

## Conflict Resolution Styles and Marital Satisfaction: A Dyadic Perspective

Bhawana Arya\* Neha Kaushik\*\*

### Abstract

*Interdependence is the essence of relational research. Members of a dyad exert mutual influences on the outcome experienced by both of them. The Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Kashy & Kenny, 1990; Kenny & Cook, 1999) emphasizes that the behaviors of both individuals in a dyadic relationship contribute to individual or relationship adjustment. These behaviors are thought to be interdependent, that is, the way one dyad member behaves with the other dyad member depends, to some extent, on the behavior of the other dyad member. This study examined the link between husbands' and wives' use of four conflict resolution styles (conflict engagement, withdrawal, positive problem solving and compliance) and each spouse's marital satisfaction. Subjects were 100 married couples. The unit of analysis was a dyad. Actor and partner effects were calculated using the APIM. The way couples resolve conflict has often cited to be an important variable in predicting the relationship satisfaction. Results revealed significant actor and partner effects for withdrawal.*

**Key Words :** Conflict Resolution Styles, APIM, Relationship Satisfaction

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*About Authors:* \*Assistant Professor, Dept. of Psychology, The IIS University, Jaipur

\*\*Counsellor, The IIS University, Jaipur

### Introduction

Personal relationships are central to human being and forming these relationships is an innate and biological component of human behavior (Guerrero, Anderson & Afifi, 2011). Research on interpersonal relationships is the need of the hour as the quality of relationship has a great impact on the lives of people. All interpersonal relations occur at the basic unit of a dyad. According to Becker and Useem (1942), "two persons may be classified as a dyad when intimate, face-to-face relations have persisted over a length of time sufficient for the establishment of a discern-able pattern of interacting personalities". Although dyadic relationships are most commonly studied in married and dating couples, friends can also be considered as a dyad. Family relationships such as siblings, mother-child, father-child also have a strong dyadic component (De Paula & Kashy, 1998).

In relational research, behavior of both members of a dyad should be included. The need to focus on the behavior of both individuals in a dyadic relationship has been stressed by many researchers (Kashy & Kenny, 1990; Kenny & Cook, 1999; Stafford & Bayer, 1993). The dynamics of interpersonal relationships cannot be completely understood without giving due importance to interdependence. Interdependence theory, first proposed by Thibaut & Kelly (1959) explains the ways in which people in interpersonal situations choose among the potential courses of action. The theory also explains the role of individual differences in people's responses to such situations of interdependence. According to the interdependence theory, there is a huge potential of mutual influences (Kelly et. al., 1983). Mutual influences are often ignored in relationship researches, which is an important aspect of dyadic relationships.

In the Actor Partner Model, each unit of the dyad is an actor and a partner at the same time. When the researcher is focused on the relationship between wife's predictor variable and her outcome variable, it is the 'actor effect'. When the researcher is interested in establishing the relationship between the husband's predictor variable and the wife's outcome variable, it is the 'partner effect'.

APIM is the respectable procedure when the researchers want to assess the interrelationship among spouses (specifically, how one dyad member predicts the other member's data) (Gonzalez & Griffin, 2001). The Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM; Cook & Kenny, 2005) is a dyadic data analytic approach used to measure interdependence within interpersonal relationships. According to Kashy & Kenny (1999) "the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model is a model that explores the dyadic relationships which integrates a conceptual view of interdependence in two person relationships with the appropriate statistical techniques for measuring and testing it". APIM assumes that people in dyadic relationships influence each other because they belong to the same interpersonal system.

Married couples are the strongest example of a dyad within the Indian societal framework. Legally, marriage can be defined as a relationship between two individuals in order to fulfill material, sexual and psychological needs (Sexton, 1992). Interactions between married partners provide a rich contextual background to study the mutual influences that both the partners exert on the quality of the relationship. Marital satisfaction is the most important indicator of the quality of marriage (Fincham & Linfield, 1997) and is mainly results from the subjective evaluation of the relationship.

Marriage, like any other intimate relationship is prone to conflict. Conflict is "an

expressed struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce rewards, or interference from the other party in achieving their goals" (Hocker & Wilmot, 1995, p.41). The way conflicts are managed by the members of a dyad goes a long way in predicting the overall quality of relationship. Properly managed conflicts lead to enhancement of quality in relationship. Research shows that the manner in which a couple resolves conflict has an influence on their ability to be happy and successful in the relationship (Gottman, 1994a). Kurdek (1995) has identified that conflict resolution styles are linked with couple's marital satisfaction. Also, there is considerable research on individual differences in conflict management. Conflict resolution varies from couple to couple (Edgar, 2013). There is ample empirical evidence to show that the relationship quality in a married couple is affected by the conflict management styles of both the partners (Kurdek, 1995; Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006).

