Conflict Management Styles and its Outcome among Married Couples

Nazia Iqbal, Nighat Gillani, and Anila Kamal
Quaid-i-Azam University Islamabad, Pakistan

The present study was designed to explore the Conflict Management styles and its outcome relations among married couples in Pakistan. It was also aimed to explore the gender differences in Conflict Management styles and its outcomes. The instruments used were a) The Disagreement Scale-When We Disagree (Camara & Resnik, 1989), and b) When We Disagree: Outcome (Camara & Resnik, 1989). These scales measure the conflict management styles used by the partners and their feelings after the conflict is over. Sample of 260 individuals' (130 husbands and 130 wives) was taken, who were married for more than five years (5 to 20 years). The data was composed from different cities of Pakistan through convenience sample. i.e. Islamabad (n=96), Rawalpindi (n=74), and Faisalabad (n=90). Results demonstrated non-significant gender differences in conflict management. Significant differences between husbands and wives were found on outcomes of conflict. The study concluded that there were no preferred style of conflict management between husbands and wives, however feelings of intimacy of husbands increases after the conflict was over as compared to the wives. Findings of the study could be utilized in marital counseling and training programs to maintain healthy marital relationships.

Keywords: conflict management, outcome of conflict, couples

People engage in different social positions, each of which is based on idea of give and take. A give-and-take relationship involves an exchange of encouraging feelings, which creates a connection between two people. If the desired connection stops taking place, conflict may eventually emerge to disrupt the relationship. Conflict in close relationships (e.g. married couples) happens everywhere. How partner deals and manage that conflict is an important issue. Himes (1980) suggested that the conflict is a struggle over status, and authority in which the endeavors of the conflicting partners are not only to gain the ideal and best values, but also to neutralize, or eradicate their competitors.

Conflict is the argument about different opportunities, reasons, goals, principles, or needs; and the struggle for limited resources. Conflict is a state of discomfort when two or more persons are in opposition to one another because of their wants, goals, or principles are different. In many cases the conflict is continuously go along with the feelings of anger, anxiety, or fear (Gottman, 1994). Argyle and Furnham (1983) found that relational closeness and conflict were positively associated. In their study people rated different relationships in terms of how much conflict the participants had and how emotionally close they felt. They found that most conflict occurred in closest relationships.

All conflicts are not the same; some are associated with communication difficulties, and others are not. They also differ in quantity, emotional investment, and more importantly, the concerns at risk. Deetz and Stevenson (1986) categorized conflicts into four different types; i.e., differing opinions, incompatible roles, incompatible goals, and competition for limited resources. According to them managing conflict requires identification of the issues giving rise to the conflict.

Literature suggests that the most serious disagreements among couples are associated to the fair distribution of household work, resentment, possessiveness, sex, wealth and possessions, the social association which also include in laws, and children (Gottman, 1994). According to one of Gottman's (1994) findings, satisfied couples are mostly discuss issues of disagreement, whereas dissatisfied couples are more likely to minimize or avoid conflict by confronting issues of disagreement.

Conflict is a foreseeable part of human relationships and by itself is not a negative phenomenon. However, the way we manage conflict is what shapes its outcomes. As explained by Ting-Toomey (1994) conflict is the perceived and/or actual incompatibility of values, expectations, processes, or outcomes between two or more parties over substantive and/or relational issues. The conflict course of action produces aggressive emotions between the parties over an issue, association, or the process itself. According to Khalid and Kausar (2003), there is a link between conflict resolution tactics and perceived marital adjustment, according to them well adjusted couples did not differ significantly in the use of positive conflict resolution strategies i.e. there is a constructive relationship between well adjustment and heartening conflict resolution tactics Although using strategies such as collaboration and compromise can help people deal with conflict more effectively. Often conflict escalates into a negative spiral with both partners becoming increasingly angry. Several types of negative spirals can occur (Gottman, 1994; Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Sillars & Wilmot, 1994). One of these spirals i.e. the demand-withdrawal sequence, one partner wants to talk about the conflict issue, while the other partner continually withdraws.

Research showed significant differences among males and females in conflict management styles. It was proposed that married women more than married men used accommodative, comprising, and avoidance strategies (Bardwick, 1971). Married men on the other hand were to a large extent more aggressive and confident than their spouses (Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder, &

Huesmann, 1977) in resolving conflict. The women were more helpful of their spouses and were more helpful in the resolution process (Zimmermann & West, 1975). Men use dominating and competing resolution style regardless of their culture. A study by Brahnam, Margavio, Hignite, Barrier, and Chin, (2005) addresses a research assumption that there exist differences between male and female and conflict resolution, in addition to compare conflict resolution strategies of both men and women. Results of these studies showed that women are more likely to employ a mutual and helpful conflict resolution style, whereas men are more expected to avoid conflict.

