

Perceived Match or Mismatch on the Gottman Conflict Styles: Associations with Relationship Outcome Variables

DEAN M. BUSBY, PH.D.*
THOMAS B. HOLMAN, PH.D.*

Gottman has proposed that there are 3 functional styles of conflict management in couple relationships, labeled Avoidant, Validating, and Volatile, and 1 dysfunctional style, labeled Hostile. Using a sample of 1,983 couples in a committed relationship, we test the association of perceived matches or mismatches on these conflict styles with relationship outcome variables. The results indicate that 32% of the participants perceive there is a mismatch with their conflict style and that of their partner. The Volatile-Avoidant mismatch was particularly problematic and was associated with more stonewalling, relationship problems, and lower levels of relationship satisfaction and stability than the Validating matched style and than other mismatched styles. The most problematic style was the Hostile style. Contrary to existing assumptions by Gottman, the 3 matched functional styles were not equivalent, as the Validating Style was associated with substantially better results on relationship outcome measures than the Volatile and Avoidant styles.

Keywords: Conflict Styles; Gottman; Couples

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The purpose of this study is threefold: first, to test the idea that three couple conflict styles found in John Gottman's observational research are functionally equivalent in terms of relationship quality outcomes and that these three styles are superior to a style Gottman labeled hostile. Second, to find out if couples containing partners with "mismatched" styles are disadvantaged vis-a-vis relationship outcomes compared with the three "matched" styles. Third, to investigate whether what Gottman called "avoidant" couples are different from "hostile" couples in terms of "withdrawal" as

*Professor, School of Family Life, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, USA

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dean M. Busby, Professor, School of Family Life, Brigham Young University, 2086-C JFSB, Provo, UT 84602, USA. E-mail: dean_busby@byu.edu

characterized in the so-called “demand-withdrawal” pattern (Eldridge, Sevier, Jones, Atkins, & Christensen, 2007).

COUPLE CONFLICT STYLES

The research of Gottman and associates (Cartensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Gottman, 1993; Gottman & Levenson, 2000) proposes that there are at least three different styles of couple conflict that can lead to successful marital outcomes (Gottman, 1993; Gottman & Levenson, 2002). These three styles are Avoidant, Validating, and Volatile—which Gottman calls regulated (Gottman, 1993, 1994, 1999). These styles are regulated in that couples maintain a more stable and satisfying relationship than “unregulated” styles by using strategies to disengage from destructive conflict and by engaging in positive interactions that are significantly more frequent than the negative interactions. An important point that Gottman (1999, p. 88) makes is the idea that “one [regulated] style is not superior to the other.” The three regulated styles are distinguished by the *degree* to which partners attempt to influence each other through persuasion and dialogue and the *timing* of the influence attempts. Avoidant couples prefer to minimize conflict as much as possible by agreeing to disagree. Validating couples address conflict by emphasizing the importance of making sure each person is understood and their views are appreciated, or validated. Volatile couples are more passionate and energetic and are not afraid of lively debates and disagreements. In contrast, unregulated couples are labeled “hostile” and participate in destructive and contemptuous conflict that undermines positive sentiment and marital stability.

Using two different samples, Holman and Jarvis (2003) investigated the relationship between the three regulated couple conflict types, the unregulated hostile couple conflict type, and several relationship outcomes. As expected, they found differences between the regulated and unregulated couples on relationship outcomes, but unlike Gottman’s hypotheses, their findings suggested that although volatile and avoiding couples had higher relationship quality than hostile couples, they had significantly lower relationship quality than those with a validating style. Therefore, one purpose of this research is to investigate the question of whether the regulated conflict types are equivalent in terms of relationship outcomes.

MISMATCHED COUPLE CONFLICT STYLES

As might be expected, and as presented by Gottman (1999), many individuals have different preferences regarding conflict styles and mismatches between partners are common. In his 1994 (pp. 235–236) research-oriented book in the section titled *Mismatch Theory*, Gottman states the following:

... hostile/detached couples are simply failures to create a stable adaptation to marriage that is either volatile, validating, or avoiding. In other words, the results . . . are an artifact of the prior inability of couples to accommodate one another and have one of the three types of marriage. For example, a person who wishes a volatile marriage may have married one who wishes a validating or avoiding marriage.

