

Intimate Enemies: Marital Conflicts and Conflict Resolution Styles in Dissatisfied Married Couples

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Abstract: The current study is a qualitative approach aims at exploring the marital conflicts and conflict resolution styles in dissatisfied married couples (DMC). Sample consisted of five dissatisfied married couples in district Gujrat, Pakistan. Convenient purposive sampling was used for selection of couples. Kansas Marital Satisfaction (KMS) Scale was used to assess dissatisfaction in marriage. Semi-structured interviews were conducted separately for husbands and wives at different times. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes across dissatisfied married couples and these were grouped under the relevant conflict resolution styles. Findings suggested DMC face different kinds of marital conflicts i.e. as aggressive spouse (husband) (80%), lack of cooperation, lack of spending time together, in-laws issues (respectively 60%), children issues (20%), decrease in effective communication and financial problems (respectively 40%). Moreover, both spouses of dissatisfied married couples actively use avoiding style of conflict resolution whereas both do not use accommodating, collaborating or compromising styles. However, competitive style is mostly used by dissatisfied husbands which indicates the dominant nature of males in our culture. Findings are significant in area of marital counseling to develop healthy conflict management skills to promote satisfaction in marriage.

Key words: Conflict Resolution • Dissatisfaction • Competitive • Avoiding • Conflict Management • Marital Counseling

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a stage of transition in one's life. Married couples enter into this institution with a thought to start a family which demands excessive responsibility on part of both husband and wife. Marriage is not only a source of fulfillment for many of desires, but it also requires constant attention from both spouses. Married couples experience many ups and downs in their life. There can never be perfection in any area of life, so is the marriage. Conflicts are unavoidable and somewhat essential for continuous running of this carriage of love and affection. When these conflicts are mishandled, this may lead toward unfulfilled desires, dissatisfaction and psychological problems like depression, anger, worry etc. The important ingredient is to handle marital conflicts in such a way as to develop smoothness in life. The current study may be helpful in exploration of not only types of marital conflicts but also conflict resolution styles of

dissatisfied married couples. It may further facilitate married couples as how to manage their marital conflicts in a healthy way which may promote satisfaction and affection.

Conflict is inevitable in intimate relationship in the form of disagreements, dislikes, arguments and tensions. It may result in the renovation if handled properly or deterioration of relationship if managed poorly. It is assumed from the empirical evidences that conflict occurs in both satisfied and dissatisfied marriages but the behaviors to manage these conflicts vary considerably between both. The constructive way to handle conflicts in relationship may facilitate intimacy, while destructive ways to deal with conflict may aggravate dysfunction and distress in marriage [1-4]. Kurdek (1995) has identified that specific conflict resolution styles are linked with couple's marital satisfaction [5]. Conflict is inevitable in any marriage. Hocker and Wilmot (1995) defined conflict as "An expressed struggle between at least two

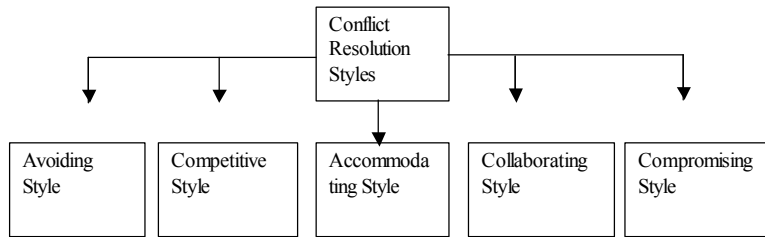


Fig. 1: Conflict Resolution Styles

interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards, or interference from the other party in achieving their goals". Conflict and health are closely related [3].

