

# Gender Differences in Handling Marital Communication Conflict and Choice of Individual Coping Strategies

Carrie Grace Jaymess, Fatahyah Yahya

**Abstract:** This study examined gender differences in handling marital communication conflict and choice of individual coping strategies in a sample of 130 (89 females and 41 males) married working individuals aged between 25 and 60 years old, who have been married for at least 6 months at the time of study. The Communication Pattern Questionnaires (CPQ) and Coping Resources Inventory (CRI) were used to collect the data. A Mann-Whitney U test was run to determine any differences in the scores of marital communication conflict and coping strategies between the males and the females. The median marital communication conflict score was statistically and significantly different between males and females,  $U = 1218.5$ ,  $z = -3.037$ ,  $p = 0.002$ . The median marital communication score for males was 164, which was higher than the female score of 142. The score for median coping strategies was also statistically significantly different between males and females,  $U = 1370.5$ ,  $z = -2.276$ ,  $p = 0.023$ . The score for median coping strategies for females was 165, which was higher than the scores of the males (159). The results indicate that the males attained significantly higher marital conflict communication scores than the females while females attained significantly higher coping strategy scores than the males.

**Index Terms:** Coping Strategies, Gender Differences, Marital Communication Conflict

## I. INTRODUCTION

In contrast to ancient times, the role of women and men in today's household have become almost equal. Women, who were once synonymous with staying at home and cooking, have evolved to assume the role once dominated by men. If previously, men were the sole breadwinner, now, women have also stepped up to the plate. This situation has definitely changed the basic concept of maintaining the household and the division of roles between husband and wife. It may also expose couples to different challenges and problems. Many studies have proven the importance of effective communication in retaining a good relationship. Good communication between couples can reduce misunderstandings when conflicts occur. Conflict is inevitable in a marriage; this conflict will surely put pressure on the couple, so when faced with a stressful situation, couples should be wise at finding solutions or ways to

**Revised Manuscript Received on June 10, 2019.**

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channel their stress. There are many studies that have shown that men and women communicate differently and have their own way of dealing with problems and stressful events. This study aims to assess whether or not there are gender differences in the way males and females handle marital communication conflict and individual coping strategies.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Result of Previous Studies

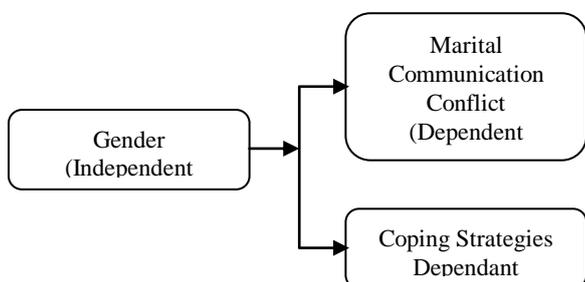
In many homes today, women serve as the bread winners, providing for the needs of the family members and also engaging in professional careers, various vocations, and/or full-time trading/farming (Nwatu, 2018). According to Christensen and Heavey (1990), marital conflict typically emerges when one partner behaves in a way that is unpleasant to the other. Peterson (1983) posited that once this initiating event has occurred, the couple makes a crucial decision to either engage in discussion or to avoid the discussion of the issue altogether. A study of the demand/withdraw behavioural patterns in the event of marital conflict by Christensen and Heavey (1990) indicated that both the husband and the wife were more likely to demand a discussion for change in their favour and were more likely to withdraw when discussing a change in their partner's favour. However, men were more withdrawn than women overall, but women were not more demanding than men overall. According to a study by Wanic and Kulik (2011), men's habit of withdrawing from conflict exacerbates the power differential during marital arguments and denies wives the conversation or movement towards a resolution they desire. The research indicated that marriage had beneficial health consequences for morbidity and mortality, but the benefits were stronger for men than for women. One plausible explanation for this difference arises from responses to marital conflict, where women are more negatively impacted both physiologically and psychologically. Lengua and Stormshak (2000) noted that both genders use coping strategies differently, as has also been reported in a number of studies. There are also individual differences in how people cope with distress (Nwatu, 2018), because a modern woman, unlike her counterpart four decades ago, is challenged by the current economic situation to pursue and have a career and also to help in achieving organizational goals as well as being a companion to the husband, and a caregiver to her children; she needs



