Interpersonal Conflict Resolution: Differences Across Sex and Socially Established Gender

Abby Ramon
Lindenwood University

Interpersonal Conflict Resolution:

Differences Across Sex and Socially Established Gender

Abby Ramon

The purpose of this study was to examine, compare, and contrast how men and women handle conflict in romantic interpersonal relationships. The purpose was also to examine the relationship between people's particular ways of responding and their levels of masculinity and femininity, as measured by a modified version of the Bem Sex Role Inventory. Eighty-two participants between the ages of 18 and 55 were recruited for this study. They were all asked to fill out a personality inventory and two questionnaires, both of which consisted of a hypothetical conflict scenario and questions for the participant to answer. The data were analyzed using a MANOVA, Pearson correlations, and descriptive statistics. The MANOVA yielded non-significant findings, with one approaching significance. The Pearson correlations indicated either no correlation or small correlations.

Garnering continued research interest is the topic of conflict in interpersonal romantic relationships. Previous research has investigated the extent to which significant differences exist in how men and women approach and handle this type of conflict. Although extensive research has been conducted to explore components of this type of conflict in relation to sex and gender, findings often create further questions for investigation, or they may yield conflicting results (Aylor & Dainton, 2004; Neff &Harter, 2002). In order to understand and be able to maintain healthy relationships, these questions should be investigated. The area of conflict in romantic relationships under investigation in the present study involves conflict resolution and how it may vary according to sex and social gender roles. There were three

parts to the purpose, specifically: to examine differences in the way men and women rate their inclinations to solve a hypothetical, interpersonal romantic conflict scenario; to examine these same differences according to socially established gender, as opposed to a person's biological sex; and to examine individuals reasons for resolving or not resolving conflicts.

Previous research has suggested that women think about and approach conflict differently than men do (Tannen, 1990). As suggested by Tannen (1990), women are more oriented to connectedness and affiliation with others; therefore, conflict is seen as threatening and undesirable. Conversely, conflict for men is likely to be seen as a method for gaining status or demonstrating power; therefore, conflict for men is not as threatening. Following this assertion, one is provided with a good rationale for the first purpose of examining differences in the way men and women approach and handle conflict.

These differences were not only examined across biological sex. The second part of the purpose involved examining these differences across socially established gender in terms of a person's given score of masculinity, as measured by a modified version of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (1971).

As indicated by Aylor and Dainton (2004), current research seems to indicate more and more that differences in maintenance strategies in relationships may be more a function of socially established gender roles than biological sex of a person. This finding is relevant to the present study if we consider that conflict resolution may be a type of maintenance strategy. Therefore, *conflict resolution* might be more a function of socially established gender than biological sex. Thus, the importance of including a measure of femininity and masculinity is highlighted.

In addition to the two parts of the purpose stated above, the third part involved examining, in an open-ended form, individual's reasons for resolving or not resolving conflicts. A study conducted by Neff and Harter (2002) indicated that reasons for resolving and not resolving conflict did not vary significantly according to a person's sex. The researcher of the present study was interested in conducting a similar exploratory investigation to determine the frequencies of the reasons people provided for resolving and not resolving conflict.

Others have also conducted research to examine men and women's responses when faced with a romantic conflict. El-Sheikh, Buckhalt, and Reiter (2000) discussed that women have been found to confront and talk about feelings in conflict, while men tend to withdraw and deny. Conversely, other studies have also found that men may be less avoidant than women (Duane as cited in El-Sheikh et al., 2000) and may use more direct strategies of approaching conflict (Ohbuchi & Baba as cited in El-Sheikh et al., 2000). El-Sheikh et al (2000) found that, in general, conflict had a greater impact on women than men. These conflicting findings illustrate the subjectivity and difficulty in interpreting results in this area of research.

