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CONFLICT RESOLUTION AMONG PAKISTANI MARRIED COUPLES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

This article draws on a qualitative study examining how married individuals in Pakistan perceive and navigate conflict within their marital relationships. Marriage in Pakistan is embedded within a strong framework of religious, cultural, and family expectation, and how couples manage disagreement has consistently been shown to shape marital wellbeing more than the mere presence of conflict itself. Using an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five married participants, each describing their lived experience of disagreement and reconciliation with their spouse. Six major themes emerged from the data: open and timely communication as the primary resolution strategy, mutual compromise and accountability, cultural and religious underpinnings of conflict resolution, emotional regulation and personal growth, trust and relational bonding through resolution, and boundaries with extended family and self-reliance. The findings suggest that, for these participants, marital conflict was rarely destructive; instead, it functioned as a recurring opportunity for growth, deepened understanding, and strengthened trust. The discussion situates these findings within the broader empirical literature on marital conflict, conflict resolution styles, and marital satisfaction, and considers implications for counselling practice in Pakistan as well as directions for future research.

Keywords: *Communication, Compromise, Conflict Resolution, Marital Relationships, Pakistan, Qualitative Research.*

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1. Introduction

Marriage in Pakistan is regarded not only as a personal bond between two individuals but as a union between families, embedded within a strong framework of religious, cultural, and social expectation. Within this framework, disagreement between spouses is inevitable, yet how couples choose to manage it has consistently been shown to shape the overall trajectory of the marriage far more than the mere presence or absence of conflict itself (Fincham & Beach, 1999; Fincham, 2003). Conflict, when handled constructively, can serve as an opportunity for growth and closeness; when handled destructively or avoided altogether, it can erode trust, intimacy, and satisfaction over time (Katz & Gottman, 1993).

A substantial body of research has sought to categorize the strategies couples use when disagreements arise, typically distinguishing between constructive strategies, such as integrative or compromising approaches, and destructive strategies, such as avoidance, domination, or verbal aggression (Kurdek, 1994; Zacchilli, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 2009). Standardized instruments such as the PREPARE inventory (Larsen & Olson, 1989) and the Romantic Partner Conflict Scale (Zacchilli et al., 2009), including its Pakistani validation (Farooq, Akhtar, & Zacchilli, 2022), have been widely used to measure these styles and relate them to marital outcomes. Within Pakistani samples specifically, avoidance and integrative styles have been found to relate positively to marital satisfaction, while verbally aggressive and distributive styles relate negatively to it, with some evidence that women tend to favour integrative strategies while men more often default to avoidant or distributive ones (Ali & Saleem, 2022). Other indigenous work has found that dissatisfied couples disproportionately rely on avoidance and rarely draw on accommodating, collaborating, or compromising strategies (Dildar, Bibi, & Amjad, 2013), and that extended family involvement, particularly from in-laws, is itself a notable source of marital friction (Dildar & Amjad, 2017).

Beyond Pakistan, cross-cultural research has linked constructive conflict resolution to reduced perceived stress and greater spousal support, particularly during periods of external strain such as the COVID-19 quarantine (Işık & Kaya, 2022), and has shown that resolved conflict can enhance felt intimacy, an effect that has been observed to be especially pronounced for husbands (Iqbal, Nizami, & Anjum, 2013). Open communication itself has been repeatedly identified as one of the strongest predictors of relational satisfaction, trust, and closeness (Anderson, Kunkel, & Dennis, 2006), while

research in Turkish samples has similarly emphasized problem-solving strategies contributed jointly by both spouses as predictive of satisfaction (Ünal & Akgun, 2022). At the same time, marital satisfaction in Pakistan has been shown to be shaped by a distinct set of cultural pressures, including strong stigma surrounding divorce and open marital difficulty, which may discourage couples from seeking outside support even when conflict is significant (Qadir, De Silva, Prince, & Khan, 2005).

Much of this literature, however, relies on standardized scales that, while useful for identifying broad patterns across large samples, capture conflict resolution as a fixed set of categories rather than as a lived, evolving process. Such instruments cannot easily represent how couples themselves describe the texture of an argument, the felt fairness of an apology, or the quiet cultural and religious reasoning that shapes behaviour without ever being named aloud. The present study addressed this gap by listening closely to the lived experience of five married individuals in Pakistan, using in-depth, semi-structured interviews analyzed through Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), an approach explicitly designed to capture how people make sense of significant personal experiences in their own terms (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Understanding conflict resolution specifically within a Pakistani context matters because the cultural scaffolding around marriage in South Asia differs meaningfully from the individualistic, dyad-centred model that underlies much Western relationship research. Marriage is typically negotiated with, and monitored by, an extended family network, and concepts such as honour (izzat) and family reputation carry weight that can shape whether, how, and to whom a couple discloses conflict at all. A resolution strategy that looks like avoidance on a standardized scale may, in this context, reflect a deliberate and temporary strategy for preserving family harmony rather than a failure of communication. Capturing this nuance requires methods that can register participants' own interpretive frame, which is precisely what the present qualitative approach was designed to do.

