Marital Conflict Management of Married Men and Women

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate constructive and destructive conflict resolution strategies used by married women and men, as well as the association of these strategies with sociodemographic and relationship variables. Participants were 750 heterosexual couples living in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, who answered the Conflict Resolution Behavior Questionnaire – CRBQ and 16 questions about sociodemographic data and relationship characteristics. Variance and correlation analyses were conducted in order to verify the differences and associations between the study variables. The "compromise" conflict resolution strategy was used more by men compared to women, and women used the "attack" strategy more often when compared to men. For both, religiosity was correlated with constructive strategies, whereas having children was associated with destructive strategies. Considering these findings, the aspects that can favor constructive management of conflicts by spouses are discussed.
Keywords: marriage; marital relations; marital conflict; conflict resolution

O Enfrentamento do Conflito Conjugal na Perspectiva de Mulheres e Homens Casados

Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo foi verificar o uso de estratégias construtivas e destrutivas de resolução de conflitos entre mulheres e homens casados, bem como sua associação a variáveis sociodemográficas e a características do relacionamento. Os participantes foram 750 casais heterossexuais, residentes no Rio Grande do Sul, que responderam ao Conflict Resolution Behavior Questionnaire – CRBQ, e a questões sobre dados sociodemográficos e características do relacionamento. Foram conduzidas análises de variância e de correlação, a fim de verificar as diferenças e associações entre as variáveis do estudo. A estratégia de "acordo" foi mais utilizada pelos homens em comparação às mulheres, que usaram mais o "ataque" em comparação aos homens. Para ambos os sexos, a religiosidade apresentou correlação com estratégias construtivas, enquanto que ter filhos associou-se a estratégias destrutivas. A partir desses achados, são discutidos os aspectos que podem favorecer o encaminhamento construtivo dos conflitos pelos membros do casal.
Palavras-chave: relações conjugais; conflito conjugal; resolução de conflitos

Enfrentamiento de Conflicto Conjugal desde la perspectiva de hombres y mujeres casados

Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio fue verificar uso de estrategias constructivas y destructivas de resolución de conflictos entre mujeres y hombres casados, así como su asociación con variables sociodemográficas y características de relacionamiento. Participaron 750 parejas heterosexuales residentes en Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil, que respondieron Conflict Resolution Behavior Questionnaire – CRBQ y 16 preguntas sobre datos sociodemográficos y características de relacionamiento. Análisis de varianza y de correlación se llevaron a cabo con el própósito de verificar diferencias y asociaciones entre las variables del estudio. La estrategia de "acuerdo" fue más utilizada por los hombres en comparación con las mujeres, que utilizaron más "ataque". Para ambos sexos, la creencia religiosa presentó correlación con estrategias constructivas, mientras que tener hijos se asoció a estrategias destructivas. Teniendo en cuenta estos resultados, se discuten los aspectos que pueden favorecer el encaminamiento constructivo de los conflictos por los cónyuges.
Palabras-clave: relaciones conyugales; conflicto conjugal; resolución de conflictos.

Conflicts are natural and inherent phenomena to marital relations, as a result of different interests, opinions and perspectives between couple members. Conceptually, conflict can be defined as an overt opposition between spouses, which generates disagreements and relationship difficulties (Falcke, Wagner, & Mosmann, 2013; Fincham, 2009; Mosmann & Wagner, 2008).

This phenomenon is described in specialized literature as having four dimensions: content, frequency, intensity and resolution. Conflict content refers to the themes causing disagreements between partners. Some frequent conflict themes described in the literature of the field are: practices on raising children, couple's leisure time, finances, housework, sexuality (Mosmann & Falcke, 2011; Wagner & Grzybowski, 2014), disputes of power, mistrust, intimacy (Kurdek, 1994), divergent ideas, partner's personality and relatives (Wagner & Grzybowski, 2014).

National and international research show that the frequency with which conflicts occur is related to marital dissatisfaction (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006) and

children's maladjustment (Stutzman, Miller, Hollist, & Falceto, 2009). Along with the frequency, intensity of disagreements also contributes to emotional and social skills problems for children, especially in high intensity conflicts involving violence (Lindahl & Malik, 2011).

Finally, resolution is one of the determinant factors for the impact of conflicts on the relationship (Reese-Weber & Bartle-Haring, 1998), and thus, it is the most important dimension of marital conflict. The way couples manage their conflicts influences not only the marital dynamic, but also the whole family system (Fincham, 2003). In this perspective, researchers have been investigating conflict resolution strategies, defined as the behaviors through which partners try to manage their disagreements (Marchand & Hock, 2000). Couples' conflict resolution may involve constructive or destructive strategies. Constructive strategies involve accepting the other's point of view, being open to discussing the conflict motives and making efforts to solve the problem. In contrast, destructive strategies include hostility, competition and withdrawal from the conflict (Rubenstein & Feldman, 1993; Sillars, Canary, & Tafoya, 2004).

The predominance of constructive strategies in expression and resolution of conflicts favors good levels of marital satisfaction, family health and the development of social skills for children (Lindahl & Malik, 2011; McCoy, George, Cummings, & Davies, 2013; Siffert & Schwarz, 2011). The recurrent use of destructive strategies, on the other hand, is associated with behavior problems in children (Coln, Jordan, & Mercer, 2013; McCoy et al., 2013) and tends to increase family tension, generating more conflicts (Lindahl & Malik, 2011; Siffert & Schwarz, 2011).

Since the way couples manage their conflicts impacts the whole family system, several variables potentially associated with this phenomenon have been studied. Some of these studies focus on variables such as relationship length (Birditt, Brown, Orbuch, McIlvane, 2010; Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012; Woodin, 2011), presence of children, education level, income (Birditt et al., 2010; Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012), remarriage, employment (Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012), and religion (Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012; Kusner, Mahoney, Pargament, & DeMaris, 2014; Rauer & Volling, 2015).

Couples who have been in their relationship longer and who are older tend to have lower conflict levels (Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012), and manage conflicts in a more constructive manner compared to younger couples (Birditt et al., 2010). Longitudinal studies with

American couples also show that in couples with more conflicts, the level of disagreements form an inverted U across time (Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012). Birditt et al. (2010), for instance, found that withdrawal and destructive strategies used by wives decreased across time. Thus, constructive behaviors for managing conflicts seem to become stable across time.

The connection between relationship length and constructive strategies may be associated with a couple's development along the marital life cycle. The normative marital cycle is defined as a sequence of stages experienced by most couples in order to achieve marital life tasks. According to Ríos (2005), these tasks include the construction of marital patterns and cohesion, couple's internal growth, and stability.

The presence of children is also associated with marital conflict in different ways, according to literature. Having children less than 18 years old or born before the current relationship is related to higher levels of conflict and use of destructive strategies (Birditt et al., 2010; Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012). Couples in which neither partner had children before marriage seem to use more constructive strategies when managing conflicts (Birditt et al., 2010). A study with 149 couples from Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, found that the parent's relationship with children was the most frequent motive of conflict between spouses (Mosmann & Falcke, 2011).

High levels of conflict can also be found in remarried couples or in marriages in which the wife has a full-time job (Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012). Full-time jobs tend to be more burdensome for women than for men, since they usually accumulate with other responsibilities within the home. In Brazil, data from the National Household Sample Survey (Pesquisa Nacional por Amostra de Domicílios – Pnad) showed that women work an average of 18 more hours per week compared to men (Dedecca, Ribeiro, & Ishii, 2009). Thus, the women's labor overload can contribute to difficulties with managing relationship conflicts.

Religiosity, in contrast, is associated with lower frequency of conflicts (Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012), more adaptive communication patterns, and more cooperative behaviors during conflicts, compared to non-religious couples (Kusner et al., 2014; Rauer & Volling, 2015). In this sense, the sacred meaning of marriage and the support network formed by the religious community can work as protective factors for the marital relationship (Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney, 2005).

Despite the inherent nature of marital conflicts, few studies in Brazil address the issue. Publications in the country focus mainly on the children's perspective (Boas, Dessen, & Melchiori, 2010; Goulart & Wagner, 2013; Schimidt, Crepaldi, Vieira, & More, 2011), on contexts of divorce or violence (Costa, Penso, Legnanni, & Sudbrack, 2009; Rosa & Falcke, 2014), on the frequency and motives associated with disagreements (Mosmann & Falcke, 2011; Wagner & Grzybowski, 2014), and on clinical studies (Silva, 2008). However, Brazilian studies focusing on the particularities of conflict management and resolution by couples are scarce. Only one publication was found (Garcia & Tassara, 2001), approaching marital conflict from a qualitative perspective.

Since the way disagreements are resolved defines the impact of conflicts on the relationship, studying conflict resolution strategies used by couples can contribute to the proposal of specific interventions, broadening possibilities for conflict management by couples. Thus, this study aimed to investigate the prevalence of constructive and destructive conflict resolution strategies used by men and women living in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. The association between these strategies and sociodemographic and relational variables was also investigated.

Based on the literature, some hypotheses about the results were defined. It is expected that higher relationship length and age would be associated with lower use of destructive strategies and higher withdrawal, while constructive strategies would remain stable in couples in different relationship stages. Participants without children or in which children do not live with the couple are expected to use more constructive strategies compared to others, as well as couples with higher religious engagement. Remarried participants and women working more hours per day are expected to use more destructive than constructive strategies. Associations between conflict resolution strategies, education level and income are not expected, due to the higher levels of education and income in this sample.

Method

Participants

The inclusion criteria in the sample were people in a heterosexual relationship and/or cohabitating with the partner for at least six months. In order to represent the diversity of the Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil population as much as possible, no other inclusion criteria

were adopted. The sample was composed based on the convenience criterion.

Participants of the study were 750 heterosexual couples, from which 69% were married and 31% were cohabitating with their partner. The mean age was 46.26 years old ($SD = 11.24$) for men and 39.54 years old ($SD = 10.70$) for women. Partners were in the current relationship for 15.79 years on average ($SD = 10.41$), and 15% of the sample was remarried (average length of previous relationship was 8.48 years, $SD = 6.80$). Most participants were working outside the home (88.2% of men and 72.7% of women), and had children (79.1% of men and 78.5% of women). Also, 70.8% of women and 67.9% of men cohabitated with at least one child. Data concerning education, income and religious practice are shown on Table 1.

Most participants had high education levels and middle-high income. About 20% of women and 19% of men reported having an undergraduate degree, while 19.8% of women and 16.4% of men had a graduate degree. For most of the sample, income varied from one to six minimum wages (66.8%), and male income was higher than female income. Also, most participants reported practicing a religion to some degree, with women being more religiously engaged than men.

Instruments

Data collection was part of a broader study about couples in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil (Wagner et al., 2010). Participants responded to a questionnaire containing 16 questions about sociodemographic data: age, marital status, education, income, presence of children and religious practice. There were also questions concerning the romantic relationship, including current and previous relationship length, and a translated version of the CRBQ.

The Conflict Resolution Behavior Questionnaire – CRBQ (Rubenstein & Feldman, 1993, version adapted by Delatorre & Wagner, 2015) assesses the frequency with which certain behaviors are used in conflict resolution. The adapted version for the Brazilian context is composed of 21 items measured on a five-point Likert scale, varying from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Scale items are distributed in three dimensions: *attack*, composed of seven items; *compromise*, composed of six items; and *avoidance*, composed of eight items. This adapted version had a Cronbach alpha of .74 for the *attack*, .79 for the *compromise*, and .69 for the *avoidance* (Delatorre & Wagner, 2015). Strategies of *attack* include physical and verbal attacks to the partner, while *avoidance* refers

Table 1
Education level, income and religious practice, by gender

	Men	Women
Education level	%[a] (n)	%[a] (n)
Elementary or Middle School	25.5 (191)	20.4 (152)
High School	23.8 (178)	21.7 (162)
Post-Secondary Education (incomplete)	15.2 (114)	18.1 (135)
Undergraduate Degree	19.1 (143)	20.0 (149)
Graduate Degree	16.4 (123)	19.8 (148)
Total	100 (749)	100 (746)
	Men	Women
Income	%[a] (n)	%[a] (n)
No income	1.6 (12)	17.1 (124)
1 to 3 minimum wages	37.8 (279)	49.4 (359)
4 to 6 minimum wages	27.6 (204)	18.8 (137)
7 or more minimum wages	33.0 (244)	14.7 (107)
Total	100 (739)	100 (727)
	Men	Women
Religious Practice	%[a] (n)	%[a] (n)
None	13.6 (98)	6.7 (49)
Low	34.8 (251)	33.2 (244)
Moderate	34.3 (247)	39.8 (292)
High	17.3 (125)	20.3 (149)
Total	100 (721)	100 (734)

[a] Valid response percentages

to withdrawal of conflict or keeping feelings to one-self. Finally, *compromise* comprises negotiation, joint discussion of problems and compromise (Rubenstein & Feldman, 1993).

Procedures

Participants were recruited from schools, institutions assisting families such as churches, health services and social assistance services. A data collection meeting to explain research goals and give the questionnaires was scheduled with participants who agreed to participate in the study. All participants signed an Informed Consent Form and responded to the questionnaire in the presence of one research group member, who assisted couples if there was any question. In contexts such as schools and churches, the questionnaire was given collectively. Questionnaires were applied individually at couple's homes, health services and social assistance

services. In all contexts, the instruments were responded to separately by couple members, to guarantee that one would not know the other's answers. Once completed, questionnaires were stored in an envelope, which was sealed in front of the subjects to assure data confidentiality.

All ethical procedures, according to the resolution for research with humans (Resolution CNS 196/96 and CFP 016/2000), were observed. The project was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Institute of Psychology from the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, registered under the number CAAE 33175114.1.1001.5334.

Data Analysis

Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to investigate if there were differences in the use of conflict resolution strategies among participants in different

family and sociodemographic conditions, regarding marital status, remarriage, working outside home, presence of children, cohabiting with children, education, and income. Size effects were analyzed through partial eta squared (η^2), which represents the proportion of explained variance by one variable, excluding variance explained by other variables (Field, 2009). Results had statistical significance levels corrected by *Bonferroni* criterion, due to the number of analyses with the same dependent variable. The assumptions for ANOVA, normality and homogeneity of variance, were met. Normality was assessed through asymmetry and kurtosis (> -1; < 1) and the normal probability plot. Homogeneity of variances was assessed through Levene's test. Finally, Pearson correlations were used to verify if there was an association between continuous variables (age, relationship length, working hours/day, religious practice, age at the beginning of relationship and at the birth of the first child, and length of relationship at the birth of the first child) and conflict resolution strategies.

Results

Descriptive analyses were carried out in order to observe the use of conflict resolution strategies by men and women. Means for each strategy and differences between men and women are shown on Table 2. Resolution strategies were measured using a five-point Likert scale, in which the higher the mean, the more frequent is the use of the respective strategy.

The most used conflict resolution strategy by both men and women was *compromise*, followed by *avoidance* and *attack*. There were statistically significant differences between men and women in *compromise* and *attack*. Men used more *compromise* strategies than women, while *attack* was more used by women than by men.

Mean differences between conflict resolution strategies and sociodemographic variables were verified through ANOVAs, carried out separately for men and women. Results for men and women are shown on Tables 3 and 4, respectively.

Tables 3 and 4 show that men and women who have children had higher mean scores for *avoidance* when compared to participants with no children. Women cohabitating with a partner used more *attack* than married women, although there were no significant differences regarding cohabitating with children and conflict resolution strategies. There were also no significant differences in conflict resolution strategies regarding remarriage, working outside the home, education level and income.

The variables age, relationship length, working hours per day, religious practice, age at the beginning of relationship and at the birth of the first child, and length of relationship at the birth of the first child were analyzed through Pearson correlations. Results are shown in Table 5.