Unfortunately it is easier to propose this hypothesis than it is to test it. The problem in testing this hypothesis is that I have used the marital interaction as a means for classifying couples. As a result, the marriage is described as volatile, validating, or avoiding, rather than

each person's style or preferences. An independent method for classifying each person's conflict-resolution style is needed to test this hypothesis.

However, in his 1999 book, Gottman appears to have experienced a clarification in his thinking about mismatches. He presents these mismatches as "the real problem in couple relationships." He suggests mismatches as an explanation for many divorces in that couples do not feel like there is "understanding" or "connection in the marriage" (p. 95).

Surprisingly, considering the strong influence attributed to mismatches by Gottman in the 1999 work and the 1994 work, we have not been able to locate any subsequent research article that addresses mismatches. However, one team of researchers recently produced evidence for the validity of measuring conflict styles through questionnaires, opening the possibility for testing these styles with larger groups of couples (Holman & Jarvis, 2003). In the current study we advance the questionnaire method presented by Holman and Jarvis for measuring the *couple style*, to a process whereby the *individual* is asked to rate his or her own style and the style of the partner so that matches and mismatches can be determined.

POTENTIAL PROBLEMS WITH MISMATCHED STYLES

Gottman (1993, 1999) and Gottman and Levenson (2000) report several potential challenges that might be associated with mismatched styles. Couples with mismatched styles may have more difficulties with "perpetual problems," which are the types of problems that are related to basic underlying differences in how partners express themselves through communication, both positive and negative. In addition, mismatches are likely to result in at least one partner feeling emotionally flooded by the higher degree of intensity and frequency of persuasion attempts preferred by the other partner. These process differences are likely to lead to different couple outcomes such as more relationship problems, lower relationship stability, and lower relationship satisfaction. Consequently, we use these relationship outcome variables as dependent variables in the present study.

Even with the simpler questionnaire method noted above of measuring conflict styles, with four potential conflict styles for each person who is rated (including the hostile, nonregulated style) there are still considerable complications when evaluating matches and mismatches as there are 16 possible couple styles for each person, when they rate both self and partner, and 256 styles if responses from both partners are combined. However, Gottman's (1993, 1999) and Gottman and Levenson's (2000) writings suggest that certain mismatches may be more problematic than others. Any relationship that includes at least one person who uses the Hostile style of conflict will be more problematic and unstable than couples where neither person has a Hostile style. Also the more extreme mismatches for the regulated styles, such as the Volatile and Avoidant mismatch, are likely to be associated with more problems than mismatches characterized by Validating-Avoidant or Validating-Volatile couples. Thus, as noted in the methods section, we were able to reduce the number of mismatched couple types and test the idea that mismatched couple types were disadvantaged in marital quality compared with matched types.

CAN AN INDIVIDUAL HAVE MORE THAN ONE CONFLICT STYLE?

Because a central question in this study is whether individuals match on their preferred conflict style, it is important to consider whether individuals can have more than one style of conflict. As an example, it is conceivable that for some issues people might be more avoidant whereas for others they might be more validating. However, in the current study, and in most studies on conflict, what is being assessed is an individual's or a couple's strongest tendency or overall approach to conflict, rather than a measure of what type of conflict they engage in during conversations on different issues. Nevertheless, this question about the uniformity of conflict styles suggests several potential avenues for more research on conflict that could uncover more complex patterns within and between couples, though they are beyond the scope of this study.

DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN AVOIDANCE AND WITHDRAWAL

Another important contribution of Gottman's work from that of others is the distinction between an Avoidant style of conflict and withdrawal from the relationship (Gottman, 1993; Gottman & Levenson, 2002; Weger, 2005). An Avoidant style of conflict does not mean partners have withdrawn from the relationship. It means they prefer to handle conflict by not dealing with it directly and letting time resolve most problems. Couples with an Avoidant conflict style are still engaged in positive relationship experiences even if they prefer to avoid overt conflict. Other researchers often consider avoidant behaviors as synonyms for withdrawal (Eldridge et al., 2007).

In contrast, Gottman labels withdrawal from the relationship as "stonewalling" (Gottman, 1993, 1994). Stonewalling represents a deteriorated relationship process where partners are withdrawn from both positive and negative relationship interactions and have created a "stonewall" to keep their partners from affecting them. We found no research on this issue and therefore, in this study we investigate whether the distinction between an Avoidant conflict style and withdrawal (stonewalling) is relevant for couples.

