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

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Karin du Plessis
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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.

Chapter One: Literature Review

Intimate relationships and the forces that drive and divide them, have been an enigma and talking-point for humankind since Adam and Eve lived blissfully in the Garden of Eden. Over the last century this has also become the focus for marital and relationship researchers. Coupledness may be defined as two partners who are committed to their relationship in a primary way and intimately share emotions, activities or time (Cline, 1999). The ultimate legal manifestation of coupledness is the union of two individuals through marriage. In New Zealand, marriage rates have decreased over the last 30 years. There were 20,655 registered marriages in the year 2000. This trend is a result of the increase in de facto unions, a tendency to postpone marriage to a later age, and a rising number of people opting to stay single (Statistics, 2001). Cohabitation appears to be more common among younger people under the age of 25 and these results are similar to other countries like Australia, Europe and the United States (Statistics, 2001). Currently the rate of divorce in New Zealand is declining slowly, and the year 2000 saw 12.3 per 100 marriages ending in divorce (Statistics, 2001).

Couple Communication and Conflict Resolution

Couple communication forms an integral part of relationship functioning and can be viewed as a symbolic, transactional process by which meanings are exchanged (Galvin & Brommel, 1996). It is through this medium of communication, which includes verbal and nonverbal messages such as an exchange of conversation, body language and sexual intimacy, that relationships are formed, maintained, and disbanded. Communication patterns are relatively stable over time and unrewarding communication

patterns earlier on in a relationship are predictive of marital distress longitudinally (Markman, 1981). Communication skill and communication behaviour are concepts that are often confused in the literature (Holtzworth-Munroe & Jacobson, 1991). Consequently, communication skill deficits are often blamed as the cause of many marital problems. For example, it has been suggested that people in close relationships allow conflict to spiral out of control because they lack the communicative skill to manage themselves and others (Marshall, 1994). Although this might be the case for some couples, Burleson and Denton (1997) contend that the intentions and goals of the communicator should not be ruled out as moderating factors in relationship satisfaction. In addition they suggest that to obtain a more accurate measure of a person's communication skills, one needs to compare communication intentions with communication results, instead of just relying on observed communicative behaviour as an indication of skill.

The conflict model of personality development philosophically contends that, according to Freud, conflict is the result of opposing forces that are unavoidable, and life is a concession that makes the conflict tolerable (Maddi, 1996). Similarly we today view conflict as the result of incompatible activities (Johnson & Johnson, 2000), for instance a difference of opinion, desires, interests or values. Conflict can also occur as a result of a scarcity of resources, such as money, time or space (Deutsch, 1969). Even though the function of conflict in improving or damaging relationships remains contentious, it has been suggested that from a systems perspective if a relationship is seen as an open system in need of adaptation, then conflict might play a role in attaining the necessary adaptation (Koren, Carlton &

Shaw, 1980). All couples' relationships deal with conflict and it is the couple's ability to handle the conflict, instead of the conflict itself, that is a crucial factor in determining a couple's relationship quality (Storaasli & Markman, 1990). The literature distinguishes between manifest and underlying conflicts, and Deutch (1969) suggests that manifest conflict may be symptomatic of underlying conflict, to the extent that manifest conflict may often not be resolved more than temporarily unless the underlying issues are addressed. In their research on distressed and nondistressed couples, Christensen and Pasch (1993) identified seven sequential sequences of marital conflict, (namely conflicts of interest, stressful circumstances, precipitating events, engagement versus avoidance, interaction scenario, immediate outcome and return to normal) and proposed that there are distinct differences in the manner in which distressed and nondistressed couples handle these phases.

Conflict beliefs have been indicated as moderating factors in conflict behaviour, and Crohan's (1988) research indicates that patterns of conflict beliefs held by both partners are related to marital happiness. Bushman (1998) researched particular conflict beliefs, and found that destructive conflict resolution techniques are significantly related to two irrational beliefs, these are that "disagreement is destructive" and "people cannot change". Constructive conflict resolution strategies in response to destructive actions have been linked to higher levels of love in intimate relationships (Bushman, 1998).

Conflict and physical violence. One unfortunate and destructive outcome of some relational conflict interactions is physical violence, and whilst men might also be victim to domestic violence, it is mostly women who experience it. Domestic violence involves the misuse of power and can include behaviours that range from coercion and intimidation to beatings to rape (Lloyd & Emery, 1994). The course of abuse can quite easily become a recurring cycle and its uncontested use can lead to its integration as a prototype of behaviour (Lloyd & Emery, 1994). This is due to the fact that aggression can be conceived of as the ultimate negotiating strategy, as it consequently ensures absolute agreement with one's needs and desires (Lloyd & Emery, 1994). Physical aggression is often further negatively reinforced by the termination of what is perceived of as an aversive act (e.g. nagging), and in addition by the release of tension following the act of physical aggression (Lloyd & Emery, 1994).

A recent New Zealand survey on the effects of domestic violence on women's health reported that 17% of women have experienced physical violence by a family member at some point in their lives and that 12% of their psychological distress, and 7% of their physical illness were accounted for by the physical violence (Kazantzis, Flett, Long, Macdonald & Millar, 2000). The incidence of domestic violence in New Zealand appears to be consistent with international occurrences that rate the number of women abused each year by the man they live with to be 1 in 6 (Avis, 1992). Due to the sensitive nature of this topic and the social taboo on physical violence, these figures are therefore probably an underreporting of the actual occurrence of physical violence, and some researchers have approximated that physical violence

could be as low as 30% and high as 50%-60% (O'Leary, Barling, Arias, Rosenbaum, Malone & Tyree, 1989). These figures also apply to same-sex relationships, where violent conflict has not been greatly researched, but where it appears to be even more under-reported than in heterosexual relationships (Patterson & Schwartz, 1994). Patterson and Schwartz (1994) propose that domestic violence in same-sex relationships might appear invisible due to a cultural myth that leads people to believe that homosexual relationships are non-violent. Some couples might only experience one incident of physical violence, whereas others might encounter it as an intermittent and continuing difficulty (Strube, 1988). A review of the literature demonstrates that many factors seem to influence the decision to leave a physically violent relationship. These include the length of relationship and the number of previous separations, employment, and the presence of child abuse (Strube, 1988). Recent investigations on aversive communication in the family of origin and antisocial behaviour in adolescence have indicated that these factors might be predictive of physical violence in young adult couples (Andrews, Foster, Capaldi & Hops, 2000). Researchers have also begun to attempt to construct a typology of batterers. Factors such as family of origin, attachment, communication skills and psychological symptoms have been linked in greater or lesser degrees to the level of violence that a batterer exhibits (Waltz, Jacobson, Babcock & Gottman, 2000). Not only does the physical violence affect the person who experiences it. The literature also shows that it has a pervasive effect on the children in the house and their lives, with parents reporting that children who witness interparental physical conflict show signs and reactions indicative of emotional arousal and distress

(O'Hearn, Margolin & John, 1997). Furthermore, both men and women who have witnessed interparental physical conflict during childhood report higher levels of current psychological distress than their non-affected counterparts (Henning, Leitenberg, Coffey, Bennett & Jankowski, 1997). This then remains an issue that needs to be managed at the grass roots in the family home for the ramifications are insidious and far-reaching for those experiencing or witnessing physical conflict.

Conflict resolution. Conflict resolution is a multifaceted concept that has been referred to by Vito (1998) as either "communication or behavioural patterns/styles displayed by partners during conflictual discussions" or as "behavioural/communication styles displayed during different phases/stages of a conflictual discussion" (p.18). The traditional outlook on conflict resolution theorizing and research held that negative problem solving (e.g., disagreement, defensiveness, obstinacy, withdrawal and disapproval) is counterproductive to the well-being of an intimate relationship, and that positive problem solving (e.g., compromise, concurrence, validation) contributes to the health of a couples' relationship. This is based on the supposition that the conflict resolution styles of nondistressed couples, in contrast to distressed couples, are indicative of the well-being of their relationships (Rusbult, Johnson & Morrow, 1986). For the most part, findings have corroborated this notion. Conflict resolution research to date has indicated that couples who manage their conflict constructively experience more relationship satisfaction than their counterparts who employ destructive or ineffective conflict resolution styles. To this point, Billings (1979) found that distressed couples engaged in significantly more negative problem solving

acts and reciprocated more negative communication behaviour than their nondistressed equivalents. Rusbult, Johnson and Morrow (1986a) moreover found that destructive conflict resolution, as well as the partner's perception of the others' conflict resolution style, was more predictive of distress in couples' relationships than were positive conflict resolution. This echoes Kelley's (1979) suggestion that when studying relationships, one should not only consider the behaviour of individuals, but also the co-dependence and influence of the individual's behaviours on the relationship. In their research, Koren et al. (1980) found that distressed couples were more critical and less receptive to their partners' influence efforts, than nondistressed couples. Their research in addition indicated that the proposal of a solution to a conflict situation did not necessarily predict satisfaction with the outcome. Couples with ineffective problem solving strategies often have unresolved conflicts regarding recurrent problem areas. Research has proposed that relationship dissatisfaction shows a more pronounced affiliation with some domains of conflict. For instance, Kurdek (1994a) found that relationship power (i.e., communication styles, friends, chores, leisure time) and intimacy (defined as lack of affection and sex) are often burning issues for many couples, whether homosexual or heterosexual. Kurdek's (1994a) findings furthermore indicated that the incidence of conflict across gay and lesbian couples is analogous to heterosexual couples.

Gender differences in resolving conflicts have been investigated. A study by Buunk, Schaap and Prevoo (1990) put forward that women perceived themselves as more unreservedly discussing emotions in their efforts to resolve conflict. In addition, women also displayed more negative

emotions than their partners. Men, however, self-reported a preference to smooth things over, rather than engaging in emotional discussions. Men also showed a greater willingness to compromise when resolving conflicts (Buunk et al., 1990). Kurdek's (1995) research on husbands and wives' conflict resolution styles, indicated that husbands' satisfaction with their relationships were more often influenced by their wives' conflict resolution styles than the opposite. In particular, it was found that if wives engage in conflict frequently, there was a subsequent decline of husbands' relationship satisfaction.

Kurdek (1995) also found that low marital satisfaction was strongly linked with gender specific spousal interaction, in that the wife-demand, husband-withdraw pattern accounted for more variance in relationship satisfaction than any other conflict resolution style. More recently researchers (Berns, Jacobsen & Gottman, 1999) have studied the demand-withdraw interactions in couples with a violent husband. Results indicate that batterers express significantly higher demand and withdraw levels than other men, whereas battered women demand more change, but are less prone to withdraw than their husbands. With the demand/withdraw pattern of marital interaction, researchers (Heavy, Layne & Christensen, 1993) have indicated that gender differences do exist with regards to the extent that couples experience this role differentiation. It appears that when couples talk about problems raised by the husband there is no general demand/withdraw role demarcation.

However, there is an apparent role demarcation along gender lines, with the wife being more likely to be demanding, and the husband more likely to be withdrawing, when engaged in a problem solving situation. These assumptions are particularly true for couples whose relational interactions are

typified by gender-stereotyped roles and could be destructive to the welfare of these relationships over time. There is ample support for the notion that demand-withdraw interaction reflects the amount and intensity of intimacy that people want in a relationship, with people in a demanding role generally desiring more intimacy, whereas those withdrawing from the interaction want greater separateness (Christensen, 1987; Jacobson, 1989). It has also been suggested that these gender differences can be explained by Gottman and Levenson's (1988) findings that propose that compared to women, men experience a higher level of physiological arousal during conflict, and that as a result men try to withdraw from the conflict. More recently Gottman (1994) developed the model of relational decay that attempts to explain how couples move towards divorce. He theorized that, based on his research, negative conflict management behavior leads to perceptual shifts that lead to adverse and negative beliefs about the partner. More specifically, it has been shown that four negative behaviors are particularly corrosive to a relationship. These include complaining/criticizing, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling. Gottman (1994) contends that these negative behaviors then lead to a heightened physiological arousal and other fight or flight symptoms which men, compared to women, find particularly aversive, and which causes them to withdraw from conflict.

Concerning the marital satisfaction of couples over time it has been pointed out that wives who are obliging manage their husbands' concurrent negativity better. However, the marital satisfaction of these couples appears to decline longitudinally (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Regarding specific emotions, Gottman and Krokoff (1989) in their longitudinal research on marital

interactions, found that the marital satisfaction of wives advances in time if during conflict she communicates anger and contempt, but deteriorates if she expresses sadness or fear. Research into the influence of interparental problem solving patterns on adult child marriages has indicated that marital interactions may be modeled and intergenerationally transmitted. However, there is a difference along gender lines in the extent to which husbands and wives model their parents' conflictual patterns, and a study by Phelps (1995) showed that men's parents' marriages influenced their own marriages to a greater extent than women's parents' marriages. Contradictory to most research in the area of gender differences with regards to relational conflict, Burggraaf and Sillars (1987) found that it was not so much sex differences than couple type, which influenced how couples engaged in conflict. In addition they found that reciprocal influence processes and mutually held beliefs and expectations about the relationship explain conflict styles more adequately than gender per se.