For women, there was a set of variables related to maturity associated to an increase in constructive strategies (current age, age at the beginning of relationship and at the birth of the first child) and to a decrease in destructive strategies (current age, age at the beginning of relationship and at the birth of the first child, and relationship length) used in relationship conflict management. Religious practice had similar results, showing a positive correlation with *compromise* and a negative correlation with *attack*. Conflict *avoidance* was also correlated with working more hours per day for women, although the effect size was small.

For men, some results had the same pattern. Age at the beginning of the relationship was positively correlated with *compromise*. This strategy was also negatively correlated with relationship length at the birth of the first child. *Attack* was negatively correlated with age at the beginning of the relationship and with age at the birth of the first child. Similar

Table 2

Means and differences on conflict resolution strategies used by men and women

Conflict resolution strategy	Men	Women	F (*sd*)	Partial η^2
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*		
Compromise	3.73 (.72)	3.62 (.72)	F(1, 1417) = 8.42*	.006
Avoidance	2.33 (.62)	2.30 (.59)	F(1, 1415) = .68	.000
Attack	1.76 (.55)	2.00 (.60)	F(1, 1416) = 57.20**	.039

*p < .05; **p < .01

Table 3

Analysis of Variance of conflict resolution strategies and sociodemographic variables for men

		Attack^Z		Compromise^Y		Avoidance^W		
	N	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*Statistic*
Marital Status								$^Z F(1,705)=.77; p=.38; \eta^2 p=.001$
Married	487	1.75	.55	3.73	.70	2.33	.61	$^Y F(1,706)=.002; p=.97; \eta^2 p=.000$
Cohabiting	220	1.79	.56	3.72	.77	2.33	.63	$^W F(1,701)=.009; p=.92; \eta^2 p=.000$
Remarriage								$^Z F(1,695)=1.01; p=.31; \eta^2 p=.001$
Yes	120	1.81	.58	3.77	.78	2.30	.66	$^Y F(1,697)=.49; p=.48; \eta^2 p=.001$
No	579	1.76	.55	3.72	.70	2.34	.61	$^W F(1,692)=.61; p=.43; \eta^2 p=.001$
Work outside home								$^Z F(1,698)=.35; p=.55; \eta^2 p=.001$
Yes	621	1.77	.54	3.71	.71	2.33	.61	$^Y F(1,699)=2.71; p=1.00; \eta^2 p=.004$
No	80	1.73	.63	3.85	.79	2.31	.70	$^W F(1,695)=.06; p=.81; \eta^2 p=.000$
Have children								$^Z F(1,706)=.08; p=.77; \eta^2 p=.000$
Yes	150	1.77	.55	3.72	.74	2.36*	.61	$^Y F(1,707)=.16; p=.69; \eta^2 p=.000$
No	558	1.75	.58	3.75	.67	2.21*	.63	$^W F(1,702)=7.48; p=.006*; \eta^2 p=.011$
Cohabiting with children								$^Z F(1,560)=.08; p=.93; \eta^2 p=.000$
Yes	480	1.77	.55	3.71	.73	2.37	.62	$^Y F(1,561)=2.00; p=.16; \eta^2 p=.004$
No	81	1.76	.54	3.83	.76	2.31	.57	$^W F(1,559)=.67; p=.41; \eta^2 p=.001$
Education level								
Elem./Middle School	165	1.77	.59	3.73	.84	2.34	.64	$^Z F(4,702)=.36; p=.84; \eta^2 p=.002$
High School	167	1.74	.56	3.70	.77	2.34	.59	$^Y F(4,704)=.24; p=.91; \eta^2 p=.001$
Post Sec. (incompl.)	110	1.81	.58	3.70	.63	2.39	.59	$^W F(4,699)=.70; p=.59; \eta^2 p=.004$
Undergrad Degree	140	1.77	.50	3.74	.65	2.33	.56	
Graduate Degree	122	1.74	.52	3.78	.65	2.26	.70	
Income								
No income	20	1.95	.89	3.83	.82	2.01	.58	$^Z F(3,693)=2.80; p=.04; \eta^2 p=.012$
1 to 3 min. wages	247	1.81	.59	3.75	.77	2.36	.64	$^Y F(3,693)=.19; p=.90; \eta^2 p=.001$
4 a 6 min. wages	197	1.67	.51	3.72	.71	2.32	.57	$^W F(3,690)=1.07; p=.36; \eta^2 p=.005$
7 or + min. wages	240	1.78	.53	3.72	.69	2.34	.63	

