



How Does Geographical Distance between Married Couples Matter? Analysis of Domains of Marital Conflict and Resolution Styles

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. Author RS designed the study and wrote the protocol. Author SJ managed the literature searches, performed the statistical analysis and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Authors RS and MM managed the analyses of the study. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Conflicts are an inescapable part of every relationship. Between married people, conflicts are not necessarily destructive since they provide valuable clues that show the growing edges of the relationship and the areas that need to be worked on for making it richer and deeper. Hence, the key to successful marital relationship is not to avoid conflicts but learn how to effectively deal with them. Geographical distance between married partners is likely to influence the relationship dynamics and strategies of conflict resolution. Holding onto this thought, the present study was undertaken to identify the common areas of conflict and strategies to resolve them among Living Apart Together Couples (LATC) and Proximal couples (PC). The sample comprised of a total of 150 heterosexual couples (75 LATC and 75 PC) drawn through snowball sampling technique from Dist. Udham Singh Nagar, Uttarakhand. Both, husbands' and wives' responses on their areas of conflict and strategies of resolution were recorded using self-structured and standardized tools respectively. Mixed methods of data collection were used in the present study namely mail questionnaire, face to

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face and telephonic interviews. Findings reveal almost similar patterns and frequency of conflicts in all domains of marriage among LATC and PC. However, LATC and PC slightly differed on their conflict resolution strategies. LATC were seen to adopt separation strategy and PC practiced avoidance strategy significantly more to resolve conflict with their marriage partners. Conflict resolution strategies like compromise, interactional reactivity, domination and submission were seen to be equally prevalent among the two groups under study.

Keywords: Avoidance; conflict; domination; living apart together couples; proximal couples.

1. INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a dynamic institution legalizing union and cohabitation of two people from different backgrounds. Entering into married life is like riding on a roller coaster where there are times when everything feels rosy and times when couples find it hard to sail smoothly in the same ship together. Conflicts are natural and an inescapable component of marital relationships. Conflicts are not essentially detrimental or ruinous, since they help the bonding develop stronger; however, the manner in which they are managed affects the nature of the marital union.

Conflicts in marital relationships can stem from a wide spectrum of problems such as tuning between partners in every aspect, differences in values or belief system, loss of a child and so on. Researchers have also identified several major sources of conflict, i.e., violent behaviours of husbands, lack of cooperation in the family, inability to spend enough time together, issues related to children and other families, lack of effective communication, and financial problems [1]. Based on their perceptions, psyche, character, dispositions and temperaments, an individual makes use of different approaches to resolve conflicts. Big five factor model of personality has direct impact on the preferences of conflict handling style selection [2]. Every individual possesses his or her own distinctive thoughts, apprehensions, notions and ideas that make him/her perceive situations differently. Communication behaviours such as defensive attitude, negative criticism, refusing to work out on issues affect marital success. Negative exchanges such as aggressive behaviour undermine relationship quality [3]. A best approach chosen considering the sensitivity of time and situation in turn affects the overall quality of any relationship.

Several researchers report that propinquity is a strong determining factor in developing intimacy

and ensuing marriage [4] When the couple lives together, they can sit in companionate silence, taking pleasure and reassurance in the other's simply 'being there' [5]. On the contrary, it becomes difficult to chalk out ways to deal effectively with interpersonal conflicts if the couple is living in a long distance relationship. It requires immense patience and compassion for being in a committed relationship navigating through distance. Dramatic dissimilarities in lifestyles have potential to create indifferences between partners because both struggle to manage their personal relationships and work. Conflict arises in LDRs (Long distance relationships) from loneliness, separation from a spouse's daily life, financial challenges, travel plans, and relational maintenance [6,7]. An expectation of hope for future reunion contributes to the maintenance of long distance marriage [8].

Marriage is an inherently interdependent relationship, i.e., spouses cyclically influence each other's thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. This mutual reciprocation is a major component of intimate relationships because one partner can potentially affect the other partner's outcomes. Also, there is substantial evidence that the subjective well-being of a married person is significantly strengthened by his or her partner [9] Relationships flourish when both spouses evolve as individuals and offer to each other what they genuinely are or what they really seek.