Camara and Resnick (1989) suggested that after the conflict the intimacy of the individuals with compromising or integrating style of conflict management increases and they understand each other's concerns. There are two types of outcomes suggested by them, i) escalation in the conflict and negative feelings towards the partner, and ii) increased intimacy and more positive feelings towards the partner. This suggests that conflict can play a part in enhancing the intimacy between individuals.

A study by Shah, (2004) compared the younger and older couples on the bases of marital satisfaction and she find out that older women were having more marital satisfaction as compared to the younger ones. Naseer, (2000) found no differences in traditional and dual-carrier couples on marital adjustment. Tanwir (2003) there are no differences among husbands and wives in the styles of conflict management as in today's society people believe in women empowerment and Gender equality so both can choose any style from dominance, avoidance or compromising conflict management style according to the need. Malik (2002) find out no gender differences in conflict management styles.

The present research has been premeditated to fill the space of information to a make the way for future researchers. Similarly, to explore the conflict resolution and marital satisfaction in depth by keeping a variety of features of married life in consideration. The focus of the research is to look into the relationship and conflict management styles among married couples within Pakistani society. One of the important aims of this study is to find out the outcome of the conflict, that is, whether the conflict leaves the couples to feel distant after the conflict is over or makes them feel intimate and closer than before. Gottman, (1994) and Fincham, (1990) have disagree that young couples conflict resolution are manipulating and changing the couple's marital opinion in later life. With the passage of time couples become parents, many of their patterns of conflict resolution and perceptions about the marriage and their partner altered. From the work done by Fincham and Beach, (1999) pessimistic conflict behavior forecasts improved marital satisfaction with the passage of time. It is assumes that overall couples use an avoidant style more than any other style of conflict management, but In an intimate relationship males are mostly characterized as being conflict-avoiding, withdrawing, logical, and avoid in expressive emotions (Christensen & Heavey, 1990).In contrast to this women are socialized and are good in close interaction and are expected and push to develop and uphold intimate

connections. Most of the female counterparts try to manage and maintain the close relationship with their partners.

Hypotheses

Based on the literature review, the following hypotheses were formulated for the present research:

- Husbands will use the dominating style of conflict management more than their wives.
- Wives will use compromising style of conflict management more than their husbands.
- The intimacy of the couple using compromising style of conflict management will increases after the conflict.
- Couples will use avoidance style more than any other conflict management style.

Method

Sample

The sample was taken from three main cities of Pakistan (i.e., Islamabad n= 96, Rawalpindi n = 76 and Faisalabad n = 90) consisting of 130 couples (i.e., 130 husbands and their wives). Those couples were included who were together from five to twenty years, and who had one child as a minimum requirnment. Childless couples were not included in the sample. The sample was drawn on the basis of convenience sampling technique. The minimum educational requirement for the participants was at least 8th grade so that they can easily comprehend items on the scales. The mean age of the sample population was 36.34 years and the mean income was 22.68 thousand Pakistani rupees per month. Their education ranged from intermediate to graduation

Instruments

A set of two instruments along with a demographic data sheet was administered to respondents.

When We Disagree Scale (Camara & Resnik, 1989) measures a person's attitude and perception about his or her spouse when they disagree on some issue. Scales addressed husband and wife conflict management styles i.e. how they react to each other when they have to deal with a disagreement. This scale has two versions; one for husbands and the other for the wives. It is a four-point scale that includes 20 items. The response categories ranged from very well = 4 to Not at all = 1. The maximum score by an individual on this scale is 80 and the minimum score is 20. The maximum score indicated that the person is having high avoidance, dominance, and compromise, and minimum score indicated low avoidance, dominance, and compromise. This scale consisted of three subscales:

a) *Avoidance*: It consists of 6 items with maximum score of 24 and minimum score of 6. The alpha reliability of Avoidance Sub-Scale is 0.85. (Item number 1, 4, 7, 9, 10 and 15 measures avoidance).

b) *Dominance*: It consists of 6 items with maximum score of 24 and minimum score of 6. The alpha reliability of

Avoidance Sub-Scale is 0.91. (Item number 2, 12, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20 measures dominance).

c)   *Compromise*: It consists of 8 items with maximum score of 32 and minimum score of 8. The alpha reliability of Compromise Sub-Scale is 0.82. (Compromise subscale measures by item number 3, 5, 6, 8, 11 and 13).