*Statistical significance $p =< .007$, after applying Bonferroni correction.

to women, religious practice for men was positively correlated with *compromise* strategies and negatively correlated with *attack* strategies.

Discussion

The way couples manage their conflicts reverberates on spouses' health, on marital dynamic, and on family system as a whole (Fincham, 2003). Thus, studying the strategies through which spouses manage their disagreements and variables associated to the use of each strategy can contribute to a more precise delimitation of interventions with couples. From this perspective, analyzing how women and men from Rio Grande do Sul manage their conflicts, we sought to understand what factors are associated with certain marital conflict resolution strategies.

The hypotheses drawn from literature were partially confirmed. As expected, participants' religiosity was positively correlated with the use of constructive

Table 4

Analysis of Variance of conflict resolution strategies and sociodemographic variables for women

		Attack^Z		Compromise^Y		Avoidance^W		
	N	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	*Statistic*
Marital Status								$^Z F(1,708)=10.46; p=.001*; \eta^2 p=.015$
Married	491	1.95*	.56	3.66	.70	2.30	.58	$^Y F(1,708)=5.86; p=.02; \eta^2 p=.008$
Cohabiting	221	2.11*	.69	3.52	.76	2.33	.63	$^W F(1,711)=.39; p=.53; \eta^2 p=.001$
Remarriage								$^Z F(1,698)=2.17; p=.14; \eta^2 p=.003$
Yes	91	2.08	.71	3.67	.69	2.31	.62	$^Y F(1,700)=.52; p=.47; \eta^2 p=.001$
No	607	1.98	.59	3.61	.73	2.31	.59	$^W F(1,702)=.00; p=.99; \eta^2 p=.000$
Work outside home								$^Z F(1,703)=2.44; p=0,12; \eta^2 p=.003$
Yes	510	2.02	.61	3.62	.69	2.32	.60	$^Y F(1,702)=.20; p=.65; \eta^2 p=.000$
No	193	1.94	.57	3.60	.81	2.25	.58	$^W F(1,704)=2.38; p=.12; \eta^2 p=.003$
Have children								$^Z F(1,709)=4.00; p=.05; \eta^2 p=.006$
Yes	549	1.97	.59	3.64	.73	2.34*	.61	$^Y F(1,709)=1.69; p=.19; \eta^2 p=.002$
No	160	2.08	.64	3.55	.69	2.19*	.53	$^W F(1,712)=7.79; p=.005*; \eta^2 p=.011$
Cohabiting with children								$^Z F(1,554)=5.36; p=.02; \eta^2 p=.010$
Yes	497	1.99	.60	3.65	.73	2.34	.61	$^Y F(1,553)=2.46; p=.12; \eta^2 p=.004$
No	57	1.80	.47	3.49	.71	2.32	.54	$^W F(1,559)=.05; p=.82; \eta^2 p=.000$
Education level								$^Z F(4,705)=1.45; p=.21; \eta^2 p=.008$
Elem./Middle School	139	2.04	.69	3.59	.87	2.39	.62	$^Y F(4,705)=.88; p=.48; \eta^2 p=.005$
High School	151	1.89	.61	3.55	.79	2.30	.65	$^W F(4,708)=1.82; p=.12; \eta^2 p=.010$
Post Sec. (incompl.)	133	2.03	.56	3.61	.67	2.26	.57	
Undergrad Degree	144	2.00	.56	3.64	.64	2.35	;55	
Graduate Degree	141	2.02	.58	3.60	.60	2.22	.57	
Income								
No income	118	2.00	.54	3.58	.75	2.26	.55	$^Z F(3,686)=.10; p=.96; \eta^2 p=.000$
1 to 3 min. wages	336	2.01	.64	3.58	.76	2.33	.61	$^Y F(3,687)=.99; p=.39; \eta^2 p=.004$
4 a 6 min. wages	133	1.99	.58	3.70	.64	2.24	.60	$^W F(3,690)=1.37; p=.25; \eta^2 p=.006$
7 or + min. wages	103	2.03	.57	3.63	.63	2.37	.52	

