

## Conflict Areas and Conflict Resolution Strategies of College Students with Friends and Romantic Partners

### Arkadařlık ve Romantik İliřkilerinde Üniversite Öğrencilerinin Yařadıkları Çatıřmalar ve Kullandıkları Çatıřma Çözme Stratejileri\*

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#### *Abstract*

The purpose of this study is to explore the major conflicts college students experience with their friends and romantic partners, and to investigate whether conflict resolution strategies vary as a function of the relationships in which the conflicts occur. A total of 19 undergraduate students majoring in Psychological Counseling and Guidance (PCG) volunteered to take part in the study. Data was collected using the unstructured diary format method. Content analysis is used to examine two-week diary entries. Regarding the first aim of this study, *disagreements in academic work* received the highest percentage between friends. In addition, *jealousy* was the highest conflicting theme between romantic partners. Regarding the second aim of this study, findings suggested that participants used constructive strategies more frequently with romantic partners than with friends. The results were discussed using the conflict resolution and social exchange theory.

*Keywords:* Conflict, conflict resolution strategy, late adolescence, relationship types and social exchange theory.

#### *Öz*

Bu çalışmanın amacı, üniversite öğrencilerinin arkadař ve romantik partnerleri ile yařadıkları ana çatıřma konularını belirlemek ve kullandıkları çatıřma çözme stratejilerinin iliřki türüne göre farklılık gösterip göstermediđini arařtırmaktır. Bu çalışmanın örneklemi, Psikolojik Danıřma ve Rehberlik (PDR) bölümünde okumakta olan gönüllü 19 lisans öğrencisinden olmuřtur. Veriler, yapılandırılmamıř anı yazımı yöntemi ile toplanmıřtır. İki hafta boyunca tutulan anılar, içerik çözümlemesi yöntemi ile analiz edilmiřtir. Bu çalışmanın ilk amacına iliřkin olarak, arkadař ile yařanılan çatıřmalarda en yüksek oranda akademik anlaşmazlık; romantik partner ile kıskançlık ana çatıřma konusu olarak bulunmuřtur. İkinci amaca iliřkin olarak ise, olumlu çatıřma çözümleme stratejilerinin romantik partnerle yařanan çatıřmalarda sıklıkla kullanıldıđı bulunmuřtur. Bulgular, çatıřma çözme ve sosyal deđiřim kuramları bağlamında tartıřılmıřtır.

*Anahtar Sözcükler:* Çatıřma, çatıřma çözümleme stratejileri, geç ergenlik, iliřki türleri ve sosyal deđiřim teorisi.

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## Introduction

Although conflict was accepted as destructive in early research, recent literature has suggested that conflict is neither destructive nor something which can be avoided (Blake & Mouton, 1970; Deutsch, 1991; Thomas, 1976). Conflict is experienced whenever “incompatible activities exist” (Deutsch, 1991). In dyadic relationships, conflict arises as a result of discrepancies between the desired and actual behavior of relationship partners (Fehr, 1996; Samter & Cupach, 1998). Studies also discuss the positive potential of conflict in interpersonal development (Weinstock & Bond, 2000). Even, Hayes (1985) suggests that “the potential for conflict increases as relationships progress” (cited in Sheets & Lugar, 2005, p.384). Richey and Richey (1980) found that “most college students have quarreled with at least one of their friends” (cited in Sheets & Lugar, 2005, p.384). Professionals working in university counseling centers have revealed that difficulties between friends, roommates and romantic partners are a main reason for student populations seeking their services in the first place (Creasey, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999). It may sound contradictory that the experience of conflict accentuates interpersonal development. However, understanding the ways in which conflicts are managed could enlighten this discrepancy. Scholars argue that the ways in which conflicts are managed could have positive and negative effects on relationships and also on the continuation of these relationships. Conflict literature suggests that certain resolution strategies are constructive, such as problem solving, communicating and collaborating, and indeed produce positive results, while others are destructive, such as forcing, avoiding and accommodating (Johnson & Johnson, 1996). Five conflict resolution strategies, namely forcing (an attempt to force one’s viewpoint on the other party), avoiding (an attempt to withdraw from the conflict), accommodating (a strategy when an individual gives up his/her own need and conforms what the other wants), compromising (based on bargaining and finding a middle ground solution), and collaborating (effective problem solving activities so that all parties can achieve mutually satisfying conclusions to the dispute) are widely used in conflict management literature (Deutsch, 1994; Johnson & Johnson, 1996; Thomas, 1976).

