy, though its efficacy remains debated. On one hand, suppressing negative thoughts may temporarily alleviate conflict-induced anxiety [11], creating fleeting peace to resolve conflicts and enhance SWB [12]. On the other hand, prolonged suppression risks triggering the "white bear effect," exacerbating rumination and psychological rebound [11], where suppressed conflicts resurgently intensify, potentially undermining SWB. Neuroscientific studies reveal that thought suppression involves multiple brain regions, including the prefrontal cortex, amygdala, and hippocampus. The amygdala—a critical hub for emotional processing—also participates in inhibiting impulsive behaviors. During thought suppression, amygdala activity correlates with emotion regulation and impulse control, particularly in managing negative emotions [13]. A key question arises: Is thought suppression an adaptive strategy or a maladaptive behavior in conflict resolution? Building upon this foundation, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Conflict situations directly predict subjective well-being.

H2: Thought suppression moderates the relationship between conflict situations and subjective well-being.

2. Methods

2.1 Research Subjects

Using convenience sampling, participants were drawn from the adult demographic in Gansu Province. Before completing the questionnaire, the principles of voluntariness and anonymity were explained, and the questionnaire was distributed and collected through the Wenjuanxing platform. A total of 219 questionnaires were collected, including 110 males (50.20%) and 109 females (49.80%); 148 participants were from urban areas (67.60%), and 71 were from rural areas (32.40%); 73 were only children (33.30%), and 146 were not only children (66.70%).

2.2 Research Tools

2.2.1 Relationship Conflict Scale

This study employed the Intragroup Conflict Scale (ICS) developed by Jehn, a widely used tool based on the two-dimensional model of team conflict [2]. The relational conflict subscale consists of 4 items (e.g., "I experienced some interpersonal tension with my supervisor(s)/colleague(s)"), measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree".

2.2.2 Subjective Well-Being Scale

The Subjective Well-Being Scale developed by Diener and Suh was adopted [14], comprising three subscales: Life Satisfaction Scale: 5 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 7 = "Strongly Agree"). Positive and Negative Affect Scale: 14 items in total, with 8 items measuring positive affect (e.g., items 1, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14) and 6 items measuring negative affect (e.g., items 2, 3, 5, 7, 10, 13), rated on a 4-point frequency scale (1 = "Never" to 4 = "Very Often"). The total subjective well-being score was calculated as the sum of life satisfaction scores and the net affect score (negative affect items reverse-scored). Higher scores indicate greater subjective well-being.

2.2.3 White Bear Suppression Inventory (WBSI)

The WBSI, originally developed by Wegner and Zanakos was adapted into Chinese by Zhou Lihua, who validated its applicability in the Chinese context [15,16]. The inventory includes 15 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree"), with higher scores indicating stronger tendencies toward thought suppression [17].

2.3 Data Analysis

SPSS 26.0 was used for independent sample t-tests, Pearson correlation analysis, and regression analysis.

3. Results

Table 1 Statistics of basic demography variables and comparison of differences between main variables (*N*=219)

		N	Conflict situations	Subjective well-being	Thought suppression
			M±*SD*	*M*±*SD*	*M*±*SD*
Gender	Man	110	10.409±4.365	22.736±8.584	39.691±15.955
	Woman	109	9.541±4.156	24.055±7.284	38.046±14.236
	t		1.507	-1.225	0.805
Place of origin	City	148	10.189±4.337	22.912±8.119	39.554±15.590
	Countryside	71	9.535±4.136	24.394±7.617	37.450±14.062
	t		-1.060	1.290	-0.964
Family formation	Only-child	73	9.466±3.962	24.658±7.855	36.973±14.607
	Non-only child	146	10.233±4.413	22.760±7.982	39.822±15.319
	t		-1.254	1.676	-1.339

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; "p" is the probability, reflecting the probability of an event.

Table 1 presents the demographic and psychological differences between groups (N=219). Among the participants, 50.23% were male (110 individuals), 67.58% were of urban origin (148 individuals),

and 66.67% were non-only children (146 individuals). Psychological indicators revealed that males scored higher in conflict situations (10.41 ± 4.37) compared to females (9.54 ± 4.16), but reported lower subjective well-being (22.74 ± 8.58 vs. 24.06 ± 7.28). Urban participants exhibited higher scores in conflict situations (10.19 ± 4.34 vs. 9.54 ± 4.14) and thought suppression (39.55 ± 15.59 vs. 37.45 ± 14.06), while rural participants demonstrated better subjective well-being (24.39 ± 7.62 vs. 22.91 ± 8.12). Only children showed significantly higher subjective well-being than non-only children (24.66 ± 7.86 vs. 22.76 ± 7.98, $p < 0.05$), with no significant differences observed in other group comparisons.

Table 2 Correlation analysis of main variables (*N*=219)

	M±*SD*	1	2	3
1. Conflict situations	38.872±15.112	1		
2. Subjective well-being	23.393±7.973	-0.816**	1	
3. Thought suppression	9.977±4.274	0.840**	-0.892**	1

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; "p" is the probability, reflecting the probability of an event.

Table 2 displays the correlation analysis among key variables (N=219). Significant correlations were found between conflict situations (M = 38.87 ± 15.11), subjective well-being (M = 23.39 ± 7.97), and thought suppression (M = 9.98 ± 4.27). Conflict situations were significantly positively correlated with thought suppression ($r = 0.840$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that individuals are more likely to activate thought suppression strategies in conflict situations. Subjective well-being was significantly negatively correlated with thought suppression ($r = -0.892$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that higher levels of thought suppression may significantly reduce subjective well-being. Conflict situations showed a highly significant negative correlation with subjective well-being ($r = -0.816$, $p < 0.001$), confirming Hypothesis 1.

Table 3 The moderating effect of thought suppression on conflict situations and subjective well-being (*N*=219)

Models and Variables	Subjective well-being					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	β	*t*	*β*	*t*	*β*	*t*
1. Conflict situations	-0.816	-20.765***	-0.225	-4.412***	0.276	1.620
2. Thought suppression			-0.703	-12.916***	-0.304	-2.186*
3. Conflict situations × Thought suppression					-0.869	-3.098**
ΔR^2	0.664		0.809		0.817	
R^2	0.665		0.811		0.819	
F	431.384***		166.831***		9.595**	

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$; "p" is the probability, reflecting the probability of an event.

Table 3 tests the moderating effect of thought suppression on the relationship between conflict situations and subjective well-being (N=219). A hierarchical regression analysis was conducted: Model 1 demonstrated that conflict situations strongly and negatively predicted subjective well-being ($\beta = -0.816$, $t = -20.765$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 66.5% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.665$, $F = 431.384$, $p < 0.001$). In Model 2, the main effect of thought suppression was significant ($\beta = -0.703$, $t = -12.916$, $p < 0.001$), while the effect of conflict situations remained significant but weakened ($\beta = -0.225$, $t = -4.412$, $p < 0.001$). Model 3 revealed that the interaction term (conflict situations × thought suppression) had a significant negative moderating effect on subjective well-being ($\beta = -0.869$, $t = -3.098$, $p < 0.01$). Specifically, thought suppression mitigated the negative impact of conflict situations on

subjective well-being.

4. Discussion

This study explored the impact of conflict situations on subjective well-being and the moderating role of thought suppression. The results revealed a significant negative correlation between conflict situations and subjective well-being, with thought suppression acting as a moderator in this relationship. This indicates that conflict situations not only directly reduce individuals' subjective well-being but may also indirectly exacerbate its decline by prompting the use of thought suppression strategies. These findings align with prior research: conflict situations often trigger cognitive and emotional burdens, and excessive reliance on thought suppression—such as repressing negative thoughts or avoiding conflicts—may hinder adaptive emotion regulation, leading to depletion of psychological resources [15].

According to emotion regulation theory, thought suppression, as an avoidant coping strategy, may temporarily alleviate anxiety induced by conflicts but could intensify psychological distress over time due to cognitive rebound effects [18]. This study found that individuals in conflict situations tend to suppress negative thoughts to maintain psychological equilibrium. However, this strategy weakens their ability to perceive positive experiences, thereby reducing life satisfaction and emotional well-being.

The findings suggest that reducing the overuse of thought suppression may be key to enhancing subjective well-being. Based on these insights, the following educational recommendations are proposed:

(1) Participation in psychological counseling or group therapy should be promoted to help individuals practice alternative emotion regulation techniques (e.g., mindfulness training, cognitive reappraisal), fostering acceptance rather than suppression of conflict-related negative thoughts.

(2) Open conflict communication mechanisms should be established in schools or workplaces, such as standardized mediation processes to mitigate the destructive effects of conflicts, alongside stress management training to guide adaptive coping strategies.

(3) Parents should be encouraged to learn psychological principles in family education, focusing on adolescents' conflict resolution patterns. We need to avoid reinforcing habitual conflict avoidance; instead, promote problem-solving through expression and negotiation to reduce the negative impacts of thought suppression.

This study has several limitations. First, its cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences among conflict situations, thought suppression, and subjective well-being. Future research could employ longitudinal or experimental designs to clarify mediating pathways. Second, the measurement of thought suppression relied on self-reports, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Incorporating physiological indicators (e.g., cortisol levels) or multi-source data (e.g., peer reports) could enhance result robustness. Finally, the study did not differentiate conflict types, and the role of thought suppression may vary across contexts. Further exploration of context-specific mediating mechanisms is warranted.

5. Conclusion

Conflict situations indirectly reduce subjective well-being by triggering thought suppression strategies. Reducing reliance on thought suppression and cultivating adaptive emotion regulation skills are critical pathways to improve mental health and enhance well-being. Future research should deepen the understanding of the dynamic processes of conflict and their regulatory mechanisms, thereby providing a theoretical foundation for targeted interventions.

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