

**IMPACT OF GENDER DIFFERENCES IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT STYLES AMONG COUPLES**Mazhar Iqbal Bhatti<sup>1</sup> & Akhlaq Ahmad<sup>2</sup>**Abstract**

*The present study aimed to explore the impact of gender differences in conflict management styles among couples. A sample of 60 couples (N = 120) including husbands (n = 60) and wives (n = 60) chosen from different areas of Muzaffar Garh. The age of marriages ranged from 6 to 25 years with a mean of 15 years. The updated version of the DUTCH Test for Conflict Handling (De Dreu et al., 2001) was used to measure conflict management styles among married couples. It was hypothesized that husbands are more likely to adopt dominating, integrating and obliging conflict management styles as compared to wives and it was hypothesized that wives are more likely to adopt compromising and avoidance conflict management styles as compared to husbands. The result shows that husbands use dominating, integrating and obliging conflict management styles while wives use compromising and avoidance conflict management styles. Limitations and suggestions were also discussed at the end of the research.*

**Keywords:** couples, conflict management styles, gender differences, impact.

**INTRODUCTION**

Marriage is an important phase of life. Married couples have conflicts between them and these conflicts sometimes, create a situation where these become difficult for married couples to resolve because conflict resolution becomes difficult. According to Dzurgba (2006), the intrinsic inappropriateness between two or more individuals having different objectives is called conflict. Conflict is unstable and crucial by nature. A conflict between a married couple is also a social problem. It can break the marital relationship. It is the result of incongruity and disagreement related to some issues between married couples.

According to Albert (2005), conflict handling is a relational approach to overcoming conflict. In conflict management, interpersonal communication is used to resolve conflict and to reach a satisfactory agreement (Omoluabi, 2001). For the first time, conflict management was explained by Blake and Mouton (1964), who divided conflict handling into five major types, including forcing, compromising, withdrawing, problem-solving and smoothing. Conflict management is a process to reduce negative aspects of conflict by implementing different strategies (Rahim, 2002). Many models of conflict management have been studied in the past; one of them was given by Follett (1940), who found that a conflict has three dimensions including domination, integration, and compromise. Conflict handling such as avoidance and suppression were also found very effective.

Research work on conflict management styles suggest that women respond differently to conflict than men (Valentine, 1995). Mariner (1982), Barton and Rouhani (1991) found in a work setting

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that female nurses use more avoidance and less collaboration than their male counterparts. Blake and Mouton (1964) studied extensively conflict management and did much of this work on the conceptualization of management styles. Blake and Mouton (1964) suggest five conflict management styles including collaborating, avoiding, dominating, accommodating, and compromising (Rahim, 1983; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986).

Thomas and Kilmann (1976) described the conflict management styles include: accommodating, which work against one's own objective, goals, and desired outcomes, avoiding; it refers to when the person simply tries to deflect the issue. Likewise, the person does not help others to attain their objectives and not being assertive, collaborating; refers to pair up or cooperate with others to achieve goals, dominating; in this approach refers to a very assertive way to achieve goals, without seeking to cooperation from others, compromising: in which neither party really achieves what they want. This calls for a moderate degree of assertiveness and cooperation.

### **Socio-Cultural Background of Conflict Resolution Styles**

Communication plays a vital role in the conflict negotiation process. Various studies have supported individualism-collectivism as the major dimension of cultural variability that affects conflict communication (Chua, Gudykunst, et al., 1987). Ting-Toomey, Trubisky and Nishida (1989) found that members of individualistic cultures prefer direct conflict communication styles and solution-oriented styles more than members of collectivistic cultures. In addition, these researchers found that members of collectivistic culture tend to prefer conflict avoidance styles. Eventually, these researchers examined the relationship between conflict and culture within the frame of cultural variability dimension. By utilizing this framework the Chua and Gudykunst (1987) found that members in individualistic cultures such as the United States prefer a direct style of communication to cope with conflict situations while members of collectivistic cultures like Taiwan prefer indirect styles.

Overall, the evidence indicates that members of individualistic cultures tend to prefer conflict communication styles and resolution-oriented styles. These two styles tend to underscore the values of autonomy, competitiveness and the need for restraint. Conversely, members of collectivistic cultures tend to prefer obliging and conflict avoidance style. These two styles tend to accentuate the value for passive compliance and for maintaining relational harmony in conflict interactions.

