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## Conflict Resolution in Mexican-origin Couples: Culture, Gender, and Marital Quality

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### Abstract

This study examined associations between Mexican-origin spouses' conflict resolution strategies (i.e., nonconfrontation, solution orientation, and control) and (a) gender-typed qualities and attitudes, (b) cultural orientations, and (c) marital quality in a sample of 227 couples. Results of multilevel modeling revealed that Mexican cultural orientations were positively associated with solution orientation, and Anglo cultural orientations were negatively associated with nonconfrontation. Expressive personal qualities were negatively associated with control, whereas instrumental qualities were positively related to control. Links between conflict resolution and marital quality revealed that control and nonconfrontation were associated with spouses' ratings of marital negativity. In some cases, different patterns emerged for husbands and wives. Discussion highlights the role of culture and gender dynamics in marital relationships.

### Keywords

conflict; culture; dyadic/couple data; gender; Hispanic Americans; marriage and close relationships

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Managing marital conflict is crucial to spouses' perceptions of their overall relationship satisfaction, marital functioning, and marital longevity (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). In European American couples, some suggest that maintaining a marriage requires spouses to make use of conflict resolution that promotes personal growth, enrichment, and forgiveness (Fincham, Beach, & Davila, 2004; Greeff & de Bruyne, 2000). Years of empirical research, documenting the correlates of marital relationship quality, suggest that conflict management is a vital skill for marital satisfaction (Bradbury et al., 2000). There is some evidence indicating that there are unique processes that promote relationship stability in European American, African American, and Mexican American couples (Osborne, Manning, & Smock, 2007). Yet, empirical evidence linking conflict resolution and marital quality is based almost entirely on European American samples. The purpose of the present study is to examine the correlates of conflict resolution in married couples of Mexican origin.

Marriage is the norm for Hispanic families, in general, and Mexican-origin families specifically, with married couples being the majority of these families in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Marriage is the central relationship in the family and impacts individual well-being and parent-child relationships (Gottman & Notarius, 2002). Yet, there is a paucity of research on the nature and correlates of marital conflict resolution strategies

in Hispanic and Mexican-origin families. In fact, a decade review of marital research in the 1990s noted a scarcity of research on culture and marital quality overall (Bradbury et al., 2000). In this study, we focused on Mexican-origin couples only (i.e., an ethnic-homogenous design) to examine how variability in conflict resolution is linked to variability in gender and cultural processes within this group. Given that Mexican-origin individuals comprise the majority of Hispanics, the largest and fastest growing ethnic minority group in the United States. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007), that marriage is normative in this cultural group, and that cultural processes may play a role in key marital interactions like conflict resolution, it is important to understand these processes for Mexican-origin couples.

The goals of this study were threefold. The first goal was to describe conflict resolution strategies that Mexican-origin husbands and wives reported using in their marriages. Drawing on a contingency model of conflict (Putnam & Wilson, 1982) and on ideas about culturally specific processes of conflict in Mexican American families (Flores, Tschann, Marin & Pantoja, 2004), we measured three conflict resolution strategies: nonconfrontation, solution orientation, and control. This contingency model was derived from the idea that conflict strategies are chosen on the basis of conditional factors such as individual cultural factors, the relationship between individuals in conflict, and the nature of the conflict. Descriptive information on these strategies advances our understanding of conflict resolution within the context of Mexican-origin marriages. Next, we drew on gender socialization (Maccoby, 1998) and cultural-ecological (McAdoo, 1993) perspectives in exploring how gender and cultural dynamics play a role in spouses' conflict management. Our second goal was to explore the links between spouses' conflict resolution strategies and their gender-typed qualities and attitudes and cultural orientations. Finally, research suggests that the way spouses choose to manage conflict in marital relationships is an important determinant of overall relationship quality (e.g., Bradbury et al., 2000). Drawing on research that focuses on spouses' marital behaviors, our third goal was to investigate the associations between spouses' conflict resolution strategies and their marital relationship quality after accounting for the role of gender and culture. We focus on long-term marriages in families with adolescent offspring for two reasons. First, investigations of the nature and correlates of conflict resolution processes in long-term marriages provide opportunities to identify potential strengths that may inform preventive intervention efforts. Second, because marital conflicts often increase when adolescents are present in the home (Hatch & Bulcroft, 2004), this period of childrearing may be an important time to explore marital conflict resolution.

## Conflict Resolution Strategies

The resolution of conflict has long been conceptualized as involving both constructive and destructive processes (Deutsch, 1973), and research in the area of marital conflict has focused on these two global aspects of conflict management (Fincham & Beach, 1999). Constructive processes often include interactions involving cooperation, problem-solving behaviors, intentions to learn about the other's needs, willingness to talk about disagreements, and a focus on the relationship rather than the individual (Hocker & Wilmot, 1995) and are associated with high levels of marital satisfaction (Greef & de Bruyne, 2000). In contrast, destructive processes often include interactions that involve manipulation, coercion, escalation, and avoidant patterns of domination and subordination (Olson & Braithwaite, 2004).

To understand these constructive and destructive aspects of conflict, there is a need to explore spouses' strategies for managing and resolving conflicts. Putnam and Wilson (1982) identified conflict resolution strategies employed across a variety of interpersonal contexts that represented behavioral responses to conflict (i.e., disagreement or difference of opinion) within a relationship. Specifically, they described three styles of conflict resolution: solution

orientation, control, and nonconfrontation. Solution orientation resembles the constructive styles of problem solving and compromise that couples employ, including direct communication about conflict, attempts to integrate others' needs, and the act of compromising. Controlling interactions include attempts at dominating the interaction and persistently promoting one's own position. Nonconfrontation resembles avoidance in that it includes acts of withdrawing from disagreements, using behaviors such as silence, and concealment of ill feelings. Researchers have found differences in these conflict resolution styles across cultures (Cai & Fink, 2002). Thus, our first goal was to describe the extent that Mexican-origin husbands and wives reported using these conflict strategies in their marital relationship.