Couples' relationships consist of individuals, and as such the aspects of individual personality and the personal meanings individuals attach to signs and symbols have been studied with regard to their intimate relationships. The psychological construct of self-esteem has been examined in relation to conflict resolution styles, and although weak links to constructive problem solving behaviours were found, low self-esteem levels have been shown to have an association with negative and destructive problem solving behaviours (Rusbult, Morrow & Johnson, 1987). Optimism and pessimism have been correlated with conflict resolution strategies. Dicke (1997) found that optimist-optimist couples resolved their problems using cooperative strategies,

whereas pessimist-pessimist couples tended to use controlling strategies. Not surprisingly, Dicke's (1997) study also indicated that people preferred optimists as romantic partners, and that optimists, as individuals, believed that they would remain together for a longer period of time than pessimists. In an interesting study by Miller, Lefcourt, Holmes, Ware and Saleh (1986) individuals' marital locus of control (loci of control specifically related to marital satisfaction) was correlated with marital problem solving. It was found that those who are internal for marital satisfaction were more effective and active in solving their problems satisfactorily than externals. It appears from this research that if partners see themselves as accountable for relationship outcomes, then they are more likely to experience their relational interactions as manageable and act in an open and direct manner that directly contributes to their relationship satisfaction. Conflict outcomes research has been evaluated from a perspective where either both partners are satisfied with the outcome, or where objective resolutions are reached (Koren, Carlton & Shaw, 1980). Both these perspectives have been argued as the optimal outcome of conflict resolution, and Koren et al. (1980) suggests that both the subjective and the objective elements be considered in the treatment of marital conflict. Further research on a related aspect of conflict outcomes, the degree of follow-through in conflict resolution, was studied by Turner (1994), and it was found that satisfied couples were more likely to follow through with their decided behaviour changes than dissatisfied couples.

Conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Kurdek (1994b) indicates that previous research findings have been consistent in identifying a parallel link between conflict resolution styles and relationship

satisfaction. It has been suggested by Markman (1991) that when conflicts are not resolved satisfactorily in a relationship the “negative feelings start to build up, fuelling destructive patterns of marital interaction and eventually eroding and attacking the positive aspects of the relationship (p.422). The deduction that certain conflict resolution styles lead to relationship satisfaction is based on Rusbult’s interdependence theory (1983), which suggests that “perceived rewards to a relationship (such as the frequent use of constructive strategies) and perceived costs to the relationship (such as the frequent experience of negative conflict resolution styles) determine satisfaction in the relationship” (Kurdek, 1994b) (p.154). This is similar to social learning theory (e.g. Gottman, 1979), and exchange theory (e.g. Huessmann & Levinger, 1976) which proposes that satisfaction in a relationship is a result of the amount of positive and pleasing behaviors, instead of negative and displeasing behaviors, that partners exhibit in a relationship. This is also in line with Van Yperen and Buunk’s (1990) more recent equity theory on satisfaction, which proposes that relationship satisfaction is a direct function of the perception of the amount of equity, or outcomes to inputs, of one partner compared to the other. These perceptions of interaction and the meanings that people attach to them are in fact their relational schemata that drive and determine their behavior, emotions, attitudes and cognitions (Duck, 1993). In return the supposition that the level of relationship satisfaction is causally linked to the recurrence of specific conflict resolution styles, is based on Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid’s self-fulfilling prophecy theory (1977), which proposes that “one’s attitude (e.g. level of satisfaction with the marriage) provides a psychological environment that elicits behavior (e.g. conflict

resolution styles) that reinforces and is consistent with the initial attitude” (Kurdek, 1995) (p.154).

When reviewing the research methods employed in gathering this information, it becomes clear that researchers have mainly used self-report questionnaires and observational methods. Notwithstanding whether researchers employ behavioral observations (Noller et al., 1994) or questionnaire data (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991), Kurdek (1995) concludes that relationship satisfaction is “positively related to the frequency with which each spouse uses constructive strategies to resolve conflict (such as agreement, compromise, and humor) and negatively related both to the frequency with which each spouse uses destructive strategies to resolve conflict (such as conflict engagement, withdrawal and defensiveness)” (p.154). Most studies in the area of marital conflict indicate that over time a decline in marital satisfaction can be predicted by the husband’s use of withdrawal and defensiveness, as well as greater compliance and conflict engagement on the part of the wife as means of resolving conflict (Filsinger & Thoma, 1988; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Noller, Feeney, Bonnell & Callan, 1994). Other researchers have, however, identified that some conflict interaction patterns, which used to be considered negative and harmful to a relationship, such as disagreement and anger exchanges, may not be harmful longitudinally (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). In fact, Gottman and Krokoff (1989) proposed that couples might endure dissatisfaction as a result of their conflict in the short term, but as long as the conflict does not bring into play stubbornness, withdrawal or defensiveness, it might be functional to a relationship in the long run. More recently, Gottman (1993) found that negativity in a relationship is

only dysfunctional when it is not balanced out with at least five times the positivity, and negativity is dysfunctional when either partner indicates high levels of complaining, criticizing, defensiveness, contempt and disgust.

Satisfaction with relationships appears to add more to life-satisfaction than any other sphere of functioning, including one's career (Glenn & Weaver, 1981). There is a strong correlation between spouse's reports of marital satisfaction. Fowers and Applegate's findings (1996) indicate that satisfaction and conventionalisation are mainly dyadic level variables, in other words shared conceptualisations held by the couple, as opposed to individual level concepts. There does, however, appear to be gender differences in marital satisfaction, with findings indicating that women on the whole are experiencing less satisfactory marriages than men (Schumm, Bollman, & Jurich, 1997). It does seem unclear, though, whether these findings (Schumm et al., 1997) are the results of "an artefact of measurement issues (wives might evaluate marriage against different standards than husbands) or of the nature of marriage in the United States" (p.1005), and this remains to be explored in greater depth.

Research on the correlation of certain socio-emotional behaviours with relationship satisfaction has yielded some interesting results. For example, Huston and Vangelisti (1991) showed that affection and negativity was consistently related to marital satisfaction, but contrary to popular belief, sexual interest was unrelated to either husband or wives' marital satisfaction. Affective self-disclosure has also been positively linked to relationship satisfaction and effective conflict resolution styles (Vito, 1998; Rosen-

Grandon, 1998). In addition, it has also been suggested that marital satisfaction increases the correlation between commitment and effective conflict resolution (Christiansen, 1998). Individuals in couples' relationships who are flexible, as opposed to rigid, and who exhibit similar religious orientations and similar outlooks on relationship roles, have indicated high levels of relationship satisfaction (Craddock, 1991). Other important positive contributions to satisfaction in intimate relationships for men and women appear to be commitment, being good company and living an interesting and diverse life, whereas addictions, suspiciousness, unfaithfulness and jealousy appear to impact negatively on relationship satisfaction (Van Yperen & Buunk, 1990). Behavioural interaction patterns have also been shown to predate relationship distress in particular for couples who exhibit a tit-for-tat interactional style, where positive reciprocity often only exists when the other person initiates it (Filsinger & Thoma, 1988).

In a study that examined whether relationships these days are less satisfactory, the researchers (Rogers & Amato, 1997) compared an older cohort (married individuals who were between 20 and 35 years of age in 1980 and were married between 1969 and 1980) and a younger cohort (married individuals who were between 20 and 35 years of age in 1992 and were married between 1981 and 1992), and found that the younger generation had higher levels of marital conflict and lower levels of marital interaction. This seems to be affected by the present day changes in work and family demands as well as changes in economic resources. Despite these differences, the younger cohort was not divorce prone, and they were more committed to the idea of a life-long marriage than the older cohort (Rogers & Amato, 1997). A

cumulation of many reports spanning 30 years of research have indicated that contrary to what many people would believe, present day wife employment alone has little bearing on husband or wife marital satisfaction (Smith, 1985) and that other interpersonal and relational factors should be taken into account when assessing relationship satisfaction. People tend to respond to phases of dissatisfaction in their relationships in a variety of ways, and these actions can be moderated by factors such as the severity of the problem, the quality of alternative options, and the satisfaction level prior to the distress (Rusbult, Johnson & Morrow, 1986). Greater investment reserves and satisfaction prior to phases of dissatisfaction appear to act as a buffer in that couples are more likely to handle problems constructively rather than destructively (Rusbult, Johnson & Morrow, 1986). However, according to the dependence model of break-ups (Drigotas & Rusbult, 1992) it has been suggested that individuals often remain in relationships that they are not satisfied with because the relationship fulfils needs that can not be fulfilled elsewhere. As a result it has become clear that relationship satisfaction and stability are not the same, and that dissatisfaction does not always lead to instability or dissolution (Gottman, 1991; Fowers, 1990).

Kurdek (1993) maintains that relationship dissolution is the result of personal and inter-couple characteristics that are present at the time of marital union, as well as interactional patterns that develop in the relationship. Observational research by Gottman (1991) has indicated that relationship dissolution can be predicted based on the facial expressions of couples when they are interacting. It was found that couples in which the wife showed disgust and miserable smiles, and in which the husband showed fear and

miserable smiles, were more likely than other couples to eventually dissolve their relationships. Gottman (1991) also indicated that certain behaviours such as defensiveness, criticism, disagreement and complaining accompanied these facial expressions, and that together with the husbands' stonewalling and the wife's verbal derision, this was a recipe for divorce.

Relationship enhancement and preventative programs. The literature shows that the highest number of marital dissolutions happen prior to the 5-year mark, with most couples ending their relationships approximately 3 years into the marriage (Kurdek, 1993). New Zealand statistics (Statistics, 2001) echo these findings with a quarter of divorces in the year 2000 spelling the end for marriages after 5-9 years (this is consistent if one considers that New Zealand law requires couples to separate for 2 years prior to their divorce). Currently the rate of divorce in New Zealand is declining slowly, and the year 2000 saw 12.3 per 1000 marriages ending in divorce (Statistics, 2001). However, instead of treating the symptoms of relationship distress and bearing the social and economic burden of separation and divorce, it has been suggested that preventative techniques should rather be employed (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993).

Although premarital counselling is not a common area of practice for family therapists (Stahmann, 2000), premarital preparation programs originated through clergy and community counselling prior to World War II, and developed into community skill training approaches by the 1960's (Silliman & Schumm, 2000). The aim was to avert divorce and build couple proficiency through education (Silliman & Schumm, 2000), and the result was

a series of programs that were offered to couples in the premarital life-stages. These included among others the Couple Communication Program (Miller, Nunnally & Wackman, 1976), Relationship Enhancement (Guerney, 1977), and a cognitive-behavioural skill program the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP)(Burnett, 1993). Derived from observational research on couples and refined through longitudinal testing, the PREP program has developed a training model by which theory and practice are jointly improved (Silliman & Schumm, 2000).

Empirically based relationship enhancement programs, like the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) that specifically train couples in effective communication and conflict management, have been successful in preventing marital distress and increasing relationship satisfaction in the United States (Markman, Renick, Floyd, Stanley & Clements, 1993) and internationally (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993) to the extent that significant differences are still evident in couple communication and conflict management at 4 years post-intervention. According to Silliman and Schumm (2000) in their review of marriage preparation programs, researchers (Stanley, Markman, St. Peters & Leber, 1995) reviewed PREP programs and found that “divorce and separation rates for participant couples were lower than controls at 5 years (8% vs. 19%) and 12 years (19% vs. 28%), with relationship skills and satisfaction sustained for as long as 12 years post-treatment” (p.135).

There is considerable variety amongst premarital relationships, and it has become clear to researchers that typologies could be a useful tool in

tailoring premarital programs to the specific needs of couples. Based on a premarital inventory (PREPARE) researchers have been able to identify four couple types, namely vitalized, harmonious, traditional and conflicted couples, and in doing so have been able to identify at risk couples prior to their marriages, thus decreasing the risk of later divorce (Fowers, Montel & Olson, 1996). *Vitalized* couples have a high degree of overall relationship satisfaction, report agreement on parenting and financial matters and are satisfied with their ability to discuss feelings and resolve problems together. In addition they see religion as an important aspect in their relationship, and prefer an egalitarian role pattern. *Harmonious* couples have a moderate level of relationship satisfaction, yet they tend to have a rather unrealistic perspective of their marriage. For them, religion is not that important in their relationship, but they feel understood by their partner and can discuss and resolve differences with one another. *Traditional* couples have a moderate dissatisfaction with their relationship, in particular with the interactional areas of relationships. They do, however, have strengths in the areas of decision-making and future planning. They have a realistic perspective of their relationship and for them religion is a very important aspect of their marriage. *Conflicted* couples are dissatisfied with their relationship, and experience problems in all the important areas of couples' functioning, which include communicating and discussing problems in the relationship, leisure activities, their sexual relationship and relating to friends and family. By acting proactively, the most at risk couples (i.e. conflicted couples) according to this typology can be identified and preventative measures, such as premarital preparation programs, can be applied to prevent the likelihood of

unsatisfactory marriages and relationships, as well as the possibility of divorce.

Duration of relationships. Relationships have been explained as mutual dynamic and developing cognitive creations between individuals founded on future expectations and a re-enactment of earlier experiences (Duck, 1993). Gottman (1982) has also suggested that “over time, a temporal form is spun by interactants, much as if together they had constructed a physical shape” (p.951), and that these structures partners build together, are indeed their relationship. In attempting to substantiate this description of relationships, researchers have found that accounts from different periods of time on the quality of communication were linked to current relationship satisfaction, rather than foreseeing future relationship satisfaction. In this regard relationship development models have served researchers as helpful constructs in organizing what might otherwise have been seen as disparate experiences (Duck, 1993). One such model that traces the trajectory of relationship development, Duvall’s stages of the family life cycle, is heavily drawn on by structural family therapists (Duvall, 1957). It divides family development into eight stages at which certain developmental tasks need to be completed. Duvall’s family life cycle (1957) distinguishes between married couples without children, childbearing families, families with preschool children, families with children, families with teenagers, families launching young adults, middle-aged parents, and aging family members (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). Carter and McGoldrick (1989) have suggested that there is a foreseeable set of concerns and conflicts that individuals experience as a consequence of their position in the family life cycle. However, the family life

cycle that couples reside in appear to explain a variation of only 8.4% in relationship satisfaction (Anderson, Russell & Schumm, 1983). Some researchers (Spanier, Lewis & Cole, 1975) have criticized the usefulness of Duvall's traditional life cycle in predicting marital satisfaction. From a theoretical perspective it has been suggested that the length of a relationship might have more usefulness in predicting relationship satisfaction (Anderson et al., 1983), particularly in present day societies where many couples opt not to have children, or where children only feature in a relationship at a much later stage. Most researchers agree that relationship satisfaction is greatest at the initial dating and pre-parental stages of a relationship (e.g. Teichner & Farnden-Lyster, 1997). The literature has, however, been at odds regarding whether the relationship between life-stage and relationship satisfaction is best described by a linear or a curvilinear model (e.g. Anderson et al., 1983; Stinnett, Carter & Montgomery, 1972). Recent longitudinal research by Kurdek (1999) tracked the trajectory of change in marital quality over the first 10 years of marriage and found that a cubic pattern of change was evident in couple relationships. This showed a decline in marital quality after the first few years of marriage, then a stabilization, followed again by a rapid decline at approximately 8 years into the marriage, a phenomenon commonly known as the "seven year itch" (Kovacs, 1983). There is however, speculation that there is a curvilinear trend in which a couple's relationship satisfaction appears to lessen following the child-bearing and -rearing years, and again shows an increase once the children are past the adolescent phase (Rice, 1990). This appears to be the result of the many adjustments and the continuous management of significant conflicts that couples with children have to adapt to

(Anderson et al., 1983). Couples living without children or with stepchildren appear not to experience such a steep decline in relationship satisfaction as do couples with their own biological children (Kurdek, 1999). This is consistent with Martin and Bumpass's findings (1989) that suggest that wives bringing children into a remarriage do not influence the relationship's success. This distinction between the linearity and the curvilinearity of relationship satisfaction over life cycles is thus not always clear-cut. This is a result of many variables including individual differences and the presence of children, (Kurdek, 1999), as well as behavioral interactions like communication patterns (Zietlow & Sillars, 1988) and conflict resolution styles established over time (Gottman, 1991) which may have a variable effect on the longitudinal course of relationships. In this regard, it has been established that retired couples' communication and conflict issues over time become more predictable and less emotionally disclosive, lending them a stationary quality. Zietlow and Sillars (1988) speculate that the communication patterns of older couples seem to be related to "popular images of intimate relationships that pre-date the recent emphasis on open communication and direct expression of conflict" (p.243). However, younger couples' conflict issues seem to be addressed more directly and expressively (Zietlow & Sillars, 1988), possibly as a result of the current emphasis in popular culture on open communication and direct expression of conflict. The literature has also indicated that personality development significantly impacts on behavioral interactions and furthermore on the relationship satisfaction of retired couples. Post-conformist couples acting in a non-stereotypic manner are more able to maintain an intimate connection. This is in contrast to their counterparts in the conformist-phase of

personality development (Swenson, Eskew & Kohlhepp, 1981). Conflict management strategies then remain an important part of romantic relationships throughout life, and when handled effectively contribute to the well-being of a relationship over time.

Summary and evaluation of the conflict resolution, relationship satisfaction and duration of relationship literature. Most researchers accept it as a given that it is not so much the frequency of conflict, but rather the manner and extent to which conflict is resolved that distinguishes distressed from nondistressed couples. The research to date indicates that couples who experience a high degree of relationship satisfaction manage their conflict constructively and exhibit positive problem solving behaviors, in comparison to their less satisfied counterparts who have a strong tendency to use destructive and ineffective methods of solving their conflicts. One such an ineffective problem solving method, the demand-withdraw pattern, appears to reflect general relational dissatisfaction in a couple's relationship, and although sex-differences (wife-demand, husband-withdraw) appear to exist, it seems to be more greatly determined by which person views him/herself as disadvantaged and in need of remediating the situation. Other interactional patterns that were previously considered harmful, such as anger exchanges, might contribute to longitudinal relationship satisfaction if partners are willing to sacrifice the short-term well-being of their relationships. To experience a satisfactory relationship would therefore require a balance of five positive interactions for every negative interaction (Gottman, 1994). One extreme form of negative interaction, physical aggression, appears to be alarmingly prevalent in dating, cohabitating and marital same-sex and heterosexual

relationships. Domestic violence, which has been viewed as a conflict resolution strategy, is a complex misuse of power that involves many variables beyond the scope of this thesis. Suffice to say, it is a reality for many individuals in couples relationships that could impact longitudinally on the well-being of their relationship. It remains an issue that requires education and management initiated within the family home and supported by the greater community.

The incidence of conflict among couples of different sexual preferences is similar and unresolved conflicts in a couple's relationship often recur around certain problem areas (e.g. relationship power and intimacy). Recurrent conflicts could be the result of partners withdrawing from the discussions around certain conflict areas. They could also result from aversive physiological reactions (e.g. heightened physiological response and fight/flight symptoms resulting in withdrawal from conflict) toward the negative feelings evoked during conflictual discussions (Gottman, 1994). In this regard Markman (1991) suggested, "to the extent that marital disagreements are not handled well, unresolved negative feelings start to build up fuelling destructive patterns of marital interaction and eventually attacking the positive aspects of the relationship" (p.422). Deutche (1969) proposes that manifest conflict may be symptomatic of underlying conflict to the extent that manifest conflict is often only resolved temporarily unless the underlying issues are addressed. This might also serve to explain why couples experience unresolved conflict around recurrent areas.

Companionate love and in particular affective self-disclosure between partners has been shown to be strongly related to effective conflict management and concurrent relationship satisfaction. Like communication patterns, conflict resolution styles are also relatively stable over time. It follows, then, that to enhance relationship satisfaction, one might need to change ineffective conflict resolution styles to the extent that one becomes more adept at managing conflict constructively and satisfactorily. Relationship enhancement programs appear not only to enhance relationships, but also to act as a preventative measure for break-ups and divorce. In particular, at risk couples who exhibit interactions which lead to painful and costly separations can now be identified and suitable interventions can be applied. This reduces the risk of future break-ups and increases the chance of satisfactory relationships. However, it has become apparent that the theoretical basis of marriage prevention continues to be weak and not sufficiently tested by empirical research (Silliman & Schumm, 2000). Silliman and Schumm (2000) have furthermore suggested, "education efforts with couples would benefit from better understanding patterns of couple growth and resiliency as well as help-seeking during premarital and early marriage stages" (p.140). In addition, it has also become apparent that procedures which target at-risk couples need to be developed in order to reach a population in dire need of prevention (Sullivan & Bradbury, 1997). Thus even though many present day programs benefit a great number of couples, greater sensitivity towards issues such as culture and risk-status, as well as a better understanding and knowledge of the many factors which influence couples who are in the premarital phase or

seeking help, is required to enhance the delivery and effectiveness of premarital programs (Silliman & Schumm, 2000).

Every relationship has a history and over time people's beliefs and expectations surrounding a particular relationship change and develop. The duration of a relationship is a useful construct to researchers in that we are able to plot with some degree of certainty relational trajectories associated with relationship satisfaction. They tend to follow a curvilinear model. This seems to be the result of a decrease in relationship satisfaction during the child-bearing and -rearing years which corrects itself when children are past the adolescent phase and couples experience a renewed sense of togetherness and an increase in relationship satisfaction.

There appear to be methodological limitations in the conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction research reviewed here. It was noted that in some studies homogeneous samples were not used. For example, a common limitation seems to be that couples who vary widely in relationship duration are included in the same study (e.g. (Huston, & Vangelisti, 1991; Noller, et al., 1994), without consideration for the possibility that developmental and life-stage influences might significantly alter the interpretation of the data. It might be suggested that to obtain a more homogenous sample researchers statistically control more of the variables. On the other hand, several researchers recognize the complexity and multidimensionality of constructs such as conflict resolution (e.g. Vito, 1998) and relationship satisfaction (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987) and apply or suggest a variety of measures to tap these multifaceted concepts. There still remains some confusion,

however, when it is not explicitly stated which aspect of conflict resolution or relationship satisfaction is being measured in a study. This not only leads to confusion regarding the operational definitions and understanding of concepts such as “conflict resolution” and “relationship satisfaction”, but also makes it increasingly difficult to compare findings across studies.

Another common limitation in longitudinal studies is that the sample sizes are sometimes quite small (e.g. Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Noller et al., 1994) and to some extent this brings into question the validity and the generalisability of these findings. It is, however, encouraging to note that some researchers replicate and extend their studies (e.g. Heavy et al., 1993) in an attempt to substantiate results and improve design. Moreover, present day studies are more balanced in their gathering of information compared to early social psychological studies, in that they tend to not only focus on pathology, i.e. distressed couples, but also on what works in relationships, i.e. what contributes to relationship satisfaction.

Another issue concerns assessing the extent to which conflict resolution is achieved. Conflict resolution ability often seems to be measured as an outcome of communication behavior. This appears to be based on the assumption that poor conflict resolution is the result of a communication skill deficit. In a number of studies the couples' ability to resolve conflict, or their perception of the effectiveness of their problem solving ability, is often not assessed directly. Some findings (Koren et al., 1980) have, however, suggested that certain communication styles can be linked to resolution of conflictual discussions, but not necessarily to the couples' satisfaction with the

conflict resolution. As these findings have not been studied further, it remains unclear to which extent communication related to satisfaction with conflict resolution is related to the resolution of conflictual discussions.

The literature is still at odds concerning whether using the dyad as a unit of analysis is preferable to studying the individuals in the couple relationship to obtain the best measure of couple behavior and interaction. Some researchers are of the opinion that using the couple as a unit of analysis tends to conceal the richer patterns of association that exist in the couples' relationship (Burleson & Denton, 1997). Others argue that data derived from individuals in close relationships should never be viewed in isolation, but as one partner's perspective of a jointly construed relational experience. Both points of view probably hold some truth, and at best a compromise between the two would be the best solution. A related but separate issue concerns the use of gender as a distinguishing variable, even though contradictory evidence proposes that a classification such as couple type might be more useful (Burggraaf & Sillars, 1987). This is a bias that has persistently plagued social psychology despite the fact that research shows very few significant gender differences. There appear to be a number of reasons why researchers persist in prioritizing gender differences. One of these seems to be a distinctive pattern of human cognition that tends to classify information wherever it can (Howard & Hollander, 1997). It might be that researchers expect to find these sex-differences and that their hypotheses often act as self-fulfilling prophecies which lead to results that might not be substantively significant. As this line of thinking has not received

much exposure in the literature, it remains to be ascertained what, if any, paradigm-shifts the future holds.

It is heartening to note that some research in the relationship field has clinical applicability (e.g. Gottman, 1993) and is carried through to clinical settings. The clinical literature, in the form of marital therapy outcome studies, has greatly contributed to our knowledge of couples' interaction and processes. As relationship/marital therapy often has facilitating conflict resolution and enhancing relationship satisfaction of partners as its primary goal, it is deemed appropriate to review relevant marital therapy approaches.

Marital Therapy

To date the literature has made a distinction in describing marital therapies according to either behavioural or non-behavioural (including cognitive, emotion-focussed and insight oriented-marital therapy) orientations. Behavioural marital therapy (BMT) or behavioural couple therapy (BCT) is based on the notion that distressing relationship interactions are the result of low rates of positive reinforcement. The aim of therapy is to increase the effectiveness of behaviour exchange techniques, in other words maximizing positive and constructive communication and interactions, while minimizing negative and destructive behaviours (Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). The active ingredients of BMT and CMT appear to be a combination of behaviour exchange techniques and communication/problem solving training (Alexander, Holtzworth-Munroe & Jameson, 1994). Studies and replications of studies showing the superiority of BMT to wait list and placebo control groups are abundant, and a meta-analysis (Hahlweg & Markman, 1988) of 17 studies, in

four countries, on BMT have shown that the average effect size of BMT compared to control/placebo groups was 0.95. Alexander, Holtzworth-Munroe & Jameson (1994) report that there is conclusive evidence that the "effects of BMT cannot simply be attributed to non-specific or placebo therapy factors", and that various versions of BMT are superior to control groups, making it to date, one of the most effective therapies for couples (p.597). In a reanalysis of the data from four BMT studies it was determined that as far as the clinical significance of the BMT outcome goes, approximately 55% of couples show a statistically reliable improvement. It is however, disappointing to note that 65% of couples who receive behavioural marital therapy are unsuccessful in making any gains and a further 28% relapsed after 6-months post-treatment (Jacobson, Follette, Revenstorf, Baucom, Hahlweg & Margolin, 1984). This, however, does not seem to be the exception in marital outcome studies, and improvement rates across various other theoretical approaches seem to be consistent in leaving many couples unchanged or distressed at the end of therapy and "all treatments appear to have about the same success rate" (Jacobson & Addis, 1993) which generally stays close to the 50 percent mark (p.7).

