

Conflict Resolution Strategies among Working Couples

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Abstract: Except from determining the conflict resolution strategies among the working couples, the present study attempts to identify the demographic characteristics related to the choice of conflict resolution strategy. The sample of 150 working couples was selected purposively from the Dharwad city of Karnataka State. The Thomas Kilmann conflict management scale (1977) and general information schedule were used to collect the data. Garrett ranking, chi-square and correlation analysis were carried out to analyze the data. The results indicated that among male couples, collaboration strategy was the first and most preferred conflict resolution strategy which was followed by accommodation, avoidance, compromise and then competition whereas among female couples, accommodation was the first and most preferred strategy which was followed by collaboration, compromise, avoidance and then competition. Compared to female couples, husbands were significantly high in the adoption of collaboration and avoidance strategies whereas female couples were significantly high in the adoption of accommodation strategies. Among wives the factors like age, family size, and caste were related with the use of accommodation strategy, income was related with the use of avoidance strategy and caste was also related with the use of competition strategy. Among husbands, family size was positively related with avoidance strategy and negatively related with compromise strategy.

Keywords: accommodation, avoidance, collaboration, competition, compromise, conflict resolution strategies, dual earners.

I. Introduction

Conflict is inevitable process in any marriage. The opposing needs and interests of the couples lie at the core of marital conflict. Conflict in general is described as the process that begins when one party perceives that the other one has frustrated some concerns of his/hers (Thomas; 1976) [1] an interpersonal conflict exists whenever an action by one person prevents, obstructs or interferes with the actions of another person (Johnson 1990) [2]. In conflict situation, couples express or latent differences in satisfying their individual needs and interests, and they experience interference from their partners in accomplishing these goals. In the contemporary family, there is a great need to negotiate the changing role of husband and wife. Discussions about who makes the decisions and how they should be made create a great potential for marital conflict. Marital conflict in itself is not necessarily bad. In fact, less emphasis should be placed on the number of conflicts experienced by a couple than on how they are managed and resolved. More specifically, Gottman and Levenson (1988) [3] suggest that the manner in which a couple handle negative effect in a conflict determines whether the marriage succeeds or fails. The couple's skill in conflict resolution and the subsequent impact that such resolution has on each partner hold the key to whether the marriage continues to function in a constructive way or becomes a destructive or malfunctioning system. Hence in most interpersonal conflicts it is important to find a resolution. The unresolved conflict may lead to a feeling of resentment and furthermore, unresolved conflict can impact negatively on the mental health of one of the partners or both (Bacciocchi, 1997 [4] Markman, *et al.*, 1993 [5];). The way the couples handle conflict is usually described in terms of resolution "style" or "Strategies" which are interpersonal behaviors used in the context of a relationship to resolve disagreements (Marchand, 2004 [6]). The most effective strategies bring advantage to one's self as well as others, ensuring a harmonious relationship and ineffective behavior tries to defeat the other person or avoid issue.

The several basic models of conflict management suggest that as interpersonal process it can be understood in terms of two key dimensions: assertiveness and cooperativeness. Assertiveness is described as concern with one's own outcomes and cooperativeness as concern with the outcome of others. The research supports the five

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specific strategies of handling conflict which are derived from the combinations of the two dimensions (Thomas 1977) [7]. Thus, it is possible to pursue actions that are high or low on both dimensions, or high on one dimension and low on the other. The five Strategies are as follows:

1.1 Competition: High on assertiveness and low on cooperativeness. It is characterized by the win lose outcome where one person sets to achieve their own way almost regardless of the cost to the other involved.

1.2 Collaboration: High on both assertive and cooperative behavior. It is characterized by openness, exchange of information and attempts to generate win-win solution where the needs of both parties can be met by placing equal emphasis on their own interests and that of the others.

1.3 Compromise: Medium on assertive and cooperative behavior. It is associated with splitting issues down the middle and mutual concession thus resulting in middle ground solutions which is mutually acceptable by both.

1.4 Avoidance: Low on both assertive and cooperative behavior. This style of conflict resolution tends to avoid conflicts altogether, as the name implies. The style delays the conflict, and the person does not attempt to satisfy his own point of view or that of others.

1.5 Accommodation: Low on assertive behavior and high on cooperative behavior. With this style, a person puts aside her own needs and concerns in favor of others.

