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How Do Couples Disagree? An Analysis of Conflict Resolution Profiles and the Quality of Romantic Relationships

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SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify conflict resolution profiles and assess relationship quality levels associated with each profile. The participants were 750 heterosexual couples living in southern Brazil. They filled out measures about conflict resolution strategies, relationship quality, and sociodemographic data. A latent profile analysis was conducted in order to classify participants regarding conflict resolution. Variance and association analyses were also conducted in order to examine relationships between the resolution profiles and other study variables. Four profiles were identified: Low Conflict/Withdraw, Validator, Hostile, and Volatile. The Validator profile showed higher relationship quality, followed by Low Conflict/Withdraw and Volatile profiles, which did not differ from each other, and the Hostile, which showed low levels of relationship quality. We conclude that even though validation and negotiation are desirable, emotionally intense strategies may also be beneficial for couples in some contexts.

Keywords: relationship conflict, conflict resolution, relationship quality, marital relations, latent profiles.

¿Cómo no Están de Acuerdo las Parejas? Un Análisis de los Perfiles de Resolución de Conflictos y la Calidad de las Relaciones Románticas

Resumen

El objetivo de este estudio fue analizar los perfiles de resolución de conflictos y evaluar los niveles de calidad de la relación asociados con cada perfil. Participaron 750 parejas heterosexuales residentes en el sur de Brasil, que diligenciaron cuestionarios relativos a estrategias de resolución de conflictos, la calidad de la relación y datos sociodemográficos. Se llevó a cabo un análisis de perfiles latentes para clasificar a los participantes con respecto a la resolución de conflictos. También se realizaron análisis de varianza y asociación para examinar las relaciones entre los perfiles de resolución y las otras variables del estudio. Se identificaron cuatro perfiles: Conflicto Bajo/Evasión, Validador, Hostil y Volátil. El perfil de Validador mostró una calidad de relación más alta, seguido de los perfiles de Conflicto Bajo/Evasión y Volátil, que no presentaron diferencias entre sí. El perfil Hostil mostró bajos niveles de calidad de relación. Concluimos que, aunque la validación y la negociación son deseables, las estrategias emocionalmente intensas también pueden ser benéficas para las parejas en algunos contextos.

Palabras clave: conflictos en las relaciones de pareja, resolución de conflictos, calidad de las relaciones, relaciones maritales, perfiles latentes.

Como os casais entram em desacordo? Uma análise dos perfis de resolução de conflitos e a qualidade dos relacionamentos amorosos

Resumo

O objetivo deste estudo foi analisar os perfis de resolução de conflitos e avaliar os níveis de qualidade do relacionamento associados com cada perfil. Participaram 750 casais heterossexuais residentes do sul do Brasil, que responderam a questionários relativos a estratégias de resolução de conflitos, qualidade do relacionamento e dados sociodemográficos. Foi realizada uma análise de perfis latentes para classificar os participantes a respeito da resolução de conflitos. Também foram realizadas análises de variância e associação para avaliar as relações entre os perfis de resolução e as outras variáveis do estudo. Foram identificados quatro perfis: Conflito Baixo/Evasão, Validador, Hostil e Volátil. O perfil de Validador mostrou uma qualidade do relacionamento mais alta, seguido dos perfis de Conflito Baixo/Evasão e Volátil, que não apresentaram diferenças entre si. O perfil Hostil mostrou baixos níveis de qualidade do relacionamento. Concluimos que, embora a validação e a negociação sejam desejáveis, as estratégias emocionalmente intensas também podem ser benéficas para os casais em alguns contextos.

Palavras-chave: conflitos nos relacionamentos de casais, perfis latentes, qualidade dos relacionamentos, relações conjugais, resolução de conflitos.

MAINTAINING INTIMATE relationships, especially with a romantic partner, is an important task of adult life, and marriage is still part of the life goals of young adults in Brazil (Falcke & Zordan, 2010). In this scenario, marital conflict, as an inherent phenomenon of relationships, is an important issue in assessing marriage and romantic relationships, given that it has implications for mental, physical, and family health (Fincham, 2003). Literature defines this phenomenon as the overt opposition between spouses, which creates disagreements and difficulties in the relationship (Fincham, 2009).

Conflict resolution strategies may be constructive or destructive, depending on how functional or dysfunctional the results of its application are. Constructive strategies usually involve openness to conversation, accepting the partner's point of view, and commitment to solving the problem. Destructive strategies include hostile and competitive behaviors and withdrawal (Rubenstein & Feldman, 1993). These strategies are related to the perception of relationship quality by both spouses. Relationship quality is a multidimensional construct, including the context, the personal resources of partners and adaptive processes, with relationship satisfaction included in the latter dimension (Mosmann, Wagner, & Féres-Carneiro, 2006).

Thus, constructive strategies tend to be related to higher relationship quality, while destructive strategies are usually associated with a lower perceived relationship quality (Kurdek, 1995; McNulty & Russell, 2010; Scheeren, Vieira, Goulart, & Wagner, 2014; Wheeler, Updegraff, & Thayer, 2010). For example, Wheeler et al. (2010), studying 227 Mexican-origin American couples, found that the more constructive strategies and the less avoidance and control strategies were used, the higher was marital satisfaction. Sheeren et al. (2014) investigated the role of conflict resolution mediating the impact of attachment on relationship quality in 214 Brazilian couples. The results confirmed that conflict resolution mediates the relationship between attachment and marital

quality. Specifically, constructive strategies, even when paired with insecure attachment, were associated with higher marital quality. Conversely, destructive strategies may escalate to marital violence (Bonache, Gonzalez-Mendez, & Krahé, 2019; Salazar, 2015) and are associated with higher rates of divorce (Birditt, Brown, Orbuch, & McIlvane, 2010; Lantagne, Furman, & Novak, 2017).

Despite the emphasis given to the dichotomy between constructive and destructive strategies, some studies show that both can lead to positive and negative consequences (Gottman, 1993; McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Sibley, 2009; Overall & McNulty, 2017). For example, a longitudinal study conducted by Gottman and Krokoff (1989) with observational data on American couples found different associations between short and long-term communication patterns and marital satisfaction. Positive verbal communication was related to short-term marital satisfaction, but it turned out to be dysfunctional three years later. In contrast, conflict involvement, including positive and negative communication, predicted marital dissatisfaction in the short-term but increased marital satisfaction over time. The authors interpreted these results by suggesting that confronting disagreements itself might be functional for marriage in the long run (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Another longitudinal study investigating 207 American couples showed that the severity of problems faced by the couple in the relationship moderated the effect between negative interaction and marital satisfaction. Thus, negative interaction was associated with decreased marital satisfaction for couples facing less severe problems but was positively related to satisfaction in those marriages dealing with severe problems (McNulty & Russell, 2010).

The negative effects of conflict avoidance, in turn, can be minimized when this strategy is used in an attempt to protect the relationship (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004) or when the couple often shows affection for each other (Caughlin & Huston, 2002). In cases in which avoidance is associated with lack

of proximity between spouses, there is an increase in marital dissatisfaction (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004). Thus, avoiding the conflict in an attempt to mask hostile feelings or withdrawing from conflicts in the context of affection can have different meanings and consequences for the relationship.

Marital Conflict and Sociodemographic Data

Some studies investigate the associations between marital conflict and sociodemographic variables. For instance, the use of destructive strategies decreases over time, especially for wives (Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012); whereas avoidance of conflicts may become more frequent in long-term relationships (Holley, Haase, & Levenson, 2013). This is probably related to the fact that emotion regulation improves with age (Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr, & Nesselroade, 2000). Conflict avoidance may also play a different role according to life cycle stages. For young and middle-aged couples, avoidance can hinder resolution of conflicts (Overall et al., 2009). However, for spouses in later life and in long-term relationships, avoidance may be neutral or even adaptive by moving the discussion away from toxic areas, which may include unattainable goals, toward less harmful topics (Holley et al., 2013). Also, couples in which one of the spouses had children before marriage (Birditt et al., 2010; Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012), or couples in which the wife works full time (Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012), tend to use more destructive strategies compared to others. These results, however, might change according to the couple's cultural background and flexibility regarding gender roles and management of household and childrearing tasks.

Another variable to be considered is religion. Religious involvement is associated with lower frequency of conflicts (Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012) and more adaptive patterns of behavior during conflicts, compared to non-religious couples (Kusner, Mahoney, Pargament, & DeMaris, 2014; Rauer & Volling, 2015). In fact, there seems to be an association between the idea that marriage is

sacred and greater positivity during conflictual discussions. It is possible that this idea, along with spirituality, motivates couples to remain considerate and warm and to avoid destructive interaction (Kusner et al., 2014).

Conflict Resolution Strategies and Marital Health

Several studies associate resolution strategies to marital health-related variables, like relationship quality and satisfaction (Sheeren et al., 2014; Wheeler et al., 2010). Other research associates resolution strategies to disorders like depression (Ellison, Kouros, Papp, & Cummings, 2016). These studies attempt to verify which strategies are functional or dysfunctional. However, few studies establish resolution profiles based on a combination of strategies used, given that spouses do not always resolve their conflicts in the same manner. In this sense, Gottman's balance theory of marriage (Gottman, 1993) proposes a couple typology to classify relationships as stable or unstable, based on the balance and the regulation of spouses' positive and negative behaviors.

Stable relationships are organized into three subtypes: avoider, volatile, and validator, which represent different ways of balancing positive and negative aspects of the marital relationship (Gottman, 1993). Avoider couples do not have specific conflict resolution strategies and give little importance to acceptance of differences. Discussions are calm and infrequent; however, spouses tend to be emotionally distant. In contrast, volatile couples have high levels of positive and negative affect, which complement each other to maintain stability. Finally, the validator type is an intermediate regarding affection and interaction levels. Couples are actively involved in the conflict, validating arguments and feelings from the partner before presenting one's own point of view (Friedlander, Lee, & Escudero, 2019; Gottman, 1993). According to the theory, the three subtypes have similar chances to maintain stable relationships (Gottman & Notarius, 2000). However, a study conducted by

Busby and Holman (2009) found that the validating style was associated with better marital outcomes compared to the volatile and avoidant styles. A similar result was found in a study investigating conflict resolution, marital quality, and religiosity in 191 Latino couples (Stinson et al., 2017). These results showed that the validator style of conflict resolution was a stronger predictor of marital satisfaction, followed by the volatile style and, lastly, by the avoidant style.

In contrast, the unstable type includes hostile and the hostile/detached subtypes. Hostile couples are strongly engaged in conflicts and adopt defensive behaviors. Hostile/detached couples, in addition to that, are emotionally uninvolved and show a low availability to listen to their partner's point of view. Instability in these types of relationship is associated with incongruence between interaction styles of partners and with the incapacity to accommodate these styles in an adaptive manner (Friedlander et al., 2019; Gottman, 1993). Thus, the differentiation between stable and unstable relationships in the balance theory of marriage is based on the ratio of positivity to negativity shown during conflicts. In stable marriages, there would be a high positivity to negativity ratio, while in couples in unstable marriages, the proportion of positive and negative behaviors is similar (Gottman, 1993; Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Madhyastha, Hamaker, & Gottman, 2011).

This typology identified by Gottman was also found in other studies. For example, Ladd and McCrady (2016), investigating a sample of 169 American couples seeking couples therapy for alcohol abuse, found profiles corresponding to Avoidant, Validator, and Hostile, plus a different profile, named Ambivalent-Detached by the authors. These profiles were obtained by a cluster analysis, performed with behavioral codes of couple interactions (Ladd & McCrady, 2016). Another research, analyzing longitudinal data about marital satisfaction and conflict from 2033 American couples, found the five types postulated by the balance theory of marriage: Validator, Avoider,

Volatile, Hostile, and Hostile-Detached (Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012).

Other studies also have investigated profiles of couple communication and conflict resolution. An observational study with 144 Chinese newlywed couples found three communication profiles, which were later subgrouped into three classes regarding the prevalence of communication profiles in different interactions across several topics (Cao et al., 2015). The classes comprised couples who were: (a) consistently supportive across interactions, (b) consistently quarreling, and (c) modestly traditional, meaning that they tended to interact in a more neutral and restrained way compared to the first two. Both consistently supportive and modestly traditional reported higher marital satisfaction than consistently quarreling couples (Cao et al., 2015). Similarly, another study (Li et al., 2019) investigating a sample of 194 Chinese couples across the early years of marriage found five transition patterns regarding marital conflict resolution: (a) steadily constructive pattern, (b) more constructive pattern, (c) unpredictable pattern, (d) more destructive pattern, and (e) steadily destructive pattern. Results showed that couples in the most constructive profiles had higher initial levels of marital quality, and the transition patterns of conflict resolution were associated with the change rates of marital quality for husbands, but not for wives (Li et al., 2019).

The Present Study

Studies investigating couples conflict resolution are scarce in Brazil. Only a few descriptive studies about the prevalence of relationship conflict resolution strategies (Bolze, Crepaldi, Schmidt, & Vieira, 2013; Costa & Mosmann, 2015; Garcia & Tassara, 2001) or its association with variables such as relationship quality, attachment, and sociodemographic data (Delatorre & Wagner, 2018; Scheeren et al., 2014; Scheeren, Delatorre, Neumann, & Wagner, 2015) were found in this context. Although conflict resolution in Brazil is somewhat similar to other Western cultures, there

are probably some subtle, but important, differences in the way Brazilian couples manage their disagreements. Qualitative studies conducted so far indicate that couples tend to address conflicts in a friendly or indirect way but, at the same time, show high-intensity emotions (Costa & Mosmann, 2015; Garcia & Tassara, 2001). Thus, it is important to understand how couples combine different strategies for managing their conflicts and how these combined strategies are associated with marital quality.

In this research, we investigate how different conflict resolution strategies operate in conjunction with each other. Having the balance theory of marriage as a base, this study sought to identify profiles of conflict resolution in a southern Brazilian sample of married and cohabitating couples and to investigate relationship quality levels and sociodemographic data associated with each profile. To achieve that, we first classified participants based on the strategies they reported using when resolving conflicts, using Latent Profile Analysis (LPA), in order to identify profiles in which the combination of strategies used was relatively homogeneous across spouses. This person-centered approach is a way to add nuanced information to the traditional variable-centered approach (Jobe-Shields, Andrews, Parra, & Williams, 2015). The next step was to test whether relationship quality and sociodemographic characteristics varied across profiles. In addition to mapping the prevalence of different conflict resolution styles in the sample, the identification of these profiles allows the flexibility of conflict management to be taken into account, recognizing that resolution strategies can be functional or dysfunctional, depending on how they are used.

Method

Participants

The sample was composed by convenience and included couples in a heterosexual relationship and in cohabitation for at least, six months.

The sample was restricted to heterosexual couples because relationship dynamics may differ in other sexual orientations. All participants were recruited in metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas from the Rio Grande do Sul state, Brazil. Exclusion criteria were not adopted, in order to represent the diversity of the state's population.

The participants were 750 heterosexual couples, which were married (69%) or cohabitating with the partner (31%) for, at least, six months. The sample age ranged from 18 to 80 years old, the mean age was 40.90 ($SD=11.07$) years old, and the mean relationship duration was 15.79 ($SD=10.41$) years. Furthermore, 15% of the subjects were remarried. For these, former relationship duration was 8.48 ($SD=6.80$) years on average. Participants' mean age at the beginning of the relationship was 25.25 ($SD=6.82$) years old, while the mean age and relationship duration at the birth of the first child were 27.20 ($SD=5.86$) years old, and 1.86 ($SD=6.41$) years, respectively. Most partners reported working outside the home (80.5%) on average 8.63 hours a day and having children (79.2%). Within the latter, 87.5% cohabitated with, at least, one child and 15.5% had at least one child before marriage. Table 1 presents data on education, income, and religious practice in the sample. All the respondents lived in the Rio Grande do Sul state, Brazil, with 56.3% in the metropolitan area and 43.7% in nonmetropolitan areas (northwest, northeast, central, and southwest), covering 67 of the 497 cities in the state.

Most participants had middle or high school education and income up to three minimum wages. Nevertheless, the sample had higher education and income when compared to the general Brazilian population. In 2013, only 15.2% of people between 25 and 34 years old had an undergraduate degree, and the mean income of the population was 1.71 minimum wages (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2014). In addition, most participants are religious practitioners to some extent, and more than half the sample is concentrated at the central categories of religious practice (*low* and *moderate*).

Table 1
Education, Income, and Religious Practice in the Sample

Education	%^a (n)
Elementary or Middle School	22.9 (343)
High School	22.7 (340)
Post-Secondary Education (incomplete)	16.7 (249)
Undergraduate Degree	19.5 (292)
Graduate Degree	18.1 (271)
Total	100 (1495)
Income	%^a (n)
No income	9.3 (136)
1 to 3 minimum wages*	43.5 (638)
4 to 6 minimum wages	23.3 (341)
7 or more minimum wages	23.9 (351)
Total	100 (1466)
Religion	%^a (n)
Catholic	65.9 (976)
Evangelical	13.3 (197)
Spiritist	7.4 (109)
Atheist/agnostic/no religion	3.6 (53)
Protestant	3.5 (52)
Other	6.3 (93)
Total	100 (1480)
Religious practice	%^a (n)
None	10.1 (147)
Low	34.0 (495)
Moderate	37.1 (539)
High	18.8 (274)
Total	100 (1455)

Note: ^a Percentage of valid answers

* Minimum wage is the minimum amount set by the Brazilian government for the salary of regular workers. At the time of the data collection the minimum wage was R\$545.

Instruments

Data collection was part of a broader study about romantic relationships in the Rio Grande do Sul state, Brazil (Wagner, 2010). In this study, a questionnaire containing sociodemographic data, such as age, relationship status, education, occupation, income, children, and religion was applied. This questionnaire also included questions about the romantic relationship, such as the current and former relationship duration, the Brazilian versions of the Conflict Resolution Behavior Questionnaire (CRBQ) and the Golombok Rust Inventory of Marital State (GRIMS). The selection of measures took into account the available instruments adapted for use with the Brazilian

population and the existence of adequate results in previous studies in the country (Delatorre & Wagner, 2018; Harth & Falcke, 2017; Neumann, Wagner, & Remor, 2018; Scheeren et al., 2014).

The Brazilian version of the Conflict Resolution Behavior Questionnaire (CRBQ; Rubenstein & Feldman, 1993, adapted by Delatorre & Wagner, 2015) was used to evaluate how often certain behavior is used in conflict resolution. This adapted version contains 21 items, measured in a Likert scale of five points, ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Scale items are distributed in three subscales: attack, composed of seven items; compromise, consisting of six items; and avoidance, composed of eight items. The score is obtained by averaging the items in each subscale. Attack refers to physical and verbal attacks towards the spouse. Examples of items in this subscale are “really get mad and start yelling,” “say or do something to hurt the other’s feelings,” and “get sarcastic.” Avoidance refers to withdrawal from conflict or keeping feelings to oneself, measured by items such as “clam up and hold my feeling inside,” “get cool and distant or give the other the cold shoulder,” and “try to avoid talking about it.” Finally, compromise covers negotiation, joint discussion of problems and agreement. Examples of items in this subscale are “try to work out a compromise,” “listen to what the other says and try to understand,” and “try to reason” (Rubenstein & Feldman, 1993). Cronbach’s alpha for attack, compromise, and avoidance in the original scale study were .78, .77, and .73, respectively (Rubenstein & Feldman, 1993), and .74, .79, and .69 in this study.

The Brazilian version of the Golombok Rust Inventory of Marital State (GRIMS; Rust, Bennun, Crowe, & Golombok, 1986, adapted by Falcke, 2003) was used to evaluate relationship quality, considering aspects such as satisfaction, communication, shared interests, trust and respect between spouses. The scale consists of 28 items measured in a Likert scale varying from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 3 (*strongly agree*), in which 14 items have reversed scores. The total score is calculated by adding up the items and, the higher the score, the greater the relationship

problems. Cronbach's alpha obtained by Rust et al. (1986) was .92 for men and .90 for women. In this study, Cronbach's alpha for GRIMS was .88.

Procedures

Participants were recruited in schools and institutions providing assistance to families, such as churches, health facilities, and social services. Individuals who agreed to participate in the study were invited to a meeting in which the research was explained, the Consent Form was read and signed, and the questionnaires were administered. Data collection occurred collectively, in small groups, in contexts such as schools and churches. In other contexts, such as participants' homes, and in health and social assistance services, data collection was carried out individually. It is noteworthy that participants from such services were recruited by convenience, and are not characterized as clinical population. The spouses answered the questionnaire separately, in order to ensure that one would not know the answers of the other. The instruments were stored in an envelope, which was sealed in front of the participant, in order to guarantee the confidentiality of data. Ethical procedures regarding research with human beings were followed, according to Resolution 196/96 of the Brazilian Ministry of Health. This research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul.

Data Analysis

First, a Latent Profile Analysis (LPA) was performed, in order to classify participants regarding their resolution of relationship conflicts. LPA is a measurement model aimed at identifying the smallest number of latent profiles describing a set of continuous observed variables, called indicators, through multivariate regressions (Muthén & Muthén, 1998-2012). This technique has some advantages over approaches like cluster analysis, since LPA provides a goodness of fit index and estimated probabilities for group membership (Honkaniemi, Feldt, Metsäpelto, & Tolvanen, 2013).

The indicators used in this analysis were the participants' means in each of the three CRBQ subscales. The estimation method for model parameters was the maximum likelihood with robust standard errors (MLR). Several criteria were used to determine the number of profiles and evaluate the quality of the resulting classification: entropy, log-likelihood, Akaike Information Criterion (AIC), Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), and Lo-Mendel-Rubin Likelihood Ratio Test (LMR-LRT). Entropy evaluates the quality of resulting classification, based on probabilities of profile membership for each individual. Entropy values range from 0 to 1, wherein the larger the value, the better classification of individuals. The minimum recommended value for the solution to be valid is .70. In turn, in the log-likelihood, the AIC, and the BIC are measures used to compare models with different numbers of latent profiles, in which the lower the values, the better the solution. LMR-LRT is also used to compare models with different numbers of latent profiles, in which non-significant p -values ($p < .05$) indicate that a model with one less profile is a more parsimonious solution (Honkaniemi et al., 2013). Theoretical interpretability was also taken into account when selecting the best fitting model.

After determining the profiles, analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted to test the differences in the conflict resolution strategies across profiles, in which the four profiles were the fixed factors and the strategies were the dependent variables. Then, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed in order to verify whether there was a difference among groups in terms of relationship quality and sociodemographic data. The profiles were the fixed factors and the dependent variables were age (in years), relationship duration (in months), age at the beginning of the relationship (in years), age and relationship duration at the birth of the first child (in years), and hours worked per day. Partial eta squared (η^2), which is the proportion of explained variance by one variable, excluding the variance explained by other variables, was used as a measure of effect

size. The assumption of homogeneity of variances across groups was met. Post hoc analyses, using Games-Howell test, were performed to compare the profiles with each other. Hedges' *g* was calculated as a measure of effect size for post hoc pair comparisons, according to the procedures recommended by Lakens (2013).

Finally, a chi-square test was used to investigate differences among profiles in terms of categorical sociodemographic variables. The following variables were included in this analysis: sex, area of residence (metropolitan or nonmetropolitan), relationship status (marriage or cohabitation), religious practice (none, low, moderate, high), work outside home (yes or no), children (yes or no), cohabitating children (yes or no), premarital child (yes or no), education (elementary or middle school, high school, incomplete post-secondary education, undergraduate degree, graduate degree), and income (no income, 1 to 3 minimum wages, 4 to 6 minimum wages, 7 or more minimum wages).

Results

Five models were estimated with LPA. In this analysis, population latent profiles (modeled), explain the variability of the answers of behavior indicators. Thus, the model adjustment is tested. The model with four profiles was selected based on the comparison of the fit indices (Table 2).

In Table 2, AIC, BIC, and LMR-LRT indices decrease in each increase in the number of profiles, while entropy increases until Model 4, decreasing at Model 5. Even that entropy increases at Model 6, LMR-LRT shows no statistically significant difference between Models 5 and 6. Models 4 and 5 present statistically significant difference, however, the entropy falls below 0.70 in Model 5. Thus, taking the indices as a whole into account, the model with 4 profiles was considered to have the best fit to the data, as it presents good results across all indices and is theoretically interpretable. In Table 3, the means for the conflict resolution strategies are shown for each profile.

Table 3 shows that Profile 1 had the lowest indices for all conflict resolution strategies. Once the use of all strategies was infrequent, this profile was named Low Conflict/Withdrawal. This could mean that these spouses have low levels of conflict, or that they withdraw when presented with situations with potential for conflict. This profile partially resembles Gottman's (1993) Avoider.

Profile 2 showed the highest compromise level and low levels of attack (no significant difference compared to the previous profile) and avoidance. Thus, it was named Validator, based on Gottman's typology (1993). According to Gottman, this type of couple usually solves conflicts calmly, in a validating and cooperative way, with low levels of aggressive and evasive behaviors.

Table 2
Fit Indices of Latent Profile Analysis by Number of Profiles Tested

Profile number	Entropy	Log-likelihood	AIC	BIC	LMR-LRT	Profile size n(%)			
2	.57	-4099.89	8219.79	8272.92	485.90*	862 (57)	638 (43)		
3	.70	-4007.66	8043.32	8117.70	184.47*	751 (50)	672 (45)	77 (5)	
4	.75	-3963.46	7962.92	8058.56	88.39*	45 (3)	633 (42)	80 (5)	742 (50)
5	.67	-3931.83	7907.66	8024.55	63.26*	52 (4)	52 (4)	635 (42)	329 (22) 432 (28)
6	.74	-3914.69	7881.38	8019.52	34.28	16 (1)	56 (4)	409 (27)	589 (39) 350 (24) 80 (5)

Note: **p*<.01

Table 3
Conflict Resolution Strategies Means for the Total Sample and by Profile

		Attack M (SD)			Compromise M (SD)			Avoidance M (SD)		
General sample		1.88 (0.59)			3.67 (0.72)			2.32 (0.60)		
Profile 1		1.39 (0.27)			2.27 (0.42)			1.75 (0.40)		
Profile 2		1.44 (0.31)			4.20 (0.50)			1.98 (0.48)		
Profile 3		3.29 (0.40)			2.83 (0.61)			2.82 (0.58)		
Profile 4		2.13 (0.37)			3.39 (0.53)			2.62 (0.48)		
Difference among profiles		$F(3, 1496)=944.06^*$			$F(3, 1496)=461.33^*$			$F(3, 1496)=269.19^*$		
Profiles (pair comparisons)		Mean diff CI 95%	g	CI	Mean diff CI 95%	g	CI	Mean diff CI 95%	g	CI
Profile 1	2	-.049 [-.16, .06]	0.16	.55	-1.93** [-2.10, -1.75]	3.86	.99	-0.19* [-0.36, -0.02]	0.40	.62
	3	-1.90** [-2.06, -1.74]	5.28	.95	-.56** [-0.80, -.032]	1.02	.78	-1.07** [-1.31, -0.84]	2.03	.93
	4	-.74** [-0.84, -0.62]	2.01	.95	-1.12** [-1.29, -0.95]	2.11	.95	-0.87** [-1.03, -0.70]	1.82	.92
Profile 2	3	-1.85** [-1.96, -1.74]	5.75	.99	1.36** [1.18, 1.55]	2.64	.96	-0.88** [-1.06, -0.70]	1.78	.88
	4	-.69** [-0.73, -0.64]	2.00	.92	.81** [0.74, 0.88]	1.55	.86	-0.67** [-0.74, -0.61]	1.40	.84
Profile 3	4	1.16** [1.04, 1.28]	3.11	.98	-.056** [-0.74, -0.37]	1.03	.75	0.21* [0.03, 0.38]	0.42	.61

Note: * $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$

g=Hedges' g, CI=measure of effect size that indicates the chance that for a randomly selected pair of individuals the score of a person from Profile I is different than the score of a person from Profile J.

In contrast, Profile 3 had the highest level of attack and avoidance behaviors, and a low level of compromise. This profile was named Hostile, characterized by unstable relationships, in which the partners use attack and defensive behaviors during conflicts (Gottman, 1993).