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

The first issue we address in this study is the several ways of measuring matches or mismatches on conflict styles when both members of the dyad are measured. Using two different approaches we evaluate the association of matched and mismatched conflict styles on the relationship outcome variables of Stonewalling, Problem Areas, Stability, and Satisfaction.

Gottman's research reviewed above led to several specific research hypotheses. They are as follows:

1. With a much larger sample than that available for Gottman's interaction studies, we test the proposal that one matched regulated style is not superior to the other matched regulated styles in terms of associations with couple outcomes, and that all matched regulated styles are superior to the unregulated Hostile style.
2. We test the hypothesis that mismatched regulated styles are associated with poorer relationship outcomes than matched regulated styles, but are still superior to the unregulated Hostile style.

3. We test the hypothesis that the most extreme mismatched style of the regulated types, Volatile-Avoidant, would be associated with poorer relationship outcomes than other mismatched regulated types.
4. We test the hypothesis that Avoidant conflict is not the same as the withdrawal characterization by evaluating if the Avoidant conflict style is associated with higher levels of stonewalling (withdrawal) than other conflict approaches, especially the Hostile style.

As one study evaluating conflict patterns with couples indicates that relationship length may be influential (Cartensen et al., 1995), we control for relationship length for all the analyses. Some research with conflict styles and more specifically with Gottman styles (Gottman, 1994; Holman & Jarvis, 2003; Weger, 2005) has demonstrated gender differences. Initially we included gender as one of the independent variables in this study but no significant differences were found between females and males so this variable was dropped from the study.

METHODS

Sample and Procedures

The sample from this study was drawn from the entire population of participants, approximately 4,746, who completed the Relationship Evaluation Questionnaire (RELATE: Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001) with their partners during 2006 and 2007. All participants completed an appropriate consent form before the completion of the RELATE instrument and all data collection procedures were approved by the institutional review board at the authors' university. Individuals completed RELATE online after being exposed to the instrument through a variety of settings. Some participants were requested to take RELATE as part of an undergraduate class or workshop and many others completed it after finding it on the Web. The percentages of couples who completed RELATE as part of a class or by finding it on their own is not known as all participants take the instrument online.

Because of the relationship variables that were analyzed in this study, the only individuals retained in the sample were participants in a heterosexual relationship who were in serious/steady dating relationships, or who were engaged or married. The couples who were eliminated were individuals who indicated they were "just acquaintances" or "casually dating." This reduced the original sample to 3,966 individuals (1,983 couples).

Eighty-four percent of the sample was Caucasian, 3% African American, 3% Latino, 5% Asian, 2% Mixed/Biracial, 1% Native American, and 2% Other. In terms of education, 15% of participants had completed some college but were not currently enrolled, 29% were currently enrolled in college, 51% had received a bachelor's degree or more education, and 5% had completed a high school education or less. The mean age of the respondents was 28.9 with a SD of 9.2. With regard to relationship status, 28% reported being in a serious or steady dating relationship, 44% reported being engaged, and 28% were married. The measure of relationship length indicated that 19% of the couples had been in their relationship for 6 months or less, 14% between 6 and 12 months, 29% for 1–2 years, 22% for 3–5 years, 8% for 6–10 years, and 8% for >10 years.

Measures

The RELATE is a 274-item questionnaire designed to evaluate the relationship of individuals in a dating, engaged, or married relationship. The questions examine several different contexts—individual, cultural, family (of origin), and couple—in order to provide a comprehensive evaluation of challenges and strengths in areas that may prove helpful for participants' relationships. Previous research has documented RELATE's reliability and validity, including test-retest and internal consistent reliability, and content, construct, and concurrent validity (Busby et al., 2001). We refer the reader specifically to Busby et al.'s (2001) discussion of the RELATE for detailed information regarding the theory underlying the instrument and its psychometric properties.

Relationship outcome variables

For all of the variables in this study the couple was the unit of analysis, therefore the measures for males and females were averaged for each of the respective scales. The decision to combine male and female scores was done after preliminary analyses indicated that the patterns were the same for each gender. Although slightly more men than women were characterized as avoidant, the different matches and mismatches for each gender did not have differential effects on couple measures.