## Gender and Marital Conflict Resolution

The resolution of marital conflict takes place within a system marked by gendered behaviors, attributes, and beliefs. Maccoby's (1998) ideas concerning learned gender-typed communication behaviors suggest that women and men often have different interpersonal styles and skills that may result in different approaches to conflict resolution. For example in a study of European American (57%), African American (23%), and Mexican American (20%) married couples, wives were more likely to employ solution-oriented conflict resolution styles that included expressing thoughts and feelings directly, and husbands were more likely to avoid conflict (Mackey & O'Brien, 1998). Yet, because there are individual differences among husbands and wives, it is important to look beyond husband-wife comparisons to consider the gender-typed characteristics of spouses in efforts to understand their use of conflict resolution strategies. Researchers have found that feminine gender-typed attributes, such as expressive personality qualities (e.g., nurturing, sensitivity), were linked to compromising and avoidant conflict styles, whereas masculine gender-typed attributes, particularly instrumental personality qualities (e.g., assertiveness), were linked to dominating and controlling conflict behaviors (e.g., Brewer, Mitchell, & Weber, 2002).

Gender-typed qualities and attitudes are important to study for Mexican-origin couples because of the salient role of gender in Mexican culture (Cauce & Domenech-Rodríguez, 2002). Early work describes Mexican values as including adherence to gender-typed family roles (Madsen, 1964). More recently, researchers suggest that traditional gender-typed attitudes are not as prevalent in Mexican American families as once thought (Valentine & Mosley, 2000); rather, as Mexican American spouses acculturate to Anglo culture they tend to endorse less traditional attitudes (Leaper & Valin, 1996). Drawing on Maccoby's ideas (1998) and existing empirical work with European American couples (Brewer et al., 2002), we expected positive associations between solution orientation and nonconfrontation with expressive personal qualities, whereas we expected a positive association between controlling strategies and instrumental personal qualities. For wives, we hypothesized a positive association between gender-typed attitudes and solution orientation; for husbands, we hypothesized a positive association between gender-typed attitudes and control.

## Culture and Marital Conflict Resolution

Understanding how conflict resolution strategies relate to spouses' cultural orientations is an important step in investigating the role of cultural processes in marital interactions. Scholars interested in the role of culture underscore the importance of conceptualizing culture as multidimensional (representing both the host and ethnic culture) and multifaceted (e.g., orientations, values, behaviors) (Berry, 1997). In the present study, we considered spouses' global orientations to Mexican and Anglo culture as cultural processes that may be linked to conflict resolution strategies.

Existing research on conflict management has focused on the influence of individualism and collectivism on conflict resolution (Holt & DeVore, 2005). Research has suggested that individualistic cultures (e.g., United States) place an emphasis on values of individual achievement and personal freedom, whereas collectivistic cultures (e.g., Mexico) value group success and harmony (Hofstede, 1980). From ethnic-comparative studies, we learn that adults in individualist cultures generally prefer confrontational strategies to resolve conflict, as compared to those in collectivistic cultures who generally prefer more passive strategies, such as avoiding conflict (e.g., Cai & Fink, 2002; Pearson & Stephan, 1998). In contrast to comparative studies, studies that have examined how cultural orientations and values within a cultural group relate to variability in marital partners' use of conflict resolution strategies are virtually nonexistent. One study with a sample of Mexican American couples found that low levels of acculturation (i.e., simultaneously high orientations toward Mexican culture and low orientations toward Anglo culture) were related to avoidance during conflict, and high levels of acculturation (i.e., simultaneously high Anglo orientations and low Mexican orientations) were related to the expression of feelings during conflict (Flores et al., 2004). Drawing on these cross-cultural perspectives and limited previous work, we hypothesized positive associations between spouses' orientations toward Anglo culture and their use of controlling strategies because of the Anglo orientation toward individualism. We expected associations between spouses' Mexican orientations and their use of nonconfrontation and solution orientation because of the Mexican orientation toward collectivism.

## Marital Quality and Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution is a central task in the maintenance of marital quality for both husbands and wives (Fincham & Beach, 1999). Research has demonstrated a positive link between spouses' marital quality and constructive resolution strategies, as illustrated by empirical data with European American samples showing that compromising and collaborative behaviors are related to high marital quality (Greef & de Bruyne, 2000; Marchand & Hock, 2000). In contrast, there is evidence of an inverse relation between destructive marital conflict styles (e.g., yelling, insulting the partner), which either escalate conflict or cause withdrawal from conflict, and marital quality (Bradbury & Karney, 2004). With primarily European American samples, researchers have found that conflict resolution strategies characterized by attacking, demanding, avoidant, or controlling behaviors are associated with low levels of marital satisfaction (Johnson et al., 2005). With a sample of South African couples, who had been married at least 10 years, wives reported the lowest levels of satisfaction when they used conflict avoidant strategies (Greef & de Bruyne, 2000). For Mexican American couples, the connections between conflict resolution and relationship quality are unknown.

