The Relationship Between Dormitory Interpersonal Conflict and Emotion Regulation Ability Among College Students: The Mediating Role of Regulatory Emotional Self-Efficacy

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Abstract. This study examined the relationship between dormitory interpersonal conflict and emotion regulation ability among Chinese college students and tested whether regulatory emotional self-efficacy mediated the association between conflict and life satisfaction. A convenience sample of 612 undergraduates from three universities in Shandong Province completed a dormitory interpersonal conflict scale, the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire, the Regulatory Emotional Self-Efficacy scale, and the Satisfaction with Life Scale. Results showed that dormitory interpersonal conflict was generally below the midpoint of the scale, and students used cognitive reappraisal more frequently than expressive suppression. Conflict was negatively correlated with cognitive reappraisal, regulatory emotional self-efficacy, and life satisfaction, and positively correlated with expressive suppression. Female students scored higher on cognitive reappraisal, whereas male students scored higher on expressive suppression. First-year students reported more frequent conflict than seniors. Regulatory emotional self-efficacy partially mediated the relationship between dormitory interpersonal conflict and life satisfaction, with the indirect effect accounting for 50.97% of the total effect. These findings suggest that conflict impairs life satisfaction partly by eroding students' beliefs in their capacity to regulate emotions, and that emotion regulation training may be a promising avenue for improving dormitory life and mental health among college students.

Keywords: college students, dormitory interpersonal conflict, emotion regulation ability, regulatory emotional self-efficacy, life satisfaction, mediation.

1. Introduction

The college dormitory is an institutional arrangement that places students from different family backgrounds, habits, and daily rhythms into a single shared space. Unlike classroom interactions, contact among roommates has almost no temporal boundary[1]. Disagreements over bedtime routines, hygiene standards, noise levels, shared resources, and values recur in this setting, and for most undergraduates the roommate relationship is one of the earliest and most enduring peer relationships formed after entering university[2].

Conflict in this high-density living arrangement is far from rare. More than 40% of Chinese college students report having experienced conflict with their roommates, and between 30% and 60% are dissatisfied with their dormitory interpersonal relationships (Pan et al., 2025). The consequences extend beyond the immediate quarrel[3]. Repeated conflict has been linked to depressive symptoms, reduced belonging, and poorer overall evaluations of university life, which underscores the practical significance of understanding how students weather these interpersonal stressors[4].

People differ markedly in how they respond to conflict. Some initiate open communication and reframe the meaning of the event, whereas others suppress their feelings or withdraw from the situation. These differences hinge largely on emotion regulation ability. Emotion regulation refers to the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express them (Gross, 1998). Within the process model of emotion regulation, cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression are regarded as the two most basic and most widely studied strategies (Gross, 1998; Gross & John, 2003). Reappraisal alters the emotional impact of a situation by changing how it is interpreted, whereas suppression inhibits ongoing emotion-expressive behavior[5]. A large body of evidence indicates that habitual reappraisal is associated with more

positive affect and better interpersonal functioning, whereas suppression is linked to more negative affect and poorer psychological adjustment (Aldao et al., 2010; Gross & John, 2003; John & Gross, 2004).

Despite this accumulated knowledge, two gaps remain with respect to the dormitory context. First, most existing studies have approached the issue through the quality of dormitory relationships or through conflict coping styles (Pan et al., 2025), and relatively few have measured conflict itself in terms of its frequency and intensity and related these dimensions directly to emotion regulation ability. Second, emotion regulation ability has usually been operationalized solely at the level of strategy use, leaving out the self-efficacy component, that is, individuals' beliefs about whether they can effectively regulate their emotions (Caprara et al., 2008). Strategy use describes what individuals do; self-efficacy describes what individuals believe they can do. Both belong to the fuller picture of emotion regulation ability.

The present study therefore investigated the relationship between dormitory interpersonal conflict and emotion regulation ability, examined both the strategy and the self-efficacy layers, and tested whether regulatory emotional self-efficacy mediated the link between conflict and life satisfaction.

2. Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

2.1. Dormitory Interpersonal Conflict

Interpersonal conflict is generally defined as a state of opposition, tension, or hostility that arises when individuals' goals, interests, or needs are incompatible. Dormitory interpersonal conflict refers specifically to emotional opposition, verbal friction, or behavioral withdrawal among roommates that stems from differences in daily schedules, hygiene habits, resource sharing, or value orientations. Existing Chinese questionnaires on dormitory relationships typically treat interpersonal conflict as one dimension of the broader relationship (Pan et al., 2025), and conflict handling has been examined through styles such as cooperation, competition, avoidance, and accommodation. What remains relatively underexplored is direct measurement of how often conflict occurs and how much distress it imposes. In the present study, dormitory interpersonal conflict was operationalized along two dimensions: conflict frequency, the rate at which conflict appears in dormitory life, and conflict intensity, the subjective distress that conflict causes.