psychological remedies such as emotion-focused coping to remain functional and stable in the face of these enormous difficulties both from home and at work. Nwatu (2018) further stated that married women in different vocations have different ways of coping. The findings of the study found that married working women who adopted problem-focused strategies presented more marital stress symptoms than women who adopted emotion-focused strategies. A study by Yazdani, Kazemi, Fooladi, and Saman (2016) conducted on infertile Iranian couples found that women’s marital satisfaction, marital communication, and conflict resolution depended on the use of active confrontation and self-blame strategies; while men only used the active confronting strategy accompanied by some level of marital satisfaction and conflict resolution and some level of marital communication dependent on the self-blame strategy. Matud’s (2004) study indicated that women scored significantly higher than men when faced with chronic stress and minor daily stressors. The women scored significantly higher than the men on emotional and avoidance coping styles and lower on rational and detachment coping styles. The men were found to have more emotional inhibition than the women. The study suggested that women suffered more stress than men and their coping style was more emotion-focused than men. Gender differences might also affect coping strategies in stressful intimate relationships (Büyüksahin, 2009). Marriage thus appears to be a potential source of valuable information about coping (Bowman, 1990). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) posited that coping is the act of expending conscious effort to solve personal and interpersonal problems. Also, according to Folkman (1984), coping strategies can be defined as any effort that a person makes to manage situations he or she has appraised as potentially harmful or stressful. The issue of coping has been a popular topic among sociologists for several decades (Gray, 2003). Research on gender and coping often assume that men and women experience the same problems when exposed to the same stressful life events, but other studies found an inconsistent relationship between coping strategies and outcomes. The study of Copeland and Hess (1995) on whether young male and female adolescents had different coping strategies, found that females reported using coping strategies that included proactive orientation, catharsis, positive imagery, and self-reliance more often than males. Based on their self-report, males were more likely to use avoiding problems, physical diversion, and passive diversions. A study by Mahmoodi (2011) found that the correlation between stress coping strategy and marital satisfaction was significantly positive among Tehran women.

**B. Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework developed in this study is outlined in Figure 1 below;



**C. Hypothesis**

There is a statistically significant difference between married working males and females in the effect of marital communication conflict and individual coping strategies.

**III. METHODOLOGY/MATERIALS**

**A. Participants**

The sample consisted of 130 volunteers consisting of married working individuals from all over Sabah, Malaysia, aged between 25 and 60 years old. Among them, 32% were Dusun, 15% Kadazan, 22% Malay, 16% Bajau, and 15% other races. As much as 81% worked in the Government sector, 19% worked in the Private sector. 74% earned below RM5000 per month and 26% earned above RM5001 per month. Moreover, 16% have been married for less than 3 years, 22% have been married for 4-6 years, 17% have been married between 7 and 9 years, and 45% have been married for more than 10 years.

**B. Instruments**

Two instruments were used in this study, which are the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ) and the Coping Resources Inventory (CRI). CPQ is freely available and is one of the most commonly used self-report measures for assessing communication patterns in romantic couples (Crenshaw et al, 2016). Based in part on an original measure developed by Sullaway and Christensen (1983), the CPQ consists of 35 Likert-scale items that assess the dyadic patterns of couples when typically dealing with relationship problems at three time periods: when a problem arises, during the discussion of the problem, and after the discussion of the problem. The items of the CPQ are most commonly used to generate four subscales: constructive communication (7 items), mutual avoidance (3 items), and two demand/withdraw scales (self-demand/partner withdraw and partner-demand/self-withdraw; 3 items each). The Coping Resources Inventory (CRI) was used to measure the coping strategies of the participants. CRI measures five basic ways people handle stress. The CRI can help clients recognise or bolster their coping resources, which in turn can help them minimise the impact of change and stress in their lives. This is an efficient and valid measure of coping (Marting and Hammer, 2004). There are 60 items and five scales in CRI. The five scales are cognitive, social, emotional, spiritual/philosophical, and physical. The cognitive scale measures the extent to which individuals maintain a positive sense of self-worth, a positive outlook toward others, and optimism about life in general. The social scale assesses the degree to which individuals are imbedded in social networks that are able to provide support in times of stress. The emotional scale examines the degree to which individuals are able to accept and express a range of effects, based on the premise that a range of emotional response helps ameliorate long-term negative consequences of stress. The spiritual/philosophical scale is the degree to which the