Proximal couples (i.e., those living geographically near each other) have an opportunity to resolve their conflicts amicably immediately they arise. On the contrary, physical distance makes it extremely challenging for the LAT couples to do so. This can pave way for additional issues including; estrangement of spouses from each other, poor communication, suspicion, mistrust, infidelity and dishonesty. Couples who are in long-distance marriages are more likely to be divorced three years later in comparison to proximally close married couples [10]. Assessment of Relationship satisfaction between 55 non-commuter marriages and 55 commuter

marriages exhibited no differences with regard to relationship satisfaction [11]. Additionally, previous studies suggest comparable, and in some cases, even better marital quality in LATC setup than PC setup. For example, military couples experiencing deployment-related separations often exhibit proficiency in retaining relational satisfaction during separation [12]. Extant research states those in LDRs (Long-distance relationships) and PRs (Proximal relationships) report similar levels of sexual communication and satisfaction [13]. Also, some studies indicate that maintaining independent residences can provide some benefits that typical dual-earner couples cannot expect, despite temporal and emotional costs [14]. This strikingly interesting contrast arouses curiosity about how LAT couples differ on conflict and resolution strategies from proximal couple. Not many studies in India and in particular in Uttarakhand have been done on marital conflicts and resolution strategies in this novel and exceptional form of marital relationship. The present comprehensive investigation sought to seal the knowledge gap and will pave way for further in-depth research.

1.1 Objectives

1. To identify causes of marital conflict among LATC and PC couples.
2. To assess conflict resolution strategies used by LATC and PC Couples.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants and Procedure

The sample consisted of a total of 150 heterosexual couples (75 Living Apart Together Couples (LATC) and 75 Proximal couples (PC)) meeting the eligibility criteria for inclusion under present study. Respondents were identified using snowball sampling technique from Distt. Udham Singh Nagar. Sample selection for present study is represented diagrammatically in Fig 1. Mixed methods of data collection were used, including mail questionnaires, face-to-face and telephone interviews. Participants responded on a 5-point likert-type scale ranging from 0 (Strongly disagree with statement), 1 (Moderately disagree with statement), 2

(Neutral, neither agree nor disagree), 3 (Moderately agree with statement) and 4 (Strongly agree with statement). The data was then classified and tabulated per the objectives to arrive at meaningful and relevant inferences. The data were analyzed using statistical techniques like mean and independent sample t-test.

2.2 Measures

1. Self-structured questionnaire was employed to assess areas of conflict among LATC and PC. The questionnaire consists of 17 items viz., Emotional distance, Spillover of non-relationship stress, Relationship becoming non-romantic and passionless, Problems in sex life, Inapt dealing with important changes, Inapt dealing of issues about children, Issues concerning in-laws /relatives, Being flirtious/having affair outside relationship, Recurring unpleasant fights, Differences in basic goals/values/desired lifestyle, Disturbing events within relationship, No coordination/teamwork, Trouble sharing Power/influence. Trouble handling financial issues, not having fun together, Differences in spiritual level, conflict(s) about being a part of community. The questionnaire was shared via email with the experts of Psychology, Human Development, Extension Education, and Social Work of different Universities and they rated the questionnaire on content validity form. As per their suggestions, necessary modifications were done. Test-retest reliability was carried out by administering the test with 30 women (not part of the study) to assess consistency of results. It was found to be acceptable ($r=.73$). Romantic Partner Conflict Scale by (Zacchilli, Hendrick and Hendric, 2009) was employed to assess conflict resolution strategies of LATC and PC. Romantic partner conflict scale includes 39 items with six sub scales. The purpose of this scale is to identify everyday conflict resolution strategies employed by married couples. The subscales include: Compromise, Avoidance, Interactional Reactivity, Separation, Domination and Submission.