Studies suggest that certain characteristics of conflict, such as duration, content, intensity and the number of people involved, have a determining effect on conflict resolution strategies used by individuals (Deutsch, 1994). In this study we aimed to elaborate the structure of the relationships in which conflicts occur. In other words, we first wanted to discover to what extent, if any, the structure of relationships determine the conflict resolution strategies used by individuals in dyadic conflicts. Secondly, we wanted to know how the structure of relationships determines the type of interpersonal conflicts.

According to Social Exchange Theory (Levinger, 1983; Laursen & Collins, 1994; Shanz & Hartup, 1992), closeness and openness are two important dimensions of relationships which determine the conflict behaviors in interpersonal conflicts (cited in Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2000). According to Levinger (1983), Laursen and Collins (1994), and Shantz and Hartup (1992) the *closeness* of a relationship refers to “the degree of interdependence between two individuals when they are motivated to achieve their personal goals” (cited in Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2000, p. 924). More interdependent relationships require higher coordination of the goals by individuals (Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2000). On the other hand, *openness* refers to “the perceived availability of alternative relationships and how easily the relationship is disturbed, changed, and or ended” (Kelley, 1979; Levinger, 1983; Shantz & Hartup, 1992, cited in Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2000, p. 924). Therefore, voluntary (open) relationships can be disrupted more easily (Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2000).

Relationships with friends, especially with close friends and romantic partners, are both interdependent and open. Due to the interdependent and open structure of relationships between friends and romantic partners, it can be predicted that individuals will attempt to prevent the negative consequences of conflicts by resolving them constructively and thus maintaining the benefits of such relationships where each partner need (Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2000).

Contradictory results exist in the literature supporting social exchange theory, in which constructive resolution strategies, such as compromising and collaborating, are expected to be used more frequently with open (voluntary) relationships than with closed relationships. Supporting results of an unpublished study by Kiralp, Dincyurek, and Beidoglu (2009) revealed that college students used forcing strategies (destructive) more often with their mothers than with romantic partners, friends or close friends; accommodating strategies (destructive) more often with their fathers than with their close friends and friends; and collaborating strategies (constructive) more often with their romantic partners than with their friends. However, young adolescents reported more frequent use of verbal insults with friends than with parents (Jensen-Campell & Graziano, 2000) and no evidence was found of the differential use of negotiation in conflict with friends versus conflict with parents or siblings (Graziano et. al., 1996; Jensen-Campell et. al., 1996). Subsequent research has speculated that the similar results might come from the typical power difference between parents and children and that the young adolescents were not fully able to understand that conflicts in open relationships pose a more serious threat to their continuation than in closed relationships (Clark & Grote, 1998; Clark & Taraband, 1991; Rusbult et. al., 1991).

In this study we chose late adolescents because developmentally they are expected to understand that the destructive strategies of conflict resolution is a treat to the continuation of the relationship. (In this study) we aimed to examine conflicts experienced between friends and romantic partners. These relationships were chosen for three reasons. Firstly, because literature suggests that best friends and romantic partners are two groups of important social contacts in college students' environment (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Furman & Wehner, 1994; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Sullivan, 1953) which contribute to managing social relationships in the stage of late adolescence. Secondly, because late adolescents mostly experience daily encounters with friends and romantic partners (Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Furman & Wehner, 1994; Hazan & Shaver, 1994). And thirdly because both relationship types are considered open (voluntary) and interdependent, but to varying degrees. Relationships with romantic partners are expected to be more interdependent than those with friends due to the higher degree of intimacy and affect. Relationships with romantic partner are expected to be more intimate and affectionate. Additionally, we specifically did not include conflicts with parents even though they are an example of open relationships in order to eliminate possible power differences between parents and late adolescents. For the purpose of the present study, we expected that late adolescents would use constructive conflict strategies (compromising and collaborating) more frequently with romantic partners than with friends because relationships with romantic partner are relatively more interdependent but still open.

The purpose of the present study is to determine the main conflict issues (types of conflicts) which college students experience with their friends and romantic partners in Turkish Cypriot culture, and to examine whether the structure of relationships has a determining effect on the conflict resolution strategies used by college students. This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main conflict issues which college students experience with their friends and romantic partners?
2. Do college students' conflict resolution strategies vary as a function of the relationships within which the conflicts occur?