Cognitive and cognitive-behavioural marital or couples therapy has the added bonus of including the cognitive processes of the distressed couples. Although this is a relatively new field, it has already been established that compared to nondistressed couples, distressed couples hold more irrational beliefs and expectations about their relationships (Epstein & Eidelson, 1981). Research in the area of the effectiveness of cognitive marital therapy has to date lacked comparisons to wait list/control groups or behavioural marital

therapy and it remains unclear whether the added component of cognitive processes does in fact result in change (Alexander, Holtzworth-Munroe, & Jameson, 1994).

Insight-oriented marital therapy (IOMT) has been compared with BMT and a wait-list control group in a study by Snyder & Willis (1989), and it was found that although IOMT and BMT both produced positive changes for the couples involved, IOMT was effective much longer than BMT, with changes maintained for 4-years post-intervention. More impressively, the IOMT-couples only had a divorce rate of 3% compared to 38% of the BMT couples. Many researchers have, however, called into question the interventions used and the validity of the findings as a result of it (Alexander, Holtzworth-Munroe & Jameson 1994), and it was suggested that the BMT used in the interventions was outdated compared to modern day BMT (Jacobson, 1991). Nonetheless, these findings are impressive, and extensions and replications are eagerly awaited in the scholarly field.

Emotionally focussed marital therapy, according to Alexander et al. (1994) represents an "integrated affective-systemic approach. It emphasizes the role of affective experience in change and the role of negative interactional cycles in the maintenance of a couple's problems" (p.602). Johnson and Greenberg (1985) researched the effectiveness of a cognitive behavioural intervention that focussed on problem-solving skills compared to an experiential intervention, and found that the emotionally focussed group's scores for relationship satisfaction were significantly higher post-intervention and at 2 month follow-up. It has, however, been noted as a shortcoming that this study and other emotionally focussed marital therapy studies have not

included severely distressed couples and that follow-up periods were relatively short, casting doubt on the long-term effectiveness of this treatment (Alexander, Holtzworth-Munroe & Jameson, 1994).

Summary of the marital therapy literature. In conclusion, it can be noted that, across the board, most marital and couples' therapeutic interventions have only about a 50% success rate and that of the couples who attend therapy, a great number are left unchanged or distressed (Jacobson & Addis, 1993). Although insight-oriented marital therapy has shown heartening results (Snyder & Willis, 1989) in terms of long-term effectiveness, more long-term follow-up studies are needed to test the efficacy of treatment over a period of time. In attempting to predict marital therapy outcome, it has also been noted that couples on the less distressed end of the scale are more likely than their severely distressed counterparts to benefit from marital/couples' therapy (Jacobson & Addis, 1993). Furthermore, older couples and couples who are prone to disengage themselves emotionally are also less likely to benefit from couple's therapy (Jacobson & Addis, 1993).

Contributions of the Present Study

This study adds to our knowledge of couples and the relationship literature in general, but also more specifically to our information on the dynamics of couples living in New Zealand. This study is in part a replication of a Canadian study that was conducted by Vito in 1998 titled "Affective Self-Disclosure, Conflict Resolution and Marital Quality", and as such it seeks to validate results, generalize the findings and identify the dissimilarities of that study compared to a New Zealand population. Relevant organizations (e.g.

Relationship Services and Women's Refuge), as well as other related causes, may be able to utilize the results of this study. Marital/relationship therapy and relationship enhancement programs could potentially benefit from this study's findings if they incorporated it into their knowledge of intimate relationships and apply therapeutic principles in line with the empirical research.

Participants were given the opportunity to participate in a worthwhile undertaking and share their knowledge and experiences in a relatively safe manner. As such, participation, which inevitably required insight into and an evaluation of their relationships, heightened awareness and might have had a therapeutic effect (Rubin & Mitchell, 1976) on the relationship as such.

Hypotheses

Based on the preceding review of the literature, the following hypotheses were formulated:

Hypothesis 1: Self-reports of relationship satisfaction are predicted to be positively related to a self-reported conflict resolution style of positive problem solving, and negatively related to conflict resolution styles of conflict engagement, withdrawal and compliance.

Hypothesis 2: It is predicted that reports of conflict resolution style would account for variance in relationship satisfaction beyond that accounted for by duration of relationship and other demographic variables.

Hypothesis 3: Self-reports of relationship satisfaction are predicted to be positively related to self-reports of life-as-a-whole satisfaction.

Hypothesis 4: It is predicted that reports of relationship satisfaction would account for variance in reports of life-as-a-whole satisfaction beyond

that accounted for by duration of relationship and other demographic variables.

Hypothesis 5: Self-reports of effective personal and partner problem solving are predicted to be positively related to self-reports of relationship satisfaction.

Hypothesis 6: It is predicted that self-reports of effective personal and partner problem solving would account for variance in relationship satisfaction beyond that accounted for by duration of relationship and other demographic variables.

Chapter Two: Research Design and Methodology

Participants

117 questionnaire packages were mailed out to interested individuals and 75 were returned, resulting in a 64% response rate. Participants had been living with their current partner or spouse in a marital or cohabiting relationship for a minimum of 6 months without children in the home, as per participation criteria. Couples with children in the home were excluded based on the empirical literature that suggests that the bearing and rearing of children significantly interferes with relationship satisfaction (Rice, 1990; Anderson et al., 1983), and that couples with children have disagreements more often than couples without children (McGonagle, Kessler, & Schilling, 1992). The focus of this study was to include participants experiencing a comparable level of relationship satisfaction, by excluding individuals with children in the home who might, according to the curvilinear model of relationship satisfaction (Anderson et al., 1983), be experiencing a decrease in satisfaction within their relationship. Both married and cohabiting individuals were included in the study, as there appears to be no empirical evidence that proposes differences in the variables of interest to this study and the marital status of couples. Gay, lesbian and heterosexual couples were also welcome to participate in the study, as the literature indicates no differences across the variables of interest to this study and the sexual preference of individuals (Kurdek, 1994a; Kurdek, 1994b). However, participants were predominantly in heterosexual relationships, with some lesbian couples also participating in the study. The study focussed on the responses of one partner to the questionnaire. Data

derived from individuals in close relationships are not independent, but present one partners' perspective of the relational process.

Table 1

Demographic information of the study sample (N = 75)

	Frequency	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	61	81.3
Male	14	18.7
<i>Marital status</i>		
Married	41	54.7
Cohabiting	34	45.3
<i>Sexual preference</i>		
Heterosexual	72	96.0
Lesbian	3	4.0
<i>Ethnicity</i>		
European	67	89.3
Maori	4	5.3
Polynesian	2	2.7
Latin American and Australian	2	2.7
<i>Employment</i>		
Employed full time	38	50.7
Employed part time	11	14.7
Self employed	12	16.0
Full time homemakers	3	4.0
In school full time	6	8.0
Retired	5	6.7
<i>Age</i>		
Mean age	38.7	
Standard deviation	13.7	
Range	18 to 70 years	
<i>Length of relationship</i>		
Mean length	139.7 months (11 years and 6 months)	
Standard deviation	135.4 months (11 years and 3 months)	
Range	6 to 519 months (43 years and 3 months)	

Measuring instruments

Conflict can be said to exist based on the behavioural observations of people in a conflict situation. This deduction can only be made if the observer possesses a mental construct labelled conflict that fits the description of what he/she observes. In this research participants were asked to make inferences about their conflict experiences and to self-report those experiences against the backdrop of pre-composed measures.

The measures for the study were self-report questionnaires designed to assess different aspects of couples' relationships, including relationship and life satisfaction, conflict resolution styles and perceived effectiveness of problem solving. Although, according to Vito (1998) behavioural observations have been effective in illuminating many interactional variables, and have good validity and interrater reliability, they are expensive to replicate, time consuming, and are often so bound to the unique experimental surroundings that it becomes difficult to generalize the results. Self-report questionnaires used in surveys are less expensive and quicker to administer, but O'Leary (1990) warns that the validity, reliability and the coverage span of such instruments often lack the depth of observational methods, in particular the interactional variables that come into play with conflict resolution styles. Even though observational methods have greatly increased our understanding of relationships, particularly in the past decade (Gottman & Notarius, 2000), the use of self-report measures can still contribute by assessing constructs of importance that have been identified by observational research, as is the course of action in this study.

For the purposes of this study conflict resolution was regarded as a “marked reduction of social conflict as a result of a conscious settlement of issues in dispute” (Schellenberg, 1996, p.9) and conflict resolution style as the particular techniques that individuals apply in an attempt to reach this state of conflict resolution. Relationship satisfaction was conceptualised as an individuals’ global evaluative satisfaction with the quality of their relationship (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987).

Background information form. The researcher designed this questionnaire to assess the demographic variables of the participants and to allow for a proper description of the sample. Participants were asked questions regarding gender, age, ethnicity, duration of relationship, marital status, children, and employment. The Background Information Form can be found in Appendix 2.

Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMSS). The KMSS (Schumm, Paff Bergen, Hatch, Obiorah, Copeland, Meens et al., 1986) is a 3-item 7point Likert-type scale that is designed to be a reflection of perceived marital satisfaction. The KMSS is an instrument that evaluates the relationship as a whole, and unlike other measures does not assess constructs that are related to relationship satisfaction, e.g. communication (Fincham, & Bradbury, 1987). The KMSS asks participants to indicate their satisfaction with their relationships on a scale (1 = extremely dissatisfied, 7 = extremely satisfied) by rating three questions (“How satisfied are you with your relationship?”, “How satisfied are you with your partner?”, “How satisfied are you with your relationship with your partner?”). Previous research (Schumm, Anderson, Benigas, McCutchen, Griffin, Morris, et al., 1985; Schumm, 1986) with this

measure has shown its strong psychometric properties in terms of having internal consistency ($r = .90$) and discriminant, concurrent and criterion-related validity. The KMSS was used in this study as an index to assess the perceived level of relationship satisfaction, in other words to measure the individual's overall and subjective evaluation of his/her couple relationship. The KMSS can be found in Appendix 3.

Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI). The CRSI (Kurdek, 1994b) is a 16-item self-report questionnaire designed to measure each individual's perceived style of resolving conflicts in their relationship with their partner. The CRSI is based on the premise that each partner's individual style of resolving interpersonal conflict affects the maintenance and stability of their relationship (Heavy et al., 1993). The CRSI asks participants to indicate how frequently (with endpoints of "Never" and "Always" they use each of the styles to deal with arguments or disagreements with their partner. The 16-items fall into four style categories, that include Positive Problem Solving (CRSI-PPS) (e.g. "focussing on the problem at hand"), Conflict Engagement (CRSI-ENG) (e.g. "launching personal attacks"), Withdrawal (CRSI-WDRL) (e.g. "withdrawing, acting distant and not interested"), and Compliance (CRSI-COMPL) (e.g. "giving in with little attempt to present my side of the issue"). These four conflict resolution styles have been distinguished by researchers employing mostly behavioural observations (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989) and furthermore have shed light on, and been correlated to, changes in relationship satisfaction and the disbanding of relationships (Gottman, 1994). The CRSI has been shown to have good concurrent-related and predictive criterion-related validity (Kurdek, 1994b; Kurdek, 1995). The CRSI has good internal

consistency, with alphas for all categories ranging from .65 to .89 (Kurdek, 1994b). Test-retest correlations over a 1-year period for the CRSI have been shown to range from .46 to .83 (Kurdek, 1994b).

Since there is a separate score for each subscale (e.g. Positive Problem Solving, Conflict Engagement, Withdrawal, and Compliance), it is possible to determine the individual's perception of the extent to which they use each of the different conflict resolution styles to deal with their interpersonal relationship conflicts. The CRSI was not adapted for New Zealand participants, as it was deemed clear and understandable. However, due to the relatedness of physical violence to conflict resolution it was considered necessary to include an option box with the instruction "Please tick", for "verbal" or "physical" beneath the question of "Exploding and getting out of control". The CRSI can be found in Appendix 4.

Life-as-a-whole Index. The life-as-a-whole index (Andrews & Withey, 1976) is a single item 7-point Likert-type scale that yields an index of perceived life satisfaction, and that shows:

meaningful and reasonable relationships to a variety of more specific life qualities; it relates substantially to feelings of life being happy, satisfying, interesting, rewarding, ideal, enjoyable, and the respondent's sense of his or her own capability. (p. 108).

The life as a whole uses a "delighted-terrible" rating scale that is well known in social indicators research (Kammann & Flett, 1986). Participants in this study were asked to indicate on a scale (1 = terrible, 7 = delighted) their satisfaction with their life as a whole. The life-as-a-whole index can be found in Appendix 5.

