

Exploring possible differences in conflict resolution styles in romantic relationships

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Abstract

From time to time, almost everyone experiences conflict with their romantic partners. There are many different ways of dealing with this conflict, ranging from trying to see the other person's point of view and negotiating with them to acts of extreme physical violence. For some couples, conflict is often accompanied with abusive elements, such as psychological aggression and name-calling or even physical violence resulting in injury. For others, these conflict tactics are rare or non-existent.

The purpose of this study is to explore differences between ethnic groups in terms of their conflict resolution styles. A total of 386 students (including people who identify themselves as White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian) participated in this study in return for course credit. Their scores on the Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (negotiation, physical assault, psychological aggression, sexual coercion, and injury) were compared in terms of both their own behavior and their reports of their partner's behavior using a series of one-way ANOVA's.

On these ten scales, only one significant difference between the four ethnic groups was found. This difference could represent real differences in the behavior of different people or it could represent a difference in how people interpret and report their conflict resolution behaviors. In addition, because there was only one statistically significant result in a total of 10 hypothesis tests, it is possible that this result is a Type I error, and that no differences between the groups actually exist. Further research is needed to determine if this is a difference in behavior, a difference in reporting, or a Type I error. Even if this result is a Type I error, however, age, gender, and cultural differences in mores regarding the occurrence and reporting of conflict resolution strategies need to be taken into account during both relationship counseling and research. These issues are particularly important if the clients or research participants belong to different cultural or ethnic groups than the counselor or researcher, which may make it more likely that misunderstandings and misinterpretations will occur.

Introduction

No two people have identical priorities, needs, and ideas. Therefore, conflict is an inevitable occurrence in any long-term, close relationship. However, there are many different ways to resolve conflicts, and some of these methods are psychologically healthier than others. One strategy for dealing with conflict is to talk to one's partner about the area of disagreement and try to come up with a compromise. Another strategy is to try to enforce one's will upon the other person through threats and physical aggression. The goal of much marriage and family counseling, school counseling, and mediated settlements is to teach people how to use more effective and pro-social strategies of dealing with conflict.

Different people and different groups of people probably use different strategies for dealing with conflict, and stereotypes of group differences abound. However, there is little research on real differences in conflict resolution strategies. Because of this, counselors and researchers may be operating based on incorrect stereotypes when designing programs to teach conflict resolution strategies or when counseling individual clients. It is critical that counseling and research be based on true differences between groups, not incorrect stereotypes.

One key area in which there are stereotypes regarding group differences in conflict resolution strategies is ethnicity. Incorrect stereotypes might lead to unwarranted negative interpretations, inappropriate counseling methods, and poor therapeutic outcomes. Therefore, research on true group differences between different ethnic groups is very important.

Research comparing conflict resolution styles for people from different ethnic groups has been limited and has yielded conflicting results. Two studies that examined dating violence in high school students found that Blacks have a higher rate of physical violence than other ethnic groups (O'Keefe, 1997; Feldman & Gowan, 1998). However, studies that have used college students and studies that have controlled for possible confounding variables have had varied results. A study in 1991 used a national sample of college students and controlled for family income. In this study, no significant differences in conflict resolution styles were found for people of different

ethnicities (White & Koss, 1991). Another study using college students took into account a wide range of variables: church attendance, economic status, urban and rural environments, age at which participants began to date, and family environment while growing up. This study found that Whites engage in more dating violence than other groups (Lane & Gwartney-Gibbs, 1985). Thus, previous research on ethnic differences in conflict resolution styles has had conflicting results.

The purpose of this study is to examine ethnic differences in conflict resolution styles in the context of romantic relationships. Because previous research has had inconsistent findings, we made no predictions about group differences.

Method

Participants

A total of 386 undergraduate students (263 female, 123 male) completed this study in return for course credit. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 65, with a mean of 20.6. Participants identified themselves as belonging to four ethnic groups: White 66.1%; Asian 12.7%; Hispanic 11.4%; and Black 9.8%.

Measures

The Revised Conflict Tactics Scales (CTS 2; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy & Sugarman, 1996) measures different methods of dealing with conflict. It contains 78 items: 39 of these ask the participant to report on their own behavior, and another 39 ask how often their partner engaged in that behavior. These items are arranged into 10 scales: 5 for the self and 5 for the partner. The scales are Negotiation, Psychological Aggression, Physical Assault, Injury and Sexual Coercion. In this study, we asked people to report on the conflict tactics used in a current or recent romantic relationship.

Procedure

Participants completed the CTS2 along with other measures as part of a longer two-part study. The CTS2 was administered during the first session. The sessions were administered by trained research assistants using a standardized script, and were held in university classrooms and laboratories.

Results

One-way ANOVAs were used to compare the different ethnic groups on each of the 10 subscales of the CTS2. Each ANOVA used $\alpha = .05$. Only one of the 10 was statistically significant. If there was in fact no relationship between ethnicity and any of the conflict tactic scales, there is a 40 percent chance of making at least one Type I error when conducting a set of 10 such significance tests. Therefore, we cannot rule out the rather strong possibility that this one significant finding is a Type I error. Our results are therefore inconclusive.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine ethnic differences in conflict tactic styles. Of the ten comparisons made, one was statistically significant. This difference could represent a real difference between different ethnic groups, but it is also possible that this statistically significant result is a Type I error.

If a difference between the ethnic groups actually does exist in the populations we examined, these differences might be explained by participant variables other than ethnicity. As discussed earlier, previous studies have yielded conflicting results and contradictory conclusions. These varying results are probably due to differences between participants in areas other than ethnicity. These include differences in economic status, age, and family background (Lane & Gwartney-Gibbs, 1985; White & Koss, 1991). Because our study did not measure or control for these other variables, even if we had had several statistically significant results, we would not know how to attribute these differences. Further research is needed to identify the participant factors that most often affect one's choice in conflict resolution styles and to determine which of these participant factors are related to ethnicity and which are independent of it. Stereotypes of ethnic differences in conflict resolution styles abound: Additional research is needed to replace stereotypes with knowledge.

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