

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Self concept, family background, and personality characteristics as factors influencing conflict resolution strategies among couples in Ado Ekiti, Nigeria**

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**The study investigated the effect of self concept, family background and personality characteristics on conflict resolution strategies of couples in Ado-Ekiti. One hundred and seventy four married participants completed a questionnaire comprising of the Index of Self-Esteem, the Big Five Personality Inventory and the Conflict Resolution Strategy Scale. The research participants were selected in Ado-Ekiti through purposive and convenience sampling methods. Responses from the survey research were analyzed using multiple regression and independent t test statistics. Results of the study showed that self-concept, family background and sex did not individually influence couples' conflict resolution strategies. Personality characteristics had a significantly effect on conflict resolution strategies. However, the interaction of self-concept, family background, sex, and personality characteristics significantly influence couples conflict resolution strategies. Family background did not have a significant effect on self concept of couples. Results were discussed in line with previous literature and it was recommended that marital therapists and counselors should adequately assess the self concept, personality, and family background of couples before implementing therapeutic plan so as to assist them in adopting appropriate styles of resolving conflicts in marital life.**

**Key words:** Self concept, family background, personality, conflict resolution strategies, couples, Nigeria.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since antiquity, conflicts have been a major element of interpersonal relationships. In some instances, conflict has led to breakthroughs in diverse areas of human lives while at the other end; it has resulted to an irreversible breakdown in the societal order. Seen as a perceived incompatibility of interests, conflict is often caused by a misalignment of goals, motivations, or actions between two parties that can be real or only perceived to exist (Taylor and Moghaddam, 1994).

In marital relationships, it is not unusual for conflict to occur because of differences in life orientations of spouses. Over the years, unresolved conflicts between spouses have had negative impact on the marriage institution. Nearly one third of all marriages fail within the first 5 years (National Center for Health Statistics, 1991) and between one half and two thirds end in divorce (Cherlin, 1992; Martin and Bumpass, 1989). In order to sustain continual healthy marital relationship, couples

must learn to adopt appropriate conflict resolution styles across different situations of their lives.

Conflict resolution strategies are seen by Miller (2003) as "a variety of approaches aimed at terminating conflicts through the constructive solving of problems." These strategies include confrontation/collaborative, withdrawal, forcing, smoothing and compromise (Howat and London, 1980). The confrontational/collaborative style involves having a face to face meeting or encounter where one party challenges the other to resolve conflict. It has the highest level of win/win orientation that involves information sharing, openness, and clarification of issues on the point of conflict to reach a solution acceptable to

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both parties (McShane and Von Glinow, 2000). The withdrawal style provides to lose–lose outcomes because parties of the conflict relation relinquish communication of their needs. The forcing or competitive style is one in which one party tries to dominate or force the other party to accept a particular position. The smoothing strategy is a way of avoiding conflict. Differences are not emphasized, and points common to both parties are highlighted (Salami, 2010). The compromise style requires each party to give up something of value. Compromise may be an optimum strategy when conflicting parties are equal in power; when time pressure demands expedient action.

The use of a particular conflict management style in marriage may rest upon the type of family background one is nurtured, personality disposition of the individual, and the perception of the self. Families are influential figures in an individual's search for identity (Baumrind, 1971). Sullivan (1980) focused on the extensive role played by family members in shaping a child's self image. He found that the mother, father and others may influence the self of a child by their overt and subtle relations (Baumrind, 1971). Parents play a vital role in their children's lives, serving as their earliest and most important role model. Children tend to look up to and observe their parent's behavior from a very young age (Herzong and Cooney, 2002). All these point to the fact that the nature of families in terms of whether they are intact or broken can be a factor in the self concept or personal self worth of offspring. Past research has also demonstrated that the levels of tension in family background could lead to couple involvement in conflict (Tolman, 1981). Most couples who use the negative conflict resolution strategies have no content of stable family units. Some come from single-parent or homes without parents (Nweke, 2005).

Self-concept or self esteem relates with the positive or negative values which one puts as his or her own attributes (Caldwell, 1997). Individuals with low self-esteem are said to exhibit self-dissatisfaction, lower level of self-respect, and have a negative self-picture. It may be viewed that individuals who possess negative self concept may not be organized enough to adopt appropriate strategies to resolve interpersonal conflicts because of the deficiency in perceptions of the self at performing what is good.

Previous researches have revealed that personality factors or characteristics could determine conflict resolution styles. Techrone (1970), for example, stated that personality type is a predictive factor of conflict management style. In a similar vein, Antonioni (1998) argued that there is a relationship between the Big Five personality factors (neuroticism, extraversion, openness, conscientiousness and agreeableness) and conflict management strategies. From these past researches, it could be said that resolution of crises among couples may be dependent upon their personality make-up.

In consideration of the above, the present study is aimed at investigating whether nature of family background, self concept, and or personality factors determines strategies employed by couples at resolving conflicts. It is therefore hypothesized in this study that:

1. Family background, self concept and personality characteristics will be significant factors influencing conflict resolution strategies,
2. Males and females will differ significantly in their conflict resolution strategies,
3. There will be a significant interaction effects of family background, self concept, sex, and personality characteristics on conflict resolution strategies among couples, and that
4. Self concept of couples from intact families will differ significantly from those of couples from broken families.

It is expected that the outcome of this study will be useful to couples in understanding themselves and in adopting the appropriate conflict resolution strategies in differing situations. Marital therapists and counselors will also find the result of this work useful in their efforts at assisting and guiding couples at resolving marital conflicts.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

In investigating the influence of family background, self concept and personality factors on conflict resolution strategies, the following procedures were adopted.

### **Research participants**

A total of one hundred and seventy-four research participants comprising of 86 males and 88 females with an age range of 21 to 54 were employed in this study. Purposive and convenience sampling methods were adopted in selecting participants for this study. Purposive in the sense that only married individuals were used and convenience in the sense that married individuals in different areas in Ado-Ekiti were used.

### **Research design**

The study was an ex-post facto field study in which responses of research participants were collected using the questionnaire method. Thus, this study incorporates the independent groups' and factorial design. The independent groups' design was adopted because the researchers are interested in comparing two sets of mean scores of variables of study. Factorial design was adopted for the researcher to test the interaction effects of the independent variables on the dependent variable.

### **Measure**

Three standardized psychological instruments were used

**Table 1a.** Independent t-test summary table showing the effects of self-concept, family background and sex on conflict resolution strategies.

Variables	Level	N	X	S.D	df	t	p
Self concept	High	73	79.44	22.13	172	0.92	>0.05
	Low	101	76.96	13			
Family background	Broken/Separated	52	75.29	14.73	172	-1.34	>0.05
	Intact	122	79.16	18.37			
Sex	Male	88	76.25	20.66	172	-1.34	>0.05
	Female	86	79.79	13.17			

**Table 1b.** Independent t-test summary table showing the effects of family background on self-concept of couples.

Family background	N	X	S.D	df	t	P
Intact	52	75.17	9.89	172	-2.09	> .05
Broken/Separated	122	9.61	13.85			

in the study. They are:

I. The Index of Self-Esteem (ISE) developed by Hudson (1982) to measure self concept of couples. It is a 25-item inventory designed to measure the self perceived and self-evaluative component of self concept, which is the sum total of the self perceived and other perceived view of the self held by the person. Hudson (1982) obtained a coefficient alpha of 0.93 for the scale.

II. The Big Five Inventory (BFI) developed by John, Donahue and Kentle (1991) was used to measure personality characteristics. It assesses personality from a 5 dimensions which is extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness to experience. The global Cronbach alpha of the BFI is 0.80 (John, Donahue and Kentle, 1991).

III. Conflict Resolution Strategies Scale (CRSS) developed by Howat and London (1980) was used to measure strategies used by couples to resolve conflicts. It is a 25-item inventory designed to assess 5 basic conflict resolution strategies which are confrontation, withdrawal, forcing, smoothing, and compromise. The Cronbach alpha coefficient of the CRSS subscales are 0.84, 0.66, 0.84, 0.73, and 0.64 respectively (Howat and London, 1980).

### Procedure

Two hundred copies of a questionnaire containing the ISE, BFI and the CRSS together with biographic information eliciting items were given out to research participants to personally complete, having sought and obtained their consent to participate in the study. The

completed copies of the questionnaire were later retrieved from respondents for analyses. Seven (7) copies of the questionnaire were not returned and out of the remaining one hundred and ninety three (193) copies of the questionnaires, only one hundred and seventy four were properly completed and used for data analysis. Thus, a response rate of 96.5 per cent was achieved

### RESULTS

From Table 1a, it can be seen that self-concept [ $t(172) = 0.92, P > 0.05$ ], family background [ $t(172) = -2.09; P > 0.05$ ] and sex [ $t(172) = -1.34, P > 0.05$ ] did not significantly influence conflict resolution strategies among couples. Table 1b also showed that family background did not have a significant influence on self concept of couples.