2. Method

This study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a qualitative approach concerned with how individuals make sense of significant lived experiences, combining close attention to individual accounts with an interpretive, or hermeneutic, layer of analysis on the part of the researcher (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA is particularly well suited to research questions concerning identity, relationships, and meaning-making, and has been widely used and refined within health and relationship psychology (Smith, 1996, 2004, 2011; Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). Five married participants, two men and three women, took part in semi-structured interviews exploring how they experienced and resolved conflict with their spouse. Interviews were conducted individually rather than as couples, transcribed, and analyzed using an idiographic, case-by-case approach before patterns were drawn across the sample, consistent with standard

IPA procedure (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Six superordinate themes were identified through this process and form the basis of the findings reported below.

Ethical considerations were addressed through informed consent, protection of participant confidentiality through pseudonymisation, and the participants' right to withdraw at any stage without needing to provide a reason. Given the personal and potentially sensitive nature of discussing marital conflict, particular care was taken to create an interview environment in which participants felt able to speak candidly, while retaining full control over what they chose to disclose.

3. Findings

Six major themes emerged from the analysis: open and timely communication, mutual compromise and accountability, cultural and religious underpinnings, emotional regulation and personal growth, trust and relational bonding, and boundaries with extended family and self-reliance. Each is discussed in turn below.

3.1. Open and Timely Communication

The most dominant theme across the data was participants' reliance on open, direct conversation as the principal means of resolving disagreement. For most participants, conflict was addressed the same day, through calm, honest discussion in which each partner voiced their perspective and made a deliberate effort to understand the other's point of view. One participant explained that both she and her husband preferred to say what was on their mind rather than let it sit unspoken, while another described that neither partner liked to let a disagreement linger unresolved.

For at least one participant, resolution followed a somewhat different pattern: rather than addressing the issue immediately, both partners would withdraw into silence for a day or two before one of them re-initiated contact, after which the issue was discussed and set aside. Even here, participants were clear that this cooling-off period was temporary and was always followed by conversation rather than permanent avoidance; none of the participants described conflict as something they tried to sidestep indefinitely. As one participant put it, catching a small issue early prevents it from growing into a larger one, while another noted that suppressing a disagreement only makes it harder to resolve later. This pattern was not necessarily present from the beginning of the relationship; several participants described becoming more communicative over time, as earlier tendencies toward reactivity or silence gradually gave way to a preference for direct conversation.

3.2. Mutual Compromise and Accountability

The second theme reflected participants' shared understanding that resolution required compromise from both partners rather than concession from only one side. Several participants explicitly rejected the idea that one spouse habitually gave in more than the other, describing instead a fluid process in which whichever position made more sense in the moment was accepted, regardless of who held it. This was consistently

described as feeling fair rather than one-sided, and participants seemed to draw a clear distinction between compromise that felt mutual and compromise that felt imposed.

Closely related to this was a norm of acknowledging fault: whichever partner was in the wrong was expected to apologise, and participants emphasised that resolution did not require a dramatic or formal apology so much as a mutual, often unspoken, understanding that the matter had been addressed. As one participant reflected, once both partners have said what needed to be said, things simply return to normal without either side dwelling on it further. This reciprocity, more than any fixed rule about who yields more often, appeared closely tied to how sustainable and fair participants perceived their conflict resolution process to be over the course of the marriage.

3.3. Cultural and Religious Underpinnings

The third theme captured the way cultural and religious values shaped participants' approach to conflict, often implicitly rather than through conscious deliberation. Several participants noted that they did not consciously think about religious teaching in the midst of an argument, yet described qualities such as patience, honesty, and kindness as though they arose automatically, suggesting that these values had become internalised rather than deliberately invoked in the moment. One participant described having grown notably closer to their faith since marriage, describing this as a quiet source of guidance in how disagreements were handled.