Hendrick, (1998) found that marital satisfaction, meaning the partners' subjective evaluation of the marriage relationship, is used in reference to the concept of marital quality or marital adjustment [3]. Gottman and Levenson (1988) suggested that the manner in which a couple handles negative affect in a conflict determines whether the marriage succeeds or fails [3]. Different researchers like Gottman (1999), Jacobson and Addis (1993), Kurdek, (1995), couples' conflict interactional patterns have been linked to relationship satisfaction. The demand-withdrawal pattern of interaction linked negatively to relationship satisfaction [4]. In this pattern of response, one spouse demands that the issue be resolved while the partner tries to withdraw from the conflict. Gottman and Krokoff (1989) suggested that demand-withdraw interactional style is not helpful for couples; so avoiding conflict is also detrimental to relationships [4]. They found a positive relationship among attachment styles, conflict resolution techniques and marital quality of 52 married couples. Hostile, volatile and validating conflict resolution styles were significantly negatively correlated with relationship quality. Results suggested that hostile and volatile patterns were significant mediational variables between secure, fearful attachment style and relationship quality [1]. Conflict resolution styles have been investigated in relation to marital adjustment in a sample of 50 couples. Their marriage duration was 10 to 15 years. Results revealed significant relationship between the use of conflict resolution strategies and perceived marital adjustment. The gender differences were also found [2]. Conflict in adult close relationships has been examined and concluded that the way of handling marital conflict may increase intimacy and satisfaction [6]. In unhappy marriages, conflict is associated with patterns of behavior

(e.g. negative affect reciprocity, demand-withdraw) and researcher also stated that whether conflicts facilitate intimacy or distress, it all depends upon individual differences that how they respond to conflict or interpret [7].

Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann (1970) identified 5 main styles of dealing with conflict that vary in their degrees of cooperativeness and assertiveness. These include competitive, avoiding, collaborative, compromising, and accommodating [3]. Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann (1970) theories of conflict resolution styles have been used as a theoretical framework in the present study.

Fig. 1: Shows five different types conflict resolution styles.

Objectives of the Study: Following objectives have been identified for the current study.

- What are the types of conflict experienced by dissatisfied married couples?
- What are the conflict resolution styles used by dissatisfied married couples?

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The present study is a phenomenological inquiry situated within the constructivism paradigm. The aim was to explore the lived experiences of the dissatisfied married couples regarding the nature of marital conflicts and its resolution from perspective of both spouses. Convenient purposive sampling was used to select five dissatisfied married couples in the city of Gujrat. Purposive sampling refers to the selection of sample on the particular research question Inclusion criteria included both husbands and wives who are dissatisfied with their marital life, with minimum age of couple 25, having no physical disability and psychopathology. Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale was used to assess dissatisfaction in marriage [8].

In-depth semi structured interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic Analysis was used to analyze the transcripts of the data. "A thematic analysis is a process of identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes data set in (rich) detail [9]. Validity of the present qualitative research has been established with the help of literature review, researches and expert review about interview transcription and analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results have been discussed in relation to marital conflicts and conflict resolution styles. Identified themes have been categorized under the conflict resolution styles proposed by Kenneth Thomas and Ralph Kilmann (1970). These conflict resolution styles include competitive/dominant, avoiding, collaborative, compromising, and accommodating.

Demographics of the Satisfied Married Couples: Demographics of the dissatisfied married couples include description like married couples' total marriage period ranges from 2 to 20 years. The marriage pattern was love marriage (60%) and arranged marriage (40%). Only 20% of respondents had children, while 80% of couples were without a child. Education of all spouses varied from Metric to M.Phil. Most of the married couples (80%) lived in a joint family system while 20% of the respondents live in a nuclear family system.

Types of Marital Conflicts in Dissatisfied Married Couples: There are different types of marital conflicts faced by dissatisfied married couples i.e. aggressive husband (80%), lack of cooperation (60%), lack of spending time together (60%), in-laws issues (60%), children issues (20%), decrease in effective communication (40%) and financial problems (40%).