Table 2 shows that there was a significant joint influence of the five domains of personality on conflict resolution strategies among couples [ $F(5) 168 = 2.98, P < 0.05$ ] but only conscientiousness ( $\beta = -0.33$ ) and openness to experience [ $\beta = 0.09$ ] have significant individual influences on conflict resolution strategies.

From Table 3, it was revealed that self concept, family background, sex, and personality characteristics have significant interaction effect on couples' conflict resolution strategies [ $F(4, 169) = 24.24, P < 0.05$ ].

### DISCUSSION

As the result of this study indicated, self-concept, family background and sex did not individually influence couples' conflict resolution strategies. On the other hand,

**Table 2.** Summary of regression analysis table showing the influences of personality characteristics on conflict resolution strategies among couples.

Variable	B	t	P	R	R Square	F	P
<b>Personality</b>							
Extraversion	0.105	1.04	>0.05				
Agreeableness	-0.22	-.19	>0.05				
Conscientiousness	-0.33	-3.91	<0.05	0.604	0.35	2.98	<0.05
Neuroticism	0.061	1.45	>0.05				
Openness to Experience	-0.09	-0.35	<0.05				

Dependent variable: Conflict resolution strategies

**Table 3.** Summary of ANOVA analysis showing the interaction effect of self-concept, family background, sex and personality characteristics on conflict resolution strategies.

Model	Sum of square	df	Means square	F	P
Regression between condition	19112.521	4	4778.130		
Residual within condition	33319.479	169	197.157	24.24	<0.05
Total	52432.000	173			

personality factors were found to significantly influence conflict resolution strategies. And the interaction of self-concept, family background, sex and personality characteristics were found to significantly influence couples conflict resolution strategies.

The reason why personality characteristics independently influenced couples' conflict resolution strategies but not self concept, family background and sex may be adduced to the fact that the latter variables are the bases or components of building one's personality. So, it is possible for personality characteristics to influence conflict resolution strategies independently but not self concept, family background, and sex individually. For example, whether one comes from an intact or broken family may contribute to building of the self or personality. A child whose parents have divorced or separated may not enjoy full parental care and support which are impetuses for the child's self or personality when compared to the one from an intact family. This is buttressed by past research where Kurdek (1992) carried out a study on the relationship between parent-adolescent relationships with adolescent's self-esteem. The result of his study showed that warmth in the parent-adolescent relationship was positively related with self-esteem, whereas conflict was negatively related to self-esteem. The behaviors of others, especially significant others such as parents, are also perceived as the symbol of self-worth or personality (Esfandyari et al., 2009).

Being male or female (sex) is another factor that determines an individual's behavior or personality. Masculinity is often linked to aspects of aggression, militarization, dominance, hierarchy and competition.

Femininity is often associated with motherhood, care, non-violence and potential capacities for peace. The interpretations of masculinity and femininity, shaped by the gender culture in which women and men live, and by the nature of the conflict, in the end determine male and female behavior, perceptions, personality, positions and roles (International Alert, 2000). Self concept is another factor that determines the personality of an individual. Tiller et al. (2003) stated that, how someone is to behave depends on his self concept, which is about what he thinks about himself, including strength, weakness and personality.

Hence, it can be concluded that self concept, family background and sex are factors embedded in one's personality which limited their independent influence on couples' conflict resolution strategies, whereas, their interaction is significant at influencing conflict resolution strategies.

Though there is paucity of research in the area of the link between self concept and conflict resolution strategies (Hisli et al., 2009), the result of this study is not in consistence with the outcome of a study that established a link between self concept and conflict resolution strategies. The finding was that self-concept was predictive of the confrontation approach to conflict resolution.

It was observed that an increase in positive self-concept was related to an increase in confrontation behaviors (Hisli et al., 2009). Another study that looked at self-concept reported that there was a positive relationship between the success and duration of interpersonal relationships and a positive self-concept (Neuringer and Wandke, 1966). Another study reported

that increasing positive self-concept improves social capabilities (Comer et al., 1986) which may contribute to a constructive conflict resolution.