Subscale of the Couple Problem-Solving Scale. A subscale of the couple problem-solving scale (Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986) regarding the perceived effectiveness of personal and partner problem solving was included in this study. In previous research the complete couple problem-solving scale was utilized as a multidimensional measure of the distress/nondistress of couples (Rusbult et al., 1986). However, the aim of using the subscale in this study was only to assess the perceived effectiveness of personal and partner problem solving. Participants were asked to indicate the frequency of their behaviour by using a five-point scale (0 = not at all, 4 = all the time). On the subject of the effectiveness of personal problem-solving, participants answered the following questions: "Do you think your method of solving problems works?"; "Do you think that you respond to problems in your relationship in a healthy manner?"; "Does your method of solving problems make you feel good afterwards?"; and "Does the way in which you react to periods of dissatisfaction make your relationship stronger?". Regarding the effectiveness of partner problem-solving, participants were asked these same items (appropriately reworded, e.g., "Do you think your partner's method of solving problems works?"), on the same five-point scale (0 = not at all, 4 = all the time). The subscale of couple problem solving regarding the effectiveness of personal and partner problem solving can be found in Appendix 6.

Qualitative questions. The researcher and her supervisor developed the three qualitative questions in the questionnaire for the express purposes of this study. The aim was to give participants an opportunity to communicate and give examples of their own conflict resolution experiences. Participants

were asked to answer and comment on the questions, supplying examples where possible. The questions ranged from problem solving styles that failed to reach a solution for the couple to ways of problem solving that worked really well for the couple. Participants whose children have left the household were also asked to indicate any changes in resolving problems since the departure of their children. The qualitative questions can be found in Appendix 7.

Procedure

Full ethics approval was obtained from the Massey University, Albany Campus Human Ethics Committee prior to the recruitment of participants. The procedure consisted of completion of one questionnaire per individual in a couples' relationship. This provided a "snapshot" view, or moment in time, of conflict resolution styles and relationship satisfaction as experienced by each individual participant. Given the importance of obtaining a heterogeneous sample, the participants for this study were recruited from various locations in the Auckland region. Participants were recruited through announcements in the local media (i.e., community radio and newspaper articles and advertisements), and posters and pamphlets throughout various areas in the Auckland region (e.g. community centres, shopping malls, grocery stores, etc.). Newspaper, radio and poster advertisements can be found in Appendix 8.

Interested individuals who fulfilled the criteria set out in the advertising media were able to provide their names, addresses and telephone numbers on a telephone answering service, the number of which was listed on the various advertisements, articles and pamphlets. Interested individuals had to

meet the following inclusion criteria: the individual had to be proficient in the English language (as all the measures were worded in English) and had to be part of a cohabiting or married couples relationship who had been living together for at least 6 months, without children living in the home. Only one partner of the couples' relationship was required to participate in the study, since it was not the objective of the study to examine within-couple comparisons. Individuals who were interested in the study were mailed a questionnaire package to be completed and returned by them.

The questionnaire package included a cover letter that quite specifically informed participants of the purpose of the study, the criteria for participation, the procedures involved as well as issues involving confidentiality, anonymity, consent and the risks of participating in the study. The cover letter notified participants that their participation in this study was entirely voluntary and that should they wish to, they could leave any questions unanswered. Participants were also informed that once completed questionnaires were returned they would not be able to withdraw from the study as the questionnaire and the identification information are separated on receipt. Finally, the cover letter contained specific instructions on returning the questionnaires, as well as where they could provide their name and address should they wish to receive a summary of the study's results. The cover letter for this study can be found in Appendix 1.

The package also included the questionnaire booklet. This included a number of demographic questions and self-report measures for the participants to complete. The questionnaire took approximately 20 minutes to complete and could be returned in the enclosed freepost envelope, along with

the form on which identifying information was included if they wished to receive a summary of the study's results. Forms with identifying information that were included along with the questionnaires were separated upon arrival and were later used upon completion of the study to mail out a summary of the general results to the participants.

Chapter Three: Results

Quantitative data analyses were performed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows Version 10.1. Qualitative data were examined for content, and broad categories and trends are summarized in the section following the quantitative data analyses.

Preliminary Analyses

Prior to inferential analyses the variables were examined for assumptions of statistical analyses. Following Tabachnick and Fidell's suggestion (1989) to evaluate normality of variables at conventional but conservative alpha levels ($p < .001$), significantly high Z scores on some variables deemed transformation necessary. Conflict engagement (CRSI-CENG) and conflict withdrawal scores (CRSI-WDRL) showed moderate positive skewness and square root transformations were applied to improve the distributions. This resulted in a normal distribution. Conflict compliance scores (CRSI-COMPL) showed substantial positive skewness and logarithmic transformations were used to render a more normal distribution. This resulted in a normal distribution. All other variables, except for the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMSS) were within the normal range of skewness and kurtosis. One univariate outlier was identified on the KMSS through simple examination of histograms, and its influence was minimized by transforming the score to three standard deviations from the mean (see Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989). This rendered a more normal distribution. No other cases were identified as multivariate outliers through use of a $p < .001$ criterion for Mahalanobis distance. A single questionnaire showed missing data on three

items and it was decided to replace the participants' three missing values with the item means to keep the case in the analyses.

Testing of Hypothesis

Major analyses were performed using SPSS. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to determine the associations between the variables of interest, and this was followed by multiple hierarchical regression analyses to further assess the relationship between the dependent variable (DV) and several independent variables (IV) of each calculation. In particular, regression analysis was used to assess the relative unimportance of various demographic variables in addition to the relative importance of other independent variables to the regression solution. Comparisons to the Vito's (1998) partially replicated Canadian study are reported in the data analysis of hypothesis 1, where relevant.

Hypothesis 1: Relationship satisfaction and conflict resolution styles. It was hypothesized that relationship satisfaction would be positively related to relationship conflict resolution styles of positive problem solving, and negatively related to conflict resolution styles of conflict engagement, withdrawal and compliance. Pearson correlation coefficients in Table 2 were calculated to determine the association between relationship satisfaction and conflict resolution styles. Results similar to the Canadian Study (CS) were obtained. As shown in Table 2 relationship satisfaction (KMSS) was positively related to the Positive Problem Solving (CRSI-PPS). Furthermore, relationship satisfaction was negatively related to the Conflict Engagement (CRSI-CENG), Withdrawal (CRSI-WDRL) and Compliance (CRSI-COMPL).

Table 2

Pearson correlations between Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI) and Relationship Satisfaction(KMSS) for all respondents (N = 75) and Canadian Study (N = 162)

	Relationship Satisfaction	Canadian Study Relationship Satisfaction
CRSI-CENG	-.45 **	-.43 **
CRSI-PPS	.61 **	.52 **
CRSI-WDRL	-.30 **	-.43 **
CRSI-COMPL	-.16	-.20 **

Note. CRSI-CENG = Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory Conflict Engagement, CRSI-PPS = Conflict Resolution Positive Problem Solving, CRSI-WDRL= Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory Withdrawal, CRSI-COMPL= Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory Compliance, KMSS= Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Hypothesis 2: Relationship satisfaction, conflict resolution styles and demographic variables. It was predicted that reports of conflict resolution styles would account for variance in relationship satisfaction beyond that accounted for by duration of relationship satisfaction and other demographic variables. The results of the regression analysis of demographic variables and conflict resolution styles (CRSI) with relationship satisfaction (KMSS) as the DV are shown in Tables 3 - 6. Each table shows the standardized regression coefficients (beta), *R*, *R*², adjusted *R*², and change in *R*² (*R*² *change*).

Table 3 demonstrates the amount of variance in relationship satisfaction (KMSS) accounted for by the Conflict Engagement style of conflict resolution (CRSI-CENG).

Table 3

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis of Conflict Resolution Styles Conflict Engagement (CRSI-CENG) and demographic variables on Relationship Satisfaction (KMSS), showing standardized regression coefficients, R, R², adjusted R², and R²change for all respondents (N = 75)

Predictor	Step 1	Step 2
Demographics		
Gender	.12	-.19
Marital status	.08	.12
Age	.06	-.28
Duration of relationship	-.04	.14
CRSI-CENG		-.52***
R	.16	.50**
R ²	.03	.22
Adjusted R ²	-.03	.20
R ² change	.03	.23***

Note. CRSI-CENG = Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory Conflict Engagement, KMSS= Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Only Conflict Engagement (CRSI-CENG) contributed significantly to the prediction of relationship satisfaction. Gender, marital status, age and length of relationship did not contribute significantly to the prediction of relationship satisfaction and altogether, 22% (20% adjusted) of the variability in relationship satisfaction was predicted by knowing the scores on these five IV's. Regarding the verbal/physical conflict engagement of participants, 72% of the participants indicated that their conflict engagement gets out of control

verbally, whereas 8% of the participants indicated that their conflict engagement gets out of control physically. This, however, may involve an underreporting of the conflict intensity due to the sensitive nature of the question. This may mean the occurrence of physical violence is closer to the previously reported estimate of 17%.

Table 4 demonstrates the amount of variance in relationship satisfaction (KMSS) accounted for by the Positive Problem Solving style of conflict resolution (CRSI-PPS).

Table 4

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis of Conflict Resolution Styles Positive Problem Solving (CRSI-PPS) and demographic variables on Relationship Satisfaction (KMSS), showing standardized regression coefficients, R, R², adjusted R², and R²change for all respondents (N = 75)

Predictor	Step 1	Step 2
Demographics		
Gender	-.12	-.22 *
Marital status	.08	.08
Age	.06	-.34 *
Duration of relationship	-.04	.29
CRSI-PPS		.70 ***
R	.16	.67 ***
R ²	.03	.45
Adjusted R ²	-.03	.41
R ² change	.03	.42 ***

Note. CRSI-PPS = Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory Positive Problem Solving, KMSS= Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Positive Problem Solving (CRSI-PPS) contributed significantly to the prediction of relationship satisfaction. The demographic variables entered on step one of the regression are not significantly associated with the DV, but on step two gender and age become significant as a result of their intercorrelation with the other IV's, a phenomenon known as the suppressor effect (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1989). Bivariate correlations, however, show that these variables are not related to the DV, and are consequently seen as nonsignificant in the prediction of relationship satisfaction. Positive Problem Solving accounted for 42% (adjusted 38%) of the variability in relationship satisfaction where altogether 45% (44% adjusted) was predicted by knowing the scores on these five IV's.

Table 5 demonstrates the amount of variance in relationship satisfaction (KMSS) accounted for by the Withdrawal style of conflict resolution (CRSI-WDRL).

Table 5

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis of Conflict Resolution Styles Withdrawal (CRSI-WDRL) and demographic variables on Relationship Satisfaction (KMSS), showing standardized regression coefficients, R, R², adjusted R², and R²change for all respondents (N = 75)

Predictor	Step 1	Step 2
Demographics		
Gender	-.12	-.26 *
Marital status	.08	.17
Age	.06	-.25
Duration of relationship	-.04	.16
CRSI-WDRL		-.43 **
R	.16	.41 *
R ²	.03	.17
Adjusted R ²	-.03	.10
R ² change	.03	.14 **

Note. CRSI-WDRL = Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory Withdrawal, KMSS= Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Withdrawal (CRSI-WDRL contributed significantly to the prediction of relationship satisfaction. Marital status, age and length of relationship did not contribute significantly to the prediction of relationship satisfaction. Gender's contribution was significant at the 5% level, but showed no significance with

Pearson correlation calculations, thus again submitting it as suspect of the previously discussed suppressor effect. Altogether, 17% (10% adjusted) of the variability in relationship satisfaction was predicted by knowing the scores on these five IV's.

Table 6 demonstrates the amount of variance in relationship satisfaction (KMSS) accounted for by the Compliance style of conflict resolution (CRSI-COMPL)

Table 6
Hierarchical multiple regression analysis of Conflict Resolution Styles Compliance (CRSI-COMPL) and demographic variables on Relationship Satisfaction (KMSS), showing standardized regression coefficients, R, R², adjusted R², and R²change for all respondents (N = 75)

Predictor	Step 1	Step 2
Demographics		
Gender	-.12	-.18
Marital status	.08	.12
Age	.06	-.01
Duration of relationship	-.04	.02
CRSI-COMPL		-.24
R	.16	.27
R ²	.03	.07
Adjusted R ²	-.03	.01
R ² change	.03	.05

Note. CRSI-COMPL = Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory Compliance, KMSS= Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Although Compliance (CRSI-COMPL) in particular, and the other demographic variables contributed to the prediction of relationship satisfaction, it was not a significant contribution. Altogether, 7% (1% adjusted) of the variability in relationship satisfaction was predicted by knowing the scores on these five IV's.

To sum hypothesis 1 and 2 up, it can be concluded that self-reports of relationship satisfaction were significantly related to most aspects of conflict resolution, and results similar to the Canadian study were found. Relationship satisfaction was significantly negatively related to ineffective conflict resolution styles of conflict engagement and withdrawal, and although not significant, also negatively related to compliance. Individuals who reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction also reported engaging in effective conflict resolution styles of positive problem solving. These correlations were maintained once the variance of duration of relationship and other demographic variables were controlled for.

Hypothesis 3: Life-as-a-whole satisfaction and relationship satisfaction.

It was hypothesized that self-reports of relationship satisfaction would be positively related to self-reports of life-as-a-whole satisfaction. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to determine the association between life-as-a-whole satisfaction and relationship satisfaction, and an intercorrelation of $r = .28$ ($p < .01$), was found.