Aggressive and Uncooperative Husband: Although dominance is more ascribed to men in almost all cultures, but men sometimes use it inappropriately. Sometimes they consciously or unconsciously try to influence their wives in such a way that their relationships are deteriorated. Most of the husbands (80%) use threats, hit things when in anger, blame their wives as reported by: "*Mere husband hmesha mujhy hi blame krty hain k un k sath jo bhi bura hua uski zimadar main hun. Kyu k woh mujh sy shadi nhi thy krna chahty. Aur un k ghar walun ny unhe force kiya*

tha jiski waja sy woh kabhi mujh sy cooperate nhi krty. Aur agar main kuch kahun to dhamki dety hain k tmhai ghar bhej dun ga. Aur kafi baar mujhy mara bhi hai" SMC3(W). English Translation: "My husband always blames me if there is any issue. If something bad happens to him, it is because of me as he did not want to marry me and his family forced him into this marriage. That is why he never cooperates with me. And if I say something, he threatens me to send me back to my family. And he has also beaten me quite a few times.", "*Jub bhi lrae hoti hai to mere husband bht aggressive ho jate hain aur maar peet krty hain"* SMC4(W): "Whenever, there are arguments, my husband becomes aggressive and starts beating (physically)."

Husbands (60%) also do not cooperate with their wives because they think that they are always right. It is mentioned in this way: "*Mere husband mujh sy bilkul cooperate nhi karte kyun k unhe hmesha lgta hai k wo saheh hain. Maine unhy bht dafa kaha hai k ap jaldi ghar a jaya kren. To kehte hain k mujhy kaam hota tmhai e smjhna pare ga agar zyada masla to apny ghar chali jao wapas"* SMC2(W): "My husband does not cooperate with me at all. He always thinks that he is right. I asked him quite a few times to come home early but he says that he has work to do and you have to understand this. And if this is a big issue for you, you can go back to your family."

Lack of spending time together: Dissatisfied wives (60%) complained about their husbands' being busy or absent from home when they need them most. "*Mere husband zyada apny business ko hi tarjeh dete hain aur mujhy bilkul time nhi dety. Har waqt business business aur us ki waja sy wo aksar ghar sy bahir rehte hain aur mujhy bilkul bhi time nhean dety. Jiski wja sy aksar hmari lrae ho jati hai"* SMC2(W): "My husband gives most of his time to business and he has no time for me. All the time it is business and that is why he is away from home quite a lot and does not give time to me. That often results in fight between us."

Conflict with in-laws: Dissatisfied wives (60%) reported conflict with In-Laws. It indicates that a girl has to face the major issue of adjustment in a different family where she is not easily accepted or she herself feels maladjusted. In the end, the sole source of catharsis seen by wives is their husbands who also suggest them to ignore this conflict so to avoid escalation. It has been accounted by wives such as: "*Mujhy in-laws sy related kafi masle thy kyun k meri 7 nanden (sister in-law) hain aur un main sy*

kisi ki bhi shadi nhi hui jin ki wja sy hmari har roz lrae ho jati thi. Wo jan bujh k mere husband ko ghalt batein bolti thein jis ki wja sy hmari lrae hoti thi" SMC5(W): "I had a lot of problem due to my In-laws. I have sister's in-law and none of them is married and this results in lot of fights. They used to create misunderstanding between me and my husband which often resulted in fight between us."

Financial Problems: Dissatisfied married couples (40%) face financial problems because they have more economic responsibilities in a joint family. "Maine kafi financial problem dekhy hain kyu k hum joint family main rehte thy. Aur mere husband ki pehle bhi biwi thi aur wo aik mazdoor thy aur aik e kamany waly bhi thy jis ki wja sy kharchy pure nhi thy hote" SMC1(W): "I have experienced many financial problems because we lived in joint family. And husband had a first wife too. He was a laborer and only earning hand in the family so we had a difficulty in making both ends meet."