As the third goal, this study explored the links between conflict resolution and marital relationship quality. Because many researchers suggest that marital quality requires mutually gratifying resolutions to conflict (Marchand & Hock, 2000), we anticipated a positive association between solution orientation and the positive aspects of marital quality (i.e., marital satisfaction and love) and nonconfrontation and control and the negative aspects of marital quality (i.e., negativity), after accounting for the role of gender and culture. Since a number of important background characteristics (i.e., age, length of time married, number of children, family income, and poverty level) are related to conflict resolution and marital quality, we included control variables in our models. Specifically, empirical data show marital satisfaction is lowest in middle age, conflict and negativity increase in middle-aged couples, and economic strain and number of children are associated with decreased marital quality (Bradbury et al., 2000).

## Method

### Participants

We collected the data during the years 2002 – 2003 as part of a larger study of family socialization and adolescent development in Mexican-origin families (Updegraff, McHale, Whiteman, Thayer, & Delgado, 2005) in and around a southwestern United States metropolitan area. Eligible families included those with a biological mother of Mexican descent, a biological or long-term adoptive father, and two adolescent siblings (i.e., a seventh grader and at least one older sibling). The family members all had to be living together and fathers worked for pay at least 20 hours per week (given that the larger study focused on how parental work dynamics relate to family processes). Although not required for participation, the majority of fathers in this study (i.e., 93%) also were of Mexican descent. We chose two-parent families so that we could examine the roles of both spouses in family dynamics. The focus of our sampling criteria was on a local population, therefore, the sample was not representative of all Mexican American families.

The 227 couples in the current study were a subsample (92%) of the 246 families that participated in the larger study. The omitted couples included husbands that were not of Mexican origin. The remaining couples indicated that they were either legally married ( $n = 210$ ) or living in a consensual union as if legally married ( $n = 17$ ). In Latin America, including Mexico, marital unions commonly referred to as consensual unions, or common-law marriages in the United States, are publically recognized (De Vos, 1999). De Vos (1999) suggested that unions of couples from these countries be considered a marriage if the union has persisted for at least 5 to 10 years. We used this criterion for selecting our sample for this study. No differences emerged between the two groups of couples on their background characteristics. Consistent with our sample, two-parent Mexican-headed households were the most common family type (67.8%) in the county from which we drew our sample (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Families represented a range of education and income levels, from poverty to upper class. Twenty-one percent of families met federal poverty guidelines, a figure similar to the 18.6% of two-parent Mexican American families living in poverty in the county of the larger sample (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). Median family income was \$38,000 for an average family size of 5.99 members. Spouses' occupations, coded using the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) system (Nakeo & Treas, 1994), ranged from 16.78 (dishwasher) to 86.05 (physician), with a median of 33.9 (office clerk) for wives ( $n = 146$ ) and 36.1 (supervisor) for husbands ( $n = 220$ ). Spouses completed an average of 10 years of education ( $M = 10.11$ ;  $SD = 3.74$  for wives, and  $M = 9.66$ ;  $SD = 4.31$  for husbands). Most spouses were born in Mexico (75% of wives and husbands), and lived in the United States an average of 12.2 ( $SD = 8.57$ ) and 15.03 ( $SD = 8.77$ ) years, for wives and husbands, respectively. Most interviews (71%) were completed in Spanish. Spouses had been together for an average of 19.25 years ( $SD = 4.82$ ) and were 40 years old on average ( $M = 39$ ;  $SD = 4.57$  for wives, and  $M = 42$ ;  $SD = 5.54$  for husbands).

### Procedures

We recruited families in and around a large southwestern city from junior high schools in five school districts and from five parochial schools that were selected to represent a range of socioeconomic situations, with the proportion of students receiving free/reduced lunch varying from 8% to 82% across schools. Letters (in English and Spanish) describing the study were sent to families of seventh grade adolescents of Hispanic descent ( $N = 1,856$ ), and bilingual staff made follow-up telephone calls to determine eligibility and interest in participation. For 396 families (21%), the contact information was incorrect and repeated attempts to find updated information through school personnel or public listings were unsuccessful, and 146 (8%) refused to be screened for eligibility. Of the 421 families who

were eligible (29% of those we were able to contact and screen for eligibility), 284 families (or 67%) agreed to participate, 95 (23%) refused, and 42 (10%) were unable to be recontacted to determine if they would participate. Interviews were completed by 246 families (87% of those who were eligible and who agreed to participate). The remaining 38 families that agreed to participate could not be located at the time of scheduling, or for repeated home visits, or were unwilling to participate when the interview team arrived.

We collected data from spouses in their preferred language (either English or Spanish) during home interviews lasting an average of three hours. Trained bilingual staff conducted interviews separately with each spouse and read questions aloud because of the variability in spouses' reading levels. Families received a total \$100 honorarium for the participation of four family members in the home interviews.

## Measures

Two translators familiar with the local Spanish dialect using the method outlined by Foster and Martinez (1995) forward and back translated all measures into Spanish. Each spouse reported on family income, place of birth, number of years living in the United States, number of children they had together, and level of education. For all measures described below, alphas were acceptable for English- and Spanish-speaking wives and husbands, thus, we report the overall alphas for efficiency.

**Conflict resolution**—We assessed spouses' conflict resolution strategies using three constructs from the Resolving Conflicts in Relationships Scale (RCR, Thayer, Updegraff, & Delgado, 2008). The 29-item RCR was developed to assess on a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *very often*) how often conflict resolution strategies (i.e., solution orientation, nonconfrontation, and control) are used within Mexican-origin family members' relationships. The majority of the items in the RCR were adapted from the Organizational Communication Conflict Instrument (OCCI; Putnam & Wilson, 1982). To make sure that the measure was culturally valid for a Mexican-origin sample, we chose additional items from a conflict resolution measure developed after focus groups with Mexican American parents (Ruiz, Gonzales, & Formoso, 1998). These items reflect how Mexican-origin families use subtle forms of negotiation in conflict resolution and the phenomenon of “making peace” as a means of managing conflict.