A study conducted by Zuroff and Duncan (1999) also examined men and women's responses to romantic conflict. Zuroff and Duncan examined the relationship between these responses and the self-criticism of individuals and found that, for women but not for men, there was a positive relationship between self-criticism and greater overt hostility displayed during conflict. These findings might suggest that perhaps women tend to confront and talk about feelings more (El-Sheikh et al., 2000) according to their levels of self-criticism.

In regard to the purpose of examining person's inclinations to solve an interpersonal romantic conflict, I expected to find significant differences in the way men and women rated themselves, when faced with a hypothetical scenario, on the following: 1) their inclination to initiate action to solve the conflict, 2) their inclination to let their partner initiate action to solve the conflict, and 3) their indication of how soon they would initiate the action. Because of conflicting previous findings and subjectivity of interpretations, I did not include a specific direction for this hypothesis.

In addition to my expectation of significant differences in the proposed area according to sex, I also expected to find that the same differences would be found according to gender roles, specifically, a persons score on a modified version of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (1971). Furthermore, I expected the differences found across the factor of gender to be stronger than the differences found across the factor of sex.

Finally, my expectations for the findings corresponding to the differences in reasons for resolving and not resolving conflicts were less resolute. Because of previous findings I was uncertain as to how the frequencies of the reasons provided by men would compare to the frequencies of the reasons provided by women.

To carry out the study, participants were asked to fill out demographic questionnaires. Also, to measure the variables of interest according to social gender, participants were asked to fill out a personality inventory which indicated their levels of masculinity. Participants were also asked to read two hypothetical, romantic conflict scenarios for which they would answer questions concerning the variables of interest.

Method

Participants

Eighty-two participants were recruited for this research study. Forty participants were men and forty-two were women. These persons were volunteers recruited through the Lindenwood University Human Subject Pool and from the Greater St. Charles and St. Louis area. The participants were recruited completely by the researcher and were of different ethnic backgrounds but predominantly Caucasian, 75.6%. The participants were between the ages of 18 and 55. The mode age was 19 years, and the required minimum age was eighteen. Approximately 96% of people had been involved in a romantic relationship before, and 57% of people were involved in romantic relationship at the time they completed the study. Compensation was given to participants recruited through the LU Human Subject Pool in the form of extra credit in their principles classes in the social sciences. Participants recruited outside of the HSP did not receive any tangible compensation for participating in this research study.

Materials

A Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix A) was used to gain some general information about the people participating in this study. The questionnaire consisted of five questions for which participants voluntarily denoted sex, age, ethnic background, whether they had ever been involved in a romantic relationship, and whether they were currently involved in a romantic relationship.

A personality inventory (Appendix B) was also used, consisting of 30 personality characteristics on which participants were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1 (never or almost never true) to 7 (almost always true). This personality inventory was a modified

version of the Bem Sex Role Inventory. The inventory was modified for length purposes. The original inventory contains 60 items total, which was considered too lengthy for this study. The personality characteristics included characteristics that are typically deemed more feminine and characteristics that are typically deemed more masculine. The inventory also included characteristics that are considered to be neutral.

The study was conducted in a lab room for participants recruited through the Lindenwood Human Subject Pool. For participants recruited outside the Lindenwood HSP, the study was conducted in public places in the Greater St. Charles and St. Louis area.

Each participant was given two hypothetical interpersonal romantic conflict scenarios (Appendix C). The order in which scenarios 1 and 2 were given to participants were alternated for every participant to counterbalance for any order effects. Conflict Scenario One consisted of a hypothetical interpersonal romantic conflict situation at the top of the page. Below were five questions asking participants to either rate their given behavior of the question or to write an open-ended response on their given behavior of the question. Conflict Scenario Two consisted of a different hypothetical interpersonal romantic conflict situation from scenario one at the top of the page. The questions below Conflict Scenario Two were the same as for Conflict Scenario One. The conflict scenarios constructed were not standardized, but rather created by the researcher. Both scenarios involved mildly serious situations possible of being encountered in everyday life.

Procedure

Each participant was tested individually or in small groups of no more than five people. The procedure took approximately 10 to 15 minutes. Informed consent was obtained from the participant by the researcher using an Informed Consent Form that both the

researcher and participant signed. The researcher handed the participant a Demographic Questionnaire (Appendix A) and asked him or her to answer all the questions voluntarily as he or she chose. When the participant was done, the researcher collected the questionnaire. The researcher then handed the participant the Personality Inventory (Appendix B) and asked him or her to rate him or herself on each item 1-7 (1 being "never" or "almost never true" and 7 being "almost always true"). When the participant was done with the inventory, the researcher collected it and handed him or her one of the Conflict Scenarios, the order of which was counterbalanced. The participant was instructed to read the hypothetical scenario at the top of the page and then answer the five questions that followed. The researcher then reiterated to the participants that they were not at all obligated to answer any questions with which they did not feel comfortable or did not want to answer. When the participant was done with the first Conflict Scenario, the researcher collected it and handed the participant second Conflict Scenario. The order in which the scenarios were given to the participants alternated with every participant. The researcher told the participant that the instructions were the same. When the participant was done with the second Conflict Scenario, the researcher collected it. The researcher then handed the participant a Feedback Letter informing him or her of the rationale and purpose of the study, while also explaining these items verbally. The researcher then answered any questions the participants had. Finally, the researcher thanked the participant for his or her contribution and informed him or her that the procedure was complete.

Results

The data were analyzed using a one-way Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA), Pearson Correlations, and descriptive methods. The one-way MANOVA was

used to analyze the potential differences in men and women's ratings of their inclinations to solve conflict. In other words, the MANOVA was used to analyze the variables of interest according to biological sex. A pearson correlation was used to analyze the relationship between individuals' scores of masculinity and their ratings of their inclinations to solve conflict. Thus, the pearson correlations were used to examine the variables of interest across socially established gender. A content analysis and descriptive statistics were used to analyze the reasons given for resolving and not resolving conflicts.

Differences Across Sex

A one-way MANOVA indicated that there was no significant sex difference in the way men and women rated their inclinations to solve conflict. Therefore, this finding did not support the research hypothesis. Specifically, there were no significant differences in the following: peoples' inclinations to initiate action to solve conflict, their inclinations to let their partner initiate the action, and how soon they would initiate action $F(6, 70) = 1.507$, p = .189. There did appear to be a component of this that seemed to approach significance. The mean for women's ratings of how soon they would initiate action, $M = 2.85$, might indicate a greater urgency to initiate action than the mean for men, $M = 4.42$. The ratings were on a scale of 1-10, with the lower the rating, the greater the urgency indicated.

Differences Across Socially Established Gender

In order to determine a person's socially established gender according to his or her level of masculinity, their ratings on the personality inventory (Appendix B) for both masculine traits and feminine traits were totaled. The ratings were on a scale of $1 - 7$. For pragmatic reasons, the order of the numbers on the scale for feminine traits was reversed to

allow the researcher to give participants one composite score rather than two different scores. These scores for socially established gender were on a continuous scale.

Pearson correlations indicated that there was either virtually no correlation or a small correlation between peoples' socially established genders and their inclinations to solve conflict. Again, the research hypothesis was not substantially supported. For scenario 1, the correlation between level of masculinity and rating of initiating action was $r = -.007$; the correlation between level of masculinity and rating of letting partner initiate the action was $r = .169$; the correlation between level of masculinity and how soon one would initiate the action was $r = -.005$. For scenario 2, the correlation between level of masculinity and rating of initiating action was $r = .074$; the correlation between level of masculinity and rating of letting partner initiate the action was $r = .053$; the correlation between level of masculinity and rating of how soon one would initiate the action was $r = .024$.