Children's Issues: Very few dissatisfied married couples (20%) faced the issue of children because majority of the dissatisfied married couples did not have children. This has been described in the following way: "Mere husband bchon ka khyal nhi thy rakhty unko bchon ki parwa nhi hoti aur hafta hafta ghar hi nhi thy aty" SMC3(W): "My husband did not care about children and he had nothing to do with them and did not come home for weeks."

Decrease in Effective Communication: Few wives (20%) reported decrease in effective communication that their husbands do not talk to her and he is busy in his business: "Mere husband mujh sy bht kum baat karty hain. Agr Karen bhi to apny business ko hi discuss krty rehte hain. Un k liye un ka business har chez sy zyada important hai" SMC2(W): "My husband talks with me off and on. When he talks, he keeps discussing business. For him, business is more important than anything else."

Conflict Resolution Styles of Dissatisfied Married Couples: Very few resolution styles are used by the dissatisfied married couples (D.S.M.C) which include avoiding and competitive styles. Both of the spouses of D.S.M.C. do not use collaborative, compromising, and accommodating styles. Descriptions of the emergent styles are as follows:

Avoiding Style: It refers to deal with conflict in such a way as to deny the conflict, changing the topic, avoiding one's own role in conflict and using jokes etc. Both spouses (80%) are actively avoiding their marital conflicts and they did not give importance to each other and conflicts. They ignore their family and personal issues. Almost all the D.S.M.C. reported that the spouses (100%) at the same time are actively involved in avoiding behaviors like changing the topic of conflict, denying, ignoring the other spouse. It has been indicated in the following accounts: "Meri biwi mujhy hmesha tab avoid krty hai. Jab main apni dusri biwi k pas jata hun ya us ko zyada time deta hun. To wo muj sy naraz ho jati hai aur baat ni karti" DSMC1(H): "My wife avoids me when I go to my second wife or give her more time then she does not talk to me and gets angry.", "Mere husband hmesha mujhe ignore karte hain. Jab wo apne doston k sath jate hain aur almost sare special events un k sath hi guzarte hain. Mujhe bilkul time hi nhi dete hmare jhagre ki main waja hi un ke dost hai" DSMC5 (W): "My husband ignores me completely when he goes with his friends. He spends almost all special occasions with them. He does not give me time. I think basic reason for all our fights are his friends."

Competitive Style: It refers to a partner's effort to resolve the problem of differing spousal needs based on one's own terms without regard for the spouse. This competitive style is characterized by behaviors such as aggression, coercion, manipulation, intimidation, and arguing. Here D.S.M.C also uses competitive style but here husband (100%) is active in use of this style. Husbands are dominant, (100%) aggressive, (100%) blaming wives (60%) using threats (60%) and assert (100%) their own opinion. They (100%) coerce or force their wives to do what they demand. Husbands (60%) raise issues in an insulting manner. It is mentioned in the following verbatim: "Mere husband muje hmesha blame karte hain k tmhara apny mamu k bete k sath affair hai. Halan k wo khud hmesha zyada time apni girlfriend k sath hi guzarte hain aik do bar to unho ny mjhe marne ki bhi dhamki di hai" DSMC5 (W): "My husband always blames me for having an affair with my cousin although he himself spends most of his time with his girlfriend. Once or twice he has threatened to kill me."; "Har issue main hmesha mere husband mjhe hi blame krte hain k un k har bure kaam ki wja main hi hun kyu k wo mjh sy shadi nhi thy karna chahte. Un k parents ny unhe force kiya tha shadi k liye" DSMC3 (W): "My husband blames me

for whatever bad happens to him. Because he did not want to marry me and his parents forced him into this marriage.”