2.2. Emotion Regulation Ability: Strategies and Self-Efficacy

Emotion regulation ability can be understood at two layers. At the strategy layer, the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) developed by Gross and John (2003) distinguishes two habitual strategies: cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression. Reappraisal involves reinterpreting an emotion-eliciting situation to reduce its emotional impact, whereas suppression involves inhibiting the outward expression of ongoing emotions. Across studies, reappraisal shows consistent positive associations with positive affect, relationship quality, and well-being, whereas suppression shows the opposite pattern (Gross & John, 2003; John & Gross, 2004). A meta-analytic review further indicates that suppression is among the strategies most strongly associated with psychopathology, whereas reappraisal is generally adaptive (Aldao et al., 2010). Gender differences in strategy preference have also been documented, with women relying more on reappraisal and men relying more on suppression (Gross & John, 2003; John & Gross, 2004).

At the self-efficacy layer, Caprara and colleagues proposed the concept of regulatory emotional self-efficacy (RESE), defined as individuals' beliefs in their capacity to regulate their own emotional states (Caprara et al., 2008). The construct encompasses perceived efficacy in expressing positive emotions, managing despondency and distress, and managing anger and irritation. Although self-efficacy beliefs overlap with strategy use, they are conceptually distinct and often predict psychological adaptation over and above actual strategy use, because efficacy beliefs determine whether individuals persist in regulation attempts when confronted with difficulty.

2.3. Conflict and Emotion Regulation: Existing Evidence

Theoretical accounts suggest a close link between dormitory conflict and emotion regulation ability. From a cognitive appraisal perspective, the emotional impact of conflict depends heavily on how the event is interpreted: reading a roommate's behavior as a deliberate provocation amplifies anger and resentment, whereas reappraising the event weakens the emotional response (Gross, 1998; Gross & John, 2003). From a resource perspective, frequent conflict consumes psychological resources, and students who remain in prolonged conflict may lose confidence in their capacity to regulate emotions, creating a cycle in which conflict undermines regulation and failed regulation aggravates conflict.

Empirical findings are consistent with this reasoning. Using latent profile analysis, Pan et al. (2025) identified groups of students who differed in their dormitory conflict coping styles and showed that students in the less adaptive group reported significantly higher levels of negative emotions. These results suggest that conflict experiences are tied not only to momentary emotional states but also, through the erosion of regulatory resources and beliefs, to broader psychological adaptation.

2.4. The Present Study and Hypotheses

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, three hypotheses were proposed. H1: Dormitory interpersonal conflict is significantly related to emotion regulation ability; conflict is negatively correlated with cognitive reappraisal and regulatory emotional self-efficacy and positively correlated with expressive suppression. H2: Dormitory interpersonal conflict is negatively correlated with life satisfaction. H3: Regulatory emotional self-efficacy mediates the relationship between dormitory interpersonal conflict and life satisfaction.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

A convenience sample of undergraduates was recruited from three public universities in Shandong Province, China, two comprehensive universities and one science-and-engineering university. A total of 700 questionnaires were distributed and 612 valid questionnaires were returned, for a valid response rate of 87.4%. The sample comprised 287 male students (46.9%) and 325 female students (53.1%). In terms of year of study, 168 students were first-year, 157 second-year, 145 third-year, and 142 fourth-year. In addition, 238 students (38.9%) were only children and 374 (61.1%) had siblings; 217 students majored in humanities and social sciences and 395 in science and engineering.

3.2. Measures

Dormitory interpersonal conflict. A dormitory interpersonal conflict scale was developed for this study with reference to existing measures of dormitory relationships and conflict (Pan et al., 2025). The scale comprises two dimensions, conflict frequency (six items) and conflict intensity (six items), rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Higher scores indicate more frequent and more intense conflict. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was .87 for the total scale, .83 for conflict frequency, and .81 for conflict intensity.

Emotion regulation. The Chinese version of the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire was used (Gross & John, 2003). The questionnaire contains 10 items, six for cognitive reappraisal and four for expressive suppression, rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha was .85 for cognitive reappraisal and .79 for expressive suppression.

Regulatory emotional self-efficacy. Regulatory emotional self-efficacy was measured with the Chinese adaptation of the Regulatory Emotional Self-Efficacy scale developed by Caprara et al. (2008). The scale contains 12 items covering perceived efficacy in expressing positive emotions,

managing despondency and distress, and managing anger and irritation, rated on a 5-point scale. Cronbach's alpha for the total scale was .89 in the present study.