Reasons For Resolving and Not Resolving

The reasons given for resolving and not resolving conflicts were about the same for men and women. For choosing to resolve the conflict, the reasons were placed in one of the following categories: blank or uncodable, personal concern, concern for other, relationship concern, or other. For choosing not to resolve the conflict, the reasons were placed in one of the following categories: blank or uncodable, low importance, personal concern, concern for other, relationship concern, avoid conflict or confrontation, or other. Each scenario asked participants to give their reasons for resolving and not resolving. Therefore, for each participant there were four answers that needed to be content analyzed and put into the corresponding categories.

In scenario 1, for choosing to resolve conflict, the most frequent reason was relationship concern for both men, 42.5%, and women, 35.7%. The second most frequent reason for choosing to resolve was personal concern for both men, 25%, and women, 26.2%. In scenario 1, for choosing *not* to resolve, the most frequent reason was blank or uncodable for both men, 37.5%, and women, 33.3%. The second most frequent reason for men was low importance, 22.5%. The second most frequent reason for women was personal concern, 21.4%.

In scenario 2, for choosing to resolve conflict, the most frequent reason was personal concern for both men, 35%, and women, 42.9%. The second most frequent reason for men was blank or uncodable, 30%. The second most frequent reason for women was relationship concern, 33.3%. Also in scenario 2, for choosing *not* to resolve conflict, the most frequent reason for men was low importance, 32.5%. The most frequent reason for women was blank or uncodable, 35.7%. The second most frequent reason for both men and women was the reverse of the previous. That is, for men, the second most frequent reason was blank or uncodable, 30%, and the second most frequent reason for women was low importance, 23.8%.

Discussion

The findings of this research study did not support the expectations of the researcher in that there would be significant differences in the way men and women handle interpersonal romantic conflict. The findings suggest that perhaps the way people handle interpersonal romantic conflict may not depend on whether that person is a man or a woman. The one component that seemed to approach significance involved how soon a person would initiate action, with women reporting a greater urgency. One might speculate that an

increased sample size might have resulted in this finding being significant. If such was the case, then one conclusion that could be reached would be that women will typically initiate action to resolve a conflict sooner than men will. These findings could be explained in the context of Tannen's writings (1990). If women reported a greater urgency to resolve conflict, this could be because women are more oriented to stay connected and affiliated with others. But, this could also contradict literature that states that women are more avoidant than men when it comes to conflict (Duane as cited in El-Sheikh et al., 2000). The non-significant findings for the first hypothesis could also have been partially due to unanticipated ambiguities in the survey questions or the scale of measurement. Perhaps if a different scale was used, it would have been easier for participants to determine what level of a given rating corresponded to what number.

The findings for the second hypothesis (differences across socially established gender) suggest that the way people handle interpersonal romantic conflict does not depend on peoples' levels of masculinity. Thus, the responses given by those low, average, and high in masculinity vary equally when compared to each other. This finding contradicts that of previous research conducted by Aylor and Dainton (2004). The reason for this contradictory finding might involve the measurement used to determine participants' levels of masculinity. The modified version of the Bem Sex Role Inventory might not have been adequate and valid enough to capture a true score of masculinity. The Bem Sex Role Inventory has also received substantial criticism over time since its introduction; therefore, in future studies it would be wise to use a measure that is less criticized to be adequately reliable and valid.

Although there were mainly no correlations between levels of masculinity and how people handled conflict, there was a small positive correlation between level of masculinity

and the rating of letting one's partner initiate action, indicating that the more masculine an individual was, the more they were likely to let their partner initiate the action to resolve the conflict. These results possibly contradict previous findings that suggest men are less avoidant about conflict and that they are more likely than women to use more direct strategies of resolving (Duane as cited in El-Sheikh et al., 2000), as opposed to passive ways of resolving as found by the present study.

The findings for the reasons given concerning resolving and not resolving conflict also indicated that men and women's responses varied about equally when compared to each other. This finding yielded similar results to the study conducted by Neff and Harter (2002), which also found no significant differences for reasons given across sex. For future studies, it would be a good extension to examine reasons across socially established gender. This examination was attempted in this study not to examine a specific purpose or hypothesis, but because of a concomitant interest from the other findings. An interesting finding was that for one of the scenarios, for choosing not to resolve the conflict, individuals high in masculinity were more likely to give reasons that fell into the low importance category than were individuals of low masculinity.

It is important to be aware of the limitations existing in the present study when considering the results. One of the unanticipated limitations of the present study involved ambiguity of some of the survey questions. Other limitations included an inherent difficulty in interpreting the subjective findings that are involved in this area of research and the use of only one rater to classify reasons into categories. Pilot testing of the questionnaires to ensure that they are sensitive enough to capture any differences and the use of several raters for content analyses would be important to add to future studies. As highlighted by much

research, the area of interpersonal romantic conflict is one that is prevalent in all societies

and transcends all cultures. Therefore, it is important to continue research in this area.

References

Aylor, B., & Dainton, M. (2004). Biological sex and psychological gender as predictors

of routine and strategic relational maintenance. *Sex Roles*, 50.

El-Sheikh, M., Buckhalt, J., & Reiter, S. (2000). Gender-related effects in emotional

responding to resolved and unresolved interpersonal conflict. *Sex Roles*, 43.

Neff, K., & Harter, S. (2002). The authenticity of conflict resolutions among adult

couples: Does women's other-oriented behavior reflect their true selves? *Sex

Roles*, 47.

Tannen, D. (1990). *You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation.* New

York, NY: Ballantine Books.

Zuroff, D., & Duncan, N. (1999). Self-criticism and conflict resolution in romantic

couples. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*, 31.

Appendix A

Demographic Questionnaire for Conflict Resolution

1. Age:

2. Sex: (circle one) male   female

3. Ethnic background:_circle

     American Indian or Alaska Native

     Hispanic or Latino

     Asian

     White

     Black or African American

     Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

     Other:

4. Have you ever been involved in a romantic relationship? (circle one)

     yes   no   not sure

5. Are you currently involved in a romantic relationship? (circle one)

     yes   no   not sure

Appendix B
Personality Inventory

Rate yourself on each item, on a scale of 1 (never or almost never true) to 7 (almost always true).

1. self-reliant	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. yielding	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. helpful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. defends own beliefs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. cheerful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. moody	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. independent	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. shy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. conscientious	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. athletic	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. affectionate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. theatrical	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13. assertive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. flatterable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15. happy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16. strong personality	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17. loyal	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18. unpredictable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
19. forceful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
20. feminine	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
21. reliable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
22. analytical	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
23. sympathetic	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
24. jealous	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
25. leadership ability	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
26. sensitive to others' needs	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
27. truthful	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
28. willing to take risks	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
29. understanding	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
30. secretive	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Appendix C

Conflict Scenario # 1

Suppose you are one of the people in a romantic relationship. You have a very good friend with whom you like to spend a lot of time. Your friend is with you some of the time that you are also with your partner. Your partner expresses to you that he or she thinks your friend is around too much when it should be time just for the two of you (you and your partner). You do not agree with him or her and the two of you argue about the matter. You end the argument on unresolved terms.

A. On a scale of 1-10, indicate how much you would be inclined to initiate action to resolve this conflict (1 being very inclined and 10 being very disinclined).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

B. On a scale of 1-10, indicate how much you would be inclined to let the other person involved initiate action to resolve this conflict (1being very inclined and 10 being very un-inclined).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

C. On a scale of 1-10, indicate how soon you would initiate action to resolve this conflict (1 being very soon and 10 being as late as possible).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 Check here if you would not initiate action ____-

D. If you were to choose to resolve this conflict, what would be your reasoning?

E. If you were to choose not to resolve this conflict, what would be your reasoning?

F. On a scale of 1-10, indicate how serious you were imagining this conflict to be (1 being very serious and 10 being not serious at all).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10