For the relationship outcome variables we used four measures: Couple Stonewalling (8 items), Couple Satisfaction (7 items), Couple Stability (3 items), and Couple Problem Areas (11 items). The Stonewalling scale was an important variable in this study as much of the literature does not distinguish between the terms "avoidant" and "withdrawal," although Gottman clearly distinguishes between these two concepts (Gottman, 1993; Gottman & Levenson, 2002; Weger, 2005). Therefore, the inclusion of the Stonewalling scale allowed us to see how the different conflict styles, including the Avoidant style, influenced Stonewalling or relationship withdrawal. Stonewalling was measured by 8 items, 4 items asking respondents how often participants felt themselves withdrawing from the relationship, whether they were losing the energy to continue fighting for the relationship, and whether during an argument they found themselves ignoring their partner. The other 4 items asked participants to answer the same questions about their partner. Higher scores indicated more stonewalling.

The Relationship Satisfaction scale asked respondents how satisfied they were with seven different areas such as intimacy, time spent together, and communication, using a five-point Likert response scale. The Relationship Stability scale asked respondents how often they thought the relationship was in trouble, how often they thought of ending the relationship, and how often they had broken up and gotten back together, using a five-point Likert response scale, with higher scores indicating greater relationship stability. The Problem Areas scale asked respondents how often they experienced problems in the relationship in areas ranging from finances to spending time together, using a five-point Likert response scale, with higher scores indicating fewer problems. Higher scores on the Satisfaction and Stability scales indicated more satisfaction and stability while higher scores on the Problem Areas scale indicated fewer problems.

The internal consistency reliability coefficient with this sample for the Stonewalling scale was .90, for the Satisfaction scale was .87, for the Stability scale was .79, and for the Problem Areas scale was .81.

Control variables

Relationship Length was used as a control variable in this study. Couples were asked to indicate how long they had been in a relationship with their partner ranging from 6 months or less to more than 30 years. Additional control variables such as religion, income, etc., were not available in the dataset and/or the sample size was not large enough to further divide into more groups than the Gottman Conflict Styles.

Conflict styles

The Conflict Styles variable was adapted from items researched by Holman and Jarvis (2003) that were used by couples to report which of the four Gottman Conflict Styles represented how they typically handled conflict as a couple. In their research, Holman and Jarvis demonstrated that these items were valid measures of the Gottman types and were able to distinguish relationships that were stable and satisfying and that had low levels of criticism, contempt, and flooding as predicted by Gottman's model. We adapted these items so that individuals were able to rate their individual style of conflict separate from their partner's style of conflict, providing an opportunity to test whether they perceived their conflict styles to match or not. One question asked participants to rate which one of the following four conflict style descriptions (without the labels) best represented how they usually handled conflict. A second question, reworded for the partner, asked them which one of the four styles best represented how their partners usually handled conflict:

Avoidant Style:

I avoid conflict. I don't think there is much to be gained from getting openly angry with others. In fact, a lot of talking about emotions and difficult issues seems to make matters worse. I think that if you just relax about problems, they will have a way of working themselves out.

Validating Style:

I discuss difficult issues, but it is important to display a lot of self-control and to remain calm. I prefer to let others know that their opinions and emotions are valued even if they are different than mine. When arguing, I try to spend a lot of time validating others as well as trying to find a compromise.

Volatile Style:

I debate and argue about issues until they are resolved. Arguing openly and strongly doesn't bother me because this is how differences are resolved. Although sometimes my arguing is intense, that is okay because I try to balance this with kind and loving expressions. I think my passion and zest actually leads to a better relationship with lots of intensity, making up, laughing, and affection.

Hostile Style:

I can get pretty upset when I argue. When I am upset at times I insult my partner by using something like sarcasm or put downs. During intense discussions I find it difficult to listen to

what my partner is saying because I am trying to make my point. Sometimes I have intensely negative feelings toward my partner when we have a conflict.

With couple data, the challenge with these two questions is that the results provide four different measures of conflict style for each couple because the female and male each rate their own and their partner's conflict style. In addition, with all four measures each with four possible dimensions, there are 256 possible categories of conflict style. It is highly unlikely that these 256 possible categories have distinct meaning and relevance for couple outcomes even if enough couples could be sampled to have a critical number in each of the categories. How then should the four measures of conflict style be used to determine whether there was a match or mismatch between the partners? Clearly if all four questions were answered the same there is 100% congruence that the conflict style is the same. However, what about situations where only one of the four is different? Does this represent a mismatched style? Even more challenging, what happens when all four measures are different? There is a mismatch but what label should it be called? An avoidant, volatile, validating, and hostile couple? Because these measurement issues are central to this study, we present our rationale and choices for how to measure mismatches in the results section.