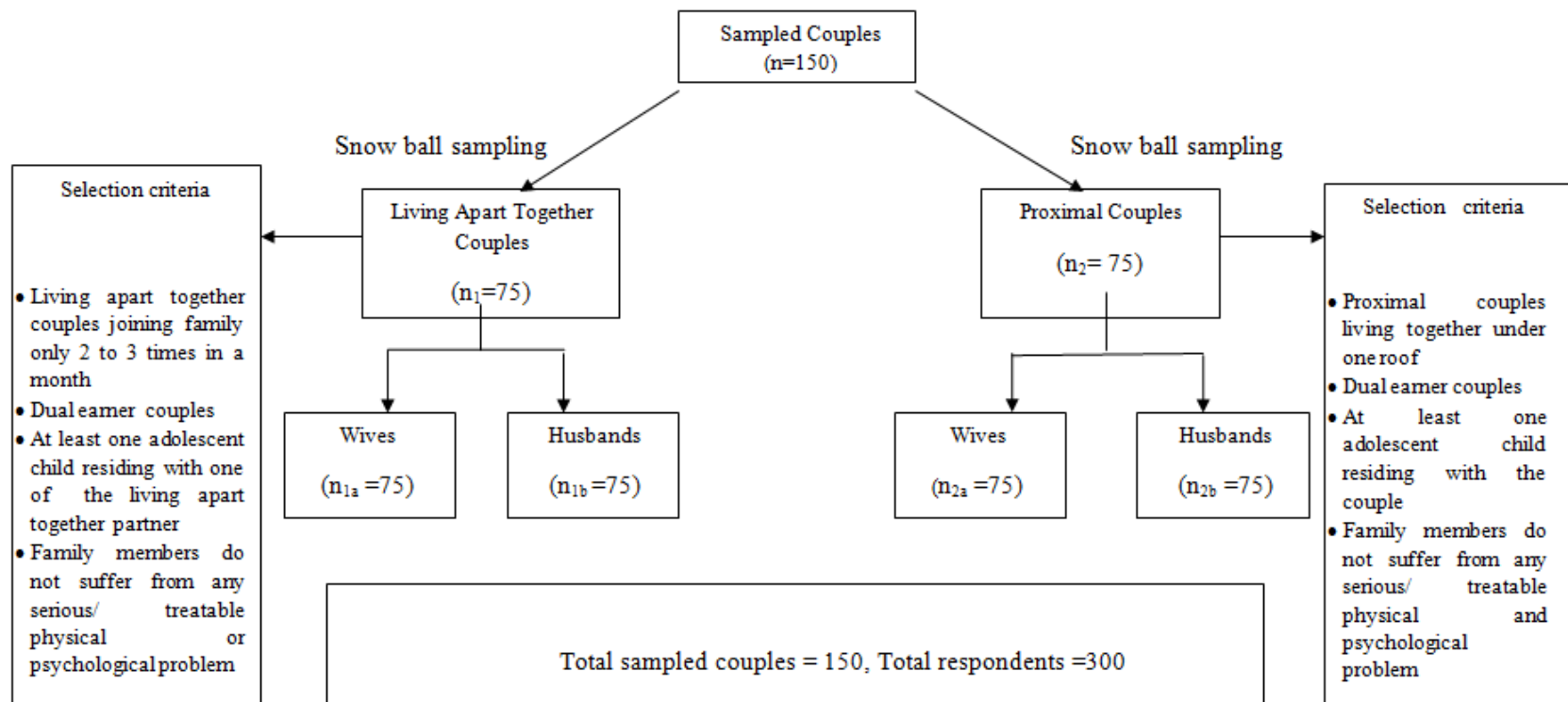


Fig. 1. Diagrammatic representation of sample selection for the present study

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Fig. 2 depicts percentage distribution of common grounds for marital conflict as reported by LAT and Proximal Couples. It can be clearly seen that foremost ground for marital conflict among both LAT (61percent) and Proximal Couples (63percent) was spill over of non-relationship

stress into their marital relationship. Most of the LAT and Proximal Couples shared that their partners vent out job or other stresses on them and their children. Unfortunately, few couples also reported that they don't discuss about their stresses in a helpful manner which forms the major ground for their marital conflict.

