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**The Conflict Resolution Styles and Relationship
Satisfaction of Couples Living in New Zealand.**

A thesis presented in
partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the
degree of Master of Arts
in Psychology
at Massey University,
Albany, New Zealand

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2001

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those people who helped me make this thesis a reality. My principal acknowledgment is to my supervisor, Cheryl Woolley, for without her guidance this task would never have been possible. Secondly, I have a particular debt of gratitude to Dr. Ross Flett who advised and assisted me on the design of the study and the statistical procedures.

A special tribute goes out to Damian and my family for the love and support (and the many cups of coffee!) that they bestowed upon me in this year of trial and tribulation.

This thesis could not have been written without the many participants who freely gave their time and effort to complete the questionnaires, and I am particularly grateful for their contribution.

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Abstract

Communication forms an integral part of couple interactions and managing conflictual communications competently greatly contributes to the quality of a relationship. This study was a partial replication of Vito's Canadian study (1998) and was designed to investigate self-reported levels of relationship satisfaction and life satisfaction, conflict resolution styles and perceived effectiveness of problem solving in individuals in cohabiting or marital relationships. These variables were examined with self-report data from 75 participants (61 women and 14 men) who participated in a mail survey. The measures used to examine these variables of interest included the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale, Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory, Life-as-a-whole Index and a subscale of the Couple Problem-Solving Scale which measured the perceived effectiveness of personal and partner problem solving.

Correlational calculations and hierarchical multiple regression analyses demonstrated that conflict resolution styles accounted for a significant amount of variance in relationship satisfaction. In particular it was found that the conflict resolution style of positive problem solving was positively related to relationship satisfaction. Individuals who, however, reported higher levels of the so-called "negative" conflict resolution styles of conflict engagement, withdrawal and compliance obtained concurrent lower scores on relationship satisfaction. Further data analyses indicated that self-reported levels of relationship satisfaction were positively related to life-as-a-whole satisfaction. Self-reported levels of perceived effectiveness of personal and partner problem solving ability were also found to be positively related to relationship

satisfaction. These preceding relationships were maintained once additional factors such as duration of relationship and other demographic variables were controlled for.

Conflict Resolution Styles and Relationship Satisfaction

This study focuses on the conflict resolution styles and relationship satisfaction of 75 New Zealand participants in couples' relationships. Close relationships have been described as the "very essence of human existence" (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2000) and they greatly contribute to our psychological and physical well-being, to the extent that they fulfil emotional, personal and social needs. Dyadic intimate relationships generally grow as a result of interpersonal attraction, often as a consequence of physical proximity and our affect at the time (Baron & Byrne, 1997). After establishing mutual attraction, individuals experience increased intimacy and self-disclosure through communication as they move closer to becoming a couple. Many cultural and social influences dictate the process of becoming a couple and rules of dating both mutually expressed by the couple and unspoken by society, can have a pervasive impact on the state and future of a relationship. Relationships, then, do not develop in a vacuum, and the factors that influence relationships have been theorized and researched. For example, network theory focuses on close involvements including friends and kin relationships and in particular on the social context in which relationships develop (Milardo & Helms-Erikson, 2000).

Due to social changes and the increased status of women as equivalent to men, the nature of intimate relationships has changed from mostly authoritarian to mostly egalitarian, particularly in the last century. Contemporary equal relationships have been associated with an increased level of positive outcome for both partners, including increased intimacy and greater relationship satisfaction (Steil, 2000). Even though greater equality

and fairness remain the goals of many intimate modern day relationships, there nevertheless appear to still be an unequal division of labour at home, with women in particular struggling to get their partners to do more work. (Steil, 2000). This, among other issues, including relationship power and intimacy (Kurdek, 1994) is often a great source of conflict for intimate couples relationships.

Conflict is a component of almost any relationship, and romantic relationships are no exception to this rule. Intimate conflict has been defined by Ting-Toomey (1994):

The implicit or explicit verbal and/or nonverbal struggling process within, between, or among two or more interdependent parties when they perceive incompatible conflict bases, processes, and/or outcomes in the course of their personal relationship development process. (p. 48).

While almost unanimously disliked, conflict is nearly always essential for the growth of a relationship. If conflict is managed in a competent fashion, it might have the desirable outcome for the participants of the conflict interaction in that certain objectives are reached and differences are settled. Conflict can be viewed as constructive when it results in the reduction of conflict and/or the resolution of differences, or destructive when in its extreme form it results in emotional and/or physical abuse. Conflict resolution styles are the particular methods that people apply in an attempt to resolve their conflicts. Certain conflict resolution styles, for example positive problem solving, have been linked to relationship satisfaction, whereas others, such as withdrawal from conflict, are related to a decrease in relationship satisfaction.

People make evaluations about their lives all the time, and because relationship satisfaction greatly contributes to life satisfaction, it follows that people will often contemplate the state of their relationships and their satisfaction with that very important sphere of their lives. Weighing up the options regarding their relationships will again influence the duration of their relationship with their partner by forcing them to decide whether the relationship is worth continuing or whether it should be dissolved.

The study of intimate relationships has attracted great interest in recent years and research into this area has yielded many interesting results. A review of the literature have been devised in an attempt to encapsulate the vast amount of information available on close relationships, in particular on couples' conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction.