

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# THE READINESS OF A YOUNG COUPLE TO ADOPT A CONSTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR DURING CONFLICT AS A FACTOR OF MENTAL HEALTH AND MARITAL SATISFACTION

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Liudmila M. Omelchenko<sup>1</sup>, Lidiya G. Chorna<sup>2</sup>, Nataliya Dyshlova<sup>2</sup>, Anna Bezhnar<sup>3</sup>, Olha T. Pletka<sup>2</sup>, Tetiana M. Vakulich<sup>4</sup>, Giuseppina Ancona<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF LIFE AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE OF UKRAINE, KYIV, UKRAINE

<sup>2</sup>INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY NATIONAL ACADEMY OF EDUCATIONAL SCIENCES OF UKRAINE, KYIV, UKRAINE

<sup>3</sup>TARAS SHEVCHENKO NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF KYIV, KYIV, UKRAINE

<sup>4</sup>INTERREGIONAL ACADEMY OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT, KYIV, UKRAINE

<sup>5</sup>AZIENDA SANITARIA PROVINCIALE DI AGRIGENTO: AGRIGENTO, SICILIA, ITALY

## ABSTRACT

**The aim:** To study the readiness of young couples to adopt a constructive behavior during conflict as a factor of mental health and marital satisfaction.

**Materials and methods:** The study used a descriptive cross-sectional plan. The sample comprised 216 young families (n = 432 persons), and mixed methods design was used. The respondents were asked to evaluate the level of marital satisfaction, family value coherence, and anxiety to make a self-assessment of the level of conflict in their own family.

**Results:** The participants showed a fairly high degree of marital dissatisfaction, as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic. The members of young dysfunctional families resorted to destructive behavior during conflicts, indicating the deteriorating mental health in these families. The stability of relationship between spouses is founded in their willingness to adopt a constructive behavior during conflict.

**Conclusions:** The study helps understand the importance of the ability to adopt a constructive behavior during conflict in the context of family mental health and marital satisfaction. The findings of this study can serve as the basis for framing counseling programs for young families.

**KEY WORDS:** young family, mental health, willingness to behave constructively during conflict, marital satisfaction, COVID-19

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite a significant amount of research concerning the family mental health, the COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated the relevance of this topic. The phenomenon of conflict negatively affects young families, particularly by deteriorating mental health and reducing marital satisfaction. An important factor of family mental well-being and a stable marriage is the willingness of spouses to behave constructively during conflict.

## MENTAL HEALTH AND MARITAL SATISFACTION OF SPOUSES

In the modern scientific paradigm, the concept of “mental health” is interpreted as a state of well-being in which everyone can realize their potential, cope with life stresses, work productively and effectively, and contribute to the life of their community [1]. Accordingly, mentally healthy marital relations contribute to harmonious relations between husband and wife, which in turn leads to the satisfaction of the actual needs of the spouses and determination of their personal development and social activity. Such rela-

tionships are quite resourceful, characterized by resistance to stressors [2], and an indicator of the marriage quality. Conversely, mentally unhealthy marriages become a source of personal trauma. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of forced restrictive measures, which made it impossible to exercise personal freedom to a large extent, caused the spread of emotional stress [3]. Moreover, the increased intensity of family communication and uneven distribution of family responsibilities between spouses increased their level of anxiety and provoked the destructive conflicts. All this confirmed the inability of young family members to cope with life stress, which is a sign of maladaptation of spouses at different levels of interaction [4]. This situation made it impossible for the spouses to realize their need for love, acceptance, support, communication, and openness. In addition, personal growth, important for modern marriage, was hindered [5], and the possibility of establishing mutual understanding was destroyed. This led to a deterioration in mental health and, therefore, a decrease in marital satisfaction. In such circumstance, timely psychological treatment can stabilize the relationship of spouses and provide constructive behavioral strategies to handle

conflict [6, 7]. Moreover, it can also prevent aggressiveness in the family [8], mental illness, alcohol abuse, suicide, and social outsidership, which in turn reduce social payments and benefits.

## THE READINESS OF YOUNG COUPLES TO ADOPT CONSTRUCTIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Marital relations are the basis of marital stability in the current situation of social development of the family as a small group [9]. Most scientists are inclined to believe that one of the factors of family maladaptation is the inability to resolve marital conflicts constructively [10], which is especially acute for the young families [11]. The ways of overcoming the conflicts are formed at the stage of marital adaptation [12]. In addition, the conflict cannot be prevented, as it exists as a dialectical opposite of consensus, and the main way to resolve it is a settlement [13, 14]. Thus, an important contributor of a mentally healthy relationship is the willingness of young couples to behave constructively during conflict. From the standpoint of a personal approach, psychological readiness is the result of preparedness for a certain activity and leads to stable, multifaceted, and hierarchical formation of personality [15]. Psychological readiness for constructive behavior in conflict is a personal formation, which is manifested in the ability of young couples to resolve conflicts constructively and predict the possible emergence of contradictions of living together [16]. Its structure includes the following components: motivational and value-based (motives, expectations, claims, values of family life), cognitive (system of knowledge and ideas about conflict), emotional-regulatory (behavioral tactics, self-regulation, and mental state) [17].

All this gives solid ground to highlight the importance of scientific research on the readiness of young couples to adopt constructive behavior during conflict. Many scholars have focused on studying the impact of conflicts on the stability of marriages [9], personality traits that cause conflicts [14], and the reasons for conflicts in young families [18]. We focused on the impact of young couples' willingness to behave constructively during conflict on marital satisfaction and family mental health.

## THE AIM

The purpose of this article is to study the readiness of young couples to adopt a constructive behavior during conflict as a factor of mental health and marital satisfaction.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

The descriptive cross-sectional study plan was used to explore the readiness of young couples to adopt a constructive interaction. The sample consisted of 216 young families (432 individuals), randomly selected from 6 regions of Ukraine. Such quantitative and regional selection provided an opportunity to represent young families in Ukraine.

The design of mixed methods was applied. The study was conducted in three stages (January–February 2020).

The following data were collected during the study: a) the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents and b) peculiarities of mental health and marital satisfaction of young families.

## DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

The first part of the survey involved collecting the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents by means of a questionnaire consisting of 15 questions concerning the residence, age, gender, marital experience, presence/absence of children, level of education, life situation, employment, etc.

In the second part of the survey, using the standardized methods, participants were questioned regarding a) satisfaction with marriage (the questionnaire by Stolín, Romanova, and Butenko: a one-dimensional scale containing 24 statements about different areas of family life, with each statement offering three options for answer); b) family value coherence (Volkova's questionnaire: 2 subtests [options for women and men], consisting of 36 statements concerning family values, expectations, claims of spouses, and their ideas about family roles); and c) level of anxiety (the Spielberger–Hanin questionnaire: self-assessment scale, consisting of 40 statements divided into 2 blocks, to determine situational and personal anxiety).

In the third stage of survey, participants were asked for a self-assessment of the level of conflict in their family using the nominative scale. Following was the question: "How often do you have conflicts?" Answers were to be given on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 to 4 (4 = very often, 3 = often, 2 = rarely, and 1 = sometimes).

## DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis was performed using SPSS statistical software (Armonk, NY: IBM). Since the questionnaires were a combination of categorical and nominal data, the descriptive statistics, the analysis of variance, and the correlation analysis were used in accordance with the specifics of data. The correlation analysis revealed the relationship between marital satisfaction and its determining factors.

## RESULTS

Results obtained can be divided into following categories: the key socio-demographic characteristics of the sample; marital satisfaction and subjective perception of the conflict level; the indicators of the level of anxiety of spouses, as well as the correlation between these characteristics; spouses' behavioral strategies in conflicts; the potential areas of conflict during interaction of spouses; and the level of family values coherence.

## SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

The sample consisted of 216 young families (432 individuals) aged 18 to 30 years, with an average of 25 years (SD =

2.53). In terms of gender, the sample had 50% women and 50% men. The participants are representatives of different regions of Ukraine (Kyiv, Cherkasy, Odesa, Vinnytsia, Kharkiv, Zhytomyr cities and Kyiv, Zhytomyr, Cherkasy, Kharkiv regions). Among the families, 42% reside in large cities, 39% in towns and urban-type settlements, and 19% in villages.

### INDICATORS THAT REFLECT THE WILLINGNESS OF YOUNG COUPLES TO BEHAVE CONSTRUCTIVELY DURING CONFLICT

The study of the level of marital satisfaction and the subjective perception of spouses concerning the level of conflict in their interaction made it possible to identify the results presented in Table I.

The indicators of variance on the scale “marriage satisfaction”: men = 20.07 (SD = 4.48); women = 20.88 (SD = 4.57).

Statistical study of the relationship among the values gave ground for establishing the correlation coefficient:  $r = 0.275$  ( $p \leq 0.01$ ).

The distribution of dominant behavioral strategies adopted by spouses during conflict is presented in Table II.

The role expectations study helped rank the potential areas of conflict during interaction of spouses. Following are the areas in the order of their ranks, starting with highest-ranked category: household: 56% (121 families); educational: 51% (110 families); social activity: 50.4% (109 families); emotional and psychotherapeutic: 39% (84 families), personal: 33% (71 families), external attractiveness: 9% (20 families); and intimate and sexual: 5% (10 families). Here, it must be noted that the percentages do not add up to 100, since each family had several conflicting areas (difference between the scales of family values of husband and wife  $> 3$ ).

The results of the study of personal and situational anxiety level are presented in Table III.

By applying the correlation analysis between the values of “marriage satisfaction” and “personal anxiety,” the following indicators were obtained: men:  $r = 0.502$  ( $p \leq 0.01$ ); women:  $r = 0.523$  ( $p \leq 0.01$ ). Moreover, between the values of “marriage satisfaction” and “situational anxiety,” following indicators were obtained: men:  $r = 0.537$  ( $p \leq 0.01$ ); women:  $r = 0.592$  ( $p \leq 0.01$ ).

### DISCUSSION

This study helped identify the level of satisfaction between spouses in the sample. Since the values of the variance of men and women participants showed non-significant statistical difference, the level of family satisfaction was determined by the arithmetic mean. The obtained data gave ground to conclude that more than one third of families (82;37.9%) are satisfied with family life; they were classified as “functional families” (absolutely functional:  $M = 45$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ; functional:  $M = 35$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ; probably functional:  $M = 30$ ;  $SD = 0.88$ ). In contrast, 106 families (49.1%) had a low level of marital satisfaction; these were classified as dysfunctional (absolutely dysfunctional:

$M = 7$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ; dysfunctional:  $M = 19$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ; probably dysfunctional:  $M = 24$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ). Further, 28 families were classified as transitional ( $M = 27$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ). A relatively high level of dissatisfaction with marriage confirmed our assumption that the phenomenon of the COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the mental health of young families; further, the interaction of spouses suffered from the destruction of trusting and harmonious relationships, provoking a traumatic situation. Our results were in agreement with the findings of other researchers on the detrimental effects of emotional stress on the interaction of spouses at the beginning of family development [2, 11].

Measuring the subjective assessment of the level of conflict in young families showed a high intensity of conflict between spouses. A total of 75 (35%) families identified conflict as a phenomenon that often manifests itself in their interaction and 52 (24%) claimed that “the conflicts are frequent.” Most of these families belonged to the dysfunctional category. Comparing the results, we suggested the possibility of an inverse relationship between the level of family conflict and spouses’ satisfaction with marriage. However, this hypothesis was not confirmed, since the correlation index for men was  $r = -0.201$  ( $p \leq 0.01$ ) and for women was  $r = -0.219$  ( $p \leq 0.01$ ). This data confirmed that the family conflicts perform not only a destructive but also a constructive function [19]. Consequently, it can be concluded that only the destructive behavior of one or both spouses has a negative effect on marital satisfaction, while a constructive strategy for resolving conflicts contributes to the harmonization of relationship.

The analysis of the prevalence of anxiety level among spouses gave ground to state that the level of situational anxiety of the spouses was higher than the level of personal anxiety. The total number of spouses with a high level of personal anxiety was 83 (19% of the total sample;  $M = 52$ ,  $SD = 2.01$ ), whereas 129 spouses had a high level of situational anxiety (30% of the total sample;  $M = 61$ ,  $SD = 1, 92$ ). The percentage of people with low situational anxiety was 0. These results indicate an increase of anxiety as an emotional response to the negative impact of destabilization of marital relations resulting from the spread of the COVID-19. The correlation analysis confirmed the relationship between the level of situational anxiety and satisfaction with marriage—men:  $r = 0.537$  ( $p \leq 0.01$ ); women:  $r = 0.592$  ( $p \leq 0.01$ ); a higher empirical significance was seen in this case than in the case of personal anxiety.

Our conclusions were confirmed by the results of the analysis of the propensity of spouses to a certain strategy of conflict behavior. A lot of men (69; 31.9%) and women (54; 25%) are prone to rivalry. The application of such a behavior during marital conflict caused destabilization of relations and deepened the destructive impact of the conflict on each spouse and on the family as a whole. Rivalry made it impossible to reach a compromise solution; consequently, spouses could not get together, and the other’s help was accepted only to strengthen their own position.

A quarter of men (54; 25%) and 18% (39) of women recourse to avoidance. This style of behavior contributed to

**Table I.** Distribution of grouped sampling frequency.

Nº	Family type	Marriage satisfaction			Level of conflict			
		n	%	M	1	2	3	4
1	Absolutely dysfunctional	41	19	7	-	-	13	28
2	Dysfunctional	32	14,8	19	-	-	17	15
3	Probably dysfunctional	33	15,3	24	-	4	23	6
4	Transitional	28	13	27	-	11	15	2
5	Probably functional	37	17,1	30	4	30	2	1
6	Functional	25	11,6	35	2	22	1	-
7	Absolutely functional	20	9,2	45	2	17	1	-

**Table II.** Distribution of respondents by behavioral strategies

Behavioral strategy	Men		Women	
	n	%	n	%
Rivalry	69	31.9	54	25
Adaptation	26	12	43	20
Avoidance	54	25	39	18
Compromise	46	21.2	61	28
Cooperation	21	9.9	19	9

**Table III.** Distribution of respondents by the level of anxiety percentage

Type of anxiety	Men			Women		
	Low	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate	High
Personal	12	51	37	8	48	46
Situational	2	42	56	-	27	73

the prolongation of the conflict, since avoiding the conflict does not help solve the problem, rather increases its negative impacts such as the escalation of negative emotions and reduction of the intensity of relations at all levels of interaction.

A significant percentage of women (20%; 43) and 12% (26) of men are prone to adjustment while interacting during conflict. Such a strategy determines the spontaneity of conflict resolution and makes it impossible to discuss controversial issues, to obtain information about the true attitude of husband and wife to the conflict.

More than 20% of men (21.2%) and women (61.28%) showed a tendency to compromise in a conflict situation. Their relationship is characterized by a refusal to confront, a rational analysis of the causes of the conflict situation, and a willingness to make mutual concessions and take into account the needs of the partner.

Cooperation was inherent in a limited percentage of men (21.9.9%) and women (19.9%). These individuals tend to meet the needs of both members and implement the approved agreements in marital interaction. This leads to stable marital relations.

The majority of spouses belonging to dysfunctional families are prone to rivalry; among these, 66 out of 106 are men and 55 out of 106 are women. Moreover, a significant proportion of them are prone to avoidance (26 out of 106 men and 20 out of 106 women) and accommodation (9 out

of 106 men and 28 out of 106 women). Further, only some members of this group tend to compromise (5 out of 106 men and 3 out of 106 women). Conversely, spouses from functional families often tend to compromise and cooperation in conflict. Thus, constructive behavioral strategies were inherent in spouses from functional families.

A comparative analysis of marital expectations of representatives of functional and dysfunctional families allowed us to conclude that the difference between the expectations and claims of husbands and wives in functional families was 0 in 19 of 83 families and not more than 2 in 51 of 83 families, and only 13 families reached 3 on the scale against potential conflict in the field of household, parental, and social activity categories. These results give ground for the conclusion that the spouses prone to constructive behavior during conflict are characterized by the ability to adequately assess their own demands and claims to another member of the married couple. They are characterized by high demands; responsibility concerning their own behavior, the partner's life, and the upbringing and care of children; and awareness about partial restriction of their own freedom.

In contrast, in dysfunctional families, the role expectations and demands on most scales of family values were radically opposite in 86 of 106 families, and in 20 (19%) families, they were different. This indicator shows the disagreements in the value-role sphere of spouses.

## LIMITATIONS

Our study presents the results of a survey conducted mainly with representatives of young urban families in Ukraine, since a greater number of such families suffered from the negative effects of the pandemic in comparison to the rural families. Therefore, the sample is not representative of the entire population of Ukraine.

Nevertheless, our study presents valid results, which are provided by well-reasoned methods of survey and empirical data analysis.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our study of the willingness of young couples to engage constructively during conflict helps understand the importance of this ability in the context of family mental health and marital satisfaction. We have shown that emotional stress negatively affects the interaction of spouses in the early stages of family development, leading to the destabilization of marital interaction; moreover, it becomes a source of trauma for family members. One of its factors is the destructive behavior of spouses in conflict. Further, conflicts between spouses are most often manifested in the household and educational spheres as well as in the field of social activity.

In addition, it was found that marital satisfaction is related to the husband's and wife's propensity for constructive behavioral strategies—compromise and cooperation—during conflict; the level of personal and situational anxiety of spouses; and their ability to adequately assess their own and the partner's demands, needs, and values. All these components contribute to the readiness of spouses to adopt a constructive behavior during conflict. The positive value of readiness is that the spouses gain experience in resolving the conflicts peacefully, without aggression or violence. Thus, it determines the possibility of harmonization of marital relations, which form the basis of a family's mental health. Therefore, our research will help to further enhance family psychological services.

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## ORCID and contributionship:

Liudmila M. Omelchenko: 0000-0002-9963-0306 <sup>A-D</sup>

Lidiya G. Chorna: 0000-0002-8107-7573 <sup>E,F</sup>

Nataliya Dyshlova: 0000-0002-8788-3111 <sup>E,F</sup>

Anna Bezhnar: 0000-0002-4516-352X <sup>E,F</sup>

Olha Pletka: 0000-0002-9248-246X <sup>E,F</sup>

Tetiana M. Vakulich: 0000-0002-5700-5035 <sup>E,F</sup>

Giuseppina Ancona: 0000-0003-3283-1565 <sup>E,F</sup>

## Conflict of interest:

The Authors declare no conflict of interest.

## CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

**Liudmila M. Omelchenko**

National University of Life and Environmental Science of Ukraine  
15 Heroes of Defense St., 03041 Kyiv, Ukraine  
tel: +380979418668  
e-mail: omelchenko2006@ukr.net

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