Many researchers have reported on gender differences between male and female on conflict resolution strategies. Leonard *et al.* (1989) [8] found that that men tended to use compromise style and women to use collaboration style to resolve conflict with their partners. Barry (1998) [9] found that women were more likely to use integrating style and less likely to use an avoiding style with their partners whereas the males were more likely to be obliging with their partner. Minet *et al.* (2007) [10] reported on conflict management strategies with adolescent girls using problem-solving, withdrawal and compliance more frequently than boys and both sexes scored low on conflict engagement. However there were very few studies reporting on the conflict management strategies among the dual earners couples. Hence in the present investigation, the main objective is to identify the conflict resolution strategies adopted by the working couples to resolve their marital conflict and also the study reports on the relationship of various demographic characteristics with conflict resolution strategies.

II. Materials and methods

Data was gathered from a sample of 150 dual-earner couples with female couple being a teacher in Government or private schools with at-least three years of teaching experience and length of marriage and having at-least one child. Thomas-Kilmann MODE (Management of Differences Exercise) Instrument (1977) was used to measure the patterns of conflict management adopted by the couples to resolve conflict in their marital and professional life. It consisted of 30 pairs of statements describing modes of handling conflict. Based on the two dimensions i.e., assertiveness and cooperativeness the scale was subdivided into five sub measures which are considered as the strategies of conflict management.

III. Results and Discussion

The responses of each subject were scored with the help of scoring key and the individual scores on each scale were obtained and data was subjected to frequency, percentage Chi-square, Garret analysis and Correlation analysis.

The individual characteristics of the couples in Table 1a indicated that the age of couples ranged between 25 and 60 years. Highest per cent (40.00%) of couples belonged to 35 and 44 years of age followed by 28 per cent of couples were between 25 and 34 years and 26 per cent were between 45-54 years of age and about 5 per cent of males were in the age group of 55-60 years. With respect to education, about 19 per cent of males and 24 per cent of females had completed pre-university education; about 26 per cent of males and 9 per cent of females had completed graduation followed by 31 per cent of males and 49 per cent had completed post graduation and around 23 percent of males and 18 per cent of females were Ph.D holders. On the whole highest per cent (40%) of couples had completed post-graduation followed by pre-university education (22%) and Ph. D (20 %) and minor per cent (18%) had completed graduation. Regarding occupation, about 47 per cent of males and 43 per cent of females were serving in central or state government and around 53 per cent of males and 57 per cent of females were serving in private sector Overall, around 45 per cent of couples were government employees and 55 per cent of couples were private employees. About income, 18 per cent of the husbands and 3 percent of wives had income between 20000 and 49999; 35 per cent of husbands and 32 per cent of wives income ranged between 10000-19999; around 27 per cent of husbands and wives had income between 5000-9999 & 20 per cent of husbands and 38 per cent of wives had their income >5000.

The results from Table 1b revealed the familial characteristics of the respondents

With respect to caste, 54.7 per cent of couples belonged to upper caste; 29 per cent were from backward caste; 10 per cent belonged to dalit caste and 6 per cent were from tribal caste. In relation to children, about 35 per cent of couples had one child; 45 per cent of couples had two children & around 19 per cent had 3 or more children. In respect of size of family, nearly 42 per cent of couples belonged to large family and about

57 per cent of couples belonged to small family. With Regard to length of marriage, the couples married years ranged between 3 and 33 years. Among them, more or less 47 per cent of couples were married for 3 to 12 years; 36 per cent of them were married for 13 to 23 years and 17 per cent of couples were in the married years between 24 to 33 years.

Table 2 represents the status and comparison of couples on five different strategies of conflict resolution. The respondents were classified on high and low dimensions on each style of conflict management. Lower score indicated lesser expression of specific behaviors pertaining to specific style of conflict management and high score indicated higher expression of behaviors pertaining to specific style of conflict management.

3.1 Competition

The results of Table 2 showed that majority of husbands (80%) and wives (83.3%) were low on competition behavior and the χ^2 (4.72NS) indicated the non significant association between gender and competition style. It clearly means that both husband and wives were more or less similar in expression of competitive behaviors. It clearly connotes that couples were not dominating in nature and they did not involve in win-lose arguing or neither the husbands nor the wives sets to achieve their own way at the cost of their partners.