Hypothesis 4: Life-as-a-whole satisfaction, relationship satisfaction and demographic variables. It was predicted that reports of relationship satisfaction would account for variance in reports of life-as-a-whole satisfaction beyond that accounted for by duration of relationship and other

demographic variables. Table 7 demonstrates the amount of variance in Life-as-a-whole satisfaction accounted for by relationship satisfaction (KMSS).

Table 7

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis of Relationship Satisfaction (KMSS) and demographic variables on Life-as-a-whole Satisfaction, showing standardized regression coefficients, R, R², adjusted R², and R²change for all respondents (N = 75)

Predictor	Step 1	Step 2
Demographics		
Gender	.07	.11
Marital status	-.09	-.11
Age	.26	.24
Duration of relationship	-.05	-.03
KMSS		.28*
R	.18	.33
R ²	.03	.11
Adjusted R ²	-.02	.04
R ² change	.03	.07*

Note. KMSS= Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Only relationship satisfaction (KMSS) contributed significantly to the prediction of Life-as-a-whole satisfaction. Gender, marital status, age and length of relationship did not contribute significantly to the prediction of Life-as-a-whole satisfaction, and altogether 11% (4% adjusted) of the variability in Life-as-a-whole satisfaction was predicted by knowing the scores on these five IV's.

Hypotheses 3 and 4 can be summarized by noting that self-reports of Life-as-a-whole satisfaction were significantly related to relationship satisfaction (KMSS). Individuals who reported higher levels of Life-as-a-whole satisfaction also reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction (KMSS). These correlations were maintained once the variance of duration of relationship and other demographic variables were controlled for.

Hypothesis 5: Relationship satisfaction and effective personal and partner problem solving. It was hypothesized that self-reports of effective personal and partner problem solving would be positively related to self-reports of relationship satisfaction. Pearson correlation coefficients in Table 8 were calculated to determine the association between relationship satisfaction and self-reports of effective personal and partner problem solving. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated for Personal Problem Solving and Partner Problem solving, and showed an intercorrelation of $r = .73$ ($p < .01$). Self-reports of effective Partner Problem Solving showed a higher correlation with relationship satisfaction (KMSS) than self-reports of effective Personal Problem Solving.

Table 8
Pearson correlations between Effective Personal and Partner Problem Solving and Relationship Satisfaction (KMSS) for all respondents (N=75)

	Relationship Satisfaction
Personal Problem Solving	.50 **
Partner Problem Solving	.68 **

Note. KMSS= Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Hypothesis 6: Relationship satisfaction, perceived effectiveness of personal and partner problems solving, and demographic variables. It was predicted that self-reports of effective personal and partner problem solving would account for variance in relationship satisfaction beyond that accounted for by duration of relationship and other demographic variables. Table 9 demonstrates the amount of variance in relationship satisfaction (KMSS) accounted for by Personal Problem Solving and Partner Problem Solving.

Table 9

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis of Personal Problem Solving, Partner Problem Solving and demographic variables on Relationship Satisfaction (KMSS), showing standardized regression coefficients, R, R², adjusted R², and R²change for all respondents (N = 75)

Predictor	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Demographics			
Gender	-.12	-.12	-.16
Marital status	.08	.06	.06
Age	.06	-.20	-.31*
Duration of relationship	-.04	.20	.17
Personal Problem Solving		.54**	.02
Partner Problem Solving			.72***
R	.16	.53**	.71***
R²	.03	.28	.51
Adjusted R²	-.03	.23	.46
R² change	.26	.26**	.23***

Note. KMSS= Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Personal Problem Solving and Partner Problem Solving contributed significantly to the prediction of relationship satisfaction. Marital status, age and length of relationship did not contribute significantly to the prediction of relationship satisfaction. Gender's contribution was only significant at the 5% level on step three, but showed no significance during bivariate Pearson correlation calculations, thus again rendering it suspect of the previously discussed suppressor effect. Altogether, 51% (46% adjusted) of the variability in relationship satisfaction was predicted by knowing the scores on these six IV's.

In review of hypothesis 5 and 6, self-reports of relationship satisfaction were significantly related to self-reports of effective personal and partner problem solving. Self-report of Personal Problem Solving was significantly positively related to relationship satisfaction. Individuals who reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction also reported their partners to be engaging in effective problem solving. These correlations were maintained once the variance of duration of relationship and other demographic variables were controlled for.

Qualitative Analysis

Individuals' attitudes and the personal meanings they attach to events, situations and behaviour was assessed to a greater extent with the qualitative questions. Qualitative answers were examined for content in an attempt to understand the subjective meaning of the participants' communication. The wealth of information gathered via the three qualitative questions underscores the quantitative findings and extends our appreciation and comprehension of

the complexity of couples' relationships, in particular their conflict resolution interactions. Some broad categories and trends were noted. However, the richness, depth and variety of the information necessitated a greater overview of the findings.

To the first qualitative question, "Have you as a couple noticed any ways of sorting out problems and arguments that result in failure to reach a solution to the problem, or that make a problem worse?", numerous participants (78.7%) self-reported unhelpful problem-solving strategies in their relationships with their partners.

A wide range of behavioural and attitudinal comments were made which proved to exacerbate problems or prevented participants from reaching a solution to a problem. Most participants indicated that not communicating, not listening and emotional overreaction often got in the way of resolving conflicts. The majority of the participants revealed that they experienced some communicative differences along gender lines, and Participant 46 quite humorously remarked that "some women have strong wills, some men have strong won't's".

Participants also displayed a wealth of information regarding other factors which negatively influenced their problem solving situations and problem solving ability, and these included, among others: "ultimatums"; "holding grudges"; "finding it hard to move on even if a resolution is reached"; "dishonesty"; "defensive attitudes"; "personal attacks/insults"; "shouting"; "getting too angry"; "being indirect"; "giving advice when not wanted"; "focusing on the negative"; "hasty decisions"; "time restraints for when an agreement has to be reached"; "silences"; "blaming"; "withdrawing"; "avoiding

each other"; "ignoring the problem"; "making assumptions about needs"; "arguing about arguments"; "not addressing the real issue"; "not taking responsibility"; "minimizing the importance of the issue"; "trying to push your views on the other person"; "being unwilling to resolve the issue"; "different problem solving strategies"; "not seeing the other person's perspective"; "wanting the other person to change"; and "saying what you think the other person wants to hear, as opposed to being truthful". Participants also described subjects which even though often unrelated, aggravate or trigger arguments such as "past issues"; "unresolved issues"; "relatives/family members"; "humiliation in front of friends"; "input into household"; "input into relationship", e.g. time spent together; addictions such as "smoking and drinking"; "lack of money"; and the "quantity and quality of sex".

To the question "How have you and your partner's ways of sorting out problems and arguments changed since your children have left the household?", 25% of the participants responded. This correlated with 25% of the participants in the study who indicated that they have children. In similar vein to the literature reviewed, there was little concurrence on whether the conflict resolution styles of couples whose children have left the household have changed. It could be suggested that individuals, due to the possible subtlety of change over time, might find it hard to assess the change in their relational interactions. The lack of an operational definition for "change", might also have proved a hindrance. Many participants were adamant that their conflict resolution styles have not changed over time, although they did indicate that they currently enjoyed better communication, were more focussed on each other, and experienced more give and take in their

relationships. Other participants expressed their conflict resolution styles as currently “better” than before (e.g. Participant 37).

Participant 35 reported that as a couple in their later years, they laugh more at themselves and now have much better sex. Many participants pointed out that the number of problems have decreased considerably since their children have left the household, since children were a cause for a lot of discussion, and that life was now “a lot more peaceful” (Participant 43). As a result many problems “just disappeared” (Participant 54), and participants reported that arguments become less complicated without their children’s input. A few participants in blended family situations were clear that a lot of conflict arose in blended families, and that compromises are often required when resolving conflict. One participant revealed that the dependence of adult children, with their own families, on parents could still be a source for arguments in the parental relationship.

To the last qualitative question “Are there any ways of sorting out problems and arguments that work really well for you and your partner?” the majority of the participants (93%) responded. Most of the participants indicated “sitting down”, “quality listening”, “communicating” and “being calm” were necessary prerequisites for effective problem solving.

The importance of temporal factors was again recognised, and participants indicated that time set aside to discuss issues, time to calm down, and time to think and reflect, impacted on their problem solving interactions. Many participants indicated that attitudes of “honesty”, “respect”, “kindness”, “responsibility” and “optimism” assisted their conflict resolution interactions and abilities. Previous research has indicated that optimism was a preferred

characteristic in romantic partners (Dicke, 1997). In addition future-oriented mindsets, a willingness to improve problems and a stance of prioritising the relationship were also indicated as helpful. In attempting to exclude unhelpful behaviours, participants again made use of the opportunity to indicate behavioural interactions which were not effective, and these included: “saying anything hurtful”; “interrupting each other”; “becoming judgmental”; “walking away”; “making mountains out of molehills” (Participant 63), and “insisting that your point of view is the only one and the best one” (Participant 23).

Many participants expressed conventional wisdom about helpful interactions when attempting to resolve conflict. These, among others, included: “compromise”; “concede”; “negotiate”; “confront the issue” (“writing it down focuses the argument” – Participant 67); “take turns presenting the argument”; “ask advice”; “apologize and forgive each other”; “make use of humour”; “a lot of give and take”; “sometimes agree to disagree”; “acknowledge the problem”; “be open to all ideas”; “make use of I-statements”; “modulate your voice to promote calmness” (Participant 38); “make lists of the arguments in favour of and against”; “set ground rules when arguing”; “straightforward requests”; “never sleep on a disagreement”; “avoid arguments as far as possible”; and, “try to understand your partners’ point of view”. Many individuals indicated an understanding that conflict often increases when stress and exhaustion levels are high, and that “long walks” and “vacations” are a particularly useful remedy to alleviate stress and reduce the risk of conflict. Going for walks with your partner were also frequently indicated as a useful time frame which for many individuals set the stage for their problem solving interactions. Less conventional problem solving

strategies were also indicated as helpful by some participants. Participant 61 reported that “smoking a joint settles us down, so we’re not uptight and can talk”, but indicates that they then often forget what the initial problem was afterwards! Participant 51 reported the following: “Let the conversation get heated and then keep talking until you’re sorry you’ve lost control”, and furthermore “be assertive in communication so your partner understands the emotional impact of the argument”. To the less assertive end of the scale some participants indicated compliant behaviour, “I let my wife have her own way, unless its something I feel really strongly about” (Participant 43) and “agreeing with the other person” (Participant 15).

In summary, the exploration of the text revealed a rich tapestry of individual meanings and perspectives. It confirms and adds to our understanding of the complexities of couples’ problem solving interactions, in particular from an individual point of view.

Chapter Four: Discussion

The present study was designed to examine different facets of couples' relationships, including relationship and life satisfaction, conflict resolution styles and perceived effectiveness of problem solving.

Discussion of Hypothesis

Hypotheses 1 and 2: Relationship satisfaction, conflict resolution styles and demographic variables. It was hypothesized that self-reports of relationship satisfaction would be positively related to effective and constructive conflict resolution styles, whereas ineffective conflict resolution styles would be negatively related to relationship satisfaction. It was furthermore hypothesized that these relationships would be maintained once duration of relationship and other demographic variables were controlled for.

As predicted, evidence emerged and the data supported these notions, which showed that self-reports of relationship satisfaction were significantly related to most aspects of conflict resolution. These findings were mostly analogous to the Canadian study (Vito, 1998), of which this study was a partial replication. 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. These results verify the Canadian study's findings, although slight differences in scores can be explained by differences in design, cohort- and cultural influences, a greater sample size ($N = 162$) and the effect of other measures used in the

Canadian study in conjunction with the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMSS) and the Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI). In particular, the present study included only couples without children, to obtain a clear impression of this subgroup. The Canadian study included both couples with and without children. Couples from same-sex and heterosexual relationships also participated in this study, whereas the Canadian study only made use of a heterosexual sample. Moreover, the results from the present study are consistent with those documented in the conflict resolution literature (e.g., Kurdek, 1994) which link positive problem solving styles with relationship satisfaction, and negative problem solving styles with a decline in relationship satisfaction.

