
RESOLVING MARITAL CONFLICTS

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DOI: 10.1515/seeur-2017-0005

Abstract

Couple relations are characterized as relations of an intimate nature dominated by constant interaction or strong interdependence and mutual influence of intense feelings between spouses. In marriages where there is conflict, there are typical examples of interaction, which result in high proportion of negative communicative acts that affect the quality of marital relationships such as: loss of confidence, the emergence of frustration, feelings of anxiety, discomfort, leading to escalation of marital conflicts. Communication as a variable has a large impact on the resolution of marital conflicts. The obtained results of our research indicate that the choice of different strategies of behavior in conflict situations among our respondents primarily depend on: the degree of persistence in the pursuit of its own interests and level of cooperation in addressing the interests of others.

In accordance with the model of behavior in conflict situations, spouses also chose the styles for resolving them. Spouses who perceive (consider) that they communicate openly unlike spouses who do not practice open communication, use the competition as a model of behavior in conflict situations and support rivalry as a style for conflict resolution. The choice of rivalry style as a style for resolving marital conflicts, among our respondents appears as a reflection of expressed wish for having an open fight for the realization of their interests, especially when it comes to the limitation of their

rights by their spouses, failure to fulfill the emotional needs (lack of love, care, attention, understanding).

But, the duration of the marital relationship as a dimension does not affect the use of certain styles for resolving marital conflicts among our respondents.

Keywords: *marital conflict, communication, duration of marriage, styles of conflict resolution.*

Introduction

Marital conflicts arise as a result of disagreements between spouses in the process of cooperation, interaction and everyday communication. The dynamics of the conflict initially affects the formation of conflict situation that reflects on both spouses to have conflicting tendencies toward an object, even though both are aware that only one will be able to meet its own needs.

Nowadays, we are confronted with the fact that many marriages are conflicting due to the decline of basic human values, leading to changes in the marital and family system, regardless of whether it comes to its structure, meaning and function. The problem of partnership conflicts is one of the key topics in the area of partnership relations research.

Conflicts are part of married life like any other close relationship. They are a result of incompatible needs, desires, goals and interests. (Straus, 2005; Wilmot and Hocker, 2007). Interaction as a basic feature of all close relationships causes the mismatch to be inevitable and highly visible. The emergence of conflicts in married life is normal, because they lead to the strengthening of the relation, hence the marriage becomes more stable than before.

What really disrupt the conjugal relations are unresolved marital conflicts or their neglecting and use of inappropriate styles for resolving them. Starting from the need to deepen the knowledge about the quality of partnership, it is necessary for the spouses to know how to overcome partner conflicts. Knowledge and use of appropriate styles of conflict resolution has a major impact on the stability, satisfaction and quality of the marital relationship. (Notarius and assoc., 1997).

Stability is one of the most important features of a marriage. It is a dimension in which at one end there is a stable marriage while at the opposite end of the same dimension is an unstable marriage which is usually characterized by high levels of conflicts, which often ends with a disturbed marital relationship or divorce. All existing marital relations are placed somewhere between the

two endpoints of this dimension. However, the stability of a marriage is a dynamic feature, which oscillates and changes over time (Šakotić -Kurbalija, 2011).

A stable marriage encourages the spouses to deal positively with their conflicts, to feel happy, to control and to reflect positive emotional climate. The stability of a marriage is also highly dependent on the performance of the spouses as well as their attitudes towards the concept of conflict. Spouses who have positive attitudes towards a conflict, have a more stable marriage, because they are able to deal with their marital conflict which strengthens their marriage, creating a common system of values, beliefs and purpose that affects spouses to further integrate between themselves.

Commitment and maintaining the marital relationship is an important motive for partners to find appropriate styles for resolving and transforming mutual conflicts. It really matters for partners how the conflict will affect their behavior, but how it will be perceived and interpreted by them. All listed items have a major impact on spouses in terms of whether they will have a constructive or negative approach to the conflict.

Of special importance is the way the partners who participate in a conflictual situation experience the conflict, because the consequences of the previous conflict are also felt on the new one. When the conflicts are suppressed by the spouses, the same unconsciously and in an uncontrolled manner disrupt the marital relations and affect the appearance of psychosomatic disorders, and diseases among spouses. But if conflicts are retained for a long time in the married life of partners, they ruin the marriage and that marriage slowly or suddenly disappears.

Literature review

Intensive research on interpersonal conflicts began in the 60s of the last century, while their study is dating back to the 20s of the same century. Results of many studies confirm the thesis that the greatest indicator of long-term success in any relationship is how spouses handle their conflicts, rather than how they support each other and express their love in peaceful times with no problems and conflicts (Gottman, 1994).

Recent research shows that women unlike men are less satisfied with marriage because men have lower expectations from marriage than women (satisfaction is an important component of the quality of the marriage (Karney and Bradbury, 1995).

Many studies examined how spouses communicate with each other (Gottman, and Krokoff, 1989) and the impact of these interactions of satisfaction in marriage, with a variety of positive interactions (e.g. compliment, respect or admiration, smile, kissing) and negative interactions (criticism, sarcasm, contempt).

The investigation of communication is oriented towards different specific components of this concept, both verbal and nonverbal communication, openness, assertiveness, active listening, empathy and respect for the styles of communication. However, the most common research problem of communication in intimate relationships is to resolve conflicts and problems between spouses. Communicative competence is one of the variables that are involved in studying the quality of marriage, because it is a feature that leads to better interpretation of their own behavior and the behavior of partner in every aspect of relationships that can result in improving the quality of communication between partners, but also the quality of relationships in general.

The research conducted so far shows that as time goes by, the quality of partnership changes (Vaillant and Vaillant, 1993 .; Markides and assoc., 1999).

The initial hypothesis of this study is that the partners, depending on the length of the marriage, use different strategies for resolving the conflicts. Partners that live together for a longer period of time use both verbal and physical aggression.

Partners that live together for a shorter period of time, deal better with conflicts, because they avoid them or they give in at resolving the marital conflicts. The results of various studies partially confirm or deny this assumption. But some studies suggest that over the duration of the marriage, the frequency of conflicts between partners is increasing, thus losing self-control and calmness during the conflict (Canary and assoc. 2001.; Stafford and assoc., 2004th).

Solving the marital conflicts

Studies have shown that the behavior of the spouses during the conflict varies widely depending on whether you have harmonious or inharmonious emotional marriage. What strategies will the spouses use in conflict resolution, primarily depends on the nature of their relationship (Canary and assoc. 1995). Furthermore, how the spouses will behave in conflict situations depends a lot on their personality (Canary and assoc. 1995 .; Holmes and Murry, 1995.). In harmonious marriages spouses use cooperative behavior where physical

aggression is less manifested. In undermined marriages even the presence of minor problems causes a conflict that rapidly amplifies and increases, and is also hard to solve. It was found that in disrupted marriages the most typical form of behavior is rivalry or withdrawal. In such marriages, usually a spouse puts pressure on the other partner to meet his/her needs, which irritates the conflict. (Čudina-Obradović and Obradović, 2005).

Often the style of affective relationship between the spouses is an important indicator of appearance of conflicts in marriage, because spouses who have established strong affective ties are prone to compromise in case of misunderstandings and conflicts.

According to the theory of social exchange, which is one of the oldest theories developed by social psychologists Thibaut and Kelley (1959th, according to Obradović and Čudina-Obradović, 1998), the quality of social and marital relationships varies depending on their development period. Three elements determine their development, and they are: the attraction between partners, barriers to cessation of the partnership, and the alternative attraction out of the partnership.

In early married life, partnership relations are developed with high quality, followed by a period of stagnation and when there is no external intervention or change, partnership relations deteriorate, i.e. their quality declines. There are four kinds of relationships between the quality of marital life and marital stability:

- First, high quality, high stability;
- Second, high quality, low stability;
- Third, low quality, high stability, and
- Fourth, low quality and low stability.

An example of low quality and high stability shows spouses who abuse each other. Women often leave the marriage very hard, even though they suffer and are abused by their spouses. Thibaut i Kelley (1959, according Obradović i Čudina-Obradović, 1998).

The theory of marriage and family crisis that is based on Hill's ABCX model since 1949, explains the reaction of the family in stressful situations (according to Karney and Bradbury, 1995.) who asks the question why some marriages and families satisfactorily resolved marriage and family crises apart from others who possess less capability in resolving these conflicts, where consequently occur conflicts in marriage and social relations. According to this model every stressful event (A) requires certain adaptation. The family

has various resources (B) to handle the stressful event and sets different definitions (C). The nature of the crisis (X) determines the level of resources that the family possesses to overcome the stressful event.

Karney and Bradbury (1995) proposed a new theoretical model, trying to explain the quality of married life and family life. Their model consists of several elements, and they are:

- Permanent vulnerability of spouses;
- Stressful events, and
- Adaptive processes.

The permanent vulnerability of spouses originates from premarital period or the previous experience the spouses carry with them, their personality and level of education. For example, children who come from unstable marriages, in a mature age with their spouses, behave in accordance to how they perceived the behavior of their parents in their childhood. Such individuals in adulthood have less developed social skills and have difficulty in communicating with the partners, which directly reflects the quality of their marital life.

Stressful events affect the quality of marital relationship, for example, job loss, unpleasant experiences outside the family, etc. Stress interacts with adaptation. The presence of stress and vulnerability among spouses affects the adaptability of these partners.

Also, the quality of the marital relationship depends on the characteristics of the spouses, quality of marital processes and marital environment, respectively from the environment of the spouses themselves).

Marital communication

Concept of communication (Klaič, 1979, 718) is derived from Latin *communicare* - and has several meanings: communication, presentation, lecture; to communicate is to announce, to deliver, to be connected. In a broader sense the word *communication* means exchange of messages between two or more persons, or between the provider and the recipient during the communication process.

Marital and family atmosphere primarily depend on the quality of marital relationships, the psychological consequences of marital conflicts, communication and interaction between spouses and other family members. An important role in creating a quality marital and family atmosphere ülays the marital and family communication; it must be direct, open, clear and unambiguous. Brajša (1979) Bečvář & Bečvář (1996) emphasizes the need

for existence of congruent communication, meaning a clear verbalization of what you are thinking, feeling and experiencing. On the other side, the incongruent communication is an ambiguous, indirect communication and is typical for spouses who have disrupted marital and family relations. When the level of communication (process and content) does not match, it results in problems that disrupt the marital psychodynamics and its functionality (Bečvář & Bečvář, 1996).

The research of Olson & Olson (2000) shows that “happy” and “unhappy marriages” are distinguished by the quality of communication. Happy partners communicate openly and honestly, trying to solve problems, and to share their opinion, show mutual understanding, emotion, tolerance and honesty. While unhappy partners avoid or ignore conflicts, blame each other, i.e. manage them in the wrong way.

Through communication spouses convey the mutual information providing that to be accepted and understood. The function of communication is the expression of one’s own emotions, ways of behavior, modification, change, implementation, achieving productivity, information and objectives. Transferring information from one person to another is a necessary process to talk about emotional experiences, needs of the spouses and the family. Communication is a mean of connection between the spouses in order to accomplish and coordinate their common goals and interests, because responsibilities, needs and other marital obligations cannot be achieved without communication.

In literature there are three types of communication, which differ from one-another and have different effects on the quality of the partnership and marriage (Alberti & Emons, 1990, according to Čudina-Obradović and Obradović, 2005). They are:

- assertive (intrusive)
- passive and
- aggressive communication.

Assertive communication is open, straightforward, which is characterized by expression of thoughts, attitudes and feelings related to the subject of debate. Assertive individuals have high self-esteem and positive thoughts for themselves.

Passive communication is typical for individuals who are afraid or unwilling to openly express their opinions, which complicates the communication.

The third type of marital communication is aggressive communication. With

this type of communication the partner wants to insult or humiliate his/her partner, who also can react aggressively, which often breaks the partnership and deepens the conflicts and misunderstandings. (Čudina-Obradović and Obradović, 2005).

Honest communication between spouses can be an indicator of a successful way of resolving conflicts. Reflection of honest communication is maintaining the level of respect and appreciation between spouses. Sometimes, during the conflict with the partner, we might offend him/her, slam the door or leave the room. Although this type of behavior might seem like a good idea, we should not forget that the person you'll insult is your spouse. Insulting the partner can also leave deep scars that will affect the quality of the relationship. When a conflict occurs, it is difficult to see a way out of this situation. But with an open and direct communication spouses express their opinions and views on the existing conflict, discuss whether and to what extent the proposed solution is suitable for both spouses or seek other creative acceptable solutions.

Methodology

The aim of our study is to learn about the couple's conflict situations and their personal experience in using beneficial models of behavior for resolving them. Our sample consists of forty couples (eighty participants) who seek couples counseling at the Centre for Social Affairs in Tetovo over a period of one year.

Thomas-Kilman Conflict Mode Instrument (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974) is completed by each participant. This instrument consists of thirty paired items and measures five choices people use in conflict situations which are called conflict handling modes or styles of conflict resolution. They are rivalry, cooperation, compromise, avoidance and adaptation. This instrument is for diagnosis of conduct in conflict situations that aims to diagnose how much the spouses have potential to show constructive or destructive behavior during conflict resolution.

For the description of the type of behavior of individuals in a conflict situation, the author uses a two-dimensional model of conflict behavior for settling down the conflicts; where as a main dimension comes the cooperation as a positive behavior and competition as a negative behavior. The questionnaire is prepared specifically for our research and aims to collect data for the couples communication and durations of their marriage. Styles of conflict resolutions (rivalry, cooperation, compromise, avoidance and adaptation) are defined

according to the model of behavior in conflict situations.