3.2 Collaboration

The results of Table 2 pertaining to the status of couples on collaboration strategy indicated that more than half of the husbands (54.7%) were high and wives (55.3%) were low on the collaborating behavior and the χ^2 (11.71, $P > 0.01$) analysis revealed the significant association between gender and collaboration style of conflict management and it means that more number of husbands had adopted collaboration strategy in their conflict resolution process compared to wives. From the results it can be argued that, husbands often react to conflict situation by involving in open and direct discussion of the problem and they seek others help in making decisions and are often considerate of satisfying the needs of both the parties in conflict situation.

3.3 Compromise

Table 2 results pertaining to couples status on compromise strategy showed that more than half of the husbands (65.3%) and wives (63.3%) were low on compromising behavior and the χ^2 analysis revealed non-significant association between gender and compromise strategy. It means that both husband and wives were more or less similar in adoption of compromise strategy of conflict resolution. Husband and wives are low on the behaviors such as give and take, accepting loss and gains, encouraging compensation and solutions which are mutually acceptable or the middle ground solutions.

3.4 Avoidance

The results of couples on avoidance status presented in Table 2 indicated that more number of husbands (42%) were high on avoidance behavior compared to wives (34.7%). The results clearly connoted that more number of husbands had adopted avoidance strategy in their conflict resolution process when compared with wives. Husbands had avoided the face to face discussion of thoughts and feelings with their wives and were most likely to let their wives take the responsibility of solving the problem.

3.5 Accommodation

The results on accommodation status of couples (Table 2) revealed that more number of wives (66%) were high on accommodating behaviors when compared to husbands (57.3%) and the χ^2 (10.80; $p > 0.01$ level) revealed significant association between gender and accommodation strategy. This may be because of the wives gender role tendency to concern for others, role expectation and their tendency to take care of husbands. Also, the Indian culture which socializes women to be more accommodative in family life.

Table 3 results report the husbands and wives ranking on five different conflict resolution strategies. The garratt ranking technique was used to rank the couples. The results indicated that husbands in this study scored highest on collaboration strategy (50.42) which was ranked first followed in order by accommodation (49.68), Avoidance (49.07), compromise (47.29) and then competition (40.56) and among wives accommodation style (52.94) was ranked first followed by collaboration (50.31), compromise (47.49), avoidance (47.36) and competition (38.71). Overall, results clearly mean that the husbands and wives were similar in their competition, and compromise styles of conflict management. Correspondingly the husbands were collaboration and avoidance adopters and wives were accommodation adopters. These results are in accordance with the findings of Brahman *et al.* (2005) [11] who reported that men and women tend to endorse conflict handling strategies that complement gender role expectations in handling conflicts, women unlike men favour accommodating strategies whereas men prefer to be more collaborating and avoiding in their style of conflict handling than women which accords precisely with gender role expectations, as men are expected to

remain cool and in control (Haferkamp, 1991) [12] and they experience anxiety in social settings which may make them more likely than women to avoid conflict.

The results of Table 4 pertaining to correlation between age and conflict strategies of husbands and wives revealed that age was not significantly related with any of the conflict strategy among husbands whereas among wives age was negatively related with the accommodation strategy ($r = -0.168$; $p > 0.05$ level). The results clearly indicate that wives belonging to higher age category least adopted the accommodation strategy. It is obvious that as the age advances the wives give better understandings as to which is the best way to resolve their inter personnel conflicts. Accommodation, even though is co-operative but it is not considerate of fulfilling needs of both parties and hence with advancement in age wives choose better style which place equal emphasis on needs of both husband and wife.

Table 4 results related to the correlation between education and strategies of conflict resolution among husbands and wives indicate that the education had negative but non-significant result with the competition and avoidance strategies among both husbands and wives. Similarly education had a positive but non-significant relation with the collaboration, compromise and accommodation strategies among both husbands and wives. The results clearly indicate that the husbands and wives with higher education least adopted the competition and avoidance strategies and most adopted the collaboration, compromise and accommodation strategies to resolve their conflict. However, the results were found to be non significant.