#### **Objective**

- To examine the actor and partner effects of conflict resolution on relationship satisfaction.

#### **Hypotheses**

Based on the review of literature the following hypotheses were proposed to be tested in the current research

- H1a There will be significant 'actor effect' of withdrawal on relationship satisfaction.
- H1b There will be significant 'actor effect' of conflict engagement on relationship satisfaction.
- H1c There will be significant 'actor effect' of compliance on relationship satisfaction.
- H1d There will be significant 'actor effect' of positive problem solving on relationship satisfaction.
- H2a There will be significant 'partner effect' of withdrawal on relationship satisfaction.

- H2b There will be significant 'partner effect' of conflict engagement on relationship satisfaction.
- H3c There will be significant 'partner effect' of compliance on relationship satisfaction
- H4d There will be significant 'partner effect' of positive problem solving on relationship satisfaction.

## Method

### Sample

The sample for the current study comprised 100 married couples in the age range of 30-45 years with minimum 3 years of marriage. The sample had minimum 1 and maximum 3 children. All couples were living together and minimum education for all of them was graduation. All wives were homemakers and none of the spouse was a problem drinker and had no psychiatric history.

### Measures

**The Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale (RDAS)** (Busby et.al, 1995) is a self-report questionnaire that assesses seven dimensions of couple relationships within three overarching categories including *Consensus* in *decision making, values* and *affection*, *Satisfaction* in the relationship with respect to *stability* and *conflict regulation*, and *Cohesion* as seen through *activities* and *discussion*. The RDAS includes only 14 items, each of which asks the respondents to rate certain aspects of her/his relationship on a 5 or 6 point scale. Scores on the RDAS range from 0 to 69 with higher scores indicating greater relationship satisfaction and lower scores indicating greater relationship distress. The cut-off score for the RDAS is 48 such that scores of 48 and above indicate non-distress and scores of 47 and below indicate marital/relationship distress. The RDAS has been found to have a Cronbach's alpha (reliability) of .90. Construct validity for the

RDAS is supported by its high correlation with a similar measure, the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (MAT).

**Conflict Resolution Style Inventory [CRSI]**(Kurdek, 1994), consists of overall 16 items which then divide into four subscales given by Gottman & Krokoff (1989). The four subscales are conflict engagement, withdrawal, compliance, and positive problem solving. Participants are asked to note their degree of disagreement and agreement. Scoring is done for four subscales by averaging the four items of each subscale to get corresponding four scores to each conflict style. Cronbach's alpha reliability is used.

### Procedure

In order to test the hypotheses, data were collected from married couples by means of questionnaires. Questionnaires were selected to form the basis of this research as they are relatively time and cost effective, and can be administered to a small population with ease. The questionnaires used in this study were unspecified to reduce the possibilities that respondents would modify their answers to be in accordance with perceived societal expectations. Data were collected from married couples who give their consent to participate in the study. The completed questionnaires were collected.

### Results

The current study was conducted with the aim to study the dyadic relationship between conflict resolution and marital satisfaction in married couples. Descriptive statistics for the measures are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Means and SDs of Forgiveness and Marital Satisfaction**

	Variables	Male		Female		Cronbach's	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Male	Female
Conflict Resolution Styles	Withdrawal	8.15	2.61	8.11	2.83	.73	.76
	Conflict Engagement	14.41	3.79	13.38	3.47	.88	.80
	Compliance	10.20	3.56	9.43	3.47	.78	.79
	Positive Problem Solving	11.25	5.39	9.88	2.84	.76	.78
	Relationship Satisfaction	53.67	9.49	56.82	10.52	.82	.84

**Table 2: Correlation between Conflict Resolution and Relationship Satisfaction**

Variables	RDAS
Conflict Engagement (Self)	-.18
Withdrawal (Self)	-.25*
Positive Problem Solving (Self)	-.13
Compliance (Self)	.34**
Conflict Engagement (Partner)	-.20
Withdrawal (Partner)	-.22*
Positive Problem Solving (Partner)	.16
Compliance (Partner)	.11

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level

A test of the Pearson correlation was used to address the relationship between conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction. The test was found to be statistically significant indicating that actor's scores on positive problem solving and compliance are significantly related to the scores on relationship satisfaction. Also no

significant association can be seen between partner's scores on conflict engagement, withdrawal, positive problem solving and compliance & relationship satisfaction, which means that only the self- scores on conflict resolution are significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction.