RESULTS

Different Approaches to Evaluating Matching on Conflict Styles

We explored a variety of approaches to developing couple matches with preliminary analyses. We identified the following five ways to evaluate whether there was a match or mismatch on conflict styles:

1. Self-Self match (e.g., the female's rating of self was compared with the male's rating of self);
2. Self-Other within person match (e.g., the male's rating of self was compared with his rating of his female partner);
3. Self-Other cross person match (e.g., the female's rating of self was compared with the male's rating of the female);
4. Other-Other match (e.g., the male's rating of the female was compared with the female's rating of the male);
5. All four ratings (all four ratings used to indicate a match).

To finalize how we were going to determine these matches we analyzed all five methods in an analysis of variance to see if any method held a statistical advantage in terms of how well it predicted couple relationship quality (using the effect size). To reduce the number of cells with an insufficient number of participants, all hostile ratings were collapsed into one cell. This was justifiable as preliminary analyses with each of the five methods demonstrated that whenever either partner in the relationship rated the self or partner as hostile, scores were significantly lower on the relationship outcome measures than all other groups. A second way we collapsed the large number of cells for method 5 (all four ratings) was to consider the couple as "matched" on a particular conflict style if three or four of the ratings were the same.

Table 1 contains the comparative results for the five methods of evaluating a match. The results in Table 1 indicate that options 4 or 5 were substantially better in terms of

TABLE 1

Comparison of Five Methods of Creating Conflict Style Matches by Predicting Couple Relationship Quality Using the Two Way and the Four Way Interaction Terms

Matching method	Conflict styles (self)		
	F-value	Significance level	Partial η^2
1. Self-Self	61.65	.000	.215
2. Self-Other within person			
Male ratings	115.33	.000	.255
Female ratings	131.01	.000	.280
3. Self-Other cross person			
Ratings of the male	76.33	.000	.254
Ratings of the female	60.88	.000	.213
4. Other-Other	152.83	.000	.312
5. All four ratings	128.93	.000	.333

predicting relationship quality. We elected to evaluate the hypotheses using both of these methods of matching, but after completing the analyses did not find any substantial differences in the results between methods 4 and 5. Consequently, we only present results for method 4 as it was more parsimonious, both in terms of the number of questions used, 2 instead of 4, and in terms of the number of categories that had to be reduced, 16 as compared with 256. Method 4 is also consistent with previous research that has demonstrated ratings of the partner are superior at predicting couple outcomes than ratings of the self (Busby et al., 2001; Busby and Gardner, 2008).

Results from Matching with Method 4

Before proceeding to answer the hypotheses in this study, it was still necessary to reduce the number of categories that existed when the two questions were used to create couple conflict styles. To reduce the number of conflict categories we conducted a series of one-way analyses of variance comparing scores for the 16 different categories on couple relationship quality (a scale combining satisfaction, stability, and problem areas scores). From these analyses we adopted the following principles for collapsing categories:

1. If either of the two ratings were "hostile" the couple was categorized as a hostile style.
2. Ratings were combined across gender. For example, a couple would be labeled Avoidant/Volatile if one person was given an avoidant rating while the other was given a volatile rating regardless of gender.

By following these procedures couple styles were collapsed into the seven conflict categories used in the analyses (see Table 2). The most common style reported was Validating, representing 25.3% of the sample, and the Hostile style was the second most common, representing 23.6% of the sample. The least common couple style was the Avoidant matched style. Out of the almost 2,000 couples who were measured only 31 existed where both partners rated each other as Avoidant, representing only 1.6%

TABLE 2

Estimated Means and SD (in parentheses) for the Seven Conflict Styles, Calculated Using Method 4, on the Four Dependent Variables While Controlling for Relationship Length