When We Disagree: Outcome of Disagreement Scale (Camara & Resnik, 1989) is a five-point Likert type scale that includes 24 items. The response categories were very often = 5, fairly often = 4, once in a while = 3, almost never = 2 and never = 1. The maximum score on this scale is 120 and the minimum score is 24. The maximum score indicated high escalation of conflict and increased intimacy. It includes two subscales:

a)   *Escalation of conflict*: It consists of 13 items with maximum score of 65 and minimum score of 13. The alpha reliability of Escalation Sub-Scale is 0.94. In this scale item number 2, 3, 6, 8, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 19, 20, 23 and 24 measures escalation of conflict.

b)   *Increased intimacy*: It consists of 11 items with maximum score of 55 and minimum score of 11. The alpha reliability of increased intimacy Sub-Scale is 0.93. In this scale item number 1, 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 14, 15, 18, 21 and 22 measures increased intimacy.

This scale was administered to test whether the partners experience more intimacy and relational harmony or escalation of conflict after the disagreement is over.

Procedure

After the initial contact and obtaining their consent to participate in the study, the couples were approached individually in their respective homes. They were briefed about the nature of the study again and their questions were answered. They were also assured that information obtained from them will only be used for research purposes and will be kept confidential. The booklet comprising of written instructions and the instruments were given to them. They were requested to answer honestly without leaving any question unanswered.

Results and Discussion

The main purpose of the present study was to determine what kind of conflict management strategies the married couples use. Furthermore, the relationship of gender and length of marriage and its association with different conflict management strategies was also observed. The scales used were reliable and the value of alpha coefficients for The Disagreement scale and its sub-scales was from 0.82 to 0.91, and for The Disagreement scale: Outcome it was from .93 to .94.

Table 1

Mean, Standard Deviation and t-value of Husbands and Wives on the Disagreement Scale

Sub-scales of Disagreement Scale					Cohen`s	95% CI	
	N	M	SD	t(258)	d	LL	UL
Avoidance							
Husbands	130	11.8	3.4				
				1.35	.18	-1.32	.24
Wives	130	12.4	3.1				
Dominance							
Husbands	130	12.9	4.2				
				1.23	.12	-.37	1.60
Wives	130	12.4	3.8				
Compromise							
Husbands	130	17.3	3.5				
				.56	-.05	-1.07	.60
Wives	130	17.5	3.3				

df =258, CI= Confidence Interval; LL= Lower Limit; UL= Upper Limit.

Table 1 show that there was non-significant difference in avoidance dominance and compromise styles of husbands and wives. The researcher was also interested in finding the outcome of conflict (increased intimacy or escalation of conflict after the conflict was over). These results did not support the first hypothesis, which suggested, "husbands will use the dominating style of conflict management more than wives". It indicates that although the mean scores of Husbands were higher on dominance scale but the results are non-significant. Our second hypothesis that is "wives will use compromising style of conflict management more than husbands" was also not supported.

Table 2

Mean, Standard Deviation and t-value of Husbands and Wives on the Disagreement Scale: Outcome

Sub-scales of The Disagreement scale: Out come	Husbands (*n* = 130)		Wives (*n* = 130)			
	M	SD	M	SD	t	p
Increase Intimacy	38.7	7.3	36.7	8.2	1.98*	.05
Escalation of Conflict	33.5	7.8	35.2	8.2	1.6	n.s.

df = 258, **p< .01, *p< .05

Table 2 shows that the significant differences for increased intimacy but husbands and wives do not differ significantly on escalation of conflict. The increased intimacy from husband`s perspective show their capabilities of understanding partner's feelings.

Table 3

Inter-scale Correlation Coefficient for The Disagreement Scale and The Disagreement Scale: Outcome

Subscales of Disagreement Outcome sub-scales	Increased Intimacy	Escalation of Conflict
Avoidance	-.24**	.45**
Dominance	-.28**	.42**
Compromise	.42**	-.15*

**p< .01, *p< .05

Our third hypothesis was supported by the results shown in Table 3 i.e. there found a high correlation among the disagreement scale and the outcome of disagreement scale which indicates that intimacy of individuals' increases when their conflict management style is compromising. On the other hand individuals who use avoidance or dominance style of conflict management show high correlation on escalation of conflict. These results are supported by the previous findings of Camara and Resnick (1989) who suggested that after the conflict the intimacy of the individuals with compromising or integrating style of conflict management increases and they understand each other's concerns. As both the partners were given the two versions of The Disagreement Scales i.e. their own perception about their reactions during and after the disagreement, and their perception about their partner's reactions. Interestingly, high correlation has been found between partners' scores (husbands, r = .31 and wives, r = .43). These high correlations might be attributed to the social desirability among partners, who in order to give a promising picture, may not have revealed the actual facts.

