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Abstract

Conflict management styles of spouses in lasting marriages

This paper focuses on conflict management styles of spouses in marriages that had lasted an average of 35 years. Data about adaptation in these marriages, which included how spouses dealt with marital conflict, was collected through in-depth interviews with 144 spouses in 72 marriages. The sample was diverse in terms of race, socio-economic status and religion. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used to analyze the data. The findings revealed that the most powerful factor in shaping conflict management styles in the recent years of these relationships was the styles of managing conflict in previous years. Based on these findings, treatment implications for marital therapy are discussed.
Conflict management styles of spouses in lasting marriages

Conflict between spouses in meaningful human relationships, such as marriage, is inevitable (Canary, Cupach and Messman, 1995); further, constructive conflict is not an "oxymoron" (Markman, 1991). These two axioms, which emerged from the results of several studies that focused on conflict in human relationships, underscore the importance of understanding the meaning of conflict in marriages rather than to frame conflict only as an undesirable element to be eliminated. The axioms encourage researchers to focus on styles of conflict management between spouses. By studying marriages that last, we may learn how spouses adapt to interpersonal conflict over time, which may assist in the development of new models of intervention (Gottman, Coan, Carrere and Swanson, 1998).

The research, on which this paper is based, started 10 years ago and has been conducted in two phases. In phase one we focused on qualitative analysis of data from 216 in-depth interviews of spouses in 108 heterosexual and same sex relationship that had lasted more than 15 years; there have been several presentations to professional groups and; two books have been published on that data (Mackey and O'Brien, 1995; Mackey, O'Brien and Mackey, 1997). In the second or current phase, we have re-coded the interview data so as to analyze them with quantitative methods.

This paper focuses on the conflict management styles of 144 spouses in 72 marriages that have lasted an average of 35 years (SD 8.55). It is based on the observations of respondents about their own styles of conflict management as well as their observations of their spouses' styles.
The paper builds onto the existing literature on the management of conflict in marital relationships. Most previous studies of conflict and its management have sampled younger subjects in relationships that have not lasted as long as those in this study. Our research focused on styles of conflict management among spouses in middle and old age. In contrast to the White, middle class samples utilized in many studies of marriage (Bradbury and Karney, 1998), we focused on couples in long-term relationships who were diverse in their race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. By design, all couples in the sample were parents, so we had the opportunity to assess how child-rearing may have affected conflict management styles during later years. Much of the research on this subject has employed questionnaires and scales; we used in depth interviews to explore the perspectives of each spouse about the management of conflict in their relationships over the years.

The goal of the paper is to identify factors that were related significantly to reported styles of managing conflict in recent years, defined as the years after the youngest children in these families reached their eighteenth birthday; a period that has been referred to as the empty nest years. The paper addresses the following questions:

1. What factors were associated with the observations of conflict management styles of respondents and their observations of the styles of their spouses among a select sample of couples who have been together for many years?
2. How may the data fit with recent research on conflict and its management in marriage?
3. What are the implications of the findings for psychotherapy with couples?

The paper is organized as follows: our definition of conflict and its management is presented, a review of recent empirical studies of conflict management styles among couples, and the theoretical framework for the current study are discussed; the research methodology of
the current study is described; the findings are discussed including logistic regression analyses of factors that contributed to the reported conflict management styles of respondents in recent years and their observations of their spouses' styles; the final section discusses the significance of the findings to psychotherapy with couples.

Defining conflict and its management

Although differences between human beings in close relationships, such as marriage, may result in interpersonal conflict, there is no consensus in the field about the definition of such conflict (Weiss and Dehle, 1994). Interpersonal differences and the accompanying negative feelings appear to have a corrosive effect on the quality of relationships when they remain unresolved. For example, Gottman and Krokoff (1989) as well as Vaillant and Vaillant (1993) found that unresolved conflict fed and reinforced negative interactions between spouses. The resulting defensive behaviors perpetuated dissatisfaction and estrangement between spouses.

Other researchers have suggested that interpersonal conflict may offer opportunities for development of marital relationships if spouses learn mutually acceptable ways of negotiating and managing differences between them (Canary, Cupach and Messman, 1995). Rather than a threat to the integrity of relationships, conflict may be a catalyst for reaching higher levels of adaptation.

We operationalized conflict as a state of reported disharmony in marital relationships that developed because of differences between spouses. Conflict may have been triggered by any one or a combination of issues such as negotiating roles, handling finances, child-rearing practices, personality clashes, difficulties in expressing one's needs and communicating one's expectations to the spouse. Our approach to developing an operational definition of conflict in these lasting marriages was to ask respondents to tell us about differences and problems in the
relationships with their spouses. They were asked to describe examples of conflict during the early, child rearing and recent years. Because all respondents reported at least minimal conflict in their relationships, the challenge for the researchers was to assess and code the severity of conflict. We focused on understanding disagreements from the perspectives of individual spouses. If conflicts were assessed to have minimal impact on marital relationships, they were coded as minor. If respondents described disagreements as highly distressing to them personally and as having significantly disruptive effects on their marital relationships, they were coded as major; the latter were reported most frequently during the child rearing years.

Recent research on conflict management styles

According to Canary, Cupach and Messman (1995), research on conflict management styles has focused on three important behavioral dimensions. The first dimension identified how individuals responded when conflict emerged; a spouse may adopt an engaging style characterized by direct verbal confrontation of the other spouse, or he/she may attempt to avoid face to face engagement by use of avoidant behaviors; these behavioral mechanisms have been referred to as the fight-flight and the demand-withdrawl responses. Second, conflict management may be characterized by the nature of affect that was triggered; commonly affect has been classified as negative or positive. The third dimension refered to whether conflict management behaviors were understood as constructive or destructive; if behavioral responses repaired any disruption in relationships, they were considered to be constructive or integrative; if responses undermined the relational connection with the spouse, then they were considered destructive.

Based on a review of several studies, Markman (1991) hypothesized a sequential model of conflict management that may lead to adaptation in marriages, rather than deterioration of
relationships. The model assumed that "all couples experience disagreements and conflict" (p. 91), which result in negative affects, such as anger and resentment. To manage negative affects, spouses needed to develop skills for expressing their feeling and linking them to "specific behavioral events" and to be able to "hear and validate" the negative feelings of the spouse. Markman posited that the handling of negative affect was "one of the key predictors" of adaptation in subsequent years. He suggested that future adaptation was related to the skill of wives in expressing negative feelings "constructively" and to the ability of husbands to respond in a reciprocal manner to the initiatives of their wives. Markman suggested, further, that the expression of negative affect that was "associated with marital distress," while upsetting at particular points in time, may result in satisfaction with relationships in subsequent years.

Gottman, Coan, Carrere and Swanson (1998) focused on similar issues to Markman in understanding constructive responses to conflict and the importance of gender in managing responses to conflict. They studied the conflict management styles of 130 couples in a laboratory setting. Based on annual observations of these couples over a six year period, this research team reported that divorce was predicted by the following sequence of relational behaviors: a "negative start-up" by wives in which anger occupied center stage in an encounter with their husbands; in response, husbands refused to "accept influence" from their wives; these initial negative encounters were followed by reciprocal negativity by wives and the "absence" of de-escalating responses from the husbands. Happy marriages that lasted were characterized by different processes: wives were able to initiate encounters with their husbands by constructive expressions of affect and, husbands responded by listening to their wives and accepting their "influence." Humor helped to de-escalate negative affect and had a soothing effect on spouses,
especially on husbands. Expressions of positive affect, despite the presence of conflict, were associated with long term happiness and stability in these marriages.

Other studies have also contributed to our understanding of conflict management styles and their relationship to stability and satisfaction in marriage. A common way of organizing data on conflict management styles has been to conceptualize a continuum with avoidant behavior at one pole and confrontive behavior at the other pole (Cahn, 1990; Gottman, 1990). Confrontation was characterized by the expression of thoughts and feelings about differences and disagreements directly to the spouse. Cahn (1990) suggested that a confrontive style, which was valued more highly by spouses than avoidance, increased the likelihood that differences would be resolved and had the potential to enhance intimacy between spouses.

Avoidance involved evading face to face discussion of thoughts and feelings about conflict. Denial, flight and fight were examples of avoidant mechanisms. As a pattern of conflict management, avoidance has resulted in chronic relational tensions between spouses (Levinger, 1979) and dissatisfaction with marriages (Baucom, Notarius, Burnett and Haefner, 1990). In general, avoidant behaviors, especially when they become chronic patterns, have been predictive of dissatisfaction with marriage (Smith, Vivian and O'Leary, 1991; Gottman and Kroff, 1989).

Conflict management styles and gender

Several studies have found an association between gender and conflict management styles. Wives have been found to be more likely than husbands to adopt confrontive modes of conflict management (Heavey, Layne and Christensen, 1993; Mackey and O'Brien, 1995; Mackey and O'Brien, 1998). The explanation for these gender based patterns of conflict management has focused on socialization experiences of males and females. Women are socialized to develop an identity within meaningful relationships (Gilligan, 1982; Surrey, 1984).
Males are socialized to develop an identity that values autonomy (Levant, 1996). As a consequence, relationships may take on different meanings to males and females. Women in marriage may value modes of dealing with conflict that enhance expressive, direct and intimate attachments with their spouses. Because their socialization to relational roles is different, husbands may experience more anxiety than their wives in dealing with conflictual matters in a face to face manner (Levant, 1996).

Another explanation for differences in conflict management styles of husbands and wives was offered by Gottman and Levinson (1988) who found physiological differences between males and females as they responded to stressful stimuli. Males reacted physiologically to stress differently than women and the differences were hypothesized to shape their social responses to conflict; they tended to adopt flight-flight responses. Because women were less reactive to stress physiologically, it was hypothesized that they adopted social responses that were tolerant of negativity and of face to face modes of conflict management. However, according to Feeney, Noller and Roberst (1998), the potential link between physiology and the social responses of males and females to stress has not been replicated in other studies.

Regardless of the reasons for gender differences, the evidence supports the hypothesis that husbands and wives are different in how they manage conflict. As a group, wives have tended to be confrontive while husbands tended to adopt avoidant conflict management styles.

**Therapeutic Intervention**

Approaches to helping couples deal with conflict have been informed by several theoretical models. Crane (1996) suggested a classification into "behavioral marital therapy, emotionally focused therapy, insight oriented therapy," (and) "minimal marital therapy" (p.28). The latter, which is based on
the work of Gottman and his associates, focuses on helping spouses to develop skills at mutual soothing, listening, and validating communication (Crane, 1996).

Other recent books on counseling and psychotherapy with couples propose similar ways of classifying approaches to helping couples cope with marital conflict. For example, Young and Long (1998) identified cognitive/behavioral, object relations, structural and strategic approaches for working with couples in contemporary practice.