The correlation between occupation and strategies of conflict resolution (Table 4) revealed that the occupation status had a significant positive relationship with the collaboration strategy among husbands ($r = 0.176$; $p > 0.05$ level). The results clearly mean that husbands who were serving in private sectors preferred the collaboration strategy compared to those serving in the Government sectors. The occupational status always has a great impact on the individuals' behavior especially among the men. In the higher occupational status where the men are administrators, managers or coordinators, their position calls them for being more dominating in nature hence those individuals apply the same in the family. The results are in conformity with study conducted by Brewer et al. 2002 [13] who revealed that upper organizational status individuals are found to be higher on the competitive strategy. The results also indicated that all other strategies have a non significant relation among both husbands and wives. The results clearly mean that irrespective of whether they were occupied in government jobs or private jobs most of the husbands and wives were low on competition, compromise and avoidance behavior and high on accommodation behavior.

The results (Table 4) pertaining to correlation between income and strategies of conflict resolution among both husbands and wives indicated that income had significant positive relation with the avoidance strategy ($r = 0.233$ $p > 0.01$ level) among wives whereas all other strategies had a non significant relation among both husbands and wives with least correlation values. These results clearly imply that wives whose income was more, they preferred the avoidance strategy more compared to those who were earning less.

The correlation between number of children and strategies of conflict resolution among husbands and wives presented in Table 4 indicated that number of children had a negative relation with the competition, compromise and avoidance strategies and positive relation with collaboration and accommodation strategies among both husbands and wives. It means that husbands and wives having more number of children least preferred the competition, compromise and avoidance strategies and most preferred the collaboration and accommodation strategies but however the results were found to be non significant. The results are in conformity with the study conducted by Sanja (2009) [14] who reported that people who had children expressed higher usage of accommodating and compromising conflict handling style than those who did not have children.

The results of Table 4 pertaining to relationship between family size and strategies of conflict resolution among husbands and wives revealed that the family size had a significant negative relationship with the compromise strategy ($r = -0.186$ $p > 0.05$) and positive relation with the avoidance strategy ($r = 0.176$; $p > 0.05$) among husbands whereas significant positive relation ($r = 0.243$; $p > 0.05$) with the accommodation strategy among wives. It means that husbands living in small family were inclined towards the use of compromise strategy and those living in large family were inclined towards the use of avoidance strategy. The results clearly identified that small families promoted the compromising behavior and large families promoted the avoiding behavior among husbands. It may be due to the reason that in large families the husbands don't enjoy that freedom which they do being in the small families and as expected with the gender roles the husbands remain cool and in control during the conflict situations to maintain their standard in the families and hence they withdraw or avoid the conflict. Wives living in large families tend to use the accommodation style compared to those living in small families. It is obvious that in large families where the wives have in-laws or dependent elderly living with them have to make more adjustments. The wife in such families willingly or unwillingly has to sacrifice their own needs to adjust to the large family system and hence in such condition wives adopt the accommodating strategy.

The results (Table 4) pertaining to correlation between length of marriage and strategies of conflict resolution among husbands and wives indicate that the length of marriage had a negative relation with the competition ($r =$

-0.077), collaboration ($r=-0.051$) and compromise strategies ($r=0.046$) and positive relation with the accommodation ($r=0.124$) and avoidance strategies ($r=0.023$) among husbands whereas length of marriage had a positive relation with competition, collaboration, avoidance and accommodation strategies and negative relations with compromise strategy among wives. But however the results were found to be non significant. The results on correlation between caste and strategies of conflict resolution (Table 4) indicated that the caste was not significantly related with any of the conflict strategies among husbands whereas among wives it was negatively and significantly related with the competition strategy ($r=-0.17$; $p> 0.05$) and positively related with the accommodation strategy($r=0.168$; $p>0.05$). The results clearly mean that wives belonging to upper caste were less inclined towards the adoption of competition strategy and more inclined towards the adoption of accommodation strategy. This may be due to the reasons that the upper castes usually promote the women to be more accommodative which accords precisely with their gender role expectation.

IV. Conclusion

The study reported on the gender differences in the conflict resolution process. The husbands were more of collaboration adopters and wives were accommodation adopters. The results were according to their gender role expectation where men think and act on problem situation providing justice to both the parties whereas women accordingly with their gender role expectation sacrifice their needs for the sake of others. The study was restricted to only the dual earning families; hence the future research on comparison between the single earner and dual earner families on their conflict management can be undertaken. The perception of couples, superiors and subordinates of conflict management strategies among dual earning couples could also be undertaken as a research area.

