

# Communication Skills, Conflict Tactics and Mental Health: A Study of Married and Cohabiting Couples in Malaysia

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## Abstract

The main purpose of the study is to examine the interrelationships of communication skills, conflict tactics, and mental health of married and cohabiting couples in Malaysia. The study also investigated how an individual's conflict tactics would affect spouse's reaction. Participating in the study were 400 married or cohabiting couples from Selangor state of Malaysia. The research instruments used were General Health Questionnaire (GHQ), Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS), and Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA). The research findings reveal significant relationships between conflict tactics and mental health, conflict tactics and spouse's communication response, conflict tactics and communication skills, and between communication skills and mental health. In summary, the study shows that couples with better communication skills and conflict tactics have better mental health.

**Keywords:** Communication skills, Marital conflict, General health, Couples

## 1. Introduction

Divorce, as a result of marital conflict, has become a worldwide trend (Stanley & Amato, 1998). The issue concerning "divorce" should also be given an immediate attention in Malaysia as the Malaysian Institute of Integrity reported an approximately 21,016 divorce cases in year 2005 alone (Sunday Star, 2008). Zarinah and Rozumah (2001) and Rozumah and Zoozilawati (2003) found that divorce, remarriage and social values play an important role in influencing individual development. The Malaysian National News Agency (2005) reported that several factors have been identified as the causes of divorce among couples in the Malaysian context. The factors include failure of discharging commitments among husband and wives, lack of spiritual support from the

perspective of religion, financial problems, sexual problems, incompatibility, interference due to communication issues and others. All in all, issues on marital conflict should not be neglected as it often affects the well-being of couples and create social problems to the country.

The assertions above are supported by research evidences such as Goering, Lancee and Freeman (1992) who found that marital conflict can create a negative impact on the course of mental health state of couples. Similarly, a 2-year longitudinal study conducted by Whisman and Uebelacker (2009) suggested that marital conflict leads to depressive symptoms among couples. Marital conflict also causes social problem as it brings about adverse effects to the children. Research found that parental marital conflict and/or divorce imposed adverse consequences on children in areas such as internalizing and externalizing behavior (Katz & Gottman, 1993), behavior problems (Amato & Cheadle, 2008), and subjective well-being on the adult children (Soboleswki & Amato, 2007).

Communication skills and conflict tactics are critical in maintaining a healthy marriage. Communication between couples through an aversive manner (e.g. complaining, nagging, or becoming violent until the partner gives in) are harmful to a relationship (Koerner & Jacobson, 1994, p. 208). Buehler *et al.* (1998) also found that conflict tactics that involve with physical and verbal aggression are most likely to cause a marital conflict. Hence, inappropriate communication skills and conflict tactics adopted in dealing with conflicting issues in a marital relationship will almost invariably results in decline in marital satisfaction.

Given the detrimental effect of marital conflict, there is an urgent need to examine its causes and consequences. Hence, the present study aims to explore the interrelationship between such causes (i.e. communication skills and conflict tactics) and consequences (i.e. mental health). The understanding on the interrelationships among communication skills, conflict tactics, and mental health are critical as it provides useful information in developing effective means of preventing, intervening, and mitigating the problematic issues of marital conflict. Precautions are particularly important in developing country like Malaysia as there are still barriers in seeking professional mental health assistance due to the lack of awareness of the availability of the service (Aida *et al.*, 2010) and stigma or discrimination against seeking such a service (Barker, 2007).

## 2. Definition

### 2.1 Conflict Tactic

According to Straus and Gelles (1990), in order to understand conflict tactic, it is necessary to distinguish the difference among three interrelated and often confusing terms; namely, conflict of interest, conflict tactic, and hostility. Generally, conflict of interest occurs when a person has different personal agenda or priority in life (e.g. amount of money to be spent on family vacation). On the other hand, conflict tactic refers to methods used to resolve conflicts (of interest) that arise. In a romantic relationship, conflict tactic is often used to resolve differing goals or incompatibilities between couples (Bradbury, Rogge & Lawrence, 2001). Lastly, hostility means feeling of antipathy or detest for a person (Straus & Gelles, 1990). Generally, there are five common conflict tactics, namely, physical aggression, obtaining social support, seeking diversion by attending to other activities like entertainment, avoiding like isolation, and compromising (Feldman & Gowen, 1998).

For the purpose of the present study, conflict tactic means the way individuals handle conflicts (i.e., effective or ineffective resolution tactic) that occur between themselves and their partner.