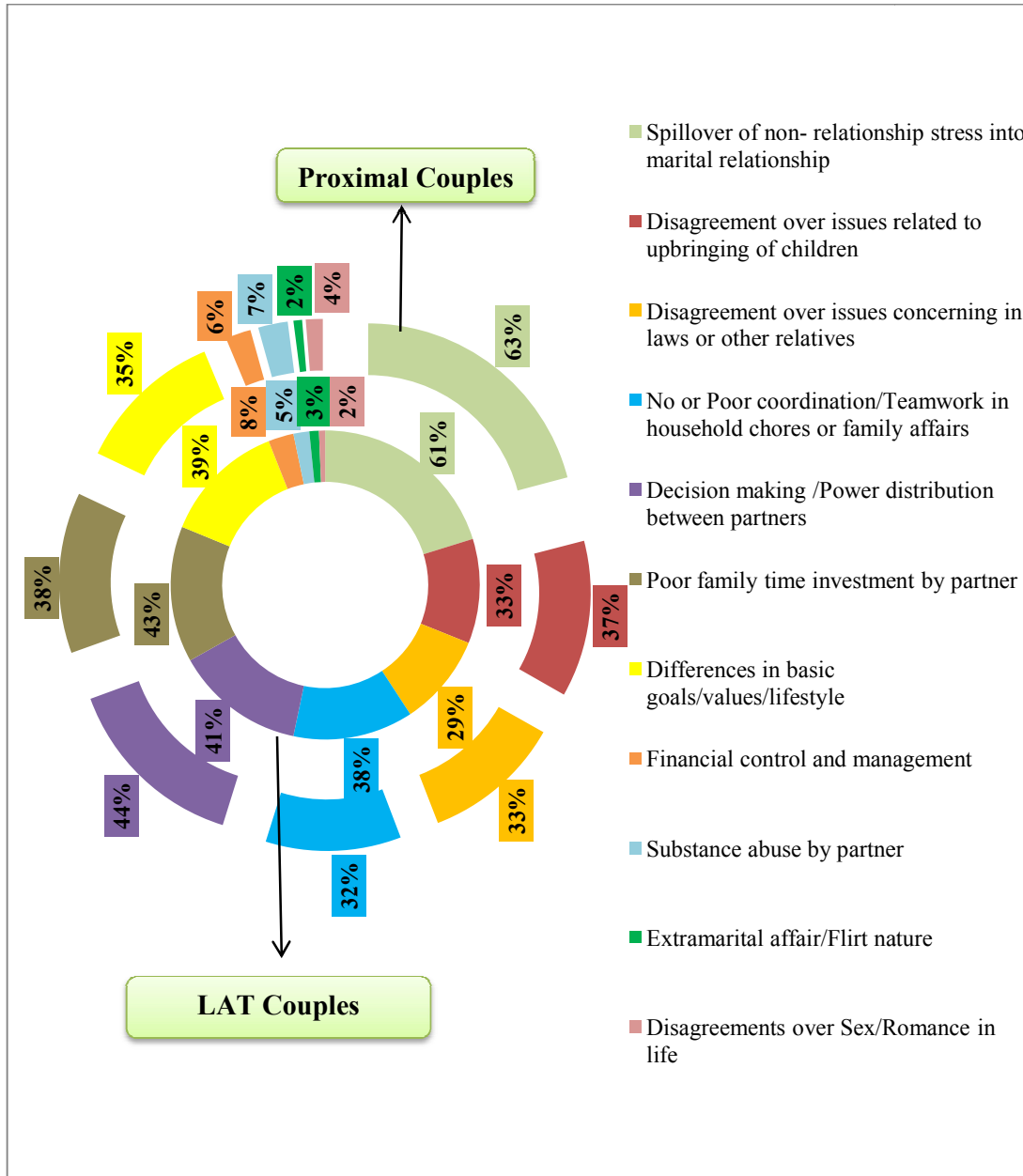


Fig 2. Percentage distribution of grounds for marital conflict among LAT Couples and proximal couples