*Statistical significance $p = < .007$, after applying Bonferroni correction.

strategies in dealing with marital conflicts. For women, higher age and relationship length was positively correlated with *compromise* and negatively correlated with *attack*, respectively. The presence or absence of children did not show differences regarding the use of constructive strategies as predicted, however, participants with children avoided conflicts more than those who did not have children. The hypothesis that remarried participants would use more destructive strategies was not supported. However, women who worked more hours

per day used more *avoidance*, as expected, although the effect size was small.

Religiosity was one of the most important contextual variables to differentiate conflict resolution strategies used by participants. Constructive management of disagreements by individuals who intensely practice some religion may be related to the ritual performed in most religions or with the connotation of an important bond, maintained before society. In addition, religions such as Catholic and Protestant ascribe a

Table 5

Correlation between conflict resolution strategies and sociodemographic variables[a]

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age (years)	1	.81**	.04	.16**	.34**	.35**	-.01	.09*	.03	-.17**
2. Relationship length	.78**	1	.03	.18**	-.27**	.05	.39**	.02	.08*	-.12**
3. Work hours/day	.04	.10**	1	-.05	.00	-.07	-.04	-.04	.09*	.00
4. Religious practice	.12**	.13**	.05	1	-.02	-.01	.02	.13**	-.05	-.13**
5. Age beginning relat.	.42**	-.22**	-.09*	-.01	1	.44**	-.61**	.12**	-.08*	-.07
6. Age at birth first child	.36**	.02	-.01	.01	.50**	1	.44**	.10*	-.16**	-.08*
7. Rel. length first child	-.09*	.36**	.12**	.01	-.63**	.36**	1	-.03	-.05	-.03
8. Compromise	-.00	-.05	-.01	.14**	.08*	.01	-.10*	1	-.31**	-.44**
9. Avoidance	.10**	.10**	.02	-.05	-.00	.00	.02	-.32**	1	.40**
10. Attack	-.06	-.00	-.01	-.13**	-.11**	-.12**	.04	-.38**	.44**	1

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$

[a] Correlations for women are shown on the upper right. Correlations for men are shown in the bottom left.

Note: Age beginning relat. = age at the beginning of relationship; Age at birth first child = age at the birth of the first child; Rel. length first child = relationship length at the birth of the first child.

sacred status to marriage, considering it a relationship that must be maintained for the entire lifetime (Kusner et al., 2014; Mahoney, 2010). This perspective can contribute to the spouses' higher investment in the relationship, adopting behaviors related to empathy, acceptance and negotiation. Moreover, the support network formed by the religious community provides its participants alternative ways to manage conflicts. Some examples are the counseling, rituals of reconciliation, and the reinforcement of the idea that suffering experienced in managing conflicts is part of the spirituality inherent to marriage (Mahoney, 2005).

The length of relationship and the age of spouses when facing crisis inherent to the marital life cycle (Ríos, 2005) also seem to be important for the management of conflicts by the couple. The conflict management strategies were associated with marital life cycle indicators, as indicated by other studies (Birditt et al., 2010; Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012; Woodin, 2011). This association corroborates the idea that cohesion and stability are continuously developing processes for the couple (Ríos, 2005). On one hand, it is possible that accumulated experiences mean that each spouse has more knowledge about the other, especially concerning the way a particular spouse usually faces marital issues and life in general. Knowledge about the other facilitates one's way of approaching him or her, especially in situations of conflict, which can lead to the selection of

more constructive strategies to manage conflicts. Thus, it is possible that younger participants, with less time living together and less knowledge about one another have more difficulties in managing conflicts, especially in the most demanding moments of the couple and family life cycle.