### **Gender Differences in Conflict Management Style**

Conflict management styles have been studied with gender differences in a few studies (Portello & Long, 1994; Brewer, Keast, & Rishworth, 2002) according to Brewer et al. (2002) females were found to have to avoid conflict-handling style (Brewer et al., 2002) and males were found at dominating conflict management styles (Portello & Long, 1994). Another study also discovered the relationship between gender differences and conflict management style, but the relationship was weak (Antonioni, 1998). The same results were found in a study on women managers. Women managers significantly differ from men managers in conflict management styles, i.e. men managers were more used to dominating and less compromising conflict management styles (Korabik, Baril, & Watson, 1993). A study conducted by Sutschek (2001), revealed that males use integrating and obliging conflict management styles,

whereas these styles were not used by females. Female managers used compromising and avoiding conflict management styles (Sorenson & Hawkin, 1995; Sutschek, 2001).

This work seeks to explore the styles of conflict management in Pakistani women and men after marriage. This study attempts to stimulate further investigation along this line of action and also on exploring the styles used by women and men whether their styles are the same or different. Many studies done in the past were not representing Pakistani culture. This study is conducted in Pakistan and it will explore new facts about conflict management styles by Pakistani couples. The data were collected from the areas of Pakistan, where little studies were conducted on family-related problems so it will prove helpful for future concern as no momentous contribution has been done in this area.

### ***Hypotheses***

Husbands are more likely to adopt dominating, integrating and obliging conflict management styles as compared to wives.

Wives are more likely to adopt compromising and avoidance conflict management as compared to husbands.

## **METHOD**

### ***Sample***

A sample of 120 individuals (60 males and 60 females) was selected from Muzaffar Garh city. Participants in this study include men and women. Age at marriage was from 25 years and above. The purposive convenient sampling technique was applied in the present study.

### ***Measures***

#### ***Demographic Information Sheet***

The demographic information sheet was used to measure gender differences among married couples in the present study.

#### ***DUTCH Test for Conflict Handling***

The updated version of DUTCH Test for Conflict Handling (De Dreu et al., 2001) was utilized to measure conflict management styles among married couples in the present study. It comprises 20 items and five subscales, which shows five types of conflict management styles including dominating, obliging, integrating, avoiding and compromising styles. It is a five-point Likert type scale which is scored according to the following five response categories: 1 as strongly disagree, 2 as disagree, 3 as neutral, 4 as agree, and 5 as strongly agree. The original alpha reliability value for the DUTCH Test was .70, .65, .68, .73 and .66 for dominating, obliging, integrating, avoiding and compromising respectively.

### ***Procedure***

First of all, the permission was taken from family members to allow the couples to participate in the study. The participants were assured of keeping the data confidential. A total of 60 married couples from Muzaffar Garh were approached and briefed about the aim of the study after taking demographic data, a questionnaire was administered. There were some concerns on the part

of the respondents while filling out the questions. In the final stage, the participants were thanked for their cooperation in the study. The result was interpreted and discussed in detail.

## RESULTS

The study aimed to explore the gender differences in conflict management styles among married couples. Conflicts and conflict management are important aspects of marital life. Mean, Standard Deviation, Alpha Reliability, Pearson Correlation and t-test were used in the present study.

Table 1

*Mean, Standard Deviation, Alpha Reliability and Pearson correlation of Conflict Management Styles used by married couples (N =120)*

Conflict Management Styles	M	SD	$\alpha$	1	2	3	4	5
1. Avoidance Style	29.25	8.76	.85	--	.24**	.34**	.22**	.14*
2. Dominating Style	37.95	10.34	.91		--	.22**	.15*	.32**
3. Compromising Style	33.78	8.57	.82			--	.45**	.35**
4. Integrating Style	35.20	9.56	.81				--	.29**
5. Obliging Style	30.96	7.56	.84					--

$P < .05, p < .01$

Table 1 shows mean, standard deviation, alpha reliability and Pearson correlation of the subscales of the Conflict Management Scale (CMS). The results show that all the subscales have satisfactory alpha reliability, hence the subscales used in this study have internal consistency and is highly reliable. Pearson correlation indicates that avoidance, dominating and compromising styles are positively correlated with each other.