The solution orientation subscale (7 items) measures conflict resolution strategies that involve cooperation and compromise (e.g., “I frequently give in a little if my spouse is willing to do the same.”). The nonconfrontation subscale (7 items) assesses strategies that involve avoidance and withdrawal from conflict (e.g., “I keep quiet about my views to avoid disagreements with my spouse.”). The control subscale (9 items) measures strategies that are competitive and unyielding (e.g., “I argue with my spouse without giving up my position.”). Psychometric assessments of the RCR conducted from pilot data are reported elsewhere (see Thayer et al., 2008). For wives,  $\alpha = .80, .83,$  and  $.76$  for wives' nonconfrontation, control, and solution orientation, respectively; and for husbands,  $\alpha = .71, .81,$  and  $.80$  for nonconfrontation, control, and solution orientation, respectively.

**Cultural orientations**—Spouses rated their cultural orientations to Mexican (17 items) and Anglo (13 items) culture using the Acculturation Rating Scale for Mexican Americans-II (ARSMA-II, Cuéllar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995). Spouses responded to items about their family and cultural backgrounds using a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *extremely often or almost always*). Sample items included “I enjoy Spanish language TV.” and “I think in English.” This scale was developed specifically for Mexican Americans, has been used extensively, and has been deemed reliable and valid (Cuéllar et al., 1995). For the current

study,  $\alpha = .86, .89, .87,$  and  $.90$  for wives' and husbands' Mexican and Anglo orientations, respectively.

**Gender-typed qualities**—To assess gender-typed qualities, spouses reported on the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI, Bem, 1974) that contained 20 adjectives or short phrases to indicate instrumental (masculine) qualities (e.g., independent, athletic, assertive), and 20 adjectives to indicate expressive (feminine) qualities (e.g., warm, sympathetic, affectionate). Husbands and wives rated how well these various qualities described themselves on a 7-point scale (1 = *never or almost never true*, 7 = *always or almost always true*). Harris (1994) validated this scale in a sample of African American, European American, and Hispanic men and women and demonstrated strong psychometric properties. In our sample,  $\alpha = .85, .80, .86,$  and  $.79$  for wives' and husbands' instrumentality and expressivity, respectively.

**Gender-typed attitudes**—Spouses completed Hoffman and Kloska's (1995) 13-item measure that asks spouses to rate a variety of statements about gender-typed attitudes toward marital roles and child rearing on a 4-point scale (1 = *strongly agree*, 4 = *strongly disagree*). High scores indicate more traditional attitudes and sample items include “For a woman, taking care of the children is the main thing but for a man, his job is.”, and “Men should make the really important decisions in the family.” This scale was validated in a sample of 167 Mexican American mothers and fathers, demonstrating strong psychometric properties (Adams, Coltrane, & Parke, 2007). After conducting a confirmatory factor analysis with our sample, we dropped three items from the scale that did not have factor loadings at or above  $.40$ . For wives,  $\alpha = .89,$  and for husbands,  $\alpha = .86.$

**Marital satisfaction**—Spouses reported how satisfied they are with their marital relationship on a 16-item scale. Items were rated on a 9-point scale (1 = *extremely dissatisfied*, 9 = *extremely satisfied*), and represented a variety of different aspects of marriage (e.g., marital communication, spouse support for your work role, division of housework and childcare, spouse's support for you as a parent, and family decision-making) (Huston, McHale, & Crouter, 1986). We added three items to the scale that were particularly pertinent to Mexican American couples (i.e., family commitment, Mexican culture and traditions, and relatives). An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with this sample yielded a single-factor solution (Eigenvalues = 9.01 and 7.56 for wives and husbands, respectively) with factor loadings greater than  $.4$ . For wives,  $\alpha = .95,$  and for husbands,  $\alpha = .92.$

**Marital love and negativity**—The love and negativity scales of Braiker and Kelley's (1979) Relationship Questionnaire were used to assess spouses' feelings of positive (9 items) and negative (5 items) emotional aspects within the marriage. Participants answered questions on a 9-point scale with higher scores indicating more love (e.g., “To what extent do you love your spouse at this stage?”) and negativity (e.g., “How often do you feel angry or resentful towards your spouse?”). Few measures of marital quality, including these subscales, have been validated in Hispanic samples. In a small sample of Latina mothers of fifth and sixth graders (Thayer & Updegraff, 2004), a principal components analysis revealed the negativity scale had strong internal consistency and represented one underlying construct. An EFA with this sample yielded a two-factor solution (Eigenvalues for love scale = 5.33 and 5.52, and Eigenvalues for negativity scale = 1.78 and 2.11 for wives and husbands, respectively) with factor loadings greater than  $.4$ . Chi-square likelihood difference tests indicated that a 2-factor solution fit significantly better than a 1-factor solution ( $\chi^2(13) = 141.09, p < .001$  for wives, and  $\chi^2(13) = 187.96, p < .001$  for husbands). In this sample,  $\alpha = .84, .67, .90,$  and  $.68$  for wives' and husbands' love and negativity, respectively.

## Analytical Strategy

**Goal 1**—To describe the types of conflict resolution strategies these couples used, we conducted a 2 Spouse (wife versus husband)  $\times$  3 Strategy (nonconfrontation, control, and solution orientation) ANOVA with spouse and strategy as the within subjects factors. Dependent variables were the spouses' reports of the three conflict resolution strategies. We calculated Cohen's *d* (Cohen, 1988) as a measure of effect size for these analyses.