Conflict styles	Dependent variables			
	Stonewalling	Relationship satisfaction	Relationship stability	Problem areas
a. Hostile ($N = 467$)	2.37* (.43)	3.44* (.65)	3.73* (.65)	3.70* (.43)
b. Avoidant/Volatile ($N = 242$)	2.05 _{ae} fg(.47)	3.85 _{ae} fg(.62)	4.08 _{ae} fg(.47)	3.94 _{ae} fg(.47)
c. Volatile ($N = 97$)	1.93 _{ade} fg(.49)	3.94 _{af} g(.59)	4.16 _{ag} (.69)	3.95 _{ae} fg(.39)
d. Avoidant ($N = 31$)	1.95 _{af} g(.50)	3.79 _{af} g(.56)	4.23 _a (.67)	4.10 _{ag} (.45)
e. Validating/Avoidant ($N = 335$)	1.76 _{abc} g(.55)	4.00 _{ab} g(.55)	4.34 _{ab} g(.73)	4.13 _{abc} g(.37)
f. Validating/Volatile ($N = 308$)	1.70 _{abcd} g(.53)	4.11* (.53)	4.31 _{ab} g(.70)	4.11 _{abc} g(.35)
g. Validating ($N = 501$)	1.48* (.45)	4.29* (.67)	4.49 _{abce} f(.67)	4.31* (.45)

Note. Letter designations indicate the means which are significantly different.

*Significantly different than all other groups at $p < .01$.

of the sample. The Volatile matched style was also uncommon (4.9% of the sample). Overall, the matched regulated conflict styles made up 31.7% of the sample, while the mixed styles represented 31.6% of the sample (Avoidant-Volatile 12.2%, Avoidant-Validating 16.9%, and Volatile-Validating 15.5%).

To further validate our use of method 4 for matching couples, we used cluster analyses to explore which of the four questions about conflict style were the best at developing unique couple types. The analyses showed that the ratings of the partner were approximately twice as powerful at producing unique couple groups as questions about the participants' own conflict style, based on the size of the F -values. Finally, although the cluster analyses resulted in anywhere from 4 to 10 couple types depending on the criteria used or the dependent variable selected, seven couple types closely paralleling those listed in Table 1 were verified as an appropriate way to divide the sample.

A multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was selected as the analytic approach appropriate for addressing the research questions in this study. The MANCOVA is particularly well-suited for exploring the relationship between categorical independent variables with different cell sizes and multiple dependent variables that are likely to be correlated (George & Mallery, 2006). In addition, the MANCOVA procedure allowed us to control for the influence of the covariate Relationship Length. The dependent variables were Couple Stonewalling, Couple Satisfaction, Couple Stability, and Couple Problem Areas. Preliminary analyses did not show a significant effect for gender either as an independent variable in the analyses with couple variables or when the Stonewalling, Satisfaction, Stability, and Problem Areas scales for females and males were evaluated separately. The lack of differences between females and males further validated our choice to use couple scores in the analyses.

The results from the MANCOVA indicated that Conflict Styles using Method 4 had significant effects on the dependent variables while holding Relationship Length

constant. The multivariate F -test for Conflict Styles was significant, Wilks's $\Lambda = .67$, $F(24, 6881) = 35.22$, $p < .001$. The covariate of Relationship Length was significantly related to the outcome measures at $p < .001$. The results indicated that as the relationships increased in length their satisfaction and stability decreased, while their problem ratings and stonewalling increased.

As the multivariate tests were significant, it was appropriate to consider the univariate results. To evaluate the effect sizes of the independent variable on the dependent variables the partial η^2 statistic was used. The univariate F -test associated with Conflict Styles was significant for the dependent variable Stonewalling, $F(6, 1975) = 141.12$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .30$; for the dependent variable Relationship Satisfaction $F(6, 1975) = 97.94$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .23$; for the dependent variable Relationship Stability $F(6, 1975) = 58.42$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .15$; and for the dependent variable Problem Areas $F(6, 1975) = 85.75$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .21$.

With significant multivariate and univariate F -tests the next step was to explore the specific differences between each conflict style on the dependent variables through step-down F -Tests, using the Bonferroni method to control for multiple comparisons. The estimated means and SD, while holding relationship length constant, for the seven conflict groups on the four dependent variables are presented in Table 2.

The first hypothesis that we tested was whether the regulated matched couple conflict styles of Validating, Avoidant, and Volatile were in fact equivalent on relationship outcome variables as hypothesized repeatedly by Gottman (1994, 1999), and that all three regulated styles were superior to the unregulated Hostile style. The findings reported in Table 2 gave partial support to the first hypothesis in that the means for the Volatile and Avoidant styles were not significantly different across all four-outcome variables. However, the Validating matched style had significantly more positive means as compared with Volatile and Avoidant in seven of the eight comparisons. The effect sizes for these mean comparisons ranged from .44 to .33. As hypothesized, all three regulated matched styles had significantly higher (or lower for Stonewalling) means than the unregulated Hostile style, with effect sizes ranging from .41 to .29.