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants were 19 undergraduate students (3 male and 16 female) majoring in Psychological Counseling and Guidance (PCG) program from two of the larger universities

in North Cyprus. The participants ranged in age from 20 to 22 years ( $M=21$ ,  $SD=.97$ ). Students who were Turkish Cypriot in origin and enrolled counseling classes in both universities were given a brief explanation of the study and asked for volunteers. As Burgoon, Dillard, Doran, and Miller (1982); Hirokawa and Miyahara (1986); Itoi, Ohbuchi, and Fukuno (1996); Ohbuchi and Takahashi (1994) and Trubisky, Ting-Toomey, and Lin (1991) discuss, people in individualistic and collectivist cultures prefer using different tactics for resolving conflicts (cited in Ohbuchi, Fukushima, & Tedeschi, 1999). Therefore in this study we aimed to get data concerning only Turkish Cypriots to be able to discuss the results with respect to Cypriot culture. Thus, criterion sampling strategy of purposful sampling was used. "The logic of criterion sampling is to review and study all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance" (Patton, 1990, p. 176). "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (Patton, 1990, p. 169). Additionally, volunteerism was also thought to be necessity in this study because, as it is explained in procedure, diary method which was used to collect data is time consuming and requires commitement (Symon, 2004).

#### *Data Collection*

In the present study, a diary method is used to collect data. The methodology of this study differs from other conflict studies in several respects. Most of the previous studies on conflict used self-report, paper-and-pencil questionnaires or vignettes to collect data (Laursen & Collins, 1994). These methods are mostly involved in hypothetical conflicts and examined preferred strategies rather than actual. "Responses to vignettes may not predict how the same individual will react to in vivo conflicts" (Graziano, 1987; Graziano, Hair & Finch, 1997; Greenberg & Folger, 1988, cited in Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2001, p.330). However, in the diary method participants work with naturally occurring interpersonal conflicts (Symon, 2004; Reis & Wheeler, 1991, cited in Jensen-Campbell & Graziano, 2001) and report what has been rather than what would, could or should have been. As Symon (2004) puts it, "diary study allows access to individuals' ongoing everyday behaviors in a relatively unobtrusive manner, which allows the immediacy of the experience to be captured, and also provides accounts of phenomena over time" (p.98).

Participants were asked to keep diaries for two weeks providing detailed explanation of conflicts they had with their friends and romantic partners and the ways in which they managed these conflicts. Diary booklets were prepared by the researchers. The cover included questions such as pseudonym, age, gender, college major, and the year of study of the participants. The first page included a short definition of interpersonal conflict and conceptual explanations of different ways of handling conflicts. No implication was made regarding the destructive or constructive nature of resolution strategies. Several common examples were given as interpersonal conflicts in order to provide understanding of the idea that conflict did not only involve fighting or arguing. The rest of the diary included sufficient empty sheets for participants to record actual daily conflicts with their friends and romantic partners and the ways in which they managed them. We decided to use an unstructured diary format method (Symon, 2004) because we wanted participants to write as they wished and felt. Qualitative diaries (unstructured) as opposed to structured and quantitative measures "allow the respondent to record subjective perceptions of phenomena of relevance to themselves at that point in time" (Symon, 2004, p.99). The only item printed on each page was a box at the top to make sure that participants included the date and marked the relationship types of the conflicting party.

#### *Procedure*

Each researcher first explained the aim of the study and asked for volunteers. Since the study was to use the diary method, which was time consuming (Symon, 2004), each researcher explained what was expected from the participants so that the students understood what their responsibility was before volunteering. Students were asked to make their decisions in a week and put their names and phone numbers on a list if they wanted to participate to the study. After

a week, each researcher called the students who volunteered and arranged a group meeting. During the initial meeting, each researcher explained the purpose of the study and explained what conflict was and answered questions from the participants to make sure that they understood how they were expected to keep the diary. Participants were asked to make entries in their diaries every night, preferably just before they went to bed. As Symon (2004) reported, it was useful to specify a particular time for the entries. The participants were not required to write anything unless they encountered conflict during the day. It was explained to participants that their diaries were personal and would be kept confidential. They were asked to select a pseudonym for themselves and for each person they reported. After the two week period, participants handed in their diaries.

#### *Data Analysis*

Content analysis was used to analyze diary entries for each problem question. Content analysis involves “establishing categories and then counting the number of instances when those categories are used in a particular item of text” (Silverman, 1993, p.59). For both research questions, we coded the latent content in which we intended to determine the underlying meaning of what was written (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003 ).

Data analysis proceeded as follows. For the first research question: (1) The second and the third researchers read the diaries individually. (2) Each conflict was analyzed as “meaning unit”, defined as “a segment of text that is comprehensible by itself and contains one idea, episode, or pieces of information” (Tesch, 1990, p.116, cited in Gustafsson et al., 2008) and then both researchers met and discussed their interpretations. (3) The meaning units were labeled with codes (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The labels were taken directly from the text that appeared to capture the key thoughts or concepts. (4) Codes were grouped under content categories which emerged from the codes. (5) The content categories were discussed (by the researchers) using both the content analysis and literature. (6) Finally, we produced 9 content categories for conflicts with friends and 7 with romantic partners.