Second most frequently reported grounds for marital conflict among both LAT and Proximal Couples were disagreement over issues related to upbringing of children (LAT Couples= 33 percent and Proximal Couples = 37 percent); disagreement over issues concerning in-laws or other relative(s) (LAT Couples= 29 percent and Proximal Couples = 33 percent); No or Poor coordination/Teamwork in household chores or family affairs (LAT Couples= 38 percent and Proximal Couples =32 percent); Decision making /Power distribution between partners (LAT Couples= 41 percent and Proximal Couples = 44 percent); Poor family time investment by partner(LAT Couples= 43 percent and Proximal Couples = 38 percent); Differences in basic goals/values/lifestyle (LAT Couples= 39 percent and Proximal Couples = 35 percent). Within disagreements over issues related to upbringing of children, major dispute among couples was over what and how to discipline children. Whereas, couples majorly wives reported that non-acceptance or mistreatment by their in -laws was the major issue of marital conflict concerning in-laws/relatives. Besides this, many wives complained that their husbands were brought up in orthodox set up wherein fathers/husbands had control over household decisions and mothers/wives were responsible for managing household affairs. This was one of the major reason for their marital conflict due to poor coordination/teamwork and unequal decision-making/power distribution issues in major life decisions. A few couples also reported poor family time investment by partner and shared that work takes up most of their time and excitement in the relationship. Couples also reported differences in basic goals/values/lifestyle as they both seem to want different things in life and therefore growing in different directions.

There were other trivial grounds too that led to marital conflicts among LAT and Proximal Couples but their occurrence was rare. Those grounds were financial control and management (LAT Couples= 9 percent and Proximal Couples = 7percent); Substance abuse by partner (LAT Couples= 5 percent and Proximal Couples = 8percent); Extramarital affair/Flirtatious nature (LAT Couples= 4 percent and Proximal Couples = 3percent); Disagreements over Sex/Romance in life (LAT Couples= 3 percent and Proximal Couples = 5 percent).Some couples reported constant stress regarding finances due to lack of

proper budgeting. A few reported substance abuse by partner to be very upsetting and repulsive. Differences in interests and work life were posed as reasons by few couples for being flirtatious outside relationship. Issues regarding disagreements over sex/romance in life ranged from wanting different experiences sexually to lovemaking being less satisfying and loving.

Fig. 3 depicts numerical difference in mean scores of husbands living apart from wives and husbands living together with wives across different conflict resolution strategies. In Table 1, an independent sample t-test elicits significant ($p<.05$) difference among husbands living apart from wives and husbands living together with wives on certain conflict resolution strategies, viz., separation $\{t(124.33)=2.443;p=.016\}$; and avoidance $\{t(137.02)=-3.945;p=.000\}$. It is evident that husbands in LATC setups practiced separation as a conflict resolution strategy significantly higher than their counterparts from PC setup. The probable reason behind separation strategy of husbands living apart from wives may be that the gap created by conflict widens within the time for which the conflict persists, thereby increasing the risk of the relationship failing, so to eliminate the routine clashes husbands may generally separate to a cooling off period.

On the contrary, husbands living together with wives practiced avoidance as a conflict resolution strategy significantly higher than their counterparts that live apart. The reason for this can be that couples from proximal couple families are very well aware of each others' triggers, so instead of indulging in an altercation (heated dispute) they try to avoid the situation. It is because when one spends a lot of time with the partner, he/she knows what is practically possible to change and what is not when it comes to behaviour of the partner. They know what their partner can confront and accept as a flaw in his/her behaviour and what he/she will simply not. However, it is not a commended form of conflict resolution because it leads to long term unresolved clash which may eventually lead to distancing and even divorce. True sense of intimacy and belongingness remains elusive until couples realize that disagreements are normal and learn to accept and accommodate after actively confronting the partner.

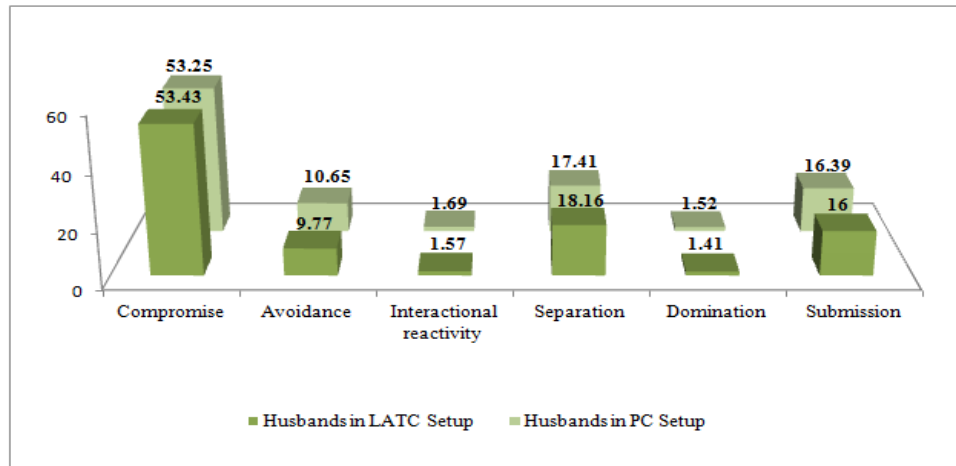


Fig. 3. Mean scores of husbands from LAT and PC setup on conflict resolution strategies