Self-reports of relationship satisfaction were significantly negatively related to ineffective conflict resolution styles of conflict engagement (e.g., "Launching personal attacks") and withdrawal (e.g., "Remaining silent for long periods of time"), and researchers have linked both styles to the longitudinal decline of relationship satisfaction (Kurdek, 1994). The "withdrawal" identified in this study is most probably part of the greater demand-withdraw pattern identified by Heavy, Layne and Christensen (1993) as well as other researchers. Qualitative data in particular indicated that insults, personal attacks, walking away, silences and withdrawing were unhelpful behaviours when attempting to solve problems. Although not significant (as is often the case in other research e.g., Kurdek, 1994), relationship satisfaction has also been negatively related to the conflict resolution style of compliance (e.g., "Not being willing to stick up for myself") in the present study. Qualitative data furthermore indicated a wide range of behaviours and attitudes which proved

to exacerbate problems or which prevented participants from reaching a solution to a problem. Most participants indicated that not communicating, not listening and emotional overreaction often got in the way of resolving conflicts. To this extent it can be noted that distressed couples often make greater use of ineffective conflict resolution styles and reciprocate negative communication (Billings, 1979). Previous research has indicated that the frequency with which unhelpful strategies such as conflict engagement, withdrawal and defensiveness are used impacts negatively on the couples' relationship satisfaction (Kurdek, 1995). However, previously considered harmful conflict resolution styles, such as disagreement and anger exchanges may not be harmful in the long run, as long as the conflict does not elicit stubbornness, withdrawal and defensiveness (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). In line with previous research (Buunk, Schaap & Prevoo, 1990) many participants also revealed that they experienced some communicative and behavioural differences along gender lines. For example, many female participants indicated that their male partners tend to "withdraw" from conflict. Previous research has indicated that greater compliance and conflict engagement on the part of the wife, and a husband's use of withdrawal and defensiveness as conflict resolution strategies, have been indicated to predict a decline in relationship satisfaction (Kurdek, 1995). Researchers have also indicated that addictions impact negatively on relationship satisfaction (Van Yperen & Buunk, 1990), and these findings are echoed in this study's qualitative data. Participants furthermore indicated that external stressors such as work related stress and exhaustion also impact negatively on conflict resolution. Together with the timing of arguments, such as late at night, before

work and during the day over the phone, stressors and work related exhaustion could be a recipe for disaster.

Individuals who reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction also reported engaging in effective conflict resolution styles of positive problem solving more frequently (e.g., "Focusing on the problem at hand"). These correlations between conflict resolution styles and relationship satisfaction were maintained once the variance of duration of relationship and other demographic variables were controlled for. Qualitative data indicated that most of the participants reported sitting down, quality listening, communicating and being calm as necessary prerequisites for effective problem solving. Previous research has indicated that the incidence of strategies such as agreement, compromise and humour are positively related to relationship satisfaction (Kurdek, 1995). A great number of participants indicated that attitudes of honesty, respect, kindness, responsibility and optimism assisted their conflict resolution interactions and abilities. Previous research has indicated that optimism was a preferred characteristic in romantic partners (Dicke, 1997). In this regard researchers have also indicated the significance of communication in intimate relationships, and affective self-disclosure, in particular, has been linked to relationship satisfaction and other effective conflict resolution styles (Vito, 1998). For the most part, the findings of the present study provide further corroboration of the relation between effective and ineffective conflict resolution styles and resulting relationship satisfaction.

Participants' reports of an 8% occurrence of physical violence are distressing and highlight the dire need for remedial and preventative action. For example some participants revealed that "he explodes and throws things

and storms off", and other that "he says he won't stay around and be abused by me". There is however, the possibility that this 8% figure is an underreporting of actual figures, which puts the occurrence of physical violence in intimate relationships in New Zealand closer to 17% (Kazantzis, Flett, Long, Macdonald & Millar, 2000). The possibility also exists that this figure might be the result of sample bias from a relatively nondistressed group.

Hypotheses 3 and 4: Life-as-a-whole satisfaction, relationship satisfaction and demographic variables. Based on the relationship satisfaction literature which indicates that satisfaction with relationships appears to contribute more to life-satisfaction, than any other sphere of functioning (Glenn & Weaver, 1981), it was hypothesized that self-reports of relationship satisfaction would be positively related to self-reports of life-as-a-whole satisfaction. To provide further clarification of the results, it was hypothesized that this relationship would be maintained once duration of relationship and other demographic variables were controlled for.

The data supported the hypothesized relationships. Self-reports of Life-as-a-whole satisfaction were significantly related to relationship satisfaction (KMSS) and participants who showed higher levels of life-as-a-whole satisfaction also reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction. These correlations were retained once the variance of duration of relationship and other demographic variables were controlled for. Although many of these relationships were considered significant, the overall size of the effect was not great. These findings are, however, in line with previous research findings,

which indicate that satisfaction with relationships, appear to add more to life-satisfaction than any other areas in one's life (Glenn & Weaver, 1981).

Hypotheses 5 and 6: Relationship satisfaction, personal and partner problem solving, and demographic variables. Based on the research on marital conflict resolution, couples with effective problem solving strategies are assumed to have higher levels of relationship satisfaction. The deduction that certain problem solving styles lead to relationship satisfaction is based on Rusbult's interdependence theory (1983), which suggests that "perceived rewards to a relationship (such as the frequent use of effective problem solving) and perceived costs to the relationship (such as the frequent experience of negative problem solving) determine satisfaction in the relationship" (Kurdek, 1994) (p.154). In return the occurrence of effective partner problem solving behaviour is based on Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid's self-fulfilling prophecy theory (1977), which proposes that "one's attitude (e.g. effective personal problem solving) provides a psychological environment which elicits behaviour (e.g. effective partner problem solving) that reinforces and is consistent with the initial attitude" (Kurdek, 1995) (p.154). The finding that there is a significant correlation between perceived personal problem solving and perceived partner problem solving, then supports this notion.

It was hypothesized that the perceived effectiveness of personal problem solving, and the perceived effectiveness of partner problem solving would be positively related to relationship satisfaction. To provide further clarification of the results, it was hypothesized that this relationship would be

maintained once duration of relationship and other demographic variables were controlled for.

Self-reports of relationship satisfaction were significantly related to self-reports of perceived effective personal and perceived partner problem solving. Self-reports of effective personal problem solving were significantly positively related to relationship satisfaction. Individuals who reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction also reported their partners to be engaging in effective problem solving. These correlations were maintained once the variance of duration of relationship and other demographic variables were controlled for.

Chapter Five: Conclusions and Future Considerations

Communication forms the basis of couples' relationships. It is through the medium of communication, including verbal and nonverbal messages, that couples connect and experience intimacy. The management of conflictual interactions through effective communications plays a huge role in the individuals' perception of their relationship quality. The specific communication area of interpersonal conflict resolution styles and the influence they have on relationship satisfaction was the focus of this study. This study was in part a replication of Vito's Canadian study (1998) and was designed to explore self-reported conflict resolution styles and the perceived effectiveness of personal and partner problem solving, as well as levels of relationship satisfaction and life satisfaction.

Conclusions of the Study

This study challenged individuals to probe their intimate relationships and reflect their experiences. The aim of the study was to examine various aspects of couples' relationships, including relationship and life satisfaction, conflict resolution styles and perceived effectiveness of problem solving. Relationship satisfaction was found to be positively related to life satisfaction, lending support to the notion that relationship satisfaction greatly contributes to our general satisfaction in life. Further findings indicated that self-reports of relationship satisfaction were positively related to effective problem solving styles and negatively related to ineffective problem solving styles. In particular, evidence emerged which showed that individuals who reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction also engaged in positive problem solving more frequently. Qualitative data underscored these findings and

indicated that most of the participants reported sitting down, quality listening, communicating and being calm as necessary prerequisites for effective problem solving. Self-reports of relationship satisfaction were also found to be negatively related to ineffective conflict resolution styles of conflict engagement, withdrawal and compliance. To this degree, the qualitative data gathered in the study indicated that insults, personal attacks, walking away, silences and withdrawing were unhelpful behaviours when attempting to solve problems. Moreover, the results from the present study are consistent with those documented in the conflict resolution literature (e.g., Kurdek, 1994) which link positive problem solving styles with relationship satisfaction, and negative problem solving styles with a decline in relationship satisfaction. However, compelling evidence exists which states that couples might endure dissatisfaction as a result of their conflictual interactions in the short term. However, as long as conflict does not bring into play stubbornness, withdrawal or defensiveness it might be functional to the relationship longitudinally (Gottmann & Krokoff, 1989). More recently, Gottman (1993) found that negativity in a relationship is only dysfunctional when it is not balanced out with at least five times the positivity in a relationship.

The deduction that certain problem solving styles lead to relationship satisfaction is based on Rusbult's interdependence theory (1983). The results from the study indicate that perception of effectiveness of personal- and partner problem solving are related to relationship satisfaction. In return the occurrence of effective partner problem solving behaviour is based on Snyder, Tanke, and Berscheid's self-fulfilling prophecy theory (1977). According to this theory an individual's effective personal problem solving could provide

circumstances which bring forth effective partner problem solving behaviour (Kurdek, 1995). Findings from the study indicate that individuals who reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction also reported their partners to be engaging in effective problem solving.

To verify all these findings to a greater extent, it was found that these results were maintained once duration of relationship and other demographic variables such as age, marital status and gender were controlled for. The qualitative data gathered in this study underscores the above-mentioned findings and extends our knowledge of couples' conflictual interactions by specifically naming and describing in greater depth the factors which influence conflict resolution in intimate relationships in a New Zealand sample of couples.

As a result of the distinct impact which conflict resolution has on the quality of relationships, as identified and verified in this study, it is hoped that a greater level of awareness might facilitate moves towards positive change in this regard for current and future generations. In particular, it is hoped that relationship enhancement and preventative programs are applied to a greater extent to prevent the likelihood of unsatisfactory marriages and relationships, as well as the possibility of divorce. The literature indicates that the highest number of marital dissolutions happens prior to the 5-year mark (Kurdek, 1993), and New Zealand statistics echo these findings (Statistics, 2001). Relationship satisfaction could be enhanced by changing ineffective conflict resolution styles (and their underlying intentions) so that one becomes more adept at managing conflict. Although relationship dissatisfaction does not always lead to dissolution (Gottman, 1991), at-risk couples should be targeted

to prevent the possibility of break-up and the social and economic costs these events have on society. Acting proactively could change this. Applying typologies such as PREPARE to identify at-risk couples and to decrease the likelihood of unsatisfactory relationships by using empirically based preventative measures such as PREP, the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program, could greatly change the relationship satisfaction of couples. A great need exists for education which aims at preventing divorce and building couple competence in handling conflict situations. In return this would lead to greater intimacy and relationship satisfaction. In addition, it is hoped that decision makers nationally and worldwide acknowledge the importance of conflict resolution styles in intimate relationships to a greater extent, and support the development of preventative and rehabilitative techniques and procedures in the greater community, thereby increasing the quality of life of its members.

Limitations of the Study

The preceding sections described the major findings of results obtained. Even so, there are limitations in the methodological design of this study that could be seen to affect the understanding and generalizability of these findings. These issues will be briefly discussed below.

Use of volunteer sample: Possible selection bias. The present study involved a heterogeneous sample of individuals in current cohabiting or marital relationships with no children living in the household. It is believed that these individuals are representative of a subgroup in the population with similar characteristics. Nonetheless, when utilizing volunteer samples possible selection bias could take place which influences the validity and

generalizability of the findings (Bordens, & Abbott, 1996). Individuals who expressed an interest in participating in the study may not be representative of the larger population of individuals in cohabiting or marital relationships without children in the home.

Self-report data: Possible influence on validity. The data utilized in this study was based on the individual's self-report on the variables of interest. Consequently the variables of interest were not measured against actual observational data, but are only individuals' perspectives (which are influenced by their recall of actual interactions) of their exchanges with their partners.

A related issue concerns the measurement of conflict resolution styles, without directly assessing "conflict" and "conflict resolution". Even though one would not need to measure the occurrence of these constructs as prerequisite to the measurement of conflict resolution styles, the absence of their actual occurrence and the measurement thereof could influence the actual self-report by the participants. Although these concepts were operationally defined to the participants, different cognitive constructs for "conflict" and "conflict resolution style" might also exist for the participants and this remains unidentified by the researcher. The extent to which participants achieve resolution in their conflict interaction, the outcome of conflict and follow-through of conflict resolution are also related subjects not assessed in this study.

Some interactional patterns were identified in the qualitative data analysis. However, the subjective nature of qualitative analysis and the self-imposed restriction on the number of questions determined that only limited

information was gathered, perhaps to a degree due to the fact that participants were not questioned more fully with, for example, qualitative interviews. Furthermore, concerning the second qualitative question it could be suggested that individuals, due to the possible subtlety of change over time, might find it hard to assess the change in their relational interactions. The lack of an operational definition for "change", might also have proved a hindrance and this might have contributed to the abbreviated answers which were the general trend for this question.

An aspect which might have influenced the validity and accuracy of the data obtained is the methodological design of the study. This involved the questionnaire package being completed at the participant's home and returned by mail. The researcher thus had no process for verifying that the participants were honest in their responses and their completion of the questionnaires.

Studying only one partner of a couple. Due to the fact that it was decided that no within-couple comparisons were to be made, it was deemed sufficient to only include one individual per couples relationship. However, the current measures were not validated against actual observations of dyadic conflict interactions or relationship satisfaction, but were only inferences made by one individual on his/her relationship. The structural design of the study prevented the researcher from exploring the other partners' responses as well as the actual shared interactions. Relationships are seen as jointly construed experiences and data derived from one individual should not be viewed independently, but merely as one partner's perspective of the relational process and experience. Some researchers are of the opinion that using the

couple as a unit of analysis tends to conceal the richer patterns of association that exist in the couples' relationship (Burleson & Denton, 1997). However, others argue that data derived from individuals in close relationships should never be viewed in isolation, but as one partner's perspective of a jointly construed relational experience. Ideally both partners' observable and reported perspectives as well as their observable and reported shared interactions would provide a more complete picture of couples relationships.