When considered from a social perspective, people with a positive self-concept may be more popular, collaborative, self-assertive, talkative, and dominant and seek better ways of resolving conflicts while those with a negative self-concept may be silent and introverted.

Result of the current study is somewhat similar to that of Animasahun and Fatile (2011) where it was revealed that family background does a little in shielding the newly wedded couple from the marriage instability that pervade the modern African society. Invariably, it may be viewed that family background as a variable may not independently affect the kind of conflict resolution strategies employed by couples; since past research has indicated that it does not significantly predict stability or instability in marriage (Animasahun and Fatile, 2011). In an opposing direction, using a sample of 223 six-year-old children and their parents over a period of one year, Melissa (2006) investigated children's adaption development in the context of inter-parental conflict over time. The results showed that the exposure to high levels of destructive inter-parental conflicts is associated with greater negative effects on children and their cognitions in response to conflicts, and more broadly, with an array of psychological problems. This means that children who grew up in a family beset with crisis may later, in their marital life react or resolve conflict in a particular way subject to earlier family experience.

Furthermore, it was expected in this study that there will be significant difference in the self concept of couples from intact and broken families, but result shows no difference. It may be explained that the family is not the only socializing environment where an individual builds his or her self esteem. The development of self esteem is also dependent on experiences one acquires from school, peer groups and religious bodies. This means that the family unit may not be the sole determinant factor in the development of self image or personal self-worth.

In contrast to this result, David (1996) indicated that when there is inter-parental conflict, offspring were found to show anxiety, depression, fear, helplessness, low level of self-esteem, and poor social behaviors. Parents play an important role because the development of self is possible only with social interaction. The behaviors of others, especially significant others such as parents, are also perceived as the symbol of self-worth. The indication or demonstration of supportive behavior by parent(s) conveys to their children that he or she is a person of value (Esfandyari et al., 2009).

It was established in this study that male and female couples did not differ on strategies adopted at resolving conflict. This finding is not in consonance with Zammuto, London, and Rowland (1979) study of the role of gender in conflict resolution. They concluded that conflict resolution depends on the type of the sexual composition

of the interactors in conflict. There exists a stereotype that women are more peace loving than men, and can bring a calmer, more compromising voice to the negotiation table. It has been argued that women are more effective and more efficient than men in negotiations and that there is a need for "peace promoters, not just warriors at the table." Social research has demonstrated that women tend to be more cooperative and less aggressive (Hunt, 2005). Difference feminism scholars celebrate women as being different to men due to the possession of natural qualities which include being co-operative and pacific (Wilford, 1994). Difference feminists argue that, "women, because of their greater experience with nurturing and human relations, are generally more effective than men in conflict resolution and group decision-making (Goldstein, 2001). It is claimed that men are relatively violent and women relatively peaceful; due to women's "care giving roles" and potential for motherhood, they are more inclined to oppose war and be more interested in finding alternative methods to conflict resolution (Goldstein, 2001).

As hypothesized, personality of couples was found to influence strategies of resolving conflict. This shows that the uniqueness in behaviors and attitudes has a great deal of influence at determining whether interpersonal conflicts will be resolved or not. This outcome corroborated the studies of Tchrune (1970) and Antonioni (1998) where they stated that personality type is a predictive factor of conflict management style.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study demonstrates that the interaction of couple's self-concept, family background, personality characteristics, and sex have significant influence on strategies adopted at resolving interpersonal conflicts. It is also revealed that these variables do not independently predict conflict resolution strategies except couples' personality characteristics. In addition, family backgrounds of couples (whether intact or broken) do not have effect on levels of self-concept.

Counselors and marital therapists should put into consideration the interplay of the self concept, family background, personality, and gender of couples when issues of conflict arise in order to assist them in learning or adopting the appropriate style at resolving such conflict. This will involve a holistic assessment of couples' personality dispositions and self esteem together with their biographic information which will in turn aid the therapist at understanding the schemata that each couple brings into marital life. Also, individuals in courtship or those seeking "better halves" should observe in their probable future partners the influence of the variables enumerated in this study that could predict the resolution of conflicts in married life. This study is not all inclusive though, as the various strategies of conflict resolutions are not examined to ascertain which is better adopted by

couples and why such strategy is adopted. Further researches are therefore recommended in such areas.

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