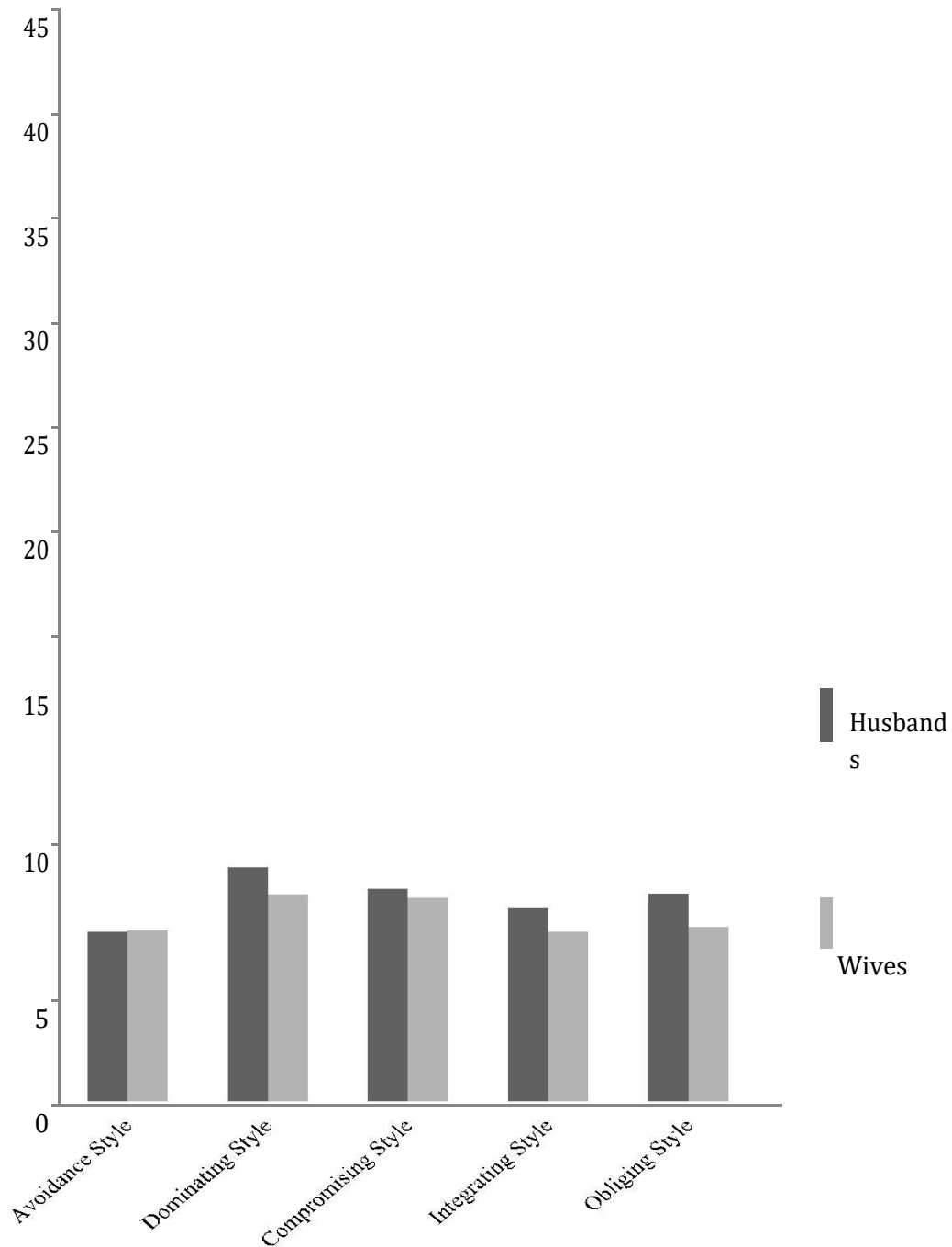
Table 2: *Mean, Standard Deviation and t values of Conflict Management Styles used by married couples (N=120)*

Conflict Management Styles	Husbands (n = 60)		Wives (n = 60)		t(118)	p	95% CI		Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			LL	UL	
Avoidance Style	29.18	7.72	29.33	9.75	1.09	.056	3.33	3.03	.21
Dominating Style	40.25	11.67	35.66	8.29	2.48	.003	.923	8.24	.45
Compromising Style	36.50	6.08	35.06	10.37	1.65	.042	-5.64	.50	.25
Integrating Style	33.26	5.89	29.23	5.67	1.78	.009	1.12	.32	.33
Obliging Style	35.68	6.00	30.02	5.78	2.24	.007	1.56	1.23	.12

Table 2 shows mean, standard deviation and t-test of conflict management styles used by couples. Results revealed that wives were significantly high on avoidance style whereas husbands were significantly high on dominating and compromising style.

Figure 1

Figure 1 is showing gender differences in conflict management styles among married couples (N = 200)



## DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to explore the gender differences in conflict management styles among married couples. Three sub-scales of DUTCH Test for Conflict Handling (De Dreu et al., 2001) were used in this study in order to investigate conflict management styles in wives and husbands independently. The results of the present study revealed that wives and husbands differed significantly in their predominant styles of managing conflict.

Conflict resulted from relationship issues between spouses, especially during the child-rearing years was held by mutual values of trust, respect, and commitment to relationships. Differences in personal styles of managing conflict were contained by symmetry in values that enabled spouses to acquire an understanding and tolerance of differences in managing conflict as they grew older together. The Alpha reliability coefficient for the scale used in the present study was computed. Alpha reliability of the subscales of DUTCH Test for Conflict Handling (De Dreu et al., 2001) varied from .81 to .91 which shows that all the subscales had high internal consistency and they were reliable for use.