In conducting a review of trends in marital therapy and research during the 1990's, Johnson and Lebow (2000) observed that "only a few methods of intervention have been subject to research validation" P. 25). They noted that most of the studies were based on cognitive/behavioral and the emotionally focused models of marital therapy. Despite variations in theoretical orientations, different approaches have tended to produce positive results. However, the positive effects of therapy may diminish over time, especially if only behavioral interventions were used. There are few studies that have utilized long term follow-up measures of the efficacy of marital therapy (Johnson and Lebow, 2000).

In the 1990's, there have been efforts to identify components of effective interventions so as to develop an integrated model(s) of marital therapy. Gottman, Coan, Carrere and Swanson (1998) have argued for a "naturalistic" approach based on what successful couples do in their relationships. Johnson and Lebow (2000) identified elements of effective therapy that cut across models, such the development of communication skills between spouses, strengthening mutual acceptance, and cultivating mutual empathy. Our approach is responsive to the recommendations of these researchers.

Theoretical Frame

We adopted a developmental, life span perspective (Dilworth-Anderson and Burton, 1996) to explore how spouses in lasting relationships managed conflict. Three periods defined
the life span of these relationships: the early years prior to the birth of the first child, the child-rearing years that began with the birth of the first child, and the recent years which began when the youngest child reached 18 years. Our approach was organized to explore the potential relationships between conflict management styles and several dimensions of marital relationships during each of these periods; these dimensions included: decision making, sexual relations, role behaviors, psychological intimacy, parenting, communication and satisfaction with relationships. The focus of our inquiry was on predominant modes of conflict management rather than on specific and discrete incidences of conflict and its management. The goal was to develop an understanding of factors that shaped conflict management styles in the recent years of these lasting relationships.

Research has highlighted differences between wives and husbands in how conflict is managed. With the exception of the work of Gottman and his associates who hypothesized a link between conflict management styles and physiological responses to stress, these differences have been framed within the context of socialization theories. Females have been reared traditionally to value relationships differently than males. Although we are in the midst of changes in cultural expectations about the roles of males and females in marriage, the effects of these changes on older couples who remain together is unknown. From the perspectives of individual spouses in lasting marriages, we wished to explore how they viewed continuity and modifications in conflict management styles over the years.

Method
A semi-structured interview format was developed after a review of the literature; the interview guide was pretested by the researchers. Collaborative researchers conducted additional pilot testing and provided feedback that led to further refinement of the interview guide.

The guide was divided into four sections: the relationship, social influences including economic and cultural factors, the relationships of parents’ marriages and experiences of respondents and views of their relationships from early to recent years. The recent years, which are the focus of this paper, were the years after the youngest child had reached 18 years of age; generally, that period included the last 5-10 years prior to the interviews.

The interview structure was designed to acquire in-depth information from the point of view of individual respondents in order to develop an understanding of how each spouse adapted over the life span of their relationships. An open-ended style of interviewing was followed to allow for freedom of expression. Focal questions were used to elicit information from the perspectives of each respondent. Interviews were exploratory which allowed respondents to express their individual perceptions of their interactions with spouses within their own frame of reference. That approach, which adapted clinical interviewing skills to the needs of the research, explored the experiences of individuals within relationships as they remembered and reported them.

Interviewers, who were advanced doctoral students with extensive clinical experience, were trained in the use of the interview guide. They were respectful and accepting of the uniqueness of each respondent’s perceptions. Their empathic interviewing skills were a valuable resource in collecting the data (Hill, Thomson and Williams, 1997).

The interviews were held in the homes of respondents, which provided additional information about their lifestyles and environments. Prior to each interview, respondents were told about the purpose of the study, given an overview of the interview schedule and were assured their identities would remain
anonymous. Informed consent for audiotaping and the research use of interviews were obtained. Each partner was interviewed separately; the length of each of the interviews was approximately two hours.

**Sample**

Couples were recruited through business, professional and trade union organizations as well as through churches, synagogues, and a variety of other community organizations. Most couples resided in the northeast part of the country. Of the respondents who volunteered to participate in the research, 85% reported that they were satisfied with their marriages.

The sample was chosen purposively to fit with the goal of developing an understanding of a diverse and older group of heterosexual couples in lasting relationships. Couples were recruited who met the following criteria:

1. married at least 20 years;
2. diversity of race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, and religious background;
3. parents whose youngest child was at least 18 years of age; and
4. no psychotherapy for marital conflict.

Despite the heterogeneity of the sample as a whole, individual couples were homogeneous in terms of their race and religion. To have included spouses with different races and religions was beyond the scope of the study.

Of the 144 spouses who were interviewed, 64% were White and 36% were people of color (African-Americans and Mexican-Americans). Religious background was as follows: 44% were Protestant; 35% were Catholic; and 21% were Jewish. Forty-four percent were college graduates and 56% were non-college graduates. The mean age for the sample as a whole was 59.63 years (S.D. = 9.29): 16% of respondents were in their 40’s, 36% in their 50’s, 29% in their 60’s, and 19% in their 70’s. The mean number of years together was 35.25 (S.D. = 8.50): 26% of couples had been
together 40 years or longer; 42% between 30 and 39 years; and 32% between 20 and 29 years. Forty-two percent had 1 or 2 children, 43% had 3 or 4 and 15% had 5 or more children. By total gross family income, 10% of couples earned less than $25,000; 30% between $25,000 and $49,999; 27% between $50,000 and $74,999; and 33% had gross incomes of $75,000 or more.