**Goals 2 and 3**—When examining dyadic relationships it is important to correct for the clustered nature of the data. Because individual spouses are embedded within families, the autocorrelation between respondents' data within these dyadic units violates the assumption of independence for ordinary least squares regression analyses, potentially shrinking standard errors and increasing type I error rates (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). The intraclass correlation quantifies the degree of resemblance between spouses within couples and ranged from .28 to .46 for the study variables. These results indicated a moderate amount of dependence within Level 2 units (families), confirming that a multilevel modeling (MLM) framework was appropriate.

We used SAS PROC MIXED to apply a “two-intercept” approach because we were especially interested in individual spouses' characteristics but wanted to control for the dependence of observations (Kenny et al., 2006). The Level 1 model represented each criterion score as a function of “true scores” for each dyad member plus measurement error. The usual common intercept was replaced by two unique intercepts that were represented by two dummy variables for the wife and the husband. The Level 2 model represented the wives' and husbands' true scores as outcomes predicted by a set of explanatory variables. This allowed each dyad member to have a separate regression equation with potentially different predictors. Wives' variables were not used to predict the husbands' variables and vice versa. We used this method, as we were interested in the pattern of associations for husbands as compared to wives. To determine if the pattern of associations varied by gender, the husbands' and wives' slopes were tested to determine if they significantly differed from one another. Full maximum likelihood estimation was used for all models. The proportion of variance explained was calculated by using the husband and wife true score variance in a baseline model without any predictors as compared to the husband and wife true score variance resulting from the explanatory models. It can be interpreted in the same way as a squared multiple correlation.

Before testing our research questions, we added the demographic variables (i.e., age, length of time married, number of children, family income, and poverty level) that previous research has identified as being related to conflict resolution and marital quality to the baseline models (Bradbury et al., 2000). We found significant associations between age and number of children with control and marital quality (satisfaction, love, negativity). Consistent with recommended multilevel model specification, we dropped the nonsignificant effects and retained only husbands' and wives' ages and number of children in subsequent analyses as control variables (Kenny et al., 2006).

## Results

Results are organized around three study goals: (a) to describe the conflict resolution strategies (i.e., nonconfrontation, control, and solution orientation) that Mexican-origin husbands and wives report using in their marital relationship, (b) to explore correlates of conflict resolution, including cultural orientations and gender-typed qualities and attitudes, (c) to investigate the links between conflict resolution and marital quality, after accounting for the role of gender and culture. See Table 1 for bivariate relations between study

variables, means and standard deviations, and t-tests of husband-wife differences for study variables.

### Goal 1: Describe Conflict Resolution in Mexican-origin Couples

Results from the ANOVA indicated a significant main effect for strategy,  $F(2, 206) = 262.01, p < .001$ . This main effect was qualified by a significant spouse by strategy interaction,  $F(2, 206) = 10.03, p < .001$ . Follow-up tests revealed that husbands used more nonconfrontation than wives, whereas wives used more control than husbands (see Table 1).

### Goal 2: Culture, Gender, and Conflict Resolution

To test the hypothesized relations between culture, gender, and conflict resolution, a series of MLM models were estimated with spouse self-reports of Anglo orientation, Mexican orientation, expressive qualities, instrumental qualities, and gender-typed attitudes as the independent variables, and nonconfrontation, control, and solution orientation as the dependent variables, respectively. We included husbands' and wives' ages and number of children as control variables in the control model.

As summarized in Table 2, for the nonconfrontation model, there was a main effect for Anglo orientation for wives, but not husbands, indicating a negative association between Anglo orientation and nonconfrontation. This association was significantly different for husbands and wives,  $t(435) = -3.99, p < .001$ . With respect to control, there was a significant negative relation between expressive qualities and control for both spouses. There also was a main effect for instrumental qualities for both spouses, indicating a positive association between instrumental qualities and control. For husbands, but not wives, there was a main effect for gender-typed attitudes, indicating a positive relation between traditional gender-typed attitudes and control. This association was significantly different for husbands and wives,  $t(435) = -3.32, p < .01$ . For the solution orientation model, there was a positive relation between Anglo orientation and solution orientation for wives but not husbands, although this association was not significantly different between spouses. For Mexican orientation, there was a main effect for both spouses, indicating a positive association between Mexican orientation and solution orientation. In addition, for wives, but not for husbands, there was a positive relation between instrumental qualities and solution orientation, although their slopes were not significantly different.

**Additional analyses**—To investigate further why we found an effect for wives for instrumental but not for expressive qualities, we tested the equality of variance between these two variables. We found that instrumental qualities had significantly more variance than expressive qualities for wives,  $F(1, 408) = 16.42, p < .001$ .

Further, given that wives' Anglo orientations and husbands' and wives' Mexican orientations both predicted use of solution orientation strategies, but the slopes for Anglo orientations were not significantly different between spouses, we conducted follow-up analyses with both spouses to test whether this effect may be attributed to a bicultural orientation. We divided spouses into two groups: (a) bicultural-oriented spouses (i.e., spouses who fell above the median on Anglo and Mexican orientations), and (b) spouses who were not categorized as bicultural. Performing a univariate ANOVA, we found a significant cultural group effect,  $F(1, 901) = 16.80, p < .01, d = .33$ , with bicultural spouses ( $M = 3.65, SD = 0.74$ ) using solution orientation more than spouses who were not bicultural ( $M = 3.40, SD = 0.77$ ).