The study of this problem imposes the application of methods and techniques for collecting, processing and interpreting data. The theoretical and practical analysis of the data will contribute to the discovery of relations established in the hypothetical system, i.e. what behavior models and styles for resolving marital conflicts spouses use, and whether there are statistical differences in the use of certain styles of conflict resolution depending on how spouses communicate and the duration of the marriage.

Discussion of Results

There are major differences in the use of certain styles of resolving marital conflicts depending on how the partners communicate with each other.

The results of our study suggest that the choice of different strategies of behavior in conflict situations among our respondents primarily depends on: the degree of persistence in the pursuit of its own interests and level of cooperation in addressing the interests of others.

The obtained results of the research indicate that the amount of value for t and p for the rivalry style indicates that the differences between the arithmetic means were statistically significant ($t = 2,117$ and $p < 0.05$). There are differences between spouses who openly communicate and spouses who do not practice open communication in rivalry style. Spouses who openly communicate apart from spouses who are not practicing open communication use rivalry as a style of conflict resolution to a greater extent.

Regarding the style of compromise ($t = - 0,656$ and $p > 0.05$), adaptation ($t = - 1, 399$ and $p > 0.05$), avoidance ($t = 1,217$ and $p > 0.05$) and cooperation ($t = - 1 784$ and $p > 0.05$) did not reach critical values for statistical significance, which would go in favor of the existence of differences.

The only differences occur in terms of rivalry style which is often used by spouses who practice open communication.

Spouses who perceive (consider) that they communicate openly opposed to spouses who do not practice open communication to a greater extent support rivalry as a style of conflict resolution. The obtained results show that during the resolving of marital conflicts, prevails the competition as a way of behavior that affects the choice of styles of conflict resolution.

The question is, Do spouses who have an open communication use rivalry as a style for resolving the marital conflicts?

Rivalry as a style for resolving marital conflicts among our respondents appears as a reflection of their wish to have an open struggle for the realization of their interests especially when it comes to limiting their rights by their spouses, in particular, failure to meet emotional needs (lack of love, care, attention, understanding). The choosing of rivalry style by our respondents indicates that they communicate openly, but they don't have enough developed positive communication skills. Underdeveloped communication skills of these partners come as a result of the low level of cohesiveness which is manifested by weak emotional connection between the spouses as well as underdeveloped adaptability.

Are there significant differences in the use of certain styles of conflict resolution depending on the duration of the partnership?

From the obtained results it can be concluded that the value level for t and p , doesn't reach critical values for statistical significance, which would go in favor of the existence of differences. The amount of t and p statistics for the styles: rivalry ($t = 1,174$ and $p > 0.01$), collaboration style ($t = 0,515$ and $p > 0.01$), avoidance style ($t = 0,599$ and $p > 0.01$) adaptation style ($t = 0,437$ and $p > 0.01$) and compromise style suggest that the differences between the arithmetic means are statistically insignificant ($t = 0,597$ and $p > 0.01$).

The analysis of the descriptive statistics in terms of styles of conflict resolution obtained on the scale for measuring the styles of conflict resolution among respondents, depending on the length of the marriage of 10-20 and 20-30 years show that they use avoidance as a dominant style and rivalry style the least, unlike spouses who live together from 5-10 years as the dominant style they use collaboration style and less the compromise style. Among respondents whose total duration of the marriage is up to 5 years, and respondents whose total duration of marriage is between 5 to 10 years there are differences in the use of rivalry style, which means that the time frame - as a dimension does not affect the way how the spouses perceive, experience and resolve their conflicts.

Conclusions

- The results show that our respondents use competition as a way of behavior in conflict situations which increases the tendency to satisfy their own interests and needs, while reducing the level of cooperation for solving mutual conflicts and interests.

- The choice of rivalry style as a style for resolving marital conflicts among our respondents appears to reflect their wish to have an open struggle for the realization of their interests, especially when it comes to limitation of the rights by spouses, and failure to meet the emotional needs (lack of love, commitment, understanding, etc.). Even though spouses openly communicate, they aspire to dominate in conflict situations, showing low aspiration for the realization of common goals and interests.
- The way spouses communicate has a role in assessing the frequency and use of individual styles of behavior of spouses in partnership conflicts.
- In order for the spouses to have assertive, open, direct communication, which is characterized by expression of thoughts, opinions and feelings, it is necessary to draw up programs and organize workshops to improve the quality of communication between spouses or influence increase of awareness of similarities and differences for the communication styles between partners.
- The partners since the premarital life should be included in these programs and workshops designed to teach and practice communication skills before they create and invest in close relationships with others.

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