However, longer relationship length does not necessarily imply better marital heath. The couple, as a living system, needs to continue development and flexibility when facing demands from marital life. When this process is paralyzed, the relationship is threatened (Ríos, 2005). This relational stagnation is more evident in longer relationships. Thus, the positive association between relationship length and conflict *avoidance* for men may be reflecting deterioration in relationships, in which partners are not able to evolve to the same extent as marital and family demands do. Similarly, the significantly more frequent use of *avoidance* among participants with children may indicate difficulties in dealing with the arrival of new members in the family system. This result is in agreement with other studies (Birditt et al., 2010; Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012) and reinforces the hypothesis that spillover, that is, the conflicts that overflow from one family subsystem to another, occurs not only from the couple to parental subsystem (Mosmann & Wagner, 2008), but also occurs in reverse (Mosmann & Falcke, 2011).

The association between aspects related to the life cycle and the conflict resolution strategies may also be mediated by gender. The meaning of the marital relationship for women may have contributed to the fact that women cohabitating with their partner managed conflicts aggressively more often, compared to married women. In a context in which marriage is still valued due to affective and social aspects, an official union may provide a feeling of greater emotional security. It is possible that cohabitating partners, who abdicate the rituals and the formalization of the union, have a sense of lack of commitment, resulting in less consideration toward the other, expressed in more immediate and less constructive conflict management strategies. This effect is more evident among women, perhaps because emotional interdependence seems to be more central to women compared to men (Kiecolt-Glasser & Newton, 2001).

Destructive management of conflict among women may also be related to intense workloads. The more pronounced use of *avoidance* by women who work more hours per day may be an effect of the women's double or triple burden. Although the effect was small, similar results were found in a study conducted by Kamp, Dush, and Taylor (2012). It is possible that the accumulation of housework, child care and formal work (Dedecca et al., 2009) causes exhaustion, lack of availability, and energy to discuss marriage related issues.

However, some authors also suggest that women tend to use more strategies that require engagement, both positive and negative, while men tend to be more defensive (Birditt et al., 2010; Woodin, 2011). In fact, women in this sample used *attack* more often than men. However, men used *compromise* more frequently compared to women, contrary to the idea that men tend to be more defensive or avoid conflict. These differences may be expressing different roles played by men and women in the relationship. In addition to the accumulation of labor and domestic tasks, family tends to be a more significant context for women (Kiecolt-Glasser & Newton, 2001), which could justify greater engagement on conflict. This involvement may also be associated with a tendency to evaluate romantic relationships in a more critical way compared to men (Falcke, Wagner, & Mosmann, 2008). Thus, women may seek to modify marital interaction in a more active and recurrent way.

Conclusions

In general, the contextual factors that most stood out regarding marital conflict management were religiosity, relationship length, and variables related to the moment of the life cycle in which the participants were in. It is worthwhile to notice that size effects were small, and thus, results should be interpreted with caution. From these findings, one may consider that other variables related to these factors may mediate the association between context and conflict resolution. It is possible that the presence of shared goals, social support, relationship stability and flexibility of partners are underlying factors to the results found in this study. Thus, it is necessary to more thoroughly investigate these elements, identifying the role played by each one in managing marital conflicts in order to better define the focus of interventions with couples with difficulties related to conflict management.

Some limitations can be identified in this study. The use of a sample from only one Brazilian state does not allow generalization to the country's population. Due to this and the low effect sizes, more diverse samples should be investigated, in order to verify if the results found in this study will be replicated. In addition, only the association of contextual variables and marital conflict were investigated. Considering the complexity of this phenomenon, we suggest that future research investigate the role played by relational and individual variables on conflicts experienced by Brazilian couples. Combining qualitative and quantitative methods could also be beneficial to better understand the couple dynamic in managing conflicts.

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