### 2.2 Mental Health

The World Health Organization defined mental health as not only the absence of mental illness but also a representative state of which individuals realizes own abilities, able to cope with life stressors and able to contribute to society (WHO, 2004). Later, Keyes (2007) came up with the definition of mental health as the integration of human's daily well functioning in cognitive, feelings and behaviours as well as the absence of disability and diseases. Haque (2005) reported that the National Policy on Mental Health in Malaysia (NPMH) defined mental health as the interactions among individuals and environment to reach optimal functioning and the integration of cognitive, affective and relational abilities towards achieving one's goals.

In sum, mental health of the present study would be the integration of one's cognitive, emotional and relational aspects in the interaction with the environment to achieve positive and balance personal growth.

### 2.3 Communication Skills

Birchler (1979) defined communication skills of married couples as the observable, changeable, verbal, and nonverbal behaviors regarding the way messages are delivered and received between the couple. Barnett and Rivers (1996) claimed that communication skill is the key factor in determining the quality of marital

relationship. It is the fundamental tool for understanding or emotional communicating with each other. According to Driver and Gottman (2004), communication skills consists of symbols ranging from verbal to non-verbal that couples use in their daily interactions. Driver and Gottman further explained that communication skills should emphasize emotional connection skills which involve sharing of information, seeking of support, and expressing of intimate feelings among couples.

To conclude communication skill plays an important role in reflecting the potential communication apprehension situations in the marital relationship. It is an important flow of meaning and sentiment between couples to establish emotional attachment.

### **3. Literature review**

#### *3.1 Communication Skills and Conflict Tactic*

Research evidences revealed that communication skills and strategies in handling conflict are the fundamental tasks in order to sustain healthy couple relationships. Communication skills and conflict tactic are interrelated and have high tendency in creating important implications for the prevention of relationship problems (Markman, 1991, Gottman, 1994). According to Baucom, Notarius, Burnett and Haefner (1990), husband and wives differ in their communication skill, particularly the tactics in handling conflicts. For example, husbands are more likely than wives to withdraw in a communication that relates to problem-solving. Besides, Tamara and Donald (1993) asserted that the negative communication from nondistressed husbands is an indication of constructive engagement which involved handling of conflict tactic in a marital adjustment.

Patterson et al. (1976) claimed that participating in training would positively result in better communications and conflict management skills that improve marital quality. A study conducted by Gottman, Markman and Notarius (1977), using a 5-point scale to rate the intent of messages sent and the effect of messages received among couples that communicate with each other about a problem in their marriage, found that unhappy couples had a significantly more negative effect on their messages received than those happy couples. They argued that the lack of effective conflict tactic could be the key factor in creating the exhibition of negativity during communication. On the other hand, Rose (1977) suggested that happy couples would have a bias to decode messages positively, whereas unhappy couples would have a bias to decode messages negatively. This implied that tactics of the partners in handling nonverbal cues are crucial in determining the quality of the couples' communication adjustment.

In summary, conflict tactic assesses variety of techniques during communication of couples. It is, therefore, the determining factor which presumably contributes to good and bad interpersonal communication in marriages (Charleanea & Howard, 1995).

#### *3.2 Conflict Tactic and Mental Health*

Marital functioning is influential to health. Specifically, marital conflict affects health habits and psychological conditions which consequently affect the individual's physiological well-being (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001).

Aseltine and Kessler (1993) suggested that marital disruption tends to increase the level of depression over a three-year interval. Similarly, Choi and Marks' (2008) longitudinal study on a representative sample of adults in the United States found that marital conflict was related to depression directly and indirectly through functional health limitations. Furthermore, Schneewind and Gerhard (2005) found that couples' conflict resolution styles are formed and habituated during the first year of marriage. These styles may consequently influence marital satisfaction and they are likely to be related to individuals' mental health. Hence, marital conflict and its resolution tactics affect an individual's mental health.

#### *3.3 Communication Skills and Mental Health*

Lenore and Arthur (1977) found that communication skills play an important role in determining a happy relationship among couples. A study conducted by Sheri and Theodore (2000) involving 49 depressed couples and 50 normal couples using the Marital Interaction Coding System for the measurement of communication skill revealed that there is a unique style of communication for the depressed couples as compared with the normal cohort. This is due to the mental health issue faced. For instance, communication from the husband frequently created negativity for the wives and it also influences the mood stability for the husbands.