The second and third hypothesis tested the idea that mismatched couple conflict styles would be inferior to matched styles and that the most extreme mismatch, the Volatile-Avoidant style, would be inferior to the other mismatches. The mismatched styles that included at least one person who was rated as Validating usually had significantly higher means than the Avoidant and Volatile matched styles, with effect sizes ranging from .28 to .05. Nevertheless, these mismatched style means were significantly lower than the Validating matched style means with effect sizes varying from .23 to .11.

The means for the mismatched style of Volatile-Avoidant clearly suggest that this style was significantly less functional than all the other mismatched conflict styles and the Validating style. For example, the effect size for the difference between the means of the Volatile-Avoidant mismatched style and the Validating-Volatile mismatched style on Relationship Satisfaction was .22. Furthermore, the effect size for the mean difference between the mismatched Volatile-Avoidant style and the Validating matched style on Relationship Satisfaction was .32. However, this mismatched style was not significantly different than the Volatile or Avoidant matched styles.

The fourth hypothesis that the Avoidant style was not more strongly related to Stonewalling (withdrawal) than other conflict approaches, especially the Hostile style,

was generally supported. This supports Gottman's distinction between the term "avoidant" and the term "withdrawal," or stonewalling. The means in Table 2 indicated that the Avoidant style was not significantly different than four out of the seven styles on the Stonewalling variable. The Avoidant style resulted in significantly less Stonewalling than the Hostile style with an effect size of .41. However, the means for the Avoidant Couple Conflict Style showed significantly more Stonewalling than the Validating matched conflict style and than the Validating-Volatile mixed conflict style, with effect sizes of .44 and .24, respectively.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

While there are limitations to this study in that the sample is not a representative sample of the U.S. population, the measures are created from self-report questionnaires, and the associations are only cross-sectional, these results provide the most thorough test to date of the association of matches and mismatches of the Gottman styles with relationship outcome variables. The effect sizes in this study fall within the moderate range (Green & Salkind, 2008). This indicates that the conflict styles of the couple are moderately associated with the dependent variables. This is an important finding as Gottman (1998) and others have argued that highly correlated self-report measures from the same person can simply be a result of "glop." The moderate, but not extremely strong, relationship between conflict styles and the dependent variables in this study is indicative of an association between these variables but not redundancy. Additional studies using several measurement methods and additional perspectives would strengthen the confidence in these findings. Of particular importance for distinguishing between "glop" and a causative relationship between conflict styles and relationship outcomes would be the completion of longitudinal studies where conflict styles are measured at one time and couple outcomes are measured at a later time. We are currently collecting data of this nature and hope to be able to speak to the causative influence of relationship styles in future research.

As illustrated by Table 2, partners are most likely to see each other as Validating. It is noteworthy that very few couples report a Volatile or Avoidant Matched Style. This may be evidence for an assortive mating process that exists where two people who are both avoidant or volatile are not attracted to each other. Some research using attachment styles has shown that it is unusual for a person with an avoidant attachment style to be attracted to another person with the same style (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007).

It is also noteworthy that almost one quarter of the couples reported that at least one person is the hostile style. However, many couples report a mismatched style. With most of these mismatched styles at least one partner is rated as validating.

Overall the results demonstrate that there are important distinctions between the three regulated styles and the nonregulated Hostile style. In addition the Avoidant and Volatile Styles are associated with significantly less functional scores than the Validating Style. This evidence is consistent with the Holman and Jarvis (2003) study in demonstrating the superiority of the Validating style. Clearly the Validating style is preferable for couples in terms of having the strongest positive associations with the dependent variables in this study. Individuals who reported a matched Validating style were less likely to experience stonewalling, more likely to be satisfied and stable, and more likely to report fewer problems in their relationship.

In two separate studies that had significant numbers of dating couples, the validating style was the most commonly selected matched style (Busby & Loyer-Carlson, 2003; Holman & Jarvis, 2003), more than likely indicating that individuals are selecting partners, at least some of the time, for their validating characteristics. However, it is important to note that so far all of the data used to evaluate the equivalency of these three styles were cross-sectional. While these results suggest there are important differences between the matched styles, whether or not these differences lead over time to the erosion of relationship quality still needs to be tested. Longitudinal studies are an important next step that should be used to further explore the predictive abilities of matching on the Gottman styles. In addition, other background variables such as relationship status, religious denomination, ethnic group membership, and previous relationship experiences should be included to expand our understanding of how conflict styles uniquely influence relationship outcomes beyond the influence of these background variables.