Cultural values of honour and family harmony were also frequently mentioned as a backdrop that discouraged escalation. Participants described a family upbringing that emphasised not letting small matters spiral into larger conflicts, and maintaining respect and peace within the household as an implicit standard against which their own behaviour during disagreement was measured. Notably, this theme surfaced a dimension largely absent from scale-based research: rather than consciously selecting a named conflict style, participants seemed to be enacting an internalised ethic of patience and family honour that shaped their behaviour beneath the level of deliberate strategy.

3.4. Emotional Regulation and Personal Growth

The fourth theme reflected a shared narrative of emotional change over time. Several participants described themselves as having been more reactive, emotional, or even careless earlier in life or earlier in the relationship, and contrasted this with a calmer, more deliberate approach in the present. Participants attributed this shift variously to simply growing older, to lessons learned through the relationship itself, and to their spouse's steady support during difficult moments.

One participant described consciously pausing to think before speaking, where previously they would have reacted immediately; another described learning, over time, to step back and cool down rather than allow an emotional reaction to spiral. This developmental arc suggests that conflict resolution is not a fixed trait that couples either

possess or lack from the outset, but a capacity that develops through the accumulated experience of navigating disagreements, consistent with broader findings linking more regulated, less reactive conflict styles to lower perceived stress (Işık & Kaya, 2022).

3.5. Trust and Relational Bonding Through Resolution

The fifth theme highlighted how successfully resolved conflict contributed to, rather than detracted from, participants' sense of trust and closeness with their spouse. Several participants explicitly stated that unresolved issues did not linger or affect their day-to-day communication, because disagreements were addressed as they arose rather than allowed to accumulate. Participants described a deepening of trust that came specifically from having a spouse who remained present, attentive, and supportive during difficult moments, describing this presence as more important to trust than almost anything else.

Several participants also described their relationship as having grown stronger, not despite the disagreements they had experienced, but partly because of how those disagreements had been worked through together. This offers a qualitative counterpart to prior findings that successfully worked-through conflict can enhance rather than diminish intimacy, an effect previously observed to be especially pronounced for husbands (Iqbal, Nizami, & Anjum, 2013); the present findings extend this pattern to a more general sense of relational security that did not appear limited to either gender.

3.6. Boundaries with Extended Family and Self-Reliance

The final theme concerned the deliberate boundary participants drew between their marital conflicts and their extended family. Across the sample, family members, including parents and in-laws, were consistently described as generally supportive of the marriage, yet participants were equally consistent in stating that these family members did not become involved in the couple's own disagreements, a boundary participants described as preferable and appropriate. This finding stands in some contrast to research identifying in-law involvement as a common source of marital conflict in Pakistani households (Dildar & Amjad, 2017); in the present sample, family appeared supportive precisely because it remained uninvolved in the couple's private negotiation of disagreement.

None of the participants had ever sought help from an elder, religious scholar, or professional counsellor in resolving a marital disagreement, describing this instead as something the couple always managed between themselves. Participants without children additionally reflected, when asked, that they anticipated needing to be considerably more careful and private in how they handled disagreement once children were present in the household, in order to shield them from exposure to marital conflict.

4. Discussion

The first theme, open and timely communication, aligns closely with prior research identifying communication as one of the strongest predictors of relationship satisfaction,

trust, and closeness (Anderson, Kunkel, & Dennis, 2006). Participants' preference for direct, same-day discussion mirrors findings that integrative and constructive resolution strategies are positively associated with marital satisfaction in Pakistani samples, in contrast to avoidant or distributive approaches (Ali & Saleem, 2022). Notably, the brief cooling-off period described by one participant, in which conflict was temporarily set aside through silence before being resolved through conversation, did not resemble the chronic avoidance linked to dissatisfaction in prior research (Dildar, Bibi, & Amjad, 2013); rather, it functioned as a temporary regulation strategy that still culminated in open discussion, suggesting that not all withdrawal from conflict is equivalent to avoidance as a destructive style.

The second theme, mutual compromise and accountability, resonates with research showing that compromising and collaborative styles, rather than domination or one-sided concession, are associated with higher marital satisfaction (Azadifard & Amani, 2017). Participants' insistence that resolution was fair, rather than dictated by a single more accommodating partner, suggests a relatively egalitarian model of conflict resolution within these marriages, consistent with findings that constructive problem-solving contributed by both husbands and wives predicts satisfaction (Ünal & Akgun, 2022).

The third theme underscores a dimension largely absent from scale-based research: the implicit, rather than consciously invoked, role of religious and cultural values. Where quantitative instruments categorise resolution strategies as compromise, avoidance, domination, or separation (Zacchilli, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 2009; Farooq, Akhtar, & Zacchilli, 2022), participants' own accounts suggest that these categories are underpinned by an internalised ethic of patience, honesty, and family honour that shapes behaviour without necessarily being named or reasoned through in the moment. This finding illustrates the value of qualitative inquiry in surfacing the cultural substrate beneath measurable conflict behaviour.