Table 1. Statistical differences in mean scores of husbands from LATC and PC marital setup on conflict resolution strategies

Independent Samples Test		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95percent confidence interval of the difference	
									Lower	Upper
Compromise	Equal variances assumed	1.44	.23	.46	148	.65	.17	.38	-.58	.92
	Equal variances not assumed			.46	147.56	.65	.17	.38	-.58	.92
Avoidance	Equal variances assumed	9.91	.002	-3.95	148	.00	-.88	.22	-1.32	-.44
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.95	137.02	.00	-.88	.22	-1.32	-.44
Interactional reactivity	Equal variances assumed	9.47	.00	-.34	148	.74	-.12	.35	-.82	.58
	Equal variances not assumed			-.34	140.39	.74	-.12	.35	-.82	.58
Separation	Equal variances assumed	20.42	.00	2.44	148	.02	.75	.31	.14	1.35
	Equal variances not assumed			2.44	124.34	.02	.75	.31	.14	1.35
Domination	Equal variances assumed	.64	.43	-.29	148	.77	-.11	.37	-.83	.62
	Equal variances not assumed			-.29	147.87	.77	-.11	.37	-.83	.62
Submission	Equal variances assumed	11.04	.00	-.83	148	.41	-.39	.46	-1.30	.53
	Equal variances not assumed			-.83	139.90	.41	-.39	.46	-1.30	.53

Husbands in both marital setups were seen to be quite similar in frequency in the use of conflict resolution strategies like compromise, interactional reactivity, domination and submission. Commitment in a marital relationship requires prioritizing the union more than anything else. The couples encounter problems when they cannot agree on mutually satisfying compromises. It is clear from the mean scores that husbands in both marital setups make sincere efforts to do so effectively. Interactional reactivity and domination are typically used when one is focused on meeting his/her own needs rather than the needs of a partner, and thus tend to be associated with negative relational outcomes [15]. Low mean scores of husbands in both marital setups on these two strategies elicit their understanding of the tone of marital relationship whether the couple is physically together or not. Submission is linked with prioritizing the partner's welfare over one's own. This may help maintain relationship quality but not at the expense of either one's well being.

practicing separation strategy during conflicts might be that they appreciate the need of giving space and time to each other to contemplate over the issues. This introspection serves as an outlet for each of them to analyze their actions and come up with a solution for resolving the dispute.

A study reports higher emotional dependency of wives on husbands when wives were either unemployed or having educational qualification only up to 10th standard. [17]. However with education and employment opportunities offered equally to women, they have become more self-reliant and confident. Wives are breaking the social stigma behind maintaining separate residences with their husbands and managing work and personal relationships. However, literature indicates that job attributes play an important role in how well commuter couples manage work and family duties [18].

Fig. 4 elaborates mean scores of wives living apart from husbands and wives living together with husbands across different conflict resolution strategies. In Table 2, an independent sample t-test elicits significant ($p < .05$) difference among wives living apart from husbands and wives living together with husbands on certain conflict resolution strategies, viz., separation $\{t(148)=2.263; p=.025\}$; and avoidance $\{t(148)=-3.132; p=.002\}$. It is evident that wives living apart from husbands practiced separation as a conflict resolution strategy significantly higher than their counterparts from PC setup. In general, women are more attentive and skilful in comforting and caring [16]. The probable reason behind

On the contrary, wives living together with husbands practiced avoidance as a conflict resolution strategy significantly higher than their counterparts. A person is a sum total of his/her innate dispositions (which make up for his personality traits) and the experiences (environment in which one lives) in life. Avoidant behaviour may spring from traumatic experiences earlier in life, wherein one did not learn to manage anxiety and pressure of settling down the disequilibrium in life. Embracing conflict is important so that we may then move to next level which is figuring out how to work out our differences. It is the next level i.e, withdrawal that has a role to play in affecting negatively the dynamics of the relationship.