Finally, Profile 4 had a high level of compromise, attack, and avoidance when compared to the other profiles. Because of the high level of positive and also negative behaviors, these participants were named Volatile, which tends to solve conflicts intensely, both with regard to positive and negative aspects (Gottman, 1993).

Next, mean differences in profiles were analyzed. A significant multivariate effect was found, Wilks' $\Lambda = .74$, $F(15, 2523.55) = 19.66$, $p < .001$, partial $\eta^2 = .10$. The results are shown in Table 4.

All variables analyzed, except for the length of relationship at the birth of the first child and labor hours per day, showed significant differences among profiles. Relationship quality was the most differing variable, and also had the largest effects sizes. Only Low Conflict/Withdrawal and Volatile profiles did not differ in relationship quality. The age of spouses in the Volatile profile was higher than in the Hostile, and the age at the beginning of the relationship was higher for Validators comparing to Volatiles. The age at the birth of the first child was also higher for Validators than for Hostiles. Finally, relationship length was longer for Volatiles, compared to Validators and Hostiles. Table 5 shows chi-square analysis for sociodemographic variables according to each profile.

Table 4
MANOVA of Relationship and Work Variables, for Conflict Resolution Profile

	Relationship quality		Age		Relationship length		Age beginning relations.		Age at first child		Rel. length at first child		Labor hours/day	
	M (SD)	g	M (SD)	g	M (SD)	g	M (SD)	g	M (SD)	g	M (SD)	g	M (SD)	g
Low Conflict/Withdrawal	32.93 (8.8)		44.25 (13.7)		243.27 (149.9)		24.39 (5.1)		26.97 (6.6)		2.99 (4.6)		9.67 (3.0)	
Validator	22.84 (9.4)		40.95 (11.2)		179.85 (126.1)		26.16 (7.5)		27.80 (6.0)		1.40 (6.9)		8.61 (2.1)	
Hostile	39.05 (11.4)		35.80 (10.6)		148.16 (105.3)		24.03 (7.0)		24.69 (6.6)		0.50 (5.6)		8.03 (2.1)	
Volatile	32.40 (9.1)		41.22 (10.7)		198.89 (122.3)		24.66 (6.2)		26.99 (5.6)		2.29 (6.1)		8.67 (2.2)	
F	92.21***		3.86**		5.55**		4.85**		4.95**		2.83*		2.06	
df	3		3		3		3		3		3		3	
partial η²	0.232		.012		.018		0.016		0.016		0.009		.007	
Profiles (pair comparisons)	Mean diff	g	Mean diff	g	Mean diff	g	Mean diff	g	Mean diff	g	Mean diff	g	Mean diff	g
	ci	ci	ci	ci	ci	ci	ci	ci	ci	ci	ci	ci	ci	ci
	95%	95%	95%	95%	95%	95%	95%	95%	95%	95%	95%	95%	95%	95%
LC/W	9.80***	1.07	2.51	0.78	37.62	0.63	-0.63	0.24	0.99	0.58	1.62	0.58	1.02	0.49
	[4.22, 15.17]		[-2.79, 7.81]		[-24.08, 99.32]		[-4.44, 3.18]		[-2.30, 4.29]		[-1.98, 5.23]		[-0.27, 2.30]	
Hos	-7.90**	0.57	6.62*	0.66	62.22	0.78	1.44	0.06	4.10*	0.52	2.67	0.63	1.40	0.67
	[-14.34, -1.45]		[0.37, 12.86]		[-10.48, 134.92]		[-3.05, 5.92]		[0.21, 7.98]		[-1.58, 6.91]		[-0.12, 2.91]	
Vol	0.66	0.06	2.23	0.52	14.67	0.59	1.01	0.85	1.69	0.74	0.67	0.54	0.94	0.45
	[-4.79, 6.10]		[-3.04, 7.51]		[-46.71, 76.05]		[-2.78, 4.80]		[-1.60, 4.97]		[-2.91, 4.26]		[-0.33, 2.22]	
Val	-17.59***	1.68	4.11*	0.86	24.60	0.25	2.06	0.29	3.11*	0.58	1.04	0.64	0.38	0.28
	[-21.45, -13.73]		[0.38, 7.85]		[-18.90, 68.10]		[-0.62, 4.75]		[0.78, 5.43]		[-1.50, 3.59]		[-0.53, 1.28]	
Vol	-9.04***	1.03	-0.27	0.77	-22.95*	0.15	1.64*	0.22	0.69	0.56	-0.95	0.14	-0.7	0.03
	[-10.76, -7.32]		[-1.94, 1.39]		[-42.32, -3.57]		[0.44, 2.84]		[-0.34, 1.73]		[-2.08, 0.18]		[-0.48, 0.33]	
Hos	8.55***	0.71	-4.39*	0.68	-47.55*	0.42	-0.42	0.10	-2.42*	0.53	-1.99	0.30	-4.45	0.29
	[4.73, 12.37]		[-8.08, -0.69]		[-90.60, -4.50]		[-3.08, 2.23]		[-4.72, -0.11]		[-4.51, 0.53]		[-1.35, 0.44]	

Note: *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

g = Hedges' g, ci=measure of effect size that indicates the chance that for a randomly selected pair of individuals the score of a person from Profile I is different than the score of a person from Profile J.

Table 5
Chi-Square of Sociodemographic Variables According to Conflict Resolution Profiles

	Low Conflict/ Withdrawal n (%)	Validator n (%)	Hostile n (%)	Volatile n (%)	$\chi^2(df)$	p	Cramer's v
Sex	Male	359 (47.9)*	22 (2.9)#	345 (46.0)#	$\chi^2(3)=31.46$	>.001	.14
	Female	21 (2.8)	274 (36.5)#	397 (52.9)*			
Region	Metropolitan	17 (2.0)#	332 (39.3)#	451 (53.4)*	$\chi^2(3)=16.15$.001	.10
	Nonmetropolitan	28 (4.3)*	301 (46.0)*	291 (44.4)#			
Relationship status	Married	30 (2.9)	444 (42.9)	520 (50.3)	$\chi^2(3)=14.48$.002	.10
	Cohabiting	15 (3.2)	188 (40.4)	222 (47.7)			
Religious practice	None	5 (3.4)	57 (38.8)	74 (50.3)	$\chi^2(9)=24.97$.003	.08
	Low	13 (2.6)	175 (35.4)#	279 (56.4)*			
	Moderate	16 (3.0)	247 (45.8)*	244 (45.3)#			
	High	10 (3.6)	136 (49.6)*	120 (43.8)#			
Work outside home	Yes	32 (2.7)	499 (41.9)	65 (5.5)	$\chi^2(3)=2.49$.477	.04
	No	12 (42.0)	126 (43.6)	138 (47.8)			
Children	Yes	37 (3.1)	485 (41.0)	602 (50.9)	$\chi^2(3)=6.43$.09	.06
	No	8 (2.5)	148 (46.5)	140 (44.0)			
Cohabiting children	Yes	28 (2.7)	425 (40.9)	57 (5.5)	$\chi^2(3)=9.23$.026	.09
	No	9 (6.1)	61 (41.2)	76 (51.4)			
Premarital children	Yes	3 (1.7)	76 (43.7)	14 (8.0)	$\chi^2(3)=6.53$.089	.08
	No	30 (3.2)	380 (40.2)	41 (4.3)			
Education	Elem/Middle	17 (5.0)	139 (40.5)	25 (7.3)	$\chi^2(12)=28.50$.005	.08
	High school	15 (4.4)	158 (46.5)	19 (5.6)			
	Post second. (incomplete)	3 (1.2)	99 (39.8)	16 (6.4)			
	Undergrad. degree	6 (2.1)	121 (41.4)	10 (3.4)			
Income	Graduate degree	2 (0.7)	116 (42.8)	10 (3.7)	$\chi^2(9)=24.36$.004	.07
	No income	3 (2.2)	53 (39.0)	6 (4.4)			
	1 to 3 m.w.	27 (4.2)*	264 (41.4)	49 (7.7)*			
	4 to 6 m.w.	8 (2.3)	155 (45.5)	14 (4.1)			
7 or more m.w.	4 (1.1#)	143 (40.7)	11 (3.1#)	193 (55.0)*			

Note: * = presence of more cases than expected according to the null hypothesis; # = less cases than expected according to the null hypothesis. Proportional differences remain significant after level a correction with Bonferroni ($\alpha=.004$).

Table 5 shows that men were classified with greater frequency in the Validator profile, while more women were classified in Hostile and Volatile profiles, compared to what would be expected if there were no differences between groups. With regard to religion, there were more participants with low religious practice in Volatile profile, while a larger number of participants who considered themselves practitioners of any religion were identified as Validators. Regarding the region of residence, there were more participants in the metropolitan area in the Volatile profile, and more nonmetropolitan respondents in the Low Conflict/Withdrawal and the Validator profiles. Relationship status had an effect only for Hostiles so that more cohabitating participants were classified in this profile, compared to the others. Finally, there were more respondents with an income between one and three minimum wages in Low Conflict/Withdrawal and Hostile profiles, and more participants who earned seven or more minimum wages in Volatile profile.

Discussion

Conflict resolution is an important component of relationship dynamics, and the abilities of accommodation and flexibility are fundamental for the maintenance of relationship health. Thus, this study aimed to identify conflict resolution profiles based on strategies used by partners to solve disagreements. Then, the association between these profiles and relationship quality was investigated.

Conflict Resolution Profiles

Four conflict resolution profiles were identified, partially based on Gottman's typology: Low Conflict/Withdrawal, Validator, Hostile, and Volatile. In Gottman's typology, avoidant couples had the lowest indices in positive and negative interactions when compared to the other types. Avoider couples were higher than the others only in withdrawal. However, in this study participants in this profile had low levels in all conflict resolution strategies. It is possible

that the method for data collection explains that difference. Gottman used observational data and, thus, withdrawal and evasive behaviors could be observed directly in couples' interaction. In this study, which used self-reported data, participants who usually avoid conflicts may have minimized their occurrence, reporting low frequency for all conflict resolution strategies.

The distribution of spouses across profiles was consistent with previous qualitative studies addressing conflict resolution strategies in Brazil. These studies show that Brazilian couples tend to manage disagreements in a friendly or indirect way, but, at the same time, present high-intensity emotions (Costa & Mosmann 2015; Garcia & Tassara, 2001). Thus, it is not surprising that the majority of spouses was classified either in the Volatile or in the Validator profiles.

Conflict Resolution Profiles and Marital Quality

According to the balance theory of marriage, the three stable subtypes, Avoider, Validator and Volatile, have a similar probability to maintain relationship stability (Gottman & Notarius, 2000). However, the associations found between the profiles and relationship quality suggest a slightly different scenario. Validator and Hostile profiles are clearly different from the others concerning relationship quality. On one hand, Validators had better relationship quality and Hostiles had more relationship problems. On the other hand, Low Conflict/Withdrawal and Volatile profiles did not show significant differences between them concerning relationship quality, suggesting that these profiles are intermediates with regard to relationship quality.

In fact, there is evidence that the negative effect of conflict avoidance may be attenuated by personal characteristics and by the type of motivation to adopt this strategy (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004) or by usual demonstration of positive affect between spouses (Caughlin & Houston, 2002). However, frequent avoidance of conflict prevents effective

resolution, resulting in accumulated negative affect, which tends to return in future disagreements (Overall et al., 2009). Thus, although conflict avoidance is not always negative, using avoidance as the main strategy brings intermediate results concerning relationship quality.

The attack strategy, which was above the overall mean for Volatiles, combined with intermediate levels of compromise and avoidance, may be functional in some situations. A study carried out by Gottman and Krokoff (1989) showed that conflict involvement, even in a negative way, can be functional in the long-term. Subsequent studies showed that this effect is associated with situations in which there are severe relationship problems (McNulty & Russell, 2010; Overall & McNulty, 2017) and in which there is a direct confrontation between spouses (Overall et al., 2009). In the same direction, the amount of interaction and confrontation reported by Volatile participants seem to be beneficial at some level since they had an average level of relationship quality. However, the specific paths through which the use of these strategies contributed to the relationship quality in this sample group should be further investigated.

Thus, the idea that negativity is only a problem when not balanced with positive affect and behavior, and that avoidance is only dysfunctional at very high levels (Gottman, 1993) was partially supported by the results. Although Low Conflict/Withdrawal and Volatile profiles had average relationship quality, Validator profile was associated with greater relationship quality when compared to all other profiles. It is possible that, because Low Conflict/Withdrawal and Volatile profiles depend on a balance between positive and negative behaviors, the results associated with them rely more on the context and other aspects concerning the relationship. At the other extreme, the Hostile profile is associated with more damage in the relationship. This result is consistent with the Balance Theory of Marriage, because the destructive behavior is not balanced with positive interactions.

Conflict Resolution Profiles and Sociodemographic Data

The fact that participants classified as Volatile were younger at the beginning of the relationship compared to the Validators, for example, may be due to the developmental phase of these individuals. In fact, there is evidence that the use of destructive strategies decreases over time (Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012). Initiating a relationship in a less mature phase may increase the difficulty to manage negativity and modify dysfunctional behaviors, given that young people tend to have less ability to regulate emotions, and experience more negative emotions compared to older people (Carstensen et al., 2000). The Volatile profile was also associated with individuals with low religious practice, metropolitan residents, and with high income. Low religious involvement may be related to the average levels of attack found in this profile. The opposite occurred in the Validator profile, which was associated with high religious practice. Other studies also found a connection between religious practice and constructive resolution of marital problems (Kusner et al., 2014; Rauer & Volling, 2015) or lower frequency of conflict (Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012). These results are probably associated with the fact that spouses who consider marriage as sacred tend to make stronger efforts to maintain positive behavior and avoid destructive interaction (Kusner et al., 2014). However, further research is needed to confirm this hypothesis.

Similarly, living in a metropolitan area usually implies being in larger cities, where the sense of community tends to be lower. On the one hand, the community can be a source of support for the couple, which may explain the association of Validator profile with nonmetropolitan residents. On the other hand, these associations perhaps reflect the fact that belonging to a strong community may increase the exposure to peer judgment. In addition, the accelerated pace of big cities, compared to the calmer life in smaller cities, can contribute to a more aggressive and immediate-result conflict resolution style, such as the Volatile profile. In

fact, there is evidence that the association between urbanization and low relationship quality is moderated by social integration level so that it exists only when there is low social integration (Barton, Futris, & Nielsen, 2014). We could not find a theoretical explanation for the association between income and Volatiles.

With regard to the Hostile profile, it is possible that the association with cohabitation is related to the lack of ritualization and formalization of the union, which may lead to insecurity and lack of commitment, resulting in short-term and less constructive conflict resolution strategies. However, levels of commitment and relationship stability were not investigated in this study and thus, it is not possible to confirm these associations. This profile was also associated with women, while men were associated with the Validator profile. Some studies show that women tend to be more involved in the conflict, while men use more avoiding and defensive strategies (Wheeler et al., 2010). Men also tend to evaluate their relationships more positively than women, especially in self-report measures (Boerner, Jopp, Carr, Sosinsky, & Kim, 2014). However, this does not explain why men were more frequently associated with a positive profile and, women, with a negative profile. Further studies are needed to clarify these results. Understanding the variables related to the Hostile profile is fundamental, once high levels of destructive strategies, especially when not balance with positive behaviors, may escalate to marital violence (Bonache et al., 2019; Salazar, 2015).

Implications for Research and Practice

The findings in this study have some implications for couple's therapy and research. Analysis of resolution profiles associated with relationship quality shows that positive interactions based on listening, validation, cooperation, and negotiation, along with a low frequency of hostile and evasive behaviors, may serve as a model because they are associated with high relationship quality. However, therapists must recognize that not all

couples function in the same way. Other models of relationship functioning, in which there is less confrontation or in which interactions are emotionally intense, for instance, may be reinforced without harm for the relationship, depending on individual, couple, and context characteristics. In such cases, it is possible that the balance between positive and negative aspects is more tenuous, and therefore, further research is needed to investigate under what conditions this balance is maintained, and what other variables are involved in this process.

Limitations and Future Directions

Some limitations can be identified in this study. The fact that the data was collected only in one Brazilian state does not allow generalization of results. Although the identified profiles partially replicated Gottman's (1993) findings, samples from other regions of the country should be analyzed to verify if the results are maintained. Additionally, self-report data has some limitations, such as the gender bias and the fact that couples who avoid disagreements or minimize its impact on the relationship may report lower conflict rates than what actually occurs.

It is also worth noting that the distribution of participants in the profiles may have influenced the results, since 92% of the entire sample was comprised in the Validator and Volatile profiles. Only 3% of respondents were classified in the Low Conflict/Withdrawal profile, raising the question about whether only a small proportion of spouses had low frequency or avoidance of conflicts, or whether this result was due to some weakness in the measuring instrument or to some response bias. In contrast, it seems reasonable that only 5% of the sample was classified as Hostile, given that the participants were not part of a clinical sample. Finally, because interaction profiles are formed by relationship elements, and also by spouses' personal characteristics, we suggest further studies to investigate the role of individual variables, such as personality in conflict resolution and relationship quality.

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