For the second research question, we used priory coding method (Saldana, 2009). Categories used were; forcing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, collaborating, as defined by Thomas (1976). (1) The second and the third researchers read the journals individually. (2) They analyzed the entries for “meaning units. (3) Then the meaning units were labeled with codes (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Initially, the labels were taken directly from the text that appeared to capture key thoughts or concepts. To promote reflexivity (Marshall & Rossman, 2006), the researchers discussed their interpretations and the second researcher acted as critical friend, “discussing alternative explanations of the interpretations to promote reflection and find potential bias” (cited in Gustafsson, et al., 2008, p, 806). (4) The initial codes were grouped into 5 predetermined categories which were defined by Thomas’ criteria (1976). Disagreements regarding the content categories were discussed between the researchers and a mutual consent was reached. Inter-coder reliability was found .77. After this, the categories were placed into two predetermined themes: constructive (compromising and collaborating) and destructive (forcing, avoiding, and accommodating) (Deutsch, 1994).

### Results

A total of 19 diaries were analyzed. A total of 121 conflict incidents were reported in the diaries; 56 were between friends and 65 were between romantic partners.

Research Question 1: What are the main conflict issues which college students experience with their friends and romantic partners?

Table 1 consists of the data regarding the first research question.

Table 1.  
*Frequencies and Percentages of conflicts categories*

Categories of Conflicts with friends	f	%	Categories of Conflicts with romantic partner	f	%
Academic work disagreements	17	30.35	Jealousy	30	46.15
Verbal insults	12	21.42	Differences in opinions	16	24.61
Differences in opinions	10	17.85	Lack of caring	9	13.84
Keeping promises	7	12.5	Keeping promises	4	6.15
Jealousy	5	8.92	Academic work disagreements	3	4.61
Keeping secrets	2	3.57	Lack of responsibility	2	3.07
Abandonment	1	1.78	Verbal Insult	1	1.53
Loan refusal	1	1.78			
Telling lies	1	1.78			
Total	56		Total	65	

As Table 1 indicates (conflicts with friends), 30.35% of the conflicts were related to academic work disagreements; 21.42% with verbal insults; and 17.85% with differences in opinions. On the other hand (conflicts with romantic partners), 46.15% of the conflicts involved jealousy; 24.61% involved differences of opinion; and 13.84% involved lack of caring.

Research Question 2: Do college students' conflict resolution strategies vary as a function of the relationships within which the conflicts occur?

Table 2 consists of the data regarding the first research question.

Table 2.  
*Frequencies and Percentages of Conflict Resolution Strategies used by college students*

Strategy categories	Friends		Romantic partners	
	f	%	f	%
Forcing	26	46.42	31	47.69
Avoiding	17	30.35	14	21.53
Accommodating	7	12.5	11	16.92
Compromising	5	8.92	6	9.23
Collaborating	1	1.76	3	4.61
Total incidents	56		65	

As Table 2 indicates, the results of this study reveal that college students used the forcing strategy in 47.69% of their conflicts with romantic partners and in 46.42% of conflicts with their friends. The avoiding strategy was used in 21.53% of their conflicts with their romantic partners and in 30.35% of conflicts with their friends. The accommodating strategy was used in 16.92%

of their conflicts with their romantic partners and in 12.5% of conflicts with their friends. The compromising strategy was used in 9.23 % of their conflicts with their romantic partners and in 8.92% of conflicts their friends. The collaborating strategy was used in 4.61% of their conflicts with their romantic partners and in 1.76% of conflicts with their friends.

The results also reveal that college students used constructive strategies (compromising and collaborating) in 13.84% of conflicts with romantic partners and in 10.68% of conflicts with friends, whereas destructive strategies (forcing, avoiding, and accommodating) were used in 86.14% of conflicts with romantic partners and in 89.27% of conflicts with friends.

### Discussion

This 2-week diary study had two aims: to explore the main conflict issues which college students experience with their friends and romantic partners, and to investigate whether college students' conflict resolution strategies vary as a function of the relationships within which the conflicts occur.

Regarding the first aim of this study, *disagreements in academic work* received the highest percentage between friends, followed by verbal insults, differences in opinions, and keeping promises. On the other hand, *jealousy* was the highest conflicting theme between romantic partners, followed by differences in opinion and *lack of caring*.