There were no significant distinctions between the Volatile and Avoidant Styles though perhaps with a larger sample some of the means in Table 2 might be significantly different. This interesting finding deserves future research with larger samples and additional measures to explore whether the similarity between these two styles in this study is an artifact of measurement error or a legitimate finding.

The idea that matched styles would be superior to mismatched styles received mixed support. The mismatched styles that included at least one person who was rated as validating were significantly better in most instances than the Avoidant and Volatile matched styles; however, these mismatches were significantly worse than the Validating matched style. These results emphasize the "one is enough but both is best" idea. When individuals rate at least one person as validating this may insulate these couples from lower relationship quality, even though there are differences in preferred styles for handling conflict. Conversely, the "one is enough" idea is also supported by the results for relationships where at least one person is rated as hostile. No matter what the other person is rated, these relationships with at least one hostile person have poorer results on all the dependent variables than all of the other possible couple styles.

The mismatched couple conflict style of Volatile-Avoidant was clearly less functional than most of the other conflict styles with the exception of the Hostile Style. As Gottman (1999) hypothesized, this extreme mismatch is associated with a variety of problems from communication difficulties and flooding to poorer relationship outcomes. While some couples may initially be attracted to the opposite style of conflict, as a volatile person may appreciate the calmness of the avoidant person and the avoidant person may appreciate the energy and passion of the volatile person, it does not appear to be a style that is associated with higher functioning for most couples.

These results on the match or mismatches of couple conflict styles have important implications for applied professionals. Almost one-third of the couples in this study had some type of mismatch on the Gottman styles. Of course, if one of the mismatches includes a hostile rating for either partner, this should be a matter of serious concern for professionals working with couples. Those who are working with couples in a relationship education framework will usually want to refer these couples to therapists. Those working in a therapeutic format will want to conduct additional assessment to discern the nature of the hostility. We have found that asking individuals, in sessions without their partners, to specifically describe the worst instances of hostile conflict

can sometimes lead to disclosures of violence. Violence in the couple relationship would indicate additional safety measures need to be instituted and that in some instances couple treatment would be contraindicated.

The results on the other mismatches that do not include a hostile partner indicate a variety of applied issues. First the systemic nature of these results implied by the “one is enough” principle can be used from a strength perspective to help couples utilize the relationship resources that each person possesses. Recognition and support for the conflict approaches that each person has can assist couples with reducing patterns they may engage in where they try to emphasize that one approach is better than the other. A important caveat about the “one is enough” idea that should be considered is that the results from this study show that these couples are doing well, but over time this may not be the case. It may be that the differences between a validating and volatile style, as an example, eventually result in an erosion in relationship satisfaction that would not be evident with the current correlational data. Additionally, there is a certain degree of circularity between the variables in this study as conflict styles could lead to higher levels of problem areas and stonewalling, but higher levels of problems and stonewalling could lead to different types of conflict styles. Again longitudinal research would clarify the direction of the influence between these variables.

Finally, there does appear to be a distinction between the concept of “withdrawal” and “avoidance” in terms of conflict. The avoidant style did not result in substantially more relationship withdrawal (stonewalling) than many of the other conflict styles (see Table 2). These results indicate that the distinction between an avoidant style and withdrawal that Gottman makes is relevant and may improve the exploration of conflict in couple relationships. Although these two terms are often used synonymously in the literature (Eldridge et al., 2007), there are potentially important distinctions that could be made between the terms for couples, researchers, and applied professionals. When researchers consider the demand-withdraw, or pursuer-distancer, conflict style it may be useful to distinguish between the preference to avoid conflict and the act of withdrawing from the relationship. The results from this study in Table 2 suggest that withdrawal, as measured by stonewalling, is strongly associated with hostility, or the demanding confrontational style. This is exactly what Gottman hypothesized when he presented his marital cascade to divorce where he suggested stonewalling is a phase that represents the almost total deterioration of the relationship. Hostility sometimes precedes, coincides, or follows stonewalling (Gottman, 1993, 1994). In contrast, couples where both partners prefer an Avoidant conflict style may be functioning well. Both researchers and applied professionals should avoid labeling these couples as withdrawn unless additional assessment is done regarding their investment in the relationship.

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