### Goal 3: Conflict Resolution and Marital Quality

To examine the relations between conflict resolution and marital quality, we estimated a series of MLM models with wife and husband self-reports of nonconfrontation, control, and

solution orientation as independent variables, and marital satisfaction, love, and negativity as dependent variables, respectively. We also included expressive and instrumental qualities, gender-typed attitudes, Anglo and Mexican orientations, husbands' and wives' ages, and number of children in these models as control variables.

As summarized in Table 3, for marital satisfaction, there were main effects for nonconfrontation for both spouses, indicating a negative association between nonconfrontation and marital satisfaction. There was a negative association between control and marital satisfaction for wives but not for husbands, but their slopes were not significantly different. There was also a main effect for solution orientation for both spouses, indicating a positive relation between solution orientation and marital satisfaction. With respect to love, there were main effects of gender-typed attitudes for both spouses and expressive qualities for wives, indicating positive associations between gender-typed attitudes and expressive qualities with love. The association between expressive qualities and love was significantly different for husbands and wives,  $t(429) = 2.04, p < .05$ . There were also main effects for nonconfrontation and solution orientation for both spouses, indicating negative links between nonconfrontation and solution orientation with love. There was a negative association between control and love for husbands but not for wives, but their slopes were not significantly different. For negativity, there was a main effect for gender-typed attitudes for husbands but not for wives, indicating a negative relation between gender-typed attitudes and negativity. Nonetheless, this association was not significantly different for husbands and wives. There were also main effects of nonconfrontation and control for both spouses, indicating positive links between nonconfrontation and control with negativity. The association between nonconfrontation and control was significantly different for husbands and wives,  $t(429) = 2.08, p < .05$ .

## Discussion

The present findings contribute to the literature on marital conflict resolution in Hispanic couples by providing descriptive information about Mexican-origin spouses' conflict management and by exploring the associations of gender, culture, and marital quality with conflict resolution strategies. Mexican-origin husbands and wives in long-term marriages used solution-oriented conflict resolution strategies more often than other strategies. This is consistent with the premise that Mexican-origin families often place an emphasis on group harmony and familism values (Cauce & Domenech-Rodríguez, 2002), and thus may endorse conflict resolution strategies that promote mutually satisfying conflict outcomes for both members of the marital dyad. Individual conflict episodes have short-term negative effects but will most likely not have a long-term negative impact on the relationship if conflict is resolved in a constructive manner when couples are in long lasting relationships (Burman, Mangolin, & John, 1993).

In relation to the overall use of control and nonconfrontation, there were consistent differences between husbands and wives in this sample. Similar to previous research with European American couples that found wives tend to demand and husbands tend to withdraw during marital conflict (Christensen & Heavey, 1990), wives used controlling strategies more often than husbands, and husbands used nonconfrontational (e.g., avoidance) strategies more often than wives. Mexican-origin families often have traditional gender-typed attitudes about family roles, and relationship maintenance often is a role of women (Cauce & Domenech-Rodríguez, 2002). Thus, wives may feel more responsible for the maintenance of their marital relationships (Maccoby, 1998), often want more change in their relationships (Heyman, Hunt-Martorano, Malik & Smith Slep, 2009), and thus use controlling strategies to manage conflicts.

The results of our study also highlight the importance of the role of gendered qualities and attitudes and cultural orientations in relation to the conflict resolution strategies used by Mexican-origin spouses, despite the scarcity of empirical work on these constructs (Bradbury et al., 2000). For nonconfrontational resolution strategies, cultural orientation was an important correlate whereas gender-typed qualities and attitudes were not. Wives with a strong orientation toward Anglo culture reported less frequent use of nonconfrontational strategies, consistent with research on primarily European American couples that found that wives are less likely to withdraw from conflict (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). In contrast, gendered qualities and cultural orientations did not explain variance in husbands' use of nonconfrontation. Some evidence suggests that husbands use nonconfrontational behaviors in response to wives' critical behavior, as indicated by research on the "demand/withdraw" interaction pattern (Christensen & Heavey, 1990). Thus, husbands may be using nonconfrontational strategies under different circumstances than wives. These findings underscore the importance of understanding the differential effect of the cultural context of marriage for husbands and wives. Future research should investigate the impact of each spouse's choice of nonconfrontational strategies on the other spouse's behavior within the cultural and gendered context of these couples' relationships.

In exploring factors that relate to spouses' use of controlling strategies, we found that gender-typed qualities and attitudes were related to control, whereas cultural orientations were not. Husbands and wives with high levels of instrumental personality qualities (e.g., domination, competitiveness) reported using control, whereas those with high levels of expressive personality qualities (e.g., nurturing, sensitivity) reported using low levels of control. This is consistent with previous research on gender-typed attributes and conflict behaviors (Brewer et al., 2002). In addition, husbands, but not wives, with gender-typed attitudes reported using controlling strategies. Husbands' traditional attitudes about gender may indicate, in part, that they feel they should be the authority or dominant figure in their family (Casas, Wagenheim, Banchemo, & Mendoza-Romero, 1994). This may facilitate their use of controlling strategies when conflicts arise. This is consistent with the limited research about the hypermasculinized attitudes (*machismo*) of Hispanic men that stereotypically portrays them as authoritarian, emotionally restrictive, and controlling (Torres, Solbery, & Carlstrom, 2002). These findings demonstrate the need to look beyond stereotypical views of gender in marriage when explaining variation in conflict resolution for Mexican-origin couples.