First of all, it was hypothesized that husbands are more probable to use dominating, integrating and obliging style in conflict management as compared to wives is supported in the current research. You act in a very assertive way to achieve your goals, without trying to cooperate with the other party, and it may be at the expense of the other party. The results of the present study proved this hypothesis. A study has been done in the past show consistent results with this hypothesis (Portello & Long, 1994). As men have dominating nature and more authoritative status than women, especially in Pakistan and the results are significant at the level of .001. Holt and Devore (2005) conducted a meta-analysis, self-report data on conflict styles, overall they found that males reported more or less tendency of dominating and female reported the tendency of compromising.

Sutschek (2001) studied conflict-handling styles and reported that male use the integrating and obliging conflict-handling styles more often than females when challenged with the same conflict situation. Male managers did not use the competitive conflict-handling style as compared to female managers. Before utilizing the avoiding strategy, males prefer to use the dominating conflict-handling style. Sorenson and Hawkin (1995) also found more similarities in conflict-handling styles of both sexes when dealing with the same conflict state of affairs. The fact that the integrating and dominating and obliging styles have been prominent amongst the five conflict-handling styles calls for some further explanations. It should be mentioned that the dominating style of conflict is considered to be the worst style because it increases frustration and leaves remaining frustration which results in further conflict (Rahim, 1992).

The study hypothesized that wives are more probable to use compromising and avoiding style in conflict management as compared to husbands is also supported in the current investigation. The current findings are in line with previous research (Sutschek, 2001; Sorenson & Hawkin, 1995; Baxter & Shepherd, 1978). This calls for a moderate degree of assertiveness and cooperation. It may be appropriate for scenarios where you require a temporary solution, or where both sides have equally important goals. The trap is to fall into compromising as an easy way out when collaborating would produce a better solution. The results of the present study show that compromising styles is used by wives in conflict management and other

past researches show consistent results with the results of this present study (Baxter & Shepherd, 1978).

Terms of the fairness and constructiveness of the styles. Once again it was the styles that expressed mutuality with their partner which were seen to be more fair and constructive - integrating and compromising. The third hypothesis stated that males are more likely to use avoidance style as compared to females in conflict management so the avoiding style was associated with decreased fairness and with being destructive. In the workplace, while once again the integrating style was associated with being constructive for both the males and the females it was associated with fairness only for the females. For the females, the compromising style was associated with being constructive and the avoiding style with being destructive.

The avoiding and neglect styles considered ineffective in interpersonal conflicts because they do not lead to conflict resolution in a beneficial way to both parties. The neglect style is applied as an aggressive approach to hurt the other person's image. Therefore it is not an appropriate way of conflict management. It was proved in another study done in 2006 by Chan et al. (2006) that men sometimes used dominating styles in conflict management while women are used to compromising with conflicting situations. Hence the results of the present study are consistent with the previously done related researches in different parts of the world.

Suzuki and Abe (2000) reported that lifelong patterns of behavior of couples and satisfaction among married couples are highly associated with the management of conflict. Because happiness is not, the absence of conflict, but the ability to cope with conflict. They reported that the healthy and compromising management of conflict often held by women more than men. In general, we observe that there is fairly consistent agreement in the empirical literature that gender differences in conflict style, when they are found, tend to involve higher competing, avoiding (Cardona, 1995) and dominating by men. There are more varied findings on what other styles women prefer—whether compromising (Holt & DeVore, 2005), accommodating (Stone, 2000). Compromising is regarded positively in our culture, and is more than often seen as a fair and expedient means of producing acceptable settlements on less-than-crucial concerns (e.g., Thomas, 2002).

### **Limitations and Suggestions**

There are some shortcomings faced by the researcher during this study due to methodological issues and some due to conceptual issues which abound within the area of study: The size of the sample is very small so results cannot be generalized to the whole population. A larger and more nationality representative sample should be practiced in order to be more convinced about generalization of the study. Different family structures also affect conflict management styles. The conflict resolution style in the presence of other family members can be different than in the absence, so the clear picture should be contemplated. Misinterpretation of the statement is present during responses. It would be advantageous to receive more information through the interview so that the investigator can have sufficient data to decide if the responses are true or false. The responses could be biased as people hide their real conflict management styles. The researcher must ensure that sample time and sufficient resources should be available in order to carry out research in a more satisfactory manner.

## CONCLUSION

The present study aimed to explore the gender differences in conflict management styles among married couples. The entire hypotheses were supported in the current study. Results revealed that husbands use integrating, dominating and obliging conflict management styles, whereas wives use avoiding and compromising conflict management styles.

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