Husbands (100%) most of the time assert their own opinions over their wives. They want them to do their desired household tasks or behave the way they want. The intensity of the dominance is high in D.S.M.C. “*Agar main unki (husband) baat na manun ya ghar ka kaam na kru to mujhe dantte hain. Aur aik do baar to mjhe mara bhi hai. Aur kehte hain k agar kaam na kiya to tmhai tmhare ghar bhej dun ga*” DSMC1 (W): “If I do not accept his opinion or do not do household chores, he scolds me. He has beaten me once or twice. He said that if i (wife) did not perform household chores, he would send me back to my family.” Researches shows that distressed couples make more negative statements and fewer positive statements than non-distressed couples. Negative behavior is both more frequent in couples that engage in physical aggression than non-distressed couples [10]. Margolin (1988) proposed that couples differ in a way in which they expressed emotions during conflict resolution, with some couples expressing their negativity very openly and directly and others keeping the conflict silent and hidden [11].

Accommodating Style: It refers to non assertive style where spouse disregards one's own needs and accedes to the partner's desires. It is nonassertive of one's own needs. Accommodating style is used by the D.S.M.C but here both spouse are not obeying order of each other's (60%) as reported by one of the dissatisfied wives: “*Shuru main main apny husband ki har baat manti thi lekin wo mje time nhi thy dety. Lekin ab main bhi unki baat nhi manti main bhi zid main a gae hun. K jub wo meri baat ni mante to main kyu manu? aur ghar keun chorun?*” DSMC2 (W): “In early days of marriage, I always used to obey my husband. But he used to not give time to me (wife). Now I also behave rigidly and do not obey him anyway. If he does not accept my opinions/matters, so why do I need to obey him (husband)? And why should I leave home?”

Both spouses never listen to each other's order (40%) and even never ignore their personal needs and desires in order to avoid the anger of spouses (60%). Both spouses did not put any efforts to maintain harmonious relationships (100%). “*Main uski (wife) baat kyu manu usey smjhna chahye k main apny business main busy hota hun. Wase bhi ye jo gayun ki larkiyun hoti hain na ye jitna bhi parh jayen jahil hi hoti hain. Ye mri masrufiyat nhi smjh skti*” DSMC2 (H):

“Why should I accept what my wife says? She should understand that I am busy with my business. These village girls remain ignorant despite getting higher education. She cannot understand my busy schedule.”

Collaborating Style: It refers to the mutual concern for one another in the marriage. This style emphasizes the importance of both the marital relationship and partners' goals. Dissatisfied married couples did not use collaborating style to handle their marital conflicts. Here both spouses are not involved in discussion of conflicts with each other (100%). As mentioned in the following: “*Mere husband ny kbhi meri baat ko importance nhi di. Aur mri baat py kbhi kaan nahi dhara hai jaese main behon k masle btati hu k hmara barha beta parh ni rha to wo sunte hi nhi hain. Aur hafta hafta ghar hi nhi aty*” DSMC3 (W): “My husband never gave importance to what I say and he even does not listen to what used to say many a times that our elder son is not studying properly. But he neither listens nor comes home for many weeks.”; They do not have mutual concern for each others' desires (40%). They never appreciate each other's (100%). It has been identified as: “*Jub mere husband mujhe mere achy kaam (ghur ke kam) par appreciate nhi krte to main kyu krun*” DSMC5(W): “If my husband does not appreciate my good effort (of household chores), then why should I appreciate him?”

It has been found that husbands' emotional distress during conflictual discussions may be driven by their wives' demanding behaviors. They are blamed for the conflict and expected to take responsibility in the requested change. Vice versa, wives' emotional reactions may be driven by the fact that their husbands deny responsibility in the requested change when they are trying to involve them in the discussion [12].

Compromising Style: It refers to give up something and the compromiser himself or herself also expects to relinquish something. Both spouses (100%) never compromise with each other. Both never try to reconcile differences (100%). Both (100%) did not try to find a middle ground to resolve a conflict and both spouses have non-cooperative behavior (100%). “*Unho ny kbhi kisi baat py compromise nhi kiya hmesha hyper ho jate hain. Aur kehte hain k tmhai tmhare ghar bhej dun ga*” DSMC4(W): “He never compromised for anything. He always gets hyper and threatens me for sending me back to my home.”