Life satisfaction. The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) was used to measure the cognitive component of subjective well-being. The scale contains five items rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating more favorable global evaluations of life. Cronbach's alpha was .84 in the present study.

3.3. Procedure

The survey was administered in class by trained graduate students in psychology. Before responding, participants were informed of the purpose of the study and the anonymous nature of the survey, and it was emphasized that there were no right or wrong answers. All participants provided informed consent, and questionnaires were collected on site. Each session lasted approximately 15 minutes.

3.4. Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed with SPSS 26.0. Descriptive statistics, independent-samples t tests, one-way analysis of variance, and Pearson correlations were computed. The mediation hypothesis was tested with the PROCESS macro (Model 4; Hayes, 2013), which applies a bias-corrected nonparametric bootstrap procedure with 5,000 resamples. The indirect effect was considered significant when its 95% confidence interval excluded zero (Baron & Kenny, 1986; Hayes, 2013).

4. Results

4.1. Common Method Bias

Because all variables were assessed with self-report questionnaires, the data may be susceptible to common method bias. Harman's single-factor test was conducted, and the factor accounting for the largest variance explained 23.71% of the total variance, well below the 40% threshold. Common method bias was therefore not a serious concern in this study.

4.2. Descriptive Statistics and Demographic Differences

Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of all variables. Scores on dormitory interpersonal conflict and its two dimensions were below the theoretical midpoints of their respective scales, indicating that conflict was generally at a moderate-to-low level. Cognitive reappraisal was used more frequently than expressive suppression, suggesting that students relied more on antecedent-focused cognitive adjustment than on response-focused expression suppression.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of All Variables (N = 612)

Variable	M	SD
Conflict total	26.34	8.12
Conflict frequency	2.15	0.78
Conflict intensity	1.98	0.71
Cognitive reappraisal	4.87	0.92
Expressive suppression	3.71	1.05
Regulatory emotional self-efficacy	3.68	0.71
Life satisfaction	4.52	1.13

Note. Conflict total scores range from 12 to 60; conflict frequency and intensity dimension scores range from 1 to 5; reappraisal and suppression scores range from 1 to 7; regulatory emotional self-efficacy scores range from 1 to 5; life satisfaction scores range from 1 to 7.

Independent-samples t tests (Table 2) showed that female students scored significantly higher than male students on cognitive reappraisal, whereas male students scored significantly higher on

expressive suppression. No significant gender differences emerged for conflict, regulatory emotional self-efficacy, or life satisfaction.

Table 2. Gender Differences in All Variables

Variable	Male (M ± SD)	Female (M ± SD)	t
Conflict total	26.58 ± 8.21	26.12 ± 8.04	1.12
Conflict frequency	2.18 ± 0.79	2.13 ± 0.77	1.03
Conflict intensity	2.02 ± 0.72	1.95 ± 0.70	1.21
Cognitive reappraisal	4.71 ± 0.93	5.02 ± 0.89	-3.12**
Expressive suppression	3.86 ± 1.02	3.58 ± 1.06	2.45*
Regulatory emotional self-efficacy	3.64 ± 0.72	3.71 ± 0.70	-1.34
Life satisfaction	4.48 ± 1.15	4.56 ± 1.11	-0.91

Note. *p < .05. **p < .01.

One-way analysis of variance revealed a significant grade difference in conflict frequency, $F(3, 608) = 3.87$, $p < .05$. LSD post hoc comparisons showed that first-year students reported significantly more frequent conflict ($M = 2.31$, $SD = 0.76$) than fourth-year students ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 0.74$). No significant grade differences were found for cognitive reappraisal, $F(3, 608) = 1.43$, $p > .05$; expressive suppression, $F(3, 608) = 1.02$, $p > .05$; regulatory emotional self-efficacy, $F(3, 608) = 1.85$, $p > .05$; or life satisfaction, $F(3, 608) = 1.67$, $p > .05$.

4.3. Correlational Analyses

Pearson correlations among the variables are presented in Table 3. Conflict total was significantly negatively correlated with cognitive reappraisal, regulatory emotional self-efficacy, and life satisfaction, and significantly positively correlated with expressive suppression. Cognitive reappraisal was positively correlated with regulatory emotional self-efficacy and life satisfaction, whereas expressive suppression was negatively correlated with both. This pattern of correlations is consistent with H1 and H2.