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Tables

Table 1a. Individual characteristic of the respondents

Sl. No	Individual variables	Husband (n=150)		Wife (n=150)		Total (N=300)	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
1.	Age(years)						
	25-34	28	18.7	58	38.67	86	28.66
	35-44	62	41.3	58	38.67	120	40.00
	45-54	44	29.3	34	22.66	78	26.00
	55-60	16	10.7	-	-	16	5.34
2.	Education						
	P.U.C	29	19.3	36	24	65	21.67
	Graduation	40	26.7	13	8.7	53	17.66
	Post-graduation	47	31.3	74	49.3	121	40.33
	Doctorate	34	22.7	27	18.00	61	20.34
3.	a. Occupation						
	Services in central/state	71	47.34	65	43.33	136	45.34

Sl. No	Individual variables	Husband (n=150)		Wife (n=150)		Total (N=300)	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
	Government Services in private sector	79	52.66	85	56.67	164	54.66
	b. Occupation						
	Teachers	50	33.34	150	100.00	200	66.66
	Non teachers	100	66.66	-	-	100	33.34
4.	Income level						
	20000-49999	27	18.0	5	3.33	32	10.66
	10000-199999	52	34.7	48	32.00	100	33.33
	5000-9999	40	26.6	40	26.67	80	26.67
	>5000	31	20.7	58	38	88	29.34

Table 1b. Familial characteristics of couples

Sl.no.	Familial characteristics	Total (N=300)	
		F	%
1.	Caste		
	Upper caste	82	54.77
	OBC	44	29.33
	Dalits	15	10.00
	Tribals	9	6.00
2.	Number of children		
	1	53	35.34
	2	68	45.33
	3 or more	29	19.33
3.	Family size		
	Small	86	57.33
	Large	64	42.77
4.	Length of marriage		
	3-12	70	46.67
	13-23	54	36.00
	24-33	26	17.33

Table 2. Status and comparison of couples on conflict resolution strategies

Conflict management style	High		Low		χ^2
	Husband	Wife	Husband	Wife	
Competition	30(20.00)	25(16.70)	120(80.00)	125(83.30)	4.72 ^{NS}
Collaboration	82(54.70)	67(44.70)	68(45.30)	83(55.30)	11.71 ^{**}
Compromise	52(34.70)	55(36.70)	98(65.30)	95(63.30)	6.19 ^{NS}
Avoidance	63(42.0)	52(34.7)	87(58.0)	98(65.3)	7.97 ^{**}
Accommodation	86(57.3)	99(66.0)	64(42.7)	51(34.0)	10.80 ^{**}

Figures in the parentheses indicate percentage

** - Significant at 0.01 level

NS- Non-significant

Table 3 Preferred strategy of conflict resolution among husbands and wives

Strategies	Husband (n=150)			Wife (n=150)		
	M	SD	Rank	M	SD	Rank
Competition	40.56	11.47	V	38.71	11.28	V
Collaboration	50.42	7.23	I	50.31	8.01	II
Compromise	47.29	8.06	IV	47.49	7.31	III
Avoidance	49.07	7.91	III	47.36	7.61	IV
Accommodation	49.68	10.23	II	52.94	9.02	I

Table 4. Relationship between demographic characteristics and conflict resolution strategies among working couples

Demographic variables	Conflict resolution strategies									
	Competition		Collaboration		Compromise		Avoidance		Accommodation	
	Husbands	Wives	Husbands	Wives	Husbands	Wives	Husbands	Wives	Husbands	Wives
Age	-0.05	0.03	0.07	0.02	0.09	0.0131	-0.08	-0.009	0.02	-0.168*
Education	-0.05	0.001	0.059	0.02	0.01	0.042	-0.007	-0.115	0.022	0.066
Occupation	0.007	0.012	-0.176	0.012	0.084	-0.030	0.027	-0.045	-0.015	0.055
Income	0.078	0.113	-0.133	0.054	-0.011	-0.147	-0.110	0.233*	0.133	0.084
Number of children	-0.077	0.035	0.094	0.005	-0.061	-0.071	-0.049	-0.048	0.086	0.133
Family size	-0.053	0.106	-0.033	0.069	-0.186*	-0.143	0.176*	0.06	0.087	0.243*
Length of marriage	-0.077	0.092	-0.051	0.010	-0.046	-0.027	0.023	0.06	0.124	0.05
Caste	0.008	0.17*	-0.057	0.016	0.105	-0.091	0.21	0.074	-0.097	0.168*

* - Significant at 0.05 level