actions of individuals are guided by stable and consistent values derived from religious, familial, or cultural tradition or from personal philosophy. Such values might serve to define the meaning of potentially stressful events and help to prescribe strategies for responding effectively. The content domain for this scale is broader than traditional Western religious definitions of spirituality. The physical scale assesses the degree to which individuals enact health-promoting behaviours believed to contribute to increased physical well-being. Physical well-being is thought to decrease the level of negative response to stress and to enable faster recovery. It may also help to attenuate potentially chronic stress-illness cycles resulting from negative physical responses to stressors that themselves become major stressors. The researcher bought the CRI instrument online and obtained approval to translate it into Malay and to make copies for distribution. In this study, the researcher analysed the coping aspect in total and not by scale.

### C. Procedure

All instruments were back translated. The back-translation procedure was performed by The Malaysian Institute of Translation and Books (ITBM). After being translated by ITBM, all instruments were then distributed to two experts specialising in family counselling and marriages for the content validation process. The two expert panels reviewed the translated version for conceptual and content equivalence. The validity was confirmed using concurrent validity. A pilot study was also conducted to ensure that the questionnaire booklet content was appropriate and the instructions for completion were clear. A total of 33 married individuals that currently worked in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, at the time of the study, were chosen for the pilot study. The purpose of a pilot test is to ensure that the respondents in the sample not only understood the questions, but also understood them in a similar way (Nor Mazlina Ghazali, 2015). After the pilot study, the researcher converted the questionnaires into Google Form format and distributed the link to married working colleagues, family members, and friends. In turn, they also recruited other participants from their contacts via snowball sampling.

### D. Design/Statistics

A quantitative survey design was used and the method of analysis was the Mann-Whitney U test. The Mann-Whitney U test is a rank-based nonparametric test that can be used to determine the differences between two groups on a continuous or ordinal dependent variable (Laerd Statistics, 2015).

### E. Data Analysis

The Mann-Whitney U Test in SPSS software was run to identify differences in the coping strategies' score between married females and males. The dependent variables were marital communication conflict and coping strategies. The independent variables were both gender groups—females and males.

## IV. RESULT AND FINDINGS

### A. Gender Differences in the Effect of Marital Communication Conflict

The Mann-Whitney U test was run to determine differences in the marital communication conflict score between males and females. The distributions of marital communication conflict for males and females were similar, as assessed via visual inspection. The median marital communication conflict score was statistically significantly different between males and females,  $U = 1218.5$ ,  $z = -3.037$ ,  $p = 0.002$ . The median coping score for males was 164, higher than the females' score of 142. The results indicated that the males obtained a significantly higher marital communication conflict score than the females.

### B. Gender Differences in the Effect of Individual

The Mann-Whitney U test was run to determine differences in the coping strategies' score between males and females. The distributions of the coping scores for males and females were similar, as assessed via visual inspection. The median engagement score was statistically significantly different between males and females,  $U = 1370.5$ ,  $z = -2.276$ ,  $p = 0.023$ . The median coping score for females was 165, which was higher than the males' score of 159. The results indicate that the females obtained significantly higher coping strategy scores than the males.

## V. CONCLUSION

The results of this study indicated that the males obtained a significantly higher marital conflict communication score than the females while the females attained a significantly higher coping strategy score than the males. Therefore, it is confirmed that there are gender differences in handling marital communication conflict and choice of individual coping strategies. However, while previous studies have indicated that women obtained significantly higher chronic stress and minor daily stressor scores than men, this study indicated that women also attained higher coping strategy scores and lower marital communication conflict scores compared to men. These results show that even if women suffered more stress than men, with good coping strategies, women somehow manage to overcome the negative impact of marital communication conflict on themselves. Men, on the other hand, experience less chronic stress and daily stressors but attained higher marital communication conflict scores and lesser coping strategy scores. In other words, with poor coping strategies, men tend to experience higher communication conflict compared to women.

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