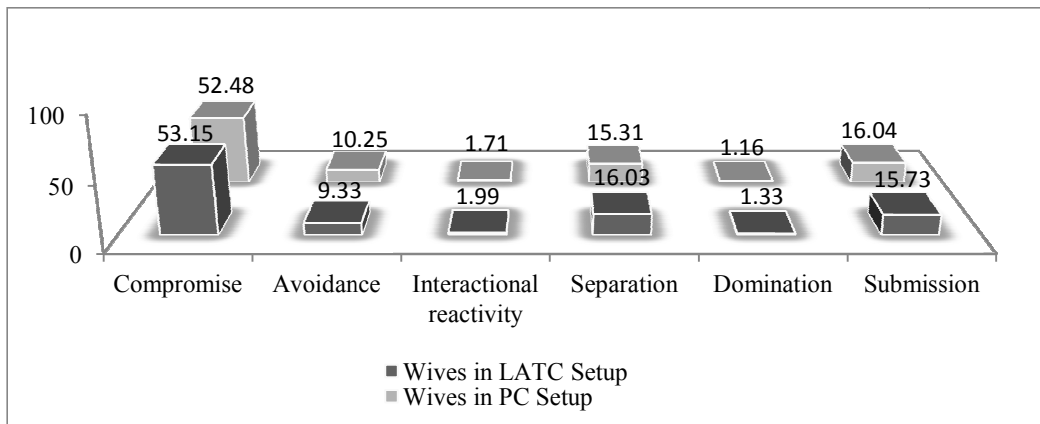


Fig. 4. Mean scores of wives from LATC and PC marital setup on conflict resolution strategies

Table 2. Statistical differences in mean scores of wives from LATC and PC marital setup on conflict resolution strategies

Independent Samples Test		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95percent Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Compromise	Equal variances assumed	15.28	.00	1.04	148	.30	.67	.64	-.60	1.93
	Equal variances not assumed			1.04	128.59	.30	.67	.64	-.61	1.94
Avoidance	Equal variances assumed	3.54	.06	-3.13	148	.00	-.92	.29	-1.50	-.34
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.13	146.68	.00	-.92	.29	-1.50	-.34
Interactional reactivity	Equal variances assumed	.09	.76	.66	148	.51	.28	.42	-.56	1.12
	Equal variances not assumed			.66	147.84	.51	.28	.42	-.56	1.12
Separation	Equal variances assumed	.84	.36	2.26	148	.02	.72	.32	.09	1.35
	Equal variances not assumed			2.26	146.65	.02	.72	.32	.09	1.35
Domination	Equal variances assumed	1.87	.17	.39	148	.70	.17	.45	-.71	1.06
	Equal variances not assumed			.39	108.71	.70	.17	.45	-.72	1.06
Submission	Equal variances assumed	.086	.77	-.69	148	.49	-.31	.45	-1.19	.57
	Equal variances not assumed			-.69	147.83	.49	-.31	.45	-1.19	.57

No significant difference was witnessed in strategies like compromise, interactional reactivity, domination and submission. Marital relationships thrive in the soil of dedication and compromise. However, continual submission and giving up of one's way of life may be detrimental to his/her health and for the partner as well. It is evident from the mean scores of wives in both marital setups that they are willing to be make adjustments for fostering stability and intimacy.

4. CONCLUSION

Marriage leads to significant transitions in one's life. Therefore, conflicts among the couple are inevitable. Mishandled and unresolved conflicts may compound stress and affect overall well being of an individual and his/her relationships. Couples in both marital setups have their unique

set of issues that moderate the quality of their relationship. Avoiding such issues and conflicts is a very unproductive approach. Chalking out effective strategies to resolve them is essentially a constructive process providing opportunities for understanding and growth.

The findings of this study are likely to have important implications for how relationship counsellors and therapists view, assess, and help couples achieve more positive relationship outcomes. Future research could focus on replicating the study on a larger sample.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, respondents' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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