Gendered qualities and cultural orientations were important in explaining patterns of solution orientation, although between-spouse differences emerged. Wives, but not husbands, with high levels of instrumental qualities used solution-orientated strategies. Mexican-origin wives that report high levels of instrumental qualities may feel relatively more power and influence in their marriages possibly because of work-related experiences (e.g., occupational prestige, income), and thus feel they can express themselves during conflicts. Additionally, both wives oriented toward Anglo culture, and husbands and wives oriented toward Mexican culture reported using solution-orientated strategies. Follow-up analyses of these results revealed that spouses with a bicultural orientation (i.e., strong orientations toward Anglo and Mexican culture), a form of cultural adaptation that has been linked to positive well-being (Padilla, 2006), used solution-oriented strategies more often than spouses who were not bicultural.

Looking across the three dimensions of conflict resolution, the findings suggest that gender and culture processes may be differentially important for different conflict resolution strategies. For example, only wives' cultural orientations were linked to nonconfrontation, whereas only gender-typed qualities and attitudes were associated with spouses' reports of control. For husbands, in particular, more variance was explained by gender-typed attitudes

and qualities in the control model than by culture or gender characteristics in either of the other models. These findings highlight both similarities and differences in the gender and cultural characteristics that are linked to husbands' and wives' conflict resolution strategies. More generally, additional research is needed using designs that examine within-culture variability in marital processes for Mexican-origin couples.

Consistent with the idea that conflict in marital relationships is inevitable and effective conflict resolution skills are important in maintaining marital quality (Fincham & Beach, 1999), our findings revealed that the three conflict resolution strategies were associated with spouses' marital satisfaction and love in the expected directions in these long-term marriages and consensual unions. When spouses used more solution-oriented strategies and less nonconfrontation and control, there was more satisfaction and love in the marriage. Previous research has found that there are reparative processes that occur during marital conflict that distinguish between distressed and nondistressed couples (Gottman, 1998). These reparative processes could be present for couples that employ solution-oriented strategies. Conversely, it has been proposed that spouses' reciprocal negativity may be the result of the failure of repair processes during conflict (Gottman, 1998). This failure may occur when spouses use less adaptive conflict strategies, specifically control and nonconfrontation that we found were related to higher levels of negativity. Indeed, spouses' conflict resolution strategies result in higher levels of explained variance in reports of negativity as compared to their reports of love and satisfaction. Future research is needed to learn more about these processes, particularly in different cultural contexts. These findings provide a foundation for future applied research and practice directed at promoting positive marital relationships for Mexican-origin couples.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Our findings must be interpreted with their limitations in mind. First, our results come from a specific sample of Mexican-origin families (two-parent families in the Southwest). As such, we have taken a first step in describing the correlates of spouses' conflict resolution in this cultural group. Future studies could incorporate Mexican-origin families from different geographic locations and from a wider range of marital statuses. Our results also are specific to couples with adolescents who have been married or in consensual unions for a long time; understanding the connections between the correlates of conflict resolution in Mexican-origin couples at various developmental stages of marriage is important. In addition, the cross-sectional design does not allow our understanding of the directions of effects. Future longitudinal work should include multiple assessments of spouses' cultural values, gender, conflict resolution, and marital qualities as they will be important in shedding light on whether strong marriages produce better conflict resolution, or if better conflict resolution strategies promote stronger relationships. Longitudinal data would also aid in teasing apart the causal mechanisms and potential mediating processes. Finally, an important next step is to look at the interactional relations between husbands' and wives' conflict processes and marital quality.

### **Conclusions**

The present study contributes to the literature on marital conflict resolution in several ways. First, we took an important step in examining within-culture variability in relation to differences in husbands' and wives' conflict resolution strategies. We provided insights about the associations between specific elements of Mexican culture and these marital relationship processes. We also identified some of the conflict resolution strategies that may be central to long-term healthy marriages for Mexican-origin couples. Understanding the cultural and gendered context of marital relationships is an important step in developing a foundation of knowledge about relationship processes in ethnic minority couples. Keeping these diverse

contexts in mind as related to conflict resolution would substantially add to the effectiveness of preventive interventions aimed at improving marital communication skills.