Our fourth hypothesis suggested that Pakistani couples would use avoidance style more than any other conflict management style is not supported by the results. Our sample did not show any preference for a specific style of conflict management. Some of the participants willingly agreed to discuss the results with the researcher. This was done to get an in depth understanding and insight about the conflicts in marital relationship. According to some couples using compromising style is more effective in most of the situations as it would calm down the conflicting situation quickly and satisfies both partners' concerns.

Demographic variables of age, length of relation, are also kept in perspective to see if they have any relationship with conflict management and its outcomes with the marital partners. These results are shown in the following tables:

Table 4

Means, standards deviations and F values for age of partners and their scores on The Disagreement Scale (N=260)

Sub-scale	below-31 years (n = 88)		32-41 years (n =109)		42-above years (n = 63)		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F
voidance	12.8	3.1	11.4	2.8	12.2	3.6	4.8**
Dominance	12.5	3.6	12.4	4.1	13.3	4.4	.97
Compromise	17.4	3.3	18.1	3.2	19.1	3.6	6.3**

p**<.001, *df* (between)= 2; df(within groups) = 258, groups total *df* = 260

Table 5

Means, Standards Deviations and F values for Age and the Disagreement Scale: Out come

Sub-scale	21-31 (n = 88)		32-41 (n =109)		42-above (n = 63)		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F
Intimacy	12.8	3.1	11.4	2.8	12.2	3.6	4.8**
Escalation	12.5	3.6	12.4	4.1	13.3	4.4	.966

p**<.001, between groups *df* = 2; within groups df = 258, groups total *df* = 260

Tables 4 and 5 indicate significant differences on Avoidance and Compromise scales, for example couples whose ages are from 21 to 31 years (i.e. younger group), use avoiding conflict management strategies more than the other two groups. Elder couples and middle-aged couples are more compromising than the younger ones, however there are non-significant differences on Dominance Scale.

It was noted that the intimacy of the young couple's increases after the conflict was over as compared to the other two age groups. These results indicated cultural impact in using the conflict management strategies. Research also indicates that younger individuals (below 31 years) exhibited increased intimacy as compared to the other category of age (Camara & Resnik, 1989). A possible explanation could be that because of the short period of their marital life, they are still in the romantic and/or exploration phase. They may face fewer conflicts and other practical and relationship issues, and may feel the need to keep investing in their relationship. It is possible that couples with many years of marriage may take their partners for granted, which in turn may influence their conflict management styles.

Table 6

Means, Standards Deviations and F values for city of residents of partners with their scores on The Disagreement Scale (N=260)

Sub-scale	Islamabad (n = 96)		Rawalpindi (n =74)		Faisalabad (n = 90)		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F
Avoidance	12.8	3.14	11.3	3.17	11.9	3.14	4.77
Dominance	13.7	4.56	12.1	3.43	11.9	3.67	5.61
Compromise	16.2	3.37	17.51	3.44	18.47	3.07	10.9

p**<.001, *df* (between)= 2; df(within groups) = 258, groups total *df* = 260

Table 6 indicates significant differences on all three Avoidance, dominance and Compromise scales, for example couples who belongs to Islamabad are using more avoiding style of conflict management as compare to couples living in Rawalpindi and Faisalabad, on the other hand couples living in Faisalabad are using more comprising style for conflict management as compare to couples living in Islamabad and Rawalpindi. These findings may be due to the family system (nuclear or extended families) most of the couples living in Islamabad belong to nuclear families while couples living in Faisalabad and Rawalpindi reside in extended families.

Conclusion

The present research suggests that the length of marriage, city of resident and age of partners play an important role determining the conflict management strategies of married couples. Results showed no gender differences among the partners in their use of conflict management strategies. However intimacy of husbands increases after the conflict was over as compared to wives. It can be concluded that there were no preferred style of conflict management among the Pakistani husbands and wives in our sample. However, considering the limitations of the research regarding the number of participants and their socio economic class, it is suggested that this type of research may be conducted on a larger sample from different social classes to have conclusive results.

This study will be helpful in the field of family and marriage relationships as well as in social psychological understanding of the conflict management styles in close relationships. It can be helpful for social workers, counselors and therapists to understand how attachment patterns are associated with the conflict management styles to design effective intervention strategies.

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