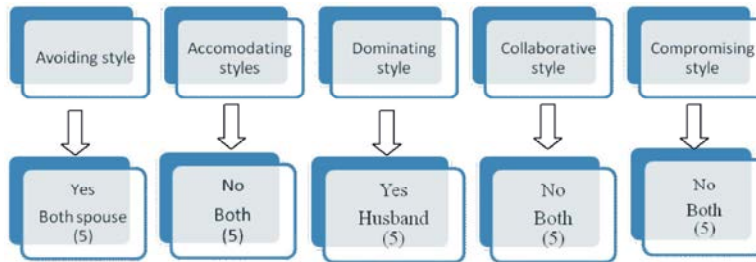


Fig. 2: Use of Conflict Resolution Styles by Dissatisfied Married Couples

Table 1: Behaviors under Conflict Resolution Styles in Dissatisfied Married Couples

Conflict Resolution Styles	Use	Frequency
1. Avoiding style	Yes	
Avoidance behavior Both spouse		100%100%
Did not give importance to conflicts Both		80%80%
2. Accommodating style	No	
Both spouse didn't try to maintain harmonious relationship Both		100%100%
Didn't obey each other's order Both		60%40%
Ignore desires to please spouse Both		60%40%
3. Dominating style	Yes	
Husbands aggressive behavior		100%
Using threats		60%
Asserting one's own opinion		100%
Blaming spouse		60%
Husband raise issues in insulting manner Husband Both		100%60%40%
4. Collaborative style	No	
Didn't discuss or resolve conflict Both		100%100%
Never appreciate Both		100%100%
Didn't show concern for each other's desire Both		40%40%
5. Compromising style	No	
Didn't compromise Both		100%100%
Didn't reconcile differences Both		100%100%
Non-cooperative behavior Both		100%100%
Didn't try to find a middle ground to resolve a conflict Both		100%

It was assumed from the literature such as Weiss and Heymann (1990) also found that couples who address their conflict with constructive style (e.g. assertion, cooperation), avoid destructive styles (e.g. aggression, withdrawal), such couples resolve their conflict with mutual satisfaction and equity, and more likely to be satisfied with their relationships [13]. Overall competitive, avoiding and accommodating styles are considered unhealthy styles of resolution conflicts while collaboration and compromising are healthy conflict resolution styles. Collaborating style is the most highly effective style of resolution. The findings of the current study reflected that the both spouses of dissatisfied married couples actively use avoiding style of conflict resolution. They do not use accommodating, collaborating or compromising styles. However, competitive style is mostly used by dissatisfied husbands who also indicate the dominant nature of husband in our culture. In accommodating style, both spouses do not use this style to resolve conflict. It is consistent with the

research findings by Epstein, and Degiovanni (1978) and Metz and Dwyer (1993) that distress partner engage in less assertiveness, exchange more aggression [13]. Gottmann (1993) found the couples types in which he said that regulated couples displayed positive problem solving behavior and positive affect approximately 5 times greater than non-regulated couples [7].

CONCLUSION

The findings of the present study highlighted some important aspects of marriage where the husband's personality being dominant and aggressive, wife's personality as noncompliant lead towards the escalation of marital conflicts when there is time of handling the conflicts. They do not compromise, collaborate or accommodate with each others. Moreover, both spouses avoid each others and husband's uncooperative behavior as well as aggression aggravates the issues making them dissatisfied in marriage. Future researchers may explore

the personality factors and conflict resolution of couples in relation to satisfaction in marriage. Findings implicated in teaching healthy conflict resolution styles to married couples in counseling.

Figure No. 2 indicates that dissatisfied married couples use avoiding and dominating styles of conflict resolution actively to manage their conflicts. Whereas both spouses do not use accommodating, collaborating and compromising styles.

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