Coding

Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed to facilitate coding and to prepare the data for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Interview passages were coded for relational themes that were then developed into categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Initially, a research team (2 women, 2 men) coded eight transcripts blindly and individually. Detailed notes were kept and categories were generated. A relationship coding sheet was developed and used in subsequent coding of eight additional interviews. As new categories arose previous interviews were re-coded in keeping with the constant comparative process. Having both genders involved in that process helped control for gender bias and contributed to the development of a shared conceptual analysis. Using this method, a scoring system was developed to identify themes that evolved from each section of the interviews. There were over 90 categories in 24 topic areas for every respondent.

Once the Relationship Coding Sheet was developed, each interview was coded and scored independently by two raters (one male and one female) who noted categories and themes as they emerged from the transcripts. One of the authors coded all 144 interviews to insures continuity in the operational definitions of variables and consistency of judgments from case to case. The agreement between raters, determined by dividing the number of identical judgments by the total number of codes, was 87%. Cohen’s kappa, used as a measure of inter-rater reliability, ranged from .79 to .93. When discrepancies
occurred, the raters met to discuss their differences and to re-examine the original transcripts until a consensus was reached as to how a particular item was to be scored.

HyperResearch software (Hesse-Biber, Dupuis and Kinder, 1992) enabled the researchers to do a thorough content analysis of interview transcripts, which totaled over 5,000 double-spaced pages, and to identify, catalogue and organize specific interview passages on which categorical codes were based.

Data analysis

The coded data from the scoring sheets yielded frequencies, which were analyzed using SPSS software. Chi square analysis was used to examine the relationship between the independent variables - which included personal, demographic and respondents' reports of various dimensions of relationships - and the dependent variables of respondents' conflict management styles and their observations of their spouses' style in recent years (see Table 1 and 3). The Alpha criterion was set at .01 for the chi-square analysis.

The chi-square statistic was appropriate since certain conditions were met. First, it has been very difficult to ensure randomness of samples in social and behavioral research, especially in studies which focus on new territory. This non-probability sample was selected deliberately to include older couples who have been understudied in previous research; namely, a diverse group of married couples who had remained together for more than 20 years. The goal was to identify factors that contributed to conflict management styles from the perspectives of individual spouses rather than to test hypotheses. Second, compared to other tests of statistical significance, chi-square has fewer requirements about population characteristics. Third, the expected frequency of 5 observations in most cells was met.
Variables that were related significantly (p<.01) to conflict management styles in recent years were selected for building a theoretical model. The model was tested using logistic regression analysis to identify factors that may predict conflict management styles in recent years (see Tables 2 and 4). Logistic regression was a useful tool in this exploratory research where the goal was to develop theory rather than test theory (Menard, 1995).

Findings

The findings are presented as follows: First, the operational definition of the dependent variables, the conflict management styles of respondents and their observations of the styles of their spouses are discussed. Second, a chi-square analysis of the significant variables associated with conflict management style of respondents in recent years as they reported them is presented; based on the chi-square analysis, a logistic regression model was constructed to identify factors that may be predictive of respondent conflict management styles in recent years. Third, a chi-square analysis of the conflict management styles of spouses in recent years as reported by respondents is presented; based on that analysis, a second logistic regression model was constructed to identify factors that may be predictive of the observations of respondents about the conflict management styles of their spouses in recent years. Fourth, we re-examine the interview data to find clues to understand adaptation in these marriages, especially in view of the relative stability in conflict management styles over the years.

Dependent variable: conflict management styles during recent years

Respondents were asked to describe how they handled differences with their spouses and how they observed their spouses handling differences with them. The focus of these
explorations was on the predominant modes of conflict management styles; in other words, how respondents usually handled differences with their spouses and their observations of how their spouse usually handled differences with them in the early years, during the child-rearing years and in recent years. Initial coding revealed several different styles both about respondents' modes of handling differences with their spouses and their observations of their spouses' modes. These perspectives were conceptualized along a continuum with avoidance at one pole and confrontation at the other pole. Direct or face to face discussions were coded "confrontive." Compared to avoidance, a confrontive style was more straight-forward and did not include sub-categories. If respondents reported that they did not or could not discuss their thoughts and feelings in face to face encounters with their spouses, such as denying their feelings or leaving the scene, the style was coded as "avoidant."

The evolution of conflict manage styles between spouses was illustrated in the following interviews with an African-American couple who had been married for 48 years. The wife commented on the change in the marriage:

*He didn't always want to listen. Instead of discussing something, he'd get irritated because I didn't agree with him. But I think we do better now. As I said, at first, he wouldn't discuss anything, just leave. Rather than talk about it. So I'd have to persuade him that we needed to talk, we just had to talk. And I think as the years have gone by, I see that it's better. We can talk things out.. I think it's been a gradual process really...I think we finally found out how to talk ... I would have to remind him: "I'm on your side." And it finally got through ... you have to keep on trying ... It's an ongoing thing.*

Her 71-year-old spouse, described the process of change from his perspective:
She always tells me I never hear anything she has to say. She says: "You don't listen to me"...

I guess there are times when I don't. I don't do it with the intent of being insulting or whatever. I guess just sometimes things come through and they just keep right on going ...

Early on, it probably did cause problems, but the longer we live together, the less I've done it.

And I often hear a lot of things she doesn't think I hear.

The observations of these respondents reflected a predominant theme in the data: compared to wives, husbands had more difficulty with face to face or confrontive modes of managing conflict. Although no dramatic changes in conflict management styles occurred over the years, there were modifications in styles that were evident in the excerpts from interviews with this couple.