Utilization of a cross-sectional design. This study assessed a sample at one point in time, and participants were not assessed at a later date. The inexpensiveness and simplicity of this design renders it an attractive option for data collection. However, it again limits the information gathered because it does not account for actual changes and processes which might influence the variables of interest. Consequently, the present study's findings have limited applicability, whereas longitudinal designs provide a more complete view of couples relationships over time.

Despite the above-mentioned limitations the study 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. The simplicity of the design and methodology not only made it possible to draw parallels between this study and Vito's Canadian study (1998), but also to fulfil the purposes the study was designed for. The qualitative findings, together with the quantitative findings, provided an adequate "snapshot" view of couples' interactions from the individuals' perspective. This study's compelling findings also underscores results documented in conflict resolution and relationship literature.

Implications for Future Research

In general, this study provides empirical support for the relationship between effective conflict resolution styles and relationship satisfaction. These findings also add to the existing literature on the relationship between life-as-a-whole satisfaction and relationship satisfaction. The fact that these results were maintained above and beyond the influence of duration of relationship and other demographic variables, lends further support to these findings.

Gender differences were not apparent in this study. The use of gender as a distinguishing variable has always been the norm, even though contradictory evidence proposes that a classification such as couple type might be more useful (Burggraff & Sillars, 1987). If, however, cognitive variables related to conflict resolution styles, including beliefs, expectations, motives and intentions were studied in relation to conflict resolution, some gender differences might become apparent. Similarly, intergenerationally transmitted conflict beliefs and interactional patterns which have shown evidence of differences along gender lines (Phelps, 1995) might also prove an interesting avenue of research particularly with regard to the extent that these become apparent in actual conflict interactions and in return influence the conflict resolution styles of couples.

The present study verified that duration of relationship does not impact on relationship satisfaction and conflict resolution styles, but could not ascertain to what degree relationship satisfaction changes over time. Every relationship has a history and longitudinal research on the development of relationships over time needs to be conducted more thoroughly to determine whether the trajectory of change in relationship satisfaction is indeed cubic

(Kurdek, 1999), curvilinear (e.g. Rice, 1990) or linear. The particular factors which influence the development of change in relationship satisfaction still remain an area requiring more thorough investigation.

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APPENDIX 1

COVER LETTER AND INFORMATION SHEET

<p>A Study on the Influence of Conflict Resolution Styles on Relationship Satisfaction of Couples at Different Life-Stages</p>

You are invited to participate in a study looking at the influence of conflict resolution styles on relationship satisfaction.

Conflict exists when incompatible activities occur, for instance a difference of opinion, desires, interests or values. A conflict can also occur as a result of a scarcity of resources such as money, time or space. Conflict resolution implies that a solution to the problem has been found. Conflict resolution styles are the particular manner in which people go about resolving their conflict.

The purpose of the study is:

- To identify different life-stages in a relationship, with regards to relationship satisfaction and conflict resolution styles.
- To generate a greater understanding of the development of relationships of couples living in New Zealand.

Karin du Plessis, a Postgraduate student at Massey University, is conducting this study in partial fulfilment of a Master's thesis.

Principal Investigator:	Karin du Plessis,	Supervisor:	Cheryl Woolley
Address:	Masterate Student School of Psychology, Atrium Building Massey University Private Bag 102 904, North Shore MSC Auckland	Address:	Senior Lecturer School of Psychology Massey University Private Bag 11 222 Palmerston North
Tel:	(09) 443 9799 ext. 9042	Tel:	(06) 350 5799 ext. 2076
Email:	Karin.Du_Plessis.1@uni.massey.ac.nz	Email:	C.C.Woolley@massey.ac.nz

This sheet provides an overview of the study so that you may make an informed decision about whether or not you would like to participate.

You are under no obligation to participate in this project.

Criteria for participating in the study:

- ❖ Be fluent in English, as all the questions are in English
- ❖ Be part of a cohabiting or married couples relationship that have been living together for at least 6 months, without children living in the home.

About the Study

- ❖ This study looks at the influence that conflict resolution styles have on relationship satisfaction of couples at different life-stages.

❖ The study involves answering a series of questions about your conflict resolution styles, your relationship satisfaction and some background information questions.

❖ It is important to note that there are no right or wrong answers. We are just interested in trying to understand how certain conflict resolution styles may influence your relationship satisfaction.

❖ If you decide to participate, you can return the completed questionnaire by freepost envelope at your earliest convenience or 31/08/2001.

❖ The questionnaire should take no longer than 20 minutes to complete.

❖ Consent to Participate: It will be assumed, if you return a completed questionnaire that you have understood the present information sheet for volunteers taking part in this study designed to investigate the influence of conflict resolution styles on relationship satisfaction, and consequently, have consented to participate.

Benefits, Risks and Safety

While there are no direct benefits for your participation in the study, we hope that it will give us a greater insight into how the influence of conflict resolution styles on relationship satisfaction differs at various life-stages. As a result, we hope to understand how couples relationships develop through life. This kind of information might be useful for relevant organisations such as Relationship Services and Women's Refuge.

It is not anticipated that the study will cause any harm to you. If, however, as a result of participating in the study you experience any psychological distress that you wish to discuss, then Relationship Services would provide appropriate counselling. They can be contacted on:

0800 RELATE
(0800 735 283)

Further information about the study

If you would like further information about the study, or have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact Karin du Plessis at the above address

Participation

❖ Participation in this study is entirely voluntary (your choice).

❖ If you agree to take part, you are free to leave any questions unanswered.

❖ Once you have returned the completed questionnaire, you are not able to withdraw from the study as the questionnaire and the identification information is separated, and it will not be possible to identify individual responses.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

It is important to note that your responses to this questionnaire will remain confidential to the research, and will not be shown to anyone that is not involved in the project. Your name and address are only required should

you request a summary of the results on completion of the study. Names and addresses will be kept entirely separate from the questionnaires in order that all responses remain anonymous. No material that could personally identify you will be used in any reports of this study.

Statement of approval

This study has received ethical approval from the Massey Human Ethics Committee.

APPENDIX 2

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FORM

We need some general information about you and your relationship with your partner. Please circle the response that best describes you, and where indicated please fill in the information requested.

- What is your gender?
 1. MALE
 2. FEMALE
- What is your partner's gender?
 1. MALE
 2. FEMALE
- What is your age? _____ years.
- To which ethnic or cultural group(s) do you belong?
(Check all that apply):
 1. _____ European
 2. _____ Maori
 3. _____ Polynesian
 4. _____ Other (please specify) _____
- How many years have you and your partner lived together as a couple? _____ years _____ months.
- Are you and your partner married?
 1. NO
 2. YES (if yes, how long? _____ years _____ months).
- Do you and your partner have any children?
 1. NO
 2. YES (if yes, how many? _____).
- What is your employment status? (Circle one only)
 1. EMPLOYED FULL-TIME
 2. EMPLOYED PART-TIME
 3. SELF-EMPLOYED
 4. FULL TIME HOMEMAKER
 5. UNEMPLOYED
 6. IN SCHOOL FULL-TIME
 7. RETIRED
 8. OTHER _____
- If employed, what is your present occupation? (please specify) _____
- If unemployed, what was your previous occupation? (please specify) _____

APPENDIX 3

KANSAS MARITAL SATISFACTION SCALE (Schumm, Paff Bergen, Hatch, Obiorah, Copeland, Meens & Bughaihis, 1986)

We would like you to respond to some questions regarding your views of you relationship with your partner. Using the following scale, please indicate your level of satisfaction in the following areas by choosing a number that best describes your view.

- 1 = EXTREMELY DISSATISFIED
- 2 = VERY DISSATISFIED
- 3 = SOMEWHAT DISSATISFIED
- 4 = MIXED
- 5 = SOMEWHAT SATISFIED
- 6 = VERY SATISFIED
- 7 = EXTREMELY SATISFIED

- _____ How satisfied are you with your relationship?
- _____ How satisfied are you with your partner?
- _____ How satisfied are you with your relationship with
your partner?

APPENDIX 4

CONFLICT RESOLUTION STYLES INVENTORY (Kurdek, 1994)

Instructions: Using the scale below, rate how frequently you use each of the following styles to deal with arguments or disagreements with your partner.

- 1 = NEVER
- 2 = OCCASIONALLY
- 3 = SOME OF THE TIME
- 4 = OFTEN
- 5 = ALWAYS

- _____ Launching personal attacks.
- _____ Focussing on the problem at hand.
- _____ Remaining silent for long periods of time.
- _____ Not being willing to stick up for myself.
- _____ Exploding and getting out of control

Please tick: VERBAL ☐ PHYSICAL ☐

- _____ Sitting down and discussing differences constructively.
 - _____ Reaching a limit, "shutting down", and refusing to talk any further.
 - _____ Being too willing to agree with your partner
 - _____ Getting carried away and saying things that are not meant.
 - _____ Finding alternatives that are acceptable to each of us.
 - _____ Tuning the other person out.
 - _____ Not defending my position.
 - _____ Throwing insults and digs.
 - _____ Negotiating and compromising.
 - _____ Withdrawing, acting distant and not interested.
 - _____ Giving in with little attempt to present my side of the issue.
-

APPENDIX 5

LIFE-AS-A-WHOLE INDEX (Andrews & Withey, 1976)

Using the scale below, please answer the following question.

7 = DELIGHTED

6 = PLEASED

5 = MOSTLY SATISFIED

4 = MIXED (about equally satisfied and dissatisfied)

3 = MOSTLY UNSATISFIED

2 = UNHAPPY

1 = TERRIBLE

- _____ How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?

APPENDIX 6

SUBSCALE OF THE COUPLE PROBLEM-SOLVING SCALE (Rusbult, 1986)

These next items are about the way YOU PERSONALLY handle problems in your relationship with your partner. For each item, choose a number from the choices to show HOW OFTEN or HOW MUCH OF THE TIME you feel like that.

- 0 = NOT AT ALL
- 1 = OCCASIONALLY
- 2 = SOME OF THE TIME
- 3 = OFTEN
- 4 = ALL THE TIME

- ____ Do you think your method of solving problems works?
- ____ Do you think that you respond to problems in your relationship in a healthy manner?
- ____ Does your method of solving problems make you feel good afterwards?
- ____ Does the way in which you react to periods of dissatisfaction make your relationship stronger?

These next items are about the way YOU THINK YOUR PARTNER handles problems in your relationship. For each item, choose a number from the choices to show HOW OFTEN or HOW MUCH OF THE TIME you feel like that.

- 0 = NOT AT ALL
- 1 = OCCASIONALLY
- 2 = SOME OF THE TIME
- 3 = OFTEN
- 4 = ALL THE TIME

- ____ Do you think your partner's method of solving problems works?
 - ____ Do you think that your partner responds to problems in your relationship in a healthy manner?
 - ____ Does your partner's method of solving problems make you feel good afterwards?
 - ____ Does the way in which your partner reacts to periods of dissatisfaction make your relationship stronger?
-

APPENDIX 7

QUALITATIVE QUESTIONS

Please answer and comment on the following questions, supplying examples where possible.

➤ Have you as a couple noticed any ways of sorting out problems and arguments that result in failure to reach a solution to a problem, or that make a problem worse? (Give an example and comment)

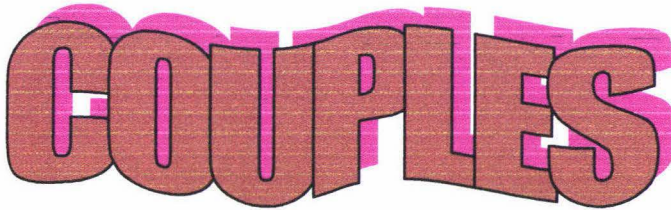
(If applicable)

➤ How have you and your partner's ways of sorting out problems and arguments changed since your children have left the household? (Give an example and comment)

➤ Are there any ways of sorting out problems and arguments that work really well for you and your partner? (Give an example and comment)

APPENDIX 8

ADVERTISEMENTS FOR THE STUDY

Community Centres Advertisement

Massey University student, Karin du Plessis, requires the help of individuals who are currently in a cohabiting or marital relationship, who have been:

- **Living together for at least 6 months;**
- **Have no children living in the home.**

Participation is anonymous and involves one partner completing a questionnaire package that will be mailed to your home. The questionnaire looks at the influence that conflict resolution styles have on relationship satisfaction of couples at different life-stages and will take no more than 20 minutes of your time to complete. Your participation will contribute to our knowledge of couples' relationships, and in return you can receive a summary of the study's general findings.

If you are fluent in English and interested in participating in this study, please call **(09) 4439799 ext.9042** and record your name and contact details (phone number and mailing address).

Radio Advertisement

COUPLES RESEARCH: *Volunteers needed*

Massey University student, Karin du Plessis, is conducting research into couples' relationships. Interested individuals who are currently in a cohabiting or marital relationship, who have been living together for at least 6 months and have no children living in the home, can take part in the study. Participation is anonymous and involves one partner completing a questionnaire package that will be mailed to your home. If you are fluent in English and interested in participating in this study, please call (AUK) 443 9799 ext. 9042 and record your name and contact details (phone number and mailing address).

Newspaper classified advertisement

RESEARCHER NEEDS
YOUR HELP!!! Couples
Conflict Resolution Study
Living together in a
relationship for more than
6 months, with no children
at home? To complete this
short questionnaire phone:
(09) 4439799 ext. 9042
and record contact details.