The fourth theme, emotional regulation and personal growth, is consistent with the broader literature linking conflict resolution to psychological wellbeing; more positive, less reactive conflict styles have been associated with lower perceived stress (Işık & Kaya, 2022), and the present findings suggest that this capacity for regulation is often described by participants as something learned and developed over the course of the relationship itself, rather than a fixed trait present from the outset.

The fifth theme, trust and relational bonding, offers a qualitative counterpart to findings that resolved conflict can enhance rather than diminish intimacy, including the finding that successfully worked-through conflict has been linked to increased felt intimacy for husbands specifically (Iqbal, Nizami, & Anjum, 2013). Participants' descriptions of deepened trust following a partner's presence during difficulty extend this idea to a more general sense of relational security, not limited to any one gender.

Finally, the sixth theme, boundaries with extended family and self-reliance, speaks to the collectivist context in which Pakistani marriages are embedded, where in-laws and extended family have been identified elsewhere as a significant source of marital conflict (Dildar & Amjad, 2017). In contrast, participants in this study described family as a supportive but deliberately uninvolved presence in their own disagreements, and notably, none had sought or considered formal counselling, a pattern that may reflect both the strong stigma attached to divorce and open marital difficulty in Pakistan (Qadir, De Silva, Prince, & Khan, 2005) and a cultural preference for resolving conflict privately within the couple.

Read together, the six themes suggest a model of conflict resolution that is fundamentally relational rather than individual: satisfaction did not appear to hinge on either partner possessing a particular personality trait or skill in isolation, but on a shared, evolving set of practices, namely talking things through promptly, sharing the burden of compromise, drawing quietly on cultural and religious values, growing more regulated together over time, and protecting the relationship from outside interference. This relational framing may help explain why participants so consistently resisted the idea of involving outside parties, whether family or professional counsellors, in their conflicts: doing so would have meant treating what they experienced as a shared, internally managed practice as though it were instead an individual deficiency requiring external correction.

5. Implications for Practice

The findings suggest that premarital and marital counselling programmes in Pakistan could usefully focus on strengthening couples' existing communicative and compromise-based strategies, rather than assuming a deficit model in which couples lack such skills. Given participants' consistent reluctance to involve extended family or formal counselling in their conflicts, practitioners may also need to consider how to make professional support more accessible and culturally acceptable, for instance by framing counselling as a private, confidential extension of a couple's own conflict resolution process rather than as an outside intervention imposed upon it. Psychoeducation efforts might also benefit from acknowledging, rather than overriding, the implicit religious and cultural values that already guide couples' behaviour during conflict, using these as a foundation on which to build rather than a barrier to work around.

6. Limitations

This study was conducted with a small sample of five participants, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Gender balance was not fully even, with three female and two male participants, which may have shaped the range of perspectives captured. Participants were interviewed individually rather than as couples, meaning the study captures each partner's own account of shared conflict rather than a joint or corroborated perspective. Additionally, none of the participants currently had children, limiting insight

into how the presence of children might alter conflict dynamics in practice rather than in anticipation.

7. Future Directions for Research

Future research could expand the sample size and include both members of the same couple to compare and contrast perspectives on shared conflicts. Including married individuals with children would allow examination of how parenting responsibilities shape conflict resolution in practice. Comparative research contrasting couples who have sought formal counselling with those who have not could also illuminate the barriers to, and potential benefits of, professional support in this cultural context. A mixed-methods design combining qualitative interviews with standardized instruments such as the Romantic Partner Conflict Scale (Zacchilli et al., 2009) or the PREPARE inventory (Larsen & Olson, 1989) could help connect the lived, idiographic detail captured here with the broader, generalisable patterns identified in quantitative research.

8. Conclusion

For the participants in this study, marital conflict was rarely destructive. Instead, it functioned as a recurring opportunity for growth, deepened understanding, and strengthened trust, shaped throughout by cultural values of honour and family harmony and by an implicit rather than formally invoked religious framework. Family members were consistently described as emotionally supportive yet deliberately excluded from the couple's private negotiation of disagreements, and none of the participants had sought or considered formal marriage counselling. Taken together, these findings contribute an in-depth, culturally grounded understanding of how Pakistani married couples resolve conflict, one that complements and extends the quantitative, scale-based approach that has historically dominated this literature.

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