**Independent variables**

Selection of independent variables for logistic regression analyses was based on the results of the chi-square analyses (see Table 1 and 3). Each of the variables in the cross tabulations had to be related significantly to conflict management styles at or beyond the .01 level to be entered into the theoretical models for testing with logistic regression procedures. Based on that criterion, the independent variables related to the conflict management styles of respondents were: sex, conflict management styles during the early and child-rearing years, the predominant role behavior of respondents over the years, the quality of communication between spouses in recent years, and the reports of respondents about the quality of their sexual relations during recent years.

The independent variables related significantly to the observations of respondents about their spouses' conflict management styles were: sex, conflict management styles of spouses during the early and child-rearing years, the quality of communication between spouses in recent
years, and the reports of respondents about the quality of their sexual relations during recent years and their observations about the level of psychological intimacy in their relationships during recent years.

Sex was coded male or female. Role behavior was coded either expressive or instrumental, depending on how respondents described themselves. If they viewed themselves predominantly as task centered and oriented primarily toward action in their marital role behavior, this variable was coded instrumental. If they saw themselves as primarily oriented toward verbalizing their thoughts and feelings as well as attending to the quality of relationships, their role behavior was coded expressive.

Assessment of the quality of communication was based on responses to the following question: How would you describe the communication between you? Communication in recent years was coded “positive” when respondents spoke affirmatively about their ability to converse with each other. Otherwise, communication was coded as “negative or mixed.” An example of the quality of communication along with role behaviors is taken from interviews with a couple that had been married about 26 years. The husband, who was highly instrumental in his role behavior, talks about his guarded nature:

I have a tendency to play the cards very close to the vest … it's probably the role model that was cast for you from early childhood that you were expected to be the bread winner, take on the burdens, and whatever pressures you were suppose to suffer them in silence. The Irish Catholic upbringing where you certainly didn't cry in your beer. It wasn't acceptable...I guess it was my lack of having a warm and charming personality and being very close mouthed and it bothered the hell out of her ... I never fessed up to anything.

As counterpoint to her husband, the wife related the following:
When it comes to that personal feeling level, neither one of us really ever, ever, learned too much about what it's like to let the other person know what you're feeling and what your needs are. He stifled and stuffed a lot. I'm sure that there's a lot of things about me that I do that he would change but he's never said anything about it, so I have no way of knowing what makes him unhappy or what he'd like to do different ... I do think that we have grown... we both probably think too much but overall, it's probably pretty good communication now.

Psychological intimacy involved being able to share inner thoughts and feelings not expressed customarily in other relationships, such as those at work. While this factor included effective communication, the distinction between communication and intimacy was a matter of degree. One could have effective communication with a partner without experiencing psychological intimacy, which was characterized by mutuality of understanding, acceptance, trust and respect based upon an openness and honesty of thoughts and feelings not customarily shared in other relationships. It is important to clarify that psychological intimacy was not a constant in these relationships (as it is not in any relationship) but a sense that one could count on having an open and honest exchange with the partner about personal matters if the need arose. If responses reflected those themes, psychological intimacy was coded “yes;” otherwise, it was coded “no/mixed.”

A couple in their 50's reflected on what intimacy meant to them. The wife described her husband as:

*My best friend, best lover. The person I can come home to when something bad happens to me. Unfortunately, we have not had parents for many years. He is my parent as well as my friend. He is the person who most cares what is happening to me. The same as in the past ...*
I can be completely honest.

The meaning of intimacy to the husband was as follows:

*I don't like to have my own space. You might as well be by yourself... the important thing is to like being with the other person ... If you don't have that feeling, I think there is a piece that is missing. I think we are our own people, but we do it together. You just have to respect the other person...trust their decisions and beliefs and want to be with them.*

Other dimensions of intimate behavior included physical affection which referred to bodily touching, such as hugging, the quality of sexual relations and the importance of sexual relations over the years. Exploration of sexual relations included questions about how spouses "got along sexually" over the years.

**Conflict management styles of respondents**

Before discussing the factors that were related significantly to the conflict management styles of respondents in recent years, it is important to note that social and demographic variables - age, years married, income, religion, race and education - were not related significantly to the reports of the conflict management styles of respondents, nor to their observations about the styles of their spouses. Several relational factors, which included the severity of marital conflict and the separateness to mutuality in couple decision-making, were also not related significantly to conflict management styles in recent years.

Table 1 shows the variables that were significantly related to the conflict management styles of respondents in recent years.

[insert table 1]
Based on the results of the chi-square analysis, a theoretical model was constructed of factors that may have shaped conflict management styles in recent years. The model was tested using logistic regression analysis. The results are shown in Table 2.

[insert table 2]

The results reported in Table 2 show that the strongest factor in predicting the conflict management styles of respondents in recent years was their style of managing conflict during the child-rearing years. The significant relationship between earlier conflict management styles and styles during recent years suggested that personal conflict management styles, as reported by respondents, did not change appreciably from the child-rearing years to recent years. Even before the child-rearing years, the majority of wives were confrontive in their conflict management styles and the majority of husbands were avoidant: in the early years, 63% of wives and 32% of husbands reported a confrontive style, which increased slightly to 67% and 35% during the child-rearing years; in recent years, the percentages of respondents who reported their styles as confrontive was to 76% and to 46% respectively.

Other factors that contributed to styles of managing conflict in recent years were the role behaviors of respondents during the child-rearing and recent years as well as the sex of respondents. Wives, who reported more expressive orientations than did their husbands, were far more likely to report confrontive styles of managing conflict.

Conflict management styles of spouses

The variables related significantly to the conflict management styles of spouses, as reported by respondents, are shown in Table 3.

[insert table 3]
The observation of respondents about the conflict management styles of their spouses in the early and child-rearing years were related significantly to their assessments of their spouses' styles in recent years. Other variables related significantly to conflict management styles of spouses in recent years were the sex of respondents, and their reports of the quality of communication, psychological intimacy and sexual relations in recent years.

The variables related significantly with conflict management styles in the chi-square analysis were the basis for constructing a theoretical model that was tested with logistic regression procedures. The results are shown in Table 4.

[insert table 4]

The strongest predictor of conflict management styles of spouses as reported by respondents was the style of managing conflict by spouses during the child-rearing years: during the child-rearing years, 31% of wives and 78% of husbands reported their spouses as confrontive, compared to 26% of wives and 72% of husbands during the early years; by recent years, 43% of wives and 81% of husbands reported their spouses as confrontive.

The conflict management style of spouses was also predicted by the quality of psychological intimacy between spouses as well as the quality of their communication as reported by respondents.

Adaptation in relationships

There was relative stability in styles of managing conflict over the span of their relationships. The finding of satisfaction with these marriages among 85% of respondents along with the avoidant conflict management styles of husbands did not fit with some previous research cited in this paper. So, we re-examined the interview data to understand how these
couples adapted over the years. Three themes emerged from that examination: communication about communication, selective understanding and balances between spouses.

Communication about communication occurred when a spouse was able to let the other spouse know about their difficulties in expressing their feelings about differences. To put one's difficulties about expressing feelings about differences into words and to have the communication accepted by the spouse may have been sufficient to maintain or restore a sense of connection in a relationship. That process of communicating about communication may result in selective understanding of the reason(s) for specific interpersonal behavior, such as being raised in a family that did not encourage or tolerate open discussion of feelings about interpersonal conflict. An outcome was gradual acceptance of behaviors that had been an irritant between spouses. For example, when husbands felt less pressure from their wives to change, they may have experienced less defensiveness about their avoidant behavior. Concurrently, wives felt less conflicted about their husbands' avoidance.

Communication about communication along with selective understanding are apparent in interviews with the following couple who were married for 40 years. The husband said:

*In the beginning communicating was tough .... I used to say to myself, well, she's not Italian. And she doesn't know my moods as an Italian. I grew up with 10 brothers and sister and a mother and father, in a very stable home with big meals and friends and relatives and open house and that type of thing. And then you look back at her house...it was cold. It was a mother and father who drank. It was a mother and a kid sister. It was not knowing what she's going to find when she comes home. So, I used to try to take that into consideration. I think it's caring for the person more than anything else ...We know each other's anger now. We've never been physical. But, I know by the tone of her voice when it's time to stop and she knows by the tone of my voice when enough is enough ... that's the point when we walk away*
... because I respect her feelings about being angry and there's no sense in pursuing it because it's just gonna get worse so either I walk away or she walks away.

For the wife, respect and determination to let her husband know how she felt were central to the viability of their relationship:

I think respect is a very important thing ... when you get pushy and that sort of thing then that's not good and there's a lot of misunderstanding because you don't talk. You've got to talk. You've got to talk. You've got to tell the person, even though you're afraid it's gonna hurt their feelings, you've just got to let him know.

This couple illustrated how communication about communication may result in selective understanding and enhanced satisfaction. The process of communication about communication and selective understanding may have modified what Gottmann and his associates identified as a "negative start-up" by wives. The words of these respondents also illustrated how spouses found ways of dealing with conflict that helped their relationship.

An outcome of success at communicating about communication and selective understanding was the recognition of qualities in a spouse that may have been obscured by negativity. When individuals were not as angry and defensive about differences, they may have become freed-up to recognize strengths in their spouses that were previously obscured. Not infrequently, that recognition led to the acknowledgement of balances in relationships. The following 2 couples describe how a recognition of complementary qualities offered balance in their relationships. A Mexican-American husband reported:

We are opposites. She's over here as the strong decision-making disciplinarian type person. I'm over here and I want to have fun. I'm still a teenager ... we complement each other. She keeps things in order, making sure everything goes right, and I get the fun part of it.
His spouse offered the following observations:

*He's understanding of me and my problems and background. His supportiveness in everything that I wanted to do or not to do, his patience ... I'm very fortunate.*

Couples who had different personality traits talked about differences bringing a balance to their relationships. A husband described complementary aspects of his relationship with his spouse:

*I consider myself as rather reserved, and she is outgoing...she makes friends automatically and immediately. I am not that way...it takes me a while to get close to people...and she has made our marriage much easier by her being the way she is.*

In discussing the relationship, the wife talked of how developmental experiences shaped the fit between them. Her selective understanding brought meaning to their relationship which allowed for acceptance of differences and recognition of strengths:

*[husband] is really very fair...and very lovable but he can't show it. But that is not his fault...it was his upbringing. If you dig long enough you get everything out of him...at times he is like a little kid. He is a good husband but his needs are different...he missed some of it growing up and he is looking for it now. He is a very kind man...and I usually get what I need from him.*

Building a relationship based on balances was a reciprocal process. In responding to the spouse, whether those needs were grounded in traits, developmental differences or both, individuals also experienced a fulfillment of their own needs. The stability of conflict management styles may have been related to fundamental qualities within the self, which were not likely to change as relationships matured. Such stability seemed to be the case with this husband. Communicating about communication and selective understanding enabled this couple to find and maintain a relational balance that apparently met their needs.
Discussion

Psychotherapists who treat couples for marital conflict may benefit from studies that focus on understanding conflict management styles from the perspectives of spouses in stable and satisfying marriages.

In this study, conflict management styles were explored through in-depth interviews. Respondents were asked about their ways of handling differences and managing conflict. When that data were subjected to bivariate analysis, several variables were related significantly to their conflict management styles. These variables were: the sex of respondents, their conflict management styles in the early and child-rearing years, whether their predominant marital roles reflected instrumental or expressive behaviors from early to recent years, the quality of communication.

Respondents were also asked for their observations about the conflict management styles of their spouses. The following variables were related significantly to the observations of respondents about the conflict management styles of their spouses: the sex of the respondent, observations of the conflict management style of their spouses in the early and child-rearing years, psychological intimacy with their spouses in recent years, the quality of communication and the quality of sexual relations in recent years.

Based on these bivariate analyses, two theoretical models were constructed and tested with logistic regression procedures. In the first model, the conflict management styles of the respondents was the dependent variable; in the second model, the observations of respondents about their spouses' styles was the dependent variable. What emerged from the regression of each model was the powerful role that conflict management styles in previous years
had in shaping the styles of respondents and their observations of their spouses' styles in recent years. Although other factors were identified as having a shaping effect on conflict management styles in recent years, they paled next to conflict management styles of respondents (B=5.30, p=.001) and their observations of the styles of their spouses (B=5.62, p=.001) during the child-rearing years.

Changes over the years in conflict management styles of spouses tended to reflect modifications in styles and not dramatic shifts. Conflict management styles as reported by most respondents, remained relatively stable from the early to recent years when less than 1 out of 2 husbands and slightly more than 3 out of 4 wives reported a confrontive style. Compared to the early years, the percentage of respondents who reported the use of a confrontive style in recent years increased by 13% among wives and 14% among husbands. In adapting to various aspects of their relationships, including the relative stability of conflict management styles from early to recent years, couples used communication about communication and selective understanding to maintain a balance in their relationships.

A model for intervention

The data about the impact of previous conflict management styles in shaping the observations of respondents about their own styles as well as the styles of their spouses in recent years add to the dialogue about the goals and focus of marital therapy recently initiated by Gottman, Coan, Carrere and Swanson (1998). They proposed a model of therapy that departs from a focus on resolving "disagreements" between spouses to a model that reflects "what real couples do" (p. 5). In that paper, the authors suggested a new approach to marital therapy that places less emphasis on active listening between spouses and more emphasis on the development of mutual empathy, respect and acceptance. Enabling couples to respect genuine differences, to
accept what they cannot change and to work toward mutual understanding are valued in this model.

Although Gottman does not mention a self psychological approach to marital therapy, the implications of their findings point in that direction (Jackson, 1991). In several respects, the authors use self psychological language (empathy, acceptance, soothing, softening) without referring to that theory. Our data taken in concert with that of Gottman, Coan, Carrere and Swanson (1998), point to the value of using self psychological concepts that includes a focus on the strengths of clients rather than active listening interventions in couples therapy.

Our approach does not purport to engage spouses in a collaborative effort to change their behavior but, rather, to engage them in a process of mutually exploring their needs, expectations and roles with the goal of enhancing mutual acceptance, respect for differences and empathic understanding. In the approach that we are proposing, strengths emerge as one of the central features. The process of exploring the needs of spouses, their expectations of getting these needs met through their marital relationships and the roles that each spouse adopts in relationships underscores mutual respect for differences and builds upon their strengths. Rather than the target of interventions, modifications in marital behavior, such as conflict management styles, may emerge from a therapeutic process that values what "naturally occurs in well-functioning marriages" (Gottman, Coan, Carrere and Swanson, 1998, p. 20), which, we suggest, may include communication about communication, selective understanding and recognition of balances.

In supporting spouses to identify their needs, the first step in the model, the role of the marital therapist is to develop a context within which spouses may begin to feel safe enough to express their inner feelings to their spouse that may have remained obscure. Important in the process are responses by therapists that underscore the importance of respect for the feelings of
each spouse. The goal is not change or the learning of new social skills but the mutual exploration of individual needs within a context of acceptance and respect.

A second step in the approach is to focus on specific expectations that spouses have of each other. Gottman and his associates (1998) identify "soothing" as especially critical for husbands who may have a stronger need than wives to deny the validity of that psychological state. To identify an inner feeling that has remained obscure in the relationship and have it validated through genuine acceptance by the spouse may become a soothing experience.

A third step is to examine the roles that spouses have adopted as a consequence of not having their needs validated and their disappointment at not having their expectations fulfilled. Rather than dwell on anger, resentment and guilt, the exploration is oriented toward the negotiation of different role behaviors based on clarity about the needs and expectations of each spouse. The development and adoption of new relational skills may follow.

In summary, we have constructed a model of marital therapy based on empirical data that emphasizes an empathic and strengths oriented approach in which spouses are supported to identify their needs, their expectations of the spouse and to negotiate marital roles to meet needs and satisfy expectations. The goal is to enhance communication about communication, especially needs and expectations, to develop selective understanding, and to work toward marital roles that will be responsive to the individual needs and expectations of each spouse.

Limitations

Qualitative modes of data collection based on in-depth interviews conducted by skilled researchers are an effective tool for studying elusive phenomena, such as conflict management styles in marriage. The richness of data elicited through the method used in this study is quite
different from data collected through other means, but there are concerns about validity and reliability as well as the nature of the sample.

It is difficult to assess the validity of the data in the traditional sense of that concept since we were eliciting the personal perceptions and evaluations of respondents about conflict management styles in their relationships at a particular point in time. The candor of respondents about highly personal matters, such as the decline in sexual relations because of sexual dysfunctions, suggests that respondents were equally candid about other aspects of their relationships, such as styles of managing conflict. By interviewing spouses separately and asking them to talk about themselves as well as their observations of their spouses in these relationships, we were able to compare responses to determine if there were significant differences about common realities. For example, did both spouses assess the nature of conflict in their relationships similarly? Did a respondent, in commenting on an aspect of a spouse's behavior, come close to the spouse's observations about the same factor? There was a correspondence between spouses on the data, which was illustrated in responses to conflict management styles, which asked respondents to describe their style as well as the style of their spouses. For example, respondents who described themselves as having an avoidant style were viewed by their spouses as also having an avoidant style.

In a cross sectional design in which subjects are asked to report on their life today and in the past, traditional measures of reliability are inadequate. The meaning of life events and an individual's response to these events will vary, and may even vary within the same person at different points over the life span. While longitudinal designs may be superior in contending with problems of validity and reliability, cross sectional designs that use interviews to uncover
the meaning of behavior have the strength of eliciting richness in the experiences of human beings.

There is a shortfall in re-coding the data from multiple categories into dichotomous ones. This step built onto the earlier qualitative analysis by offering a different lens through which to understand the data. To offset the potential reductionistic effects of re-coding, we have incorporated a discussion of the qualitative data into the results. The integration of qualitative and quantitative procedures was intended to enhance the theory development objective of the research.

The use of an interdisciplinary team throughout the research process enhanced the quality of the study (Hill, Thompson and Williams, 1997). Issues of bias and misinterpretation were discussed along with other matters that could affect the validity and reliability of the data. One of the principal investigators read all 144 interview transcripts and served as a second blind coder for each interview. Having one researcher read and code every interview provided for continuity in the operational definitions of variables. To insure that there was both a male and a female perspective on the data, the second coder was a woman. As a measure of inter-rater reliability, Cohen's kappa was used and ranged from .79 to .93.

The sample was selected purposively to include subjects in lasting relationships that are often not included in other studies; namely, people of color as well as respondents from both blue and white color occupations. The goal was not to test theory but to develop an understanding of a subject, management of conflict among an older group of diverse spouses in lasting relationships, that has not received much attention by researchers. The sample fit with the goal of this exploratory study.
Conclusion

The multi-modal method that was employed in this research was intended to open theoretical doors by examining conflict management styles among spouse in marriages that had lasted an average of 35 years. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and analyzed with qualitative and quantitative methods. The goal was to understand how spouses adapted in their relationships rather than to test hypotheses. The focus of this paper was to explore how respondents perceived their own conflict management styles as well as their perceptions of the styles of their spouses. It is valuable to develop an understanding of the conflict management styles of couples from the perspectives of individual spouses. They have much to teach professionals about the process of adaptation in lasting relationships. The data suggest an empathic model of marital therapy, which values the development of mutual acceptance, respect and understanding about needs, expectations and the roles of spouses.
References


Table 1
Conflict management style of respondents in recent years by relational variables (row percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Conflict management style of respondent</th>
<th>% Totals</th>
<th>X²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>Confrontive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% male</td>
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<td>.46</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>% female</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMS early years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% avoidant</td>
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<td>.29</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% confrontive</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.97</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior early years</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% instrumental</td>
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<td>.51</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% expressive</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>100</td>
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<td>CMS child-rearing years</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% avoidant</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% confrontive</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior child-rearing years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% instrumental</td>
<td>.54</td>
<td>.46</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>% expressive</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>.74</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication recent years</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>.50</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% positive</td>
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<td>.67</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual relations recent years</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>% negative/mixed</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>.52</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% positive</td>
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<td>.69</td>
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<tr>
<td>Behavior recent years</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% instrumental</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>% expressive</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>100</td>
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</table>

N = 144  * p = <.01  **p = <.001
Table 2

Logistic regression coefficients for variables associated with conflict management style of respondents in recent years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>S.E.</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>Exp(B)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
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<td>.10</td>
<td>3.27</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.62</td>
<td>1.97</td>
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<td>1.32</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.03</td>
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<td>CMS child-rearing years</td>
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<td>1.59</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>200.30</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.13</td>
<td>11.62</td>
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<td>6.63</td>
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<td>Comm recent years</td>
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<td>.76</td>
<td>.57</td>
<td>.65</td>
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<td>Sex relations recent years</td>
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<td>.72</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>1.99</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>.001</td>
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Model Chi-square 125.14 (8DF) p=<.001
Table 3
Respondents' observations of the conflict management style of their spouses in recent years by relational variables (row percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Conflict management style of partner</th>
<th>% Totals</th>
<th>X²</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>Confrontive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
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<td>.81</td>
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<td>.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% confrontive</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CMS partner child-rear yrs</td>
<td>% avoidant</td>
<td>.82</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% confrontive</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication recent years</td>
<td>% poor/mixed</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>.44</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>.72</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% yes</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.70</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual rels recent years</td>
<td>% negative/mixed</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% positive</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td>.71</td>
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</table>

N = 144  * p= <.01  **p= <.001
Table 4

Logistic regression coefficients for variables associated with observations of the conflict management style of spouses in recent years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<th>S.E.</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
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<td>Constant</td>
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</table>

Model Chi-square 136.19 (7DF) p<=.001