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**Table 1**  
 Husband and Wife Reports of Study Variables: Correlations and Descriptive Statistics (N = 227 Couples)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Nonconfrontation	–	-.14*	.28***	-.29***	.20**	-.05	-.22**	.19**	-.38***	-.28***	.42***	-.12 <sup>†</sup>	.03
2. Solution orientation	.03	–	.14*	.23**	.04	.11 <sup>†</sup>	.24***	-.14*	.33***	.26***	-.12 <sup>†</sup>	.01	-.04
3. Control	.34***	-.04	–	.20**	-.15*	-.09	.23***	-.18*	-.25***	-.23***	.51***	-.11 <sup>†</sup>	-.13 <sup>†</sup>
4. Anglo orientation	.01	.12 <sup>†</sup>	.07	–	-.46***	.19**	.41***	-.44***	.13*	.01	-.01	.12 <sup>†</sup>	-.20**
5. Mexican orientation	-.00	.11	-.10	-.47***	–	.04	-.13 <sup>†</sup>	.25***	.03	.04	.02	-.13	.02
7. Expressivity	-.12 <sup>†</sup>	.23**	-.26**	.06	.18**	–	.44***	-.03	.15*	.19**	-.09	.01	.07
8. Instrumentality	-.04	.17**	.11	.23***	-.10	.50***	–	-.31**	.12 <sup>†</sup>	.11	.08	.06	-.12 <sup>†</sup>
9. Gender-typed attitudes	.10	-.16**	.24***	-.42***	.31***	.03	-.17*	–	-.00	.14*	-.03	.01	.15*
10. Marital satisfaction	-.25***	.43***	-.19**	.05	.17*	.26***	.09	.02	–	.55***	-.48***	.04	.03
11. Love	-.21**	.27**	-.16*	-.11 <sup>†</sup>	.16*	.22**	.02	.12 <sup>†</sup>	.48***	–	-.44***	-.04	.11
12. Negativity	.33***	.07	.33***	.08	.04	-.16*	.10	-.10	-.11	-.26***	–	-.02	-.13*
13. Age	-.01	-.02	-.10	-.05	-.07	.03	-.08	.11	.04	.02	-.09	–	.20*
14. Number of children	-.07	-.05	-.09	-.19**	.11	.18**	-.01	.10	.03	.11 <sup>†</sup>	-.04	.24**	–
M(Wives)	2.32 <sup>a</sup>	3.49	2.49 <sup>a</sup>	2.84	4.07	5.03 <sup>a</sup>	4.59 <sup>a</sup>	2.06	6.80 <sup>a</sup>	8.03 <sup>a</sup>	4.45 <sup>a</sup>	39.01 <sup>a</sup>	3.84
M(Husbands)	2.52 <sup>a</sup>	3.47	2.29 <sup>a</sup>	2.89	4.02	4.67 <sup>a</sup>	5.02 <sup>a</sup>	2.07	7.34 <sup>a</sup>	8.19 <sup>a</sup>	4.01 <sup>a</sup>	41.55 <sup>a</sup>	3.84
SD (Wives)	.78	.69	.74	.92	.66	.68	.92	.65	1.56	1.03	1.70	4.57	1.63
SD (Husbands)	.67	.71	.68	.88	.66	.67	.86	.57	1.20	1.04	1.65	5.54	1.63

Note: Wives above the diagonal (N = 221 – 225), and husbands below the diagonal (N = 225 – 227). Means in each column with superscripts indicate significant differences between husbands and wives at  $p < .05$ .

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ .

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

**Table 2**  
 Multilevel Models Predicting Conflict Resolution From Gender and Culture (N = 226 Couples)

Predictors	Nonconfrontation				Control				Solution orientation			
	Wife		Husband		Wife		Husband		Wife		Husband	
	$\gamma$	SE	$\gamma$	SE	$\gamma$	SE	$\gamma$	SE	$\gamma$	SE	$\gamma$	SE
Intercept	2.30***	.05	2.52***	.05	2.51***	.05	2.27***	.04	3.52***	.05	3.41***	.05
Age			-.02 <sup>†</sup>	.01	-.01	.01						
Number of children			-.05	.03	-.02	.03						
Expressive qualities	.04	.06	-.03	.05	-.14**	.05	-.13**	.05	.02	.05	.08 <sup>†</sup>	.04
Instrumental qualities	-.06	.05	.01	.04	.16***	.05	.09*	.04	.11**	.04	.06	.04
Gender-typed attitudes	.03	.07	.11 <sup>†</sup>	.06	-.05	.06	.22***	.06	-.01	.05	-.04	.05
Anglo orientation	-.21***	.04	.04	.05	-.01	.04	.07 <sup>†</sup>	.04	.08*	.04	.08 <sup>†</sup>	.04
Mexican orientation	.05	.06	-.03	.06	-.04	.06	-.00	.05	.11*	.05	.18***	.05
Proportion of variance explained	.13		.00		.15		.22		.08		.08	

<sup>†</sup> p < .10.

\* p < .05.

\*\* p < .01.

\*\*\* p < .001.

**Table 3**  
 Multilevel Models Predicting Relationship Qualities From Gender, Culture, and Conflict Resolution (N = 226 Couples)

Predictors	Satisfaction				Love				Negativity			
	Wife		Husband		Wife		Husband		Wife		Husband	
	$\gamma$	SE	$\gamma$	SE	$\gamma$	SE	$\gamma$	SE	$\gamma$	SE	$\gamma$	SE
Intercept	6.80***	.10	7.37***	.08	7.97***	.07	8.19***	.07	4.55***	.11	4.01***	.11
Age	.01	.02	.01	.01	-.02	.01	-.00	.01	.02	.02	-.02	.02
Number of children	.01	.07	-.01	.05	.05	.04	.05	.04	-.12 <sup>†</sup>	.07	.03	.07
Expressive qualities	.02	.07	.15*	.06	.18**	.06	.01	.06	-.18	.13	-.21	.13
Instrumental qualities	.08	.07	-.01	.05	.06	.05	.05	.05	.16	.11	.15	.11
Gender-typed attitudes	.05	.09	.03	.08	.20**	.07	.19*	.07	-.09	.14	-.34*	.16
Anglo orientation	-.04	.06	.01	.06	.07	.05	.01	.05	-.02	.10	.12	.11
Mexican orientation	-.00	.08	.05	.07	.02	.07	.01	.07	-.03	.13	.22	.14
Nonconfrontation	-.13*	.06	-.16**	.05	-.20***	.05	-.14**	.05	.58***	.11	.25*	.11
Control	-.15*	.07	-.11 <sup>†</sup>	.06	-.11 <sup>†</sup>	.06	-.13*	.06	.68***	.11	.53***	.12
Solution orientation	.14*	.06	.27***	.08	.17**	.05	.23**	.07	-.20 <sup>†</sup>	.11	.15	.13
Proportion of variance explained	.15		.22		.27		.12		.54		.31	

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ .  
 \*  $p < .05$ .  
 \*\*  $p < .01$ .  
 \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .