Effective Conflict Resolution Strategies Essential for Marital Quality

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Abstract

The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed-methods research is to study the relationship between conflict resolution skills and marital quality. Researchers will use this data to proceed with the qualitative portion of this study to identify the most effective conflict resolution strategies in marital relationships. Initially participants will be administered the Marital Satisfaction Inventory—Revised. Researchers will use the data from this inventory to identify participants experiencing relatively high marital quality. Those participants will be selected to complete the qualitative portion of this study involving in-depth interviews conducted by researchers. Results of this study will help inform couples of beneficial conflict resolution skills to increase marital quality.

Keywords: marital quality, couples, conflict resolution skills
Introduction

There were 2,118,000 marriages in the United States in 2011; 6.8 per 1000 total population (Marriage and Divorce, 2014). In the same year there were 3.6 divorces for every 1000 people in the United States (Marriage and Divorce, 2014). There was one divorce for every two marriages in the United States in 2011; forever and always does not actually result in forever for half of all marriages in the U.S. This is startling news for the entire population because it is very likely a person will affected by divorce in some way in their lifetime. Marriage can be an extremely positive experience in a person’s life and can come with a variety of benefits.

“Compared with unmarried people, married men and women tend to have lower mortality, less risky behavior, more monitoring of health, more compliance with medical regimens, higher sexual frequency, more satisfaction with their sexual lives, more financial savings, and higher wages” (Bramlett & Mosher, 2001, p.1). However when half of marriages in the United States end in divorce, it may be difficult for some to desire marriage in the first place. Dissolution of marriage can be devastating to a person’s overall wellness and functioning and it can also cause a great disruption in their lives as well in the lives of people close to them such as children.

Couples’ conflict resolution strategies can greatly affect marital satisfaction implying they can be utilized as a defense against divorce if effective. If couples were able to manage effective conflict resolution strategies in their relationships perhaps they would maintain greater marital satisfaction resulting in less divorces. The purpose of this research is to understand the relationship between conflict resolution skills and marital quality and attempt to identify the most effective conflict resolution strategies in marital relationships.
Literature Review

All social relationships experience conflict, it is an essential aspect of human interaction. What can be done to safeguard specifically marital relationships in times of conflict to ensure stable marital quality and satisfaction for the long run? Two individuals simply maintaining a marriage is completely different from feelings of satisfaction, security, love and affection from both spouses in a marriage. Recognizing the importance of and placing value on the use of effective conflict resolution strategies in a marriage can significantly positively affect marital quality for both partners. Identification of these fundamental conflict resolution strategies is imperative, however in order to emphasize the seriousness of effective conflict resolution strategies in a marital relationship we must address the concern of why should we care?

High expectations of living happily ever after are placed on the social construct of marriage in the United States. It is a tough reality for some when they face challenges in their romantic relationship and, frankly, at a crossroads in their marriage perhaps because they may struggle to successfully move past stages of conflict. Being unaware of crucial conflict resolution strategies needed for marital quality is detrimental to a marital relationship, yet common. Wheeler, Updegraff, and Thayer (2010) noted “years of empirical research documenting the correlates of marital relationship quality have suggested that conflict management is a vital skill for marital satisfaction” (p. 991).

When productive conflict management skills are not present in a marital relationship the consequences can be devastating. Many consequences arise when effective conflict resolution strategies are not present in a marital relationship. One of the consequences that get a lot of attention is marriage dissolution. Swanson’s (2015) chart visually demonstrates divorce
occurring at alarming rates relative to the number of marriages occurring in the United States see Figure 1.

Figure 1. 144 Years of Marriage and Divorce in the United States


Divorce is unfortunately a known and well-used alternative for couples not in possession of principal conflict management skills. Other marital distress issues arising from the lack of or maladaptive conflict resolution strategies are poor mental health such as depression, couples not feeling understood or connected in their marriages, maladaptive child outcomes and harmful effects on children’s externalizing and internalizing behaviors (if the couple have children), and resorting to attacking and avoiding strategies in conflict resolution resulting in lower marital
satisfaction (Mead, 2002; Marchand & Hock, 2003; Busby & Holman, 2009). Effective conflict management skills provide a great protective factor against marital distress and the consequences that emerge along with marital distress.

The sources of conflict in marital relationships are infinitely wide and may involve finances, childbirth, and parenting among many other things. Some issues may be specific to the couple, while other things may be common conflicts all couples must work through at some point. The literature shines light on some major sources of conflict that couples must acknowledge and work through utilizing effective conflict management skills to maintain stable marital quality. Childbirth and parenthood may contribute significant sources of marital conflict if partners decide to have children. Castellano, Velotti, Crowell and Zavattini (2014) state “Childbirth represents a major life event in which couples have to negotiate extensive personal, familial, social, and often professional changes” (p. 1010). Many sources of conflict ensue with childbirth and parenting because of the inevitable shifts in the marital relationship. There will likely be a decrease in the amount of time partners will spend one-on-one without the child(ren) thus limiting vital communication in the marital relationship. The new roles of becoming parents may also contribute to conflict in a marital relationship due to the stressful and sometimes confusing aspect of shifting roles, especially for first time parents. Castellano, Velotti, Crowell and Zavattini (2014) noted the possible exacerbation of conflict in the marital relationship emerges from the newfound stress and reorganization of roles (p. 1010).

Another major source of conflict discussed in the literature is finances Papp, Cummings, and Goeke-Morey (2009) directly state “money tensions predict marital distress” (p. 91). The aspect of finances is prevalent throughout an entire marital relationship from dating through divorce. Couples are likely to experience marital quality when central issues regarding finances
are handled appropriately through applying effective conflict resolution strategies. There are potentially harmful or unhealthy consequences to marital quality if financial issues are not handled properly. An originally surprising notion Papp, Cummings, and Goeke-Morey (2009) explained that money was not considered to be the frequent source of conflict in the home, however marital conflicts over money remain the most stressful and threatening to marital functioning (p. 92).

One major concern discussed in the literature is what is being done to assist individuals in a marital relationship in identifying effective conflict management strategies and learning how to employ these strategies in a person’s marriage. There are protective factors discussed in the literature besides conflict management skills such as social support, however the overarching assistance most discussed for couples is marital therapy. The types of marital therapy are: Emotionally Focused Therapy, Cognitive Therapy, and Behavioral Marital Therapy and Depression (Eugene, 2002, p. 9-11). Marital therapy, used to promote healthy and effective conflict resolution skills, benefit marital relationships in numerous ways such as increased quality and satisfaction, communication, and a stronger bond. When couples complete treatment, they are better equipped to successfully overcome emerging conflicts due to the newfound identification or use of conflict management resolutions.

Strong, successful, and powerful marital bonds are founded on effective conflict resolution strategies. The literature identifies why this is crucial for our society to care about, possible outcomes for maladaptive conflict management skills, possible sources of conflict, and ways in which couples can receive assistance in identification and use of effective conflict resolution strategies. The significance of healthy marital relationships is immense due to the number of individuals who will be influenced by a marital relationship in their lives whether that
be directly in a marital relationship themselves, or being affected by marital relationships through their families and friends. The United States would greatly benefit from more advocacy and implementation of effective conflict resolution strategies.

**Methods**

Researchers will be questioning if conflict resolution skills have an effect on marital quality and attempting to identify the most effective conflict resolution strategies in marital relationships. The sample for this mixed-methods research design will be selected using snowball sampling of the accessible marital population in the state of Washington. The initial sample will be 150 heterosexual couples in marital relationships who have completed an initial quantitative assessment evaluating their marital quality. 50 couples out of those who have been identified as having successful marital relationships will be chosen using simple random sampling to participate in the qualitative portion of this research design. The couples who were eliminated either did not qualify due to not meeting successful marital relationship standards and/or were not chosen due to random sampling. The reduction to 50 couples will be purposely done to complete the qualitative portion of this research design to allow for exploration of context depth that is easier to attain than with a larger sample size. Researchers will strive for as much racial and ethnic diversity as possible within this research design’s sample participants. The qualitative portion of this research design involves quality interview with couples which aims to identify the most effective conflict management strategies, why they chose the strategies they did, and how they work for that couple in their marital relationship to ensure marital quality.

**Type of Design**

Researchers will be studying the relationship between conflict resolution skills and marital quality and attempting to identify the most effective conflict resolution strategies in marital relationships.
Researchers will be using a phenomenological explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design.

**Participants**

The target population in this research study is heterosexual couples in the state of Washington. The sample will be selected using criterion sampling. The initial sample will be 150 heterosexual couples in marital relationships who have completed an initial quantitative assessment evaluating their marital quality.

**Measurements**

The instrument researchers will administer to couples is the Marital Satisfaction Inventory—Revised (Snyder, 1998). Each partner will separately self-report. This inventory measures affective communication, problem-solving communication, disagreement about finances, and sexual dissatisfaction among other marital relationship dimensions. This inventory has been carefully selected due to its empirically demonstrated high reliability and high validity.

**Procedures**

50 couples out of those who have been identified as having successful marital relationships will be chosen using simple random sampling to participate in the qualitative portion of this research design. They will be randomly sampled in an attempt to eliminate any experimental confounds such as biases. The couples who were eliminated either did not qualify due to not meeting successful marital relationship standards and/or were not chosen due to random sampling. The reduction to 50 couples will be purposely done to complete the qualitative portion of this research design to allow for exploration of context depth that is easier to attain than with a larger sample size. Researchers will strive for as much racial and ethnic diversity as possible within this research design’s sample participants. The qualitative portion of this research design involves in-depth
interviews with couples aiming to identify the most effective conflict management strategies. Two
examples of questions researchers will ask are how do the couple’s conflict management strategies
enhance their marital quality, and what is each partner’s unique experience of their marital quality
due to their chosen conflict management skills.
References