In an effort to explain the importance of conflict resolution in affecting mental health state of couples, Andrew (1979) conducted a research among 12 distressed and 12 nondistressed couples to examine their

communicational interactions. The analyses of his study further supported the importance of effective communication skills in alleviating the mental health issue such as marital distress.

Coyne (1976) postulated that depressed couples often provide more negative elements such as sarcasm and disapproval in their communications. This, in turn, prolongs their mental health issue. In parallel, Tamara and Donald (1993) found that nondistressed couples will have a higher tendency to adopt constructive engagement in their communication. Besides, they are more capable in transforming the negative communication into a harmony interaction. On the other hand, distressed couples seem to experience detrimental effect due to the negative communication styles.

Biglan *et al.* (1985) found that specific type of communications by one partner will likely influence the other partner to exhibit a particular type of behavior. In contrast, Nelson and Beach (1990) found that the strength of suppression effect will be reduced after experiencing a long period of marital conflict. This suggested that the efficacy of depressive communications in fact is diminishing over time.

In short, depressed couples fail to communicate effectively with each other. Hence, effective communication can be an important means for couples to buffer and mitigate the effect of marital distress. This in turn leads to better mental health state.

#### 4. Purpose and Hypotheses

Research on communication skills and conflict tactic between couples is critical for individuals and families. This is because conflict between couple is a source of stress that correlates with negative consequences (e.g. poorer parenting role and reduced life satisfaction) and poorer mental health state (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Kelly & Voydanoff, 1985). There is a dire need to explore the interrelationships among communication skills, conflict tactics, and mental health state in view of their impacts on the wellbeing of the couples. Therefore, the present study aims to examine the mental health effect on marital communication and to investigate the interrelations between mental health and conflict tactic. It is postulated that a better handling of marital conflict and communication skills would lead to better mental health and vice versa. The hypotheses are:

H1: The higher the level of communication skills, the better the way of handling conflict among couples

H2: The better the way of handling conflict among couples, the better their mental health state.

H3: The higher the level of communication skills, the better the mental health state of couples.

In the present study, we extend previous research by examining the interrelations of communication skills, conflict tactics and mental health among couples in Malaysia. Result of present study from the perspective of Asian context would help in establishing family strength and delegating responsibility. In addition, the conduct of further analysis would contribute to the literature of family development.

#### 5. Methodology

##### 5.1 Subjects

The present study adopted convenience sampling to select the participants. The sample consisted of 400 Malaysians, comprising of 182 (45.5%) males and 218 (54.5%) females. All participants were working, either married, or living together (cohabiting) with their partners. Participants could have children or otherwise. Their ages ranged from 18 to 68 years with a mean of 37.76 years (SD = 11.20). There were 39 (9.7%) Malays, 267 (66.7%) Chinese, 69 (17.3%) Indians; and 25 (6.3%) participants were from other ethnic groups.

##### 5.2 Method and Instrument

A questionnaire survey was conducted in this study where convenience sampling was used to recruit participants. The instruments used in this study include the following:

*General Health Questionnaire (GHQ)*: This is a self-administered screening questionnaire designed by Goldberg (1981) to measure the presence of mental disorder in community and non-psychiatric clinical settings. The 12-item version of GHQ is used in this study. Participants were required to answer 12 items where four rating options were given. In particular, for questions 1-6, the rating options were: 1 = Better than usual; 2 = Same as usual; 3 = Worse than usual; 4 = Much worse than usual. In the case of questions 7-12, the rating options were: 1 = Not at all; 2 = No more than usual; 3 = Rather more than usual; 4 = Much more than usual. The total score was the sum of the ratings from the twelve items. The range of score was 12-48. The test-retest reliability of the GHQ was .51-.90 and internal consistently was .78.

*Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS)*: This instrument was developed by Straus and Gelles (1990) to measure the behaviors of the participants. It measured three dimensions of conflict tactic which include: (i) reasoning, (ii)

verbal aggression, and (iii) violence. There were altogether 20 items such as “tried to bring in someone to help settle problem”, “cried”, and “beat up the other person”. Participants were required to answer the 20 items related to the participants themselves and their spouse. Participants were given five rating options as follows: 0 = Never; 1 = Twice; 2 = 3-5 times; 3 = 6-10 times; 4 = 11-20 times; 5 = more than 20 times; and 6 = don't know.

*Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA)*: This is an instrument developed by McCroskey (1970) to measure oral communication apprehension. There were 30 Likert-type items generated to reflect the potential communication apprehension situations in the marital environment. The items were related only to spouse-spouse interaction with no involvement of children or in-laws. Half of the items were positively worded and another half otherwise. A 5-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strong disagree” were response patterns provided for each of the items. The estimated internal reliability ranged from .92 to .94 with a test-retest reliability of .83. Hence, this research instrument has obtained a good predictive validity.

## 6. Results

A correlation was conducted to examine the association between communication skills and conflict tactics. The results indicated a significant relationship,  $r = .261$ ,  $p < .01$ . This showed that if a person has better communication skills, such a person is more likely to handle conflict in a better way (see **Table 1**).

### Insert Table 1

Correlation analyses in the study also showed significant results between the use of conflict tactics and mental health ( $r = .305$ ,  $p < .01$ ), indicating that a person with better conflict tactic scale skills is more likely to have better mental health (see **Table 2**).

### Insert Table 2

Moreover, correlation analyses also indicated a significant relationship between communication skills and the mental health of respondents. This implied that a better communication skill is more likely to enhance the mental health state of couples (see **Table 3**).

### Insert Table 3

Another correlation was done between “Yourself” and “Spouse” sub-scales in the CTS, investigating the relationship between conflict tactic of respondent and spouse. The results showed a significant correlation,  $r = .717$ ,  $p < .01$  as indicated in **Table 4**. This implied that the conflict tactic adopted by one party of the couples will influence the conflict tactic of the other party.

### Insert Table 4

Table 5 consists 10 items to reflect the potential communication apprehension situations in the marital relationship. The higher the mean score, the more favourable the communication pattern of the couple. Based on the analysis, the communication apprehension with the highest mean would be “I look forward to evening talks with my spouse (mean = 3.54) and the second highest mean would be “I feel that I am an open communicator” (mean = 3.49) and so forth (see **Table 5**).

### Insert Table 5

## 7. Discussion

This study aimed to examine the interrelationships among communication skills, conflict tactics and mental health of Malaysian couples. The results revealed that better communication skills is related to better conflict tactics and better mental health respectively. It was also shown that the engagement of better conflict tactics is related to better mental health. The results also implied that the way individuals handle conflict does have a positive influence on their spouse's response to conflict.

The first hypothesis stated that the higher the level of communication skills, the better the way of handling conflict among couples. This hypothesis was supported in this study, validating previous research findings which revealed that problem of communication was the main attributive cause for poor conflict tactics among couples who seek for marital therapy (Baucom *et al.*, 1990). There have been research evidences (e.g. Bey & Lange, 1974) showing that poorer handling tactics actually resulted from inadequate communication skills between family members. Bey and Lange (1974)'s result was parallel with the current study's finding where communication skills and conflict tactic among couples are interrelated.

The finding of the present study implied that it is essential to raise the awareness of the society regarding the importance of the communication skills, conflict tactics as to promote successful marriages. In order to avoid destructive ways of handling marital conflict, finding of present study which emphasize the importance of

communication skills to enhance marital relationship would need to be translated into the mass media markets without further delay.

The second hypothesis was supported in the present study. The second hypothesis stated that the better the way of handling conflict among couples, the better their mental health state. Such inference is in congruence with previous research findings that better conflict tactic is connected with higher marital satisfaction and, hence, better mental health (Schneewind & Gerhard, 2005). Generally, this is rational as satisfaction often leads to better mental health. On the other hand, negative life events such as conflicts are likely to cause weaker mental health (Choi & Marks, 2008).

All marriages are characterized by certain levels of conflict. However, not all marital conflicts cause distress (Grych & Fincham, 1990). For example, a good handling of interpersonal conflict may provide chances to improve marital relationships if spouses are willing to negotiate differences between themselves (Canary, Cupach & Messman, 1995). This is further supported by Grych and Fincham (1990) who suggested that exposure to some marital conflicts may promote the development of constructive problem-solving skills.

Therefore, better conflict resolution tactics is beneficial for couple's relationships and consequently their mental health. As vast majority of distressed couples are reluctant to seek for marital intervention, programs that highlighted the strategy to manage conflict effectively should be encouraged in the appropriate settings and are available at a reasonable cost in our community.