Table 3. Pearson Correlations Among All Variables (N = 612)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Conflict total						
2. Conflict frequency	.79**					
3. Conflict intensity	.78**	.61**				
4. Cognitive reappraisal	-.38**	-.33**	-.35**			
5. Expressive suppression	.31**	.26**	.29**	-.12**		
6. Regulatory emotional self-efficacy	-.41**	-.36**	-.39**	.52**	-.23**	
7. Life satisfaction	-.37**	-.31**	-.35**	.44**	-.26**	.46**

Note. **p < .01.

4.4. Regression Analyses

Separate simple regression analyses were conducted with conflict total as the predictor and cognitive reappraisal, expressive suppression, and regulatory emotional self-efficacy as the outcomes (Table 4). Dormitory interpersonal conflict negatively predicted cognitive reappraisal and regulatory emotional self-efficacy and positively predicted expressive suppression.

Table 4. Simple Regressions of Emotion Regulation Ability Layers on Dormitory Interpersonal Conflict

Outcome	β	t	R^2	F
Cognitive reappraisal	-.38	-10.12**	.14	102.45**
Expressive suppression	.31	8.06**	.10	65.01**
Regulatory emotional self-efficacy	-.41	-11.02**	.17	121.48**

Note. **p < .001.

4.5. Mediation Analysis

The mediation model was tested with dormitory interpersonal conflict as the independent variable, life satisfaction as the dependent variable, and regulatory emotional self-efficacy as the mediator, using PROCESS Model 4 with 5,000 bootstrap resamples (Hayes, 2013). The results are presented in Table 5. The total effect of conflict on life satisfaction was significant. After the mediator was introduced, conflict negatively predicted regulatory emotional self-efficacy (path a), and regulatory emotional self-efficacy positively predicted life satisfaction with conflict controlled (path b). The direct effect of conflict on life satisfaction remained significant but was attenuated (path c'), indicating partial mediation.

Table 5. Mediation of Regulatory Emotional Self-Efficacy Between Dormitory Interpersonal Conflict and Life Satisfaction

Path	Effect	SE	t	95% CI
Total effect (c)	-.37	.04	-9.83**	[-.44, -.29]
Conflict to regulatory emotional self-efficacy (a)	-.41	.04	-11.02**	[-.48, -.34]
Regulatory emotional self-efficacy to life satisfaction (b)	.46	.04	12.35**	[.39, .54]
Direct effect (c')	-.18	.04	-4.52**	[-.26, -.10]
Indirect effect (a × b)	-.19	.03		[-.24, -.14]

Note. The indirect effect was tested with a bias-corrected bootstrap procedure with 5,000 resamples; the 95% confidence interval did not include zero. **$p < .001$.

The bootstrap results showed that the 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect, [-.24, -.14], excluded zero, indicating that the mediation effect was significant. The indirect effect accounted for 50.97% of the total effect, which means that approximately half of the association between dormitory interpersonal conflict and life satisfaction operated through regulatory emotional self-efficacy. H3 was supported.

5. Discussion

5.1. Overall Levels of Conflict and Emotion Regulation

Dormitory interpersonal conflict in the present sample was at a moderate-to-low level, which is consistent with the general picture drawn by earlier surveys: most dormitory relationships are broadly harmonious, yet a substantial minority of students experience conflict of varying degrees (Pan et al., 2025). Conflict frequency exceeded conflict intensity, suggesting that conflict in students' daily lives takes the form of recurrent small frictions rather than intense confrontation. This high-frequency, low-intensity profile deserves attention, because repeated minor conflicts, if left unaddressed, can accumulate into persistent negative affect and relational estrangement.

Students used cognitive reappraisal more frequently than expressive suppression, in line with the general population findings of Gross and John (2003) and with the view that reappraisal is the more adaptive habitual strategy (John & Gross, 2004). Frequent use of an antecedent-focused strategy is itself a positive sign of emotion regulation ability. Yet strategy frequency does not equal regulatory effectiveness, and this judgment needs to be supplemented with evidence at the self-efficacy layer.

5.2. Demographic Differences

Female students scored higher on cognitive reappraisal and male students scored higher on expressive suppression, a gender difference pattern that has repeatedly emerged in the literature (Gross & John, 2003; John & Gross, 2004). Socialization accounts are commonly invoked: women are encouraged earlier to identify and talk about emotions, whereas men are more often expected to control emotional displays. Notably, these strategy preferences did not translate into gender differences in regulatory emotional self-efficacy or life satisfaction, suggesting that each strategy carries its own costs and that no single strategy preference confers an overall adaptive advantage.