**Table 3: Actor and partner effects of Conflict Resolution on Actor's Relationship Satisfaction**

Variables	b	T	p
Actor Conflict Engagement	1.28	1.74	.60
Actor Withdrawal	-1.31	2.48	.017*
Actor Positive Problem Solving	.186	1.52	.142
Actor Compliance	.175	1.79	.076
Partner Conflict Engagement	.087	.768	.44
Partner Withdrawal	-.197	2.13	.031*
Partner Positive Problem Solving	.020	.267	.790
Partner Compliance	.136	1.28	.181

To test the hypotheses APIM analysis were conducted to test the predictive power of conflict resolution styles of self and partner on relationship satisfaction. Correlation between the outcome measure of both the partners is the prerequisite for assuming interdependence. As we correlate the outcome variable of both the members it was found that marital satisfaction scores of both the partners are significantly positively correlated ( $r=.77$ ,  $N=100$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The data qualifies for interdependence and dyad is kept as a unit of analysis. The fixed effects were actor and partner score on conflict engagement, withdrawal, positive problem solving and compliance and the outcome variable was relationship satisfaction.

Table 3, reveals the APIM analysis of dyadic adjustment in the prediction of relationship satisfaction. Hypotheses H1a and H2a were retained and results show that actor effects ( $b= 1.31$ ,  $p= .017$ ) and partner effects ( $b= .197$ ,  $p= .031$ ) for withdrawal are found significant. However, the actor effects for conflict engagement ( $b= 1.28$ ,  $p= .60$ ), positive problem solving ( $b= .186$ ,  $p= .142$ ) and compliance ( $b= .175$ ,  $p= .076$ ) are not significant. Similarly, the partner effects are not significant for conflict engagement ( $b= .087$ ,  $p= .44$ ), positive problem solving ( $b= .020$ ,  $p= .790$ ) and compliance ( $b= .136$ ,  $p= .181$ ). This showed that the self and partner reports of withdrawal significantly predict relationship satisfaction. Also, the self and partner scores of conflict engagement, positive problem solving and compliance are significant predictors of relationship satisfaction.

The results revealed significant actor and partner effects of withdrawal conflict resolution style on relationship satisfaction.

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine the dyadic relationship between conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction in married couples. Previous studies in the area of relationship satisfaction in marital relations are based only on the actor effects and completely ignore partner effects. To overcome this lacuna, the present study is based on APIM and the dyad is treated as the unit of analysis.

Results indicated significant negative actor effects of withdrawal for relationship satisfaction. This indicates that the outcome variable is significantly predicted by self-report of conflict resolution. Self reported conflict resolution style of withdrawal was found to be a significant negative predictor of relationship satisfaction. This implied that the more a person uses withdrawal in face of interpersonal conflict, the lesser is his/her relationship satisfaction. None of the other styles of resolving conflict were found to be significantly associated with relationship satisfaction.

Results also indicated significant negative partner effects of withdrawal for relationship satisfaction. The relationship satisfaction was significantly predicted by the withdrawal scores reported by the spouse implying that the if the spouse indulged in withdrawal while resolving conflict, the reported marital satisfaction was low.

**Table 4: Actor and Partner effects for Conflict Resolution on Relationship Satisfaction**

Variables	Actor	Partner
Conflict Engagement	Not Significant	Not Significant
Withdrawal	Significant*	Significant*
Positive Problem Solving	Not Significant	Not Significant
Compliance	Not Significant	Not Significant

Withdrawal is a negative style of conflict resolution and there is ample empirical evidence to support the results that couples who report high levels of negative conflict resolution styles have low levels of relationship satisfaction. Similarly, the results of the study showed that a partner's withdrawal conflict resolution style is significantly associated with actor's relationship satisfaction. The withdrawal style includes behaviours like refusal to talk for long periods, refusal to continue a discussion, shutting down the other spouse and withdrawing, and acting in a distant and disinterested manner. These behaviours prevent a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Even if one partner is willing to resolve the conflict, the withdrawal style used by the other partner leads to poor outcomes.

Each spouse's marital satisfaction is positively related to the frequency with each spouse uses constructive strategies to resolve conflict and negatively related to the frequency with which each spouse uses destructive strategies to resolve conflict. Earlier exploration by various researchers shows that couples differ in their tendencies to adopt various conflict styles at individual and dyadic levels (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006). As Canary (2003) aptly observed, "individuals in conflict are affected by the patterns of interaction they themselves help to create" (p. 541). Spouses' relationship conflicts are not only predicted by their own prior behaviors, but by the partners' behaviors as well (Canary, Cupach, & Serpe, 2001).

### Conclusion

To summarize marital satisfaction is positively associated with positively toned conflict resolution style when used by the self as well as by the spouse. In an intimate dyad like a married couple negative styles of conflict resolution tend to generate a lot of negative emotions when used by self or by the partners.

The impact of conflict resolution styles may be mediated by the communication between the partners. Though the mediation effect was beyond the scope of present study but there is ample empirical evidence to show the association between marital conflict behaviours and communications between the partners. Hence, positive and negative conflict behaviours are not only potentially consequential for the satisfaction of the person performing them but also consequential for the relationship satisfaction of the partner in terms of conflict communications.

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