The third hypothesis asserted that the higher the level of communication skills, the better the mental health state of couples. This hypothesis was also supported. According to Cummings and Davies (2002), negative communication between married couples is likely to cause behavioral and emotional problems among family members. Hence, communication skills between couples are important as prevention of behavioral and emotional problems that could deteriorate mental health in the long run. The results of the present study also imply that improving communication skills is critical in providing remedies for mental health. To enhance communication skills, listening skills do play an important part. This is because listening enables one to gather the necessary information in order to communicate effectively with each other.

Further analysis of Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA) of our research reflected that in order to maintain harmony relationship, couples need to take positive approach such as emphasizing open, in-depth communication with their spouse regularly. Additionally, to enhance relationship, it is equally important to include discussion which covers important aspect of relationship and inner true feelings of an individual. Analysis further indicated that no apprehension at verbalizing the immediate reaction to their spouse is crucial in determining a successful marital communication

The trustworthiness of the present study is assured as close-ended questions and the tabulation of scores based on Likert scales were used. Such an attempt enabled the researchers to have more accurate responses. Furthermore, this study adopted research instruments that gave high reliability and validity (i.e. GHQ, CTS and PRCA).

However, the findings of the present study may not be representative of the whole nation as the sample is drawn from only one state in Malaysia, namely Selangor. For future research, a wider sample from different states would help to improve the external validity. Research could also be expanded to have equal numbers of subjects from the different races to increase its representativeness.

The impact of unresolved conflict between couples is limited not only to the couples but also to their surrounding people, especially their children. Children with parents suffering from problematic relationship tend to have more behavioral problems which in turn bring about negative impacts to their adulthood. As shown in the current study, poor communication skills and conflict tactic between couples are connected to individuals' mental health which might consequently influence many other aspects of their life. Instead of allowing individuals to step into marriage and to quickly opt out while leaving adverse effect on themselves and other innocent ones, it is suggested that related parties might consider imposing certain plans or programs by referring to the results of the present study. For example, this study found that communication skills are related to both conflict tactics and mental health, so communication skills training could be imposed on couples before marriage. This prescription is beneficial for the couples to acquire effective conflict resolution methods in aiding them to manage marital conflict effectively. Furthermore, counselors/professionals in the field of couple communication and counseling could well concentrate their efforts in helping couples to learn good conflict tactics in order to communicate their positive feelings and to be more accommodating in a marital relationship. All in all, such suggestions would undoubtedly be useful in enhancing marital relationship of the couples.

## 8. Conclusion

Overall, this study reveals that the mental health of couples is correlated with marital conflict tactics. It also finds that the way couples deal with their conflict in the family is correlated with the conflict tactics of their spouse. Besides, there is a significant correlation between communication skills, conflict tactics, and mental health. It can, therefore, be concluded that positive communication and effective conflict tactics do play a critical part in predicting the state of mental health of couples. Given the fact that divorce rate is increasing at an alarming rate in Malaysia, considerable effort should be given in identifying effective strategies in handling marital conflict. Further research in this area is strongly recommended to gain better insight into the contributory factors (e.g., ineffective conflict tactic, lack of communication skills) and bases of marital problems in order to prevent, intervene in, and mitigate the deterioration of couples' mental health.

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Table 1. Correlation between Communication Skills and Conflict Tactic

Communication Skills	.261*
	Conflict Tactic

\*significant at  $p < .01$

Table 2. Correlation between Conflict Tactics and Mental Health

Conflict Tactics	.305*
	Mental Health

\*significant at  $p < .01$

Table 3. Correlation between Communication Skills and Mental Health

Communication Skills	.410*
	Mental Health

\*significant at  $p < .01$

Table 4. Correlation between Conflict Tactic of Respondent and Spouse

Conflict Tactic of Respondent	.717*
	Conflict Tactic of Spouse

\*significant at  $p < .01$

Table 5. Further Analysis: Item Mean Scores of Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA)

Item	mean
I look forward to evening talks with my spouse.	3.54
I feel that I am an open communicator.	3.49
I am comfortable in developing in-depth conversations with my spouse.	3.49
I look forward to discussing with my spouse those aspects of our relationship most important to me.	3.43
I look forward to telling my spouse my opinion on a subject.	3.39
I usually come right out and tell my spouse exactly what I say.	3.37
I never hesitate to tell my spouse my needs.	3.32
I don't hesitate to tell my spouse exactly what I mean	3.21
I never find it difficult to express my true feeling to my spouse.	3.21
I feel no apprehension at verbalizing my immediate reaction to my spouse	3.21