First-year students reported more frequent conflict than fourth-year students. New students have spent the least time living together, and members entering from different regions and family backgrounds are still in a period of adjustment during which norms about schedules, hygiene, and resource use have not yet been negotiated. Conflict frequency naturally declines as shared living time and interpersonal experience accumulate. This result is in line with the common observation that dormitory relationships stabilize as cohorts move through their undergraduate years.

5.3. Conflict and Emotion Regulation Strategies

The correlational and regression results consistently showed that dormitory interpersonal conflict was negatively associated with cognitive reappraisal and regulatory emotional self-efficacy and positively associated with expressive suppression. Students who experienced more conflict were less likely to reinterpret conflict events and more likely to rely on suppressing emotional expression; they were also less confident in their ability to manage their emotions.

This pattern can be understood in two directions. On one hand, frequent conflict constrains the availability of reappraisal. Conflict situations carry an immediate interpersonal threat, and when attention is drawn to the source of threat, the cognitive space needed for reappraisal shrinks, making it easy to slide into an automatic reading of the roommate's behavior as deliberate provocation. On the other hand, prolonged conflict repeatedly consumes the psychological resources required for emotion regulation, and after successive regulation failures, individuals' beliefs in their regulatory capacity gradually weaken (Caprara et al., 2008). This also explains why conflict predicted regulatory emotional self-efficacy ($\beta = -.41$) more strongly than it predicted either specific strategy: strategy use may fluctuate with the situation, whereas a damaged belief in one's own capacity has more enduring consequences.

5.4. The Mediating Role of Regulatory Emotional Self-Efficacy

The mediation analysis showed that regulatory emotional self-efficacy partially mediated the relationship between dormitory interpersonal conflict and life satisfaction, with the indirect effect accounting for 50.97% of the total effect. Conflict not only directly impaired life satisfaction but also indirectly lowered it by eroding self-efficacy beliefs. This finding echoes earlier evidence that conflict coping styles mediate the link between dormitory relationships and depressive symptoms (Pan et al., 2025), but it locates the mechanism more precisely at the efficacy layer: what conflict changes is not simply which strategies students use, but how capable they believe themselves to be.

The mediating role of self-efficacy has practical implications. If part of the psychological damage of conflict arises from eroded efficacy beliefs, then interventions should not stop at teaching concrete conflict-resolution skills. They also need to help students accumulate successful regulation experiences in real conflict situations so that the belief that they can handle such events is gradually rebuilt. This is consistent with the central claim of self-efficacy theory that efficacy beliefs are cultivated through mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, and social persuasion (Caprara et al., 2008).

5.5. Implications for University Housing and Mental Health

The findings offer several actionable directions for university housing management and mental health education. For first-year students, early interventions that facilitate the negotiation of dormitory norms and provide conflict-prevention education are particularly important; structured communication agreements negotiated shortly after move-in could reduce the frequency of conflict during the adjustment period. For students in general, emotion regulation training should not merely name strategies but should provide situated practice in which students repeatedly exercise cognitive reappraisal in simulated conflict scenarios and experience its effects, thereby strengthening both strategy fluency and efficacy beliefs. For students with frequent or intense conflict, counselors and resident advisors should pay special attention, combining conflict assessment with emotion regulation ability evaluation to identify students with markedly low self-efficacy and provide targeted support.

6. Conclusion

This study drew the following conclusions. Dormitory interpersonal conflict among college students was at a moderate-to-low level, with conflict frequency higher than conflict intensity, and cognitive reappraisal was the more frequently used emotion regulation strategy. Dormitory interpersonal conflict was negatively correlated with cognitive reappraisal, regulatory emotional self-efficacy, and life satisfaction, and positively correlated with expressive suppression. Conflict frequency differed by year of study, with first-year students reporting more frequent conflict than fourth-year students, and the two emotion regulation strategies differed by gender. Regulatory emotional self-efficacy partially mediated the relationship between dormitory interpersonal conflict and life satisfaction, with the indirect effect accounting for 50.97% of the total effect. The erosion of regulatory self-efficacy by dormitory conflict constitutes an important pathway through which conflict affects the psychological adaptation of college students.

7. Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The convenience sample was drawn from three universities in one province, which limits the generalizability of the conclusions to other regions and other types of institutions. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference, and the reciprocal dynamics between conflict and emotion regulation ability await longitudinal clarification. All variables were self-reported, and although the common method bias test was satisfactory, socially desirable responding may still have influenced the answers. The dormitory interpersonal conflict scale was developed for this study with reference to existing measures, and its construct validity requires further validation with additional samples. Future research could incorporate roommate dyadic data, use experience-sampling methods to capture the real-time dynamics of conflict and emotion regulation, and examine the causal structure of the conflict-efficacy-adaptation chain within a longitudinal framework.

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