We could not find any data related to late adolescents and their conflict issues in the literature. The literature mostly involves dating and roommate conflicts with respect to college students. Various studies, using the primary, middle and high school sample, found that put-downs, insults and academic work conflicts (Carruthers & Sweeney, 1996), name calling and spreading rumors for junior high schools (Theberge & Karan, 2004), and swearing and fighting for elementary schools (Turnuklu & Sahin, 2002), physical violence, verbal violence, learning environment, communication problems for middle schools (Turnuklu & Sahin, 2004), physical aggression or fighting, playground disputes, access or possession conflicts, put-downs and insults, and academic work conflicts for elementary schools (Johnson & Johnson, 1994) were the most frequently experienced conflicts. However, studies on friendship may provide an explanation of the findings in this study. Studies exploring friendship rules suggested that "friends were expected to accept each other as is, including outside relationships and activities, without interference" (Sheets & Lugar, 2005, p. 382) This is called the boundaries of relationship (boundary rule). It seems that the participants of this study, specifically in romantic relationships, experience difficulties meeting the boundary rule of friendship. Additionally, this could also be a result of the nature of romantic relationships. Romantic relationships are highlighted with the need of mutual affect, which is also an another rule of friendship (Argyle & Henderson, 1984; Samter & Cupach, 1998) and a lack of mutual affect may result in conflicts between romantic partners. According to the findings of this study, lack of caring may be interpreted along these lines. Interestingly, *differences in opinions* received the highest percentage in conflicts experienced between both friends and romantic partners. This finding requires further investigation.

Regarding the second aim of the study, given that both friends and romantic partners are open relationships, participants were expected to use similar patterns of conflict behavior, but we expected that conflicts with romantic partners would produce more constructive strategies given the more intimate and affective characteristics of romantic relationships in addition to the emotional closeness of this type of relationship (Creasey, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999). Our findings supported the Social Exchange theory that participants used constructive strategies more frequently with romantic partners than with friends. Moreover, participants reported destructive strategies more frequently with friends than with romantic partners.

These findings also support the notion in social exchange theory that "maintaining continuing rewards from the relationships becomes more important than winning an immediate

conflict" in close relationships (cited in Creasey, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999, p.924). Additionally, destructive strategies may seriously compromise evolving relationships with romantic partners (Creasey, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999).

The results of this study – using more constructive strategies with romantic partners – are consistent with previous studies where college students used more collaborating strategies (constructive) with their romantic partners than with their friends; more forcing strategies (destructive) with their mothers than romantic partners, friends and close friends; and more accommodating strategies (destructive) with their fathers than with their close friends and friends (Kiralp, Dincyurek, & Beidoglu, 2009). Another study reported more constructive conflict management strategies with romantic partners than with friends (Creasey, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999). Overall, these results also support the argument that in late adolescents, romantic partners as opposed to friends and close friends become the primary source of emotional support (Black, 2002).

There have been studies in the literature which found contradicting results with social exchange theory. One study found that young adolescents reported more use of verbal insults with friends than with parents (Jensen-Campell & Graziano, 2000) and no evidence was found of the differential use of negotiation in conflict with friends versus conflict with parents or siblings (Graziano et. al., 1996; Jensen-Campell et. al., 1996). Further research needs to be done to explore in detail the relationship factors which determine conflict resolution strategies.

In this study, distinctions between friends and close friends were not made. Therefore participants included conflict experiences with both close and non-close friends in their diaries. Future research could examine the difference between these relationship types. In this study we did not include gender differences, which could reveal a more detailed picture; previous studies have suggested that gender as a variable can play an important role in relationships (Tezer & Demir, 2001). Additionally, this study did not include gender differences regarding the types of conflict participants experience as previous studies have suggested that types of conflict vary according to gender for school age students (Atıcı, 2007; Carruthers & Sweeney, 1996; Owens et al., 2005; Vera et al., 2004).

As a result of this study, it could be suggested that inclusion of conflict resolution within pre-service curriculum would be beneficial for counselors in order to enhance their interpersonal relations which is the keystone of their future social, personal and career development. As college counseling centers are the main units for college students' personal/social development, a special sub-unit for conflict resolution/mediation would help students manage their immediate conflicts. Additionally, short term developmental courses within the university counseling centers on conflict resolution would prepare students to manage their future conflicts constructively.

### Conclusion

Despite the above mentioned limitations, this study suggests that types of conflicts late adolescents experience vary between friends and romantic partners and relationship types do in fact determine the conflict resolution strategies used in this sample.

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