

# Spousal conflict resolution strategies and marital relations in late adulthood

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## Abstract

In this study, we examined differences in the spousal conflict resolution strategies of husbands and wives in late adulthood among a sample of 76 married Israeli couples ( $N = 152$ ). Using dyadic analysis (the actor–partner interdependence model), we examined the impacts of the strategies adopted by each spouse as well as their partner on evaluations of marital life as reflected in their assessments of positive and negative dimensions of marital life. The findings revealed that integration was the most prevalent strategy used by both spouses, whereas dominance and avoidance were the least prevalent strategies. Moreover, integration contributed most significantly to explaining assessments of marital life.

In this article, we examined differences in the spousal conflict resolution strategies adopted by Israeli husbands and wives in late adulthood, and the contribution of these strategies to explaining assessments of marital life. It is commonly believed that in intimate relationships, including marriage, conflicts are inevitable because the partners may come from different backgrounds, and they may have different patterns of communication as well as different life experiences and cultural values (Cahn, 2013). Moreover, the frequency and intensity of interactions between the partners, particularly in long-term marriage, are fertile ground for the emergence of marital conflicts (Henry, Berg, Smith, & Florsheim, 2007). A basic assumption of accepted psychological approaches to the analysis of marriage is that the nature of spousal relationships is not determined simply by the experience of

conflicts, but by the way couples deal with these conflicts (Cohan & Bradbury, 1994). The behavior that spouses adopt to alleviate or resolve spousal conflicts has been defined in the literature as “spousal conflict resolution strategies” (Kerig, 1996).

Researchers have focused on examining spousal conflict resolution strategies among young couples, because most divorces occur at the beginning of marital life (Kurdek, 1993). In fact, with the exception of a few studies (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Seider, Hirschberger, Nelson, & Levenson, 2009), there is a serious dearth of research focusing on spousal conflict resolution in late adulthood. Although some of these conflicts among elderly couples continue from earlier life stages, other conflicts may occur due to the changes and life transitions encountered by spouses in late adulthood (e.g., retirement and deterioration in health, which may cause illness and dependence on the spouse; Kulik, 2016). Against this background, the three main goals of this study were: (a) to examine differences in the conflict resolution strategies adopted by husbands and wives in late adulthood, (b) to examine the relation between these strategies and assessments of marital life among

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husbands versus wives, and (c) to examine the relation of the strategies adopted by the partner and the participant's own assessments of marital life.

### *Spousal conflict resolution strategies:*

#### *A conceptual approach*

The research literature on marriage has revealed various typologies of conflict resolution strategies adopted by spouses throughout the marital life cycle. One typology was proposed by Rahim (1983) for organizational contexts and adapted later by Sharir (1996) to marital life. The typology is based on two main dimensions: concern for self and concern for others. The first dimension reflects the extent to which individuals attempt to satisfy their own needs and the second dimension reflects the extent to which individuals attempt to satisfy the needs of the spouse. The combination of these two dimensions yielded five different strategies of conflict resolution: *integration*—high concern for self and the spouse; *avoidance*—low concern for self and the spouse; *concession*—low concern for self, high concern for the spouse; *compromise*—balance between concern for self and concern for the spouse (mutual concession); and *dominance*—high concern for self, low concern for the spouse. Existing research on the topic has mainly been conducted among couples in earlier life stages. The results of these studies have revealed that the strategies of integration, compromise, and concession, which are considered soft, cooperative strategies, promote spousal adjustment (Hanzel & Segrin, 2009), whereas the strategy of avoidance, which is motivated by a lack of desire to confront one's spouse, does not lead to real conflict resolution (Cahn, 1990). Moreover, the strategy of dominance, which is considered to be coercive and emphasizes control over others (Greeff & De Bruyne, 2000), was found to be related to low marital quality in an Israeli study (Kulik & Havusha-Morgenstern, 2010).

In this context, several studies on spousal conflict resolution have focused on examining differences in the strategies used by men and women in early life stages. Due to the lack of

research on the topic among elderly couples, in this study we adopted the above-mentioned typology to assess differences in conflict resolution strategies among spouses in late adulthood.

#### *Theoretical framework: Gender and conflict resolution*

Various feminist approaches highlight the importance of interpersonal relationships as an essential component of women's development (Gilligan, 1982; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991) and emphasize the centrality of this component in women's role definition. Notably, in most cultures, women are the ones who preserve social relationships, provide support to others, and contain the emotions of others (Miller, 1976). Moreover, Bakan (1966) argued that the approach of men to life is goal oriented (agency), whereas women tend to emphasize the interpersonal processes involved in attaining the goals (communion). Thus, in the resolution of spousal conflicts, it may be expected that men tend to focus on achieving the goal itself whereas women tend to focus more on the process of achieving the goal. In this context, some of the studies conducted in the field of work in North America have found that women tend to adopt concessional conflict resolution strategies (Greeff & De Bruyne, 2000), whereas men tend to adopt strategies that are confrontational (Rosenthal & Hautaluama, 1988), competitive (Rubin & Brown, 1975), and avoidant (Greeff & De Bruyne, 2000).

As for marital life, studies on differences between husbands and wives in marital conflict resolution strategies in earlier stages of life have revealed that men and women adopt strategies that conform to behavior norms typifying their gender. In so doing, women usually attempt to resolve spousal conflicts by being sensitive to the spouse, whereas men are characterized by instrumentality (Baum, Notarius, Burnett, & Haefner, 1990). The use of soft, cooperative strategies by women is intended to promote intimacy in marital relationships and resolve the conflict by minimizing its intensity. In contrast, the instrumental orientation of men is intended

to achieve a concrete solution that resolves the source of the conflict. Moreover, a study conducted in the United States found that in the context of spousal relationships, men show a greater tendency than women to adopt the strategy of avoidance (Christen & Heavey, 1990). This finding has been attributed mainly to differential socialization processes of men and women (Wood & Eagly, 2002). The socialization perspective notes that women are encouraged to be affiliative and expressive, and that their identity is developed in the process of relationships whereas men are socialized for autonomy (Gilligan, 1982). Thus, men withdraw from conflictual situations in order to maintain autonomy, whereas women express their need for intimacy via complaints, criticism, and demands in the attempt to resolve spousal conflicts (Eldridge & Christensen, 2002). In light of the lack of research dealing with gender differences in conflict resolution strategies in late adulthood, we based our knowledge about this topic on the studies mentioned above, which were performed in earlier stages of marital life or in different social contexts (e.g., at work). Against this background, the following hypothesis was put forth:

*Hypothesis 1: Men will show a greater tendency than women to use rigid, non-cooperative strategies (dominance and avoidance), whereas women will show a greater tendency than men to use soft, cooperative strategies (concession, compromise, and integration).*

Besides examining gender differences in spousal conflict resolution strategies among older couples, we examined gender differences in the relation between the strategies adopted by husbands and wives and their assessments of the marital relationship as expressed in positive and negative dimensions of marital life.

#### *Positive and negative dimensions of marital life*

Marital relationships can be described as an intensive interaction characterized by two orthogonal dimensions: the dimension of positive interaction, which is related to experiences

of enjoyment and growth in marriage, and the dimension of negative interaction, which is related to emotions that detract from the marital relationship (Gilford & Bengtson, 1979).

In this study, the positive dimensions of the marital relationship were assessed by high marital quality and trust in the spouse, whereas the negative dimensions included marital burnout and thoughts about separation from the spouse.

#### *Marital quality*

Spanier (1976) defined marital quality as a continuous process that reflects the functioning and successes of the marital process, and ranges from low marital quality to high marital quality. The concept of marital quality includes several main components: marital satisfaction, which is reflected in the extent of happiness derived from marriage (Amato, Johnson, Booth, & Rogers, 2003); affection and empathy shown by the spouse, which is reflected in the extent of understanding exhibited by the spouse as a partner and friend (Kamp-Dush, Cohan, & Amato, 2003); communication between spouses, which is reflected in the frequency of conversations with the spouse and level of self-disclosure; and intimate interactions (Anderson, Russell, & Schumm, 1983).

#### *Trust in the spouse*

Scanlon (1979) defined the concept of trust as a sense of confidence that the partner in the interaction will satisfy one's needs. Regarding trust in the spouse, Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna (1985) proposed a more complex definition, and identified three distinct components of the concept: *predictability*, which emphasizes consistency and stability and enables one to predict behaviors; *dependability*, which reflects characteristics such as sincerity and reliability, which enable one to depend on the spouse; and *faith*, which reflects a sense of security in the relationship and confidence that the spouse will facilitate the pursuit of one's best interests. It was found that people who lack trust in their spouse tend to experience negative long-term interpretations of their spouse's behavior; they are vulnerable in interpersonal relationships, develop low expectations of their spouses, and show suspicion about the spouse's behavior (Holmes, 1991).

### *Marital burnout*

Burnout is a subjective experience of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). The prevailing assumption held by researchers in the field is that burnout is caused by loss of energy due to minor, routine stressors and not by critical life events (Pines, 1987). A few examples of minor stressors in the marital relationship include matters pertaining to personal habits, as well as spousal differences in preferences and matters relating to day-to-day living (for a review, see Anderson & Sabatelli, 2007). Most of the studies on marital burnout have dealt with the early stages of marriage (Aryee, 1993; Pines & Nunes, 2003), and only a few studies have dealt specifically with the stage of late adulthood. For example, a study conducted among older Israeli couples revealed that inequality in spousal power relationships, as reflected in the division of household labor and decision making, is related to marital burnout (Kulik, 2001).

### *Thoughts about separation*

Researchers consider thoughts about separation to be a separate element, which can be distinguished from the tendency to divorce and is present in some form among most couples over the marital life cycle (Bodenmann, Charvoz, Cina, & Widmer, 2001). For many couples who have frequent thoughts about separation, divorce is not an option due to personal or social constraints. Hence, thoughts about divorce are more prevalent than actual divorce. One of the few studies that has examined thoughts about divorce over the life cycle was conducted by Booth and White (1980), who found that couples have frequent thoughts about separation during the first 10 years of marriage. During the next 20 years, there is a decline in the tendency to have frequent thoughts about divorce, and after 30 years of marriage there is a further decline, although these thoughts still exist in late adulthood. Whether or not thoughts about separation are related to divorce, they are indicative of dissatisfaction with marriage, and therefore may be considered a negative dimension of marital life.

### *The association of conflict resolution strategies with the marital relationship*

Given the importance of spousal conflict resolution strategies in predicting the nature of marital life (e.g., Kulik & Havusha-Morgenstern, 2010), this issue has become a popular topic of research in the field of family relationships over the years. Based on consistency theories, which argue that people strive for consistency in their cognitions and behavior, the basic assumption underlying this study was that the way each spouse resolves interpersonal conflicts affects their own assessments of marital life (for a review, see Pratkanis, Breckler, & Greenwald, 2014). Further to this assumption, it may be argued that the way spouses resolve conflicts and their assessments of marital life represent different behavior and cognitive elements. Thus, adopting soft, cooperative strategies to resolve spousal conflicts will lead to a positive evaluation of their own marital life, whereas adopting rigid, noncooperative strategies will lead to negative assessments. In line with the postulations of cognitive consistency theories, it has been found that the use of dominance and confrontational strategies by wives is associated with assessments of their marital relationship as maladaptive (Kulik & Havusha-Morgenstern, 2010). Other studies have found that the use of soft, cooperative conflict resolution strategies such as concession and compromise by one spouse, as well as the use of humor, is positively associated with assessments of marital relationships as adaptive (Lawrence & Bradburg, 2007). Moreover, it has been found that the strategy of avoidance is associated with unresolved tension between couples, which often has a destructive impact on the spousal relationship (Gottman, 1994).

As for gender differences, well-known feminist scholars have postulated that interpersonal relationships (in this context, the way spouses resolve interpersonal conflicts) are of different significance for women and men. Moreover, it has been argued that interpersonal interactions are an essential basis for women's psychological development (e.g., Gilligan, 1982) and that the process of achieving the goal is important for women's well-being (Jordan et al., 1991; Miller, 1976). In contrast, interpersonal

processes (in this context, the way conflicts are resolved) are less salient for men, who place more emphasis on achieving goals (Bakan, 1966). Against this background the following hypotheses were put forth:

*Hypothesis 2: The use of soft, cooperative spousal conflict resolution strategies (concession, compromise, integration) by one partner (the husband or wife) will be positively associated with their own assessments of the positive dimensions of the marital relationship (marital quality and trust in the spouse) and negatively associated with their own assessments of the negative dimensions of the marital relationship (marital burnout and thoughts about separation). These associations will be stronger for wives than for husbands.*

*Hypothesis 3: The use of rigid, noncooperative spousal conflict resolution strategies (dominance, avoidance) by one partner (husband or wife) will be positively associated with their own assessments of the negative dimensions of the marital relationship (marital burnout and thoughts about separation) and negatively associated with their own assessments of the positive dimensions of the marital relationship (marital quality and trust in the spouse). These associations will be stronger for wives than for husbands.*

#### *Spousal crossover effects*

Besides examining the association of strategies used by the spouse with one's own assessments of marital life, we also examined the association of strategies used by one spouse with the partner's assessments of marital life. We based this analysis on the well-known, classic systems approach (Minuchin, 1974), which views the family as an "invisible web" of complex interaction patterns that regulate the day-to-day living among family members. Implicit in the discussion of the structural dimension of a system is the idea that the individuals comprising the system are mutually dependent and are influenced by one another (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). In the family system, the mutual influence of one spouse over the other

has been well documented in a large number of studies, and one aspect of this influence has been referred to as the crossover effect (for a review, see Westman, 2005). When it comes to spousal conflict resolution strategies, the crossover effect is expressed by the relation between one spouse's conflict resolution strategies on the one hand and the other partner's assessments of the marital relationship on the other (Hanzel & Segrin, 2009).

Against this background, and in light of the above-mentioned gender differences in the salience that men and women assign to interpersonal processes, it can be expected that the association between the conflict resolution strategies adopted by one spouse and the other spouse's assessments of marital relationship (as expressed in positive and negative dimensions of marital life) will be stronger for wives than for husbands.

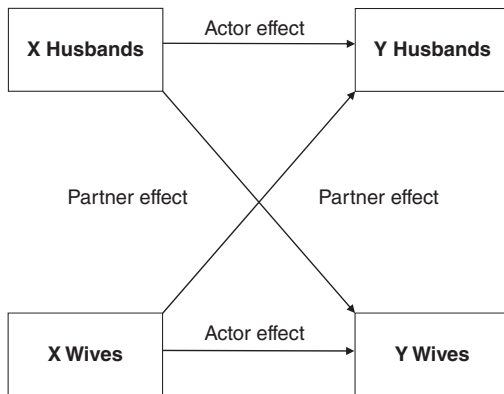
*Hypothesis 4: The use of soft, cooperative spousal conflict resolution strategies by one partner (husband or wife) will be positively associated with the other partner's assessments of the positive dimensions of the marital relationship and negatively associated with the other partner's assessments of the negative dimensions of the marital relationship. These associations will be stronger for wives than for husbands.*

*Hypothesis 5: The use of rigid, noncooperative spousal conflict resolution strategies by one partner (husband or wife) will be negatively associated with the other partner's assessments of the positive dimensions of the marital relationship, and positively associated with the other partner's assessments of the negative dimensions of the marital relationship. These associations will be stronger for wives than for husbands.*

#### *The uniqueness and contributions of the study*

In examining the research hypotheses relating to the association of spousal conflict resolution strategies with assessments of marital life, it is important to bear in mind that the participants in the study were husbands and their wives, which constitute a subsystem in the larger





**Figure 1.** The conceptual model: Actor-partner interdependence model.

context of the family. As such, they are interdependent and play off one other in meaningful ways. Therefore, in the data-processing stage we adopted the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM; Cook & Kenny, 2005) for analyzing the dyadic unit. Besides examining the contribution of spousal conflict resolution strategies adopted by the participants to explaining their own assessments of their marital relationship, the model provided a basis for examining the simultaneous impact of one partner's use of conflict resolution strategies on the other spouse's assessments of the marital relationship (see Figure 1). Another unique aspect of the study is the examination of the multiple facets of the marital relationship, as reflected in positive and negative dimensions. Finally, in light of the relative lack of research on the topic in late adulthood, and because the average duration of marriage examined in the study exceeded 30 years, the findings may fill a gap in existing knowledge on spousal conflict resolution among elderly couples.

## Method

### Sample

The sample included 152 participants (76 married couples). The mean age of the men was 69.69 ( $SD=8.02$ ), and the mean age of the women was 65.07 ( $SD=7.02$ ). As for education level, the distribution was as follows: Among the men, 14.5% had partial secondary

education, 8.7% had full secondary education, 27.6% had nonacademic postsecondary education, and 49.2% had academic education; among the women, the distribution by level of education was 14.3%, 14.3%, 17.1%, and 54.3%, respectively. Regarding country of birth, 50% of the men and 58.6% of the women were born in Israel, 31.2% of the men and 28.6% of the women were born in Europe, and 18.8% of the men and 12.8% of the women were born in Asia Africa. As for place of residence, 57.1% of the couples lived in cities, and 42.9% lived in rural localities. The average duration of marriage was 35.2 years ( $SD=3.7$ ), and the average number of children was 3.00 ( $SD=0.77$ ). This was the first marriage for 98.6% of the men and 90.8% of the women.

### Instruments

#### *Spousal conflict resolution*

Spousal conflict resolution was measured by means of a self-report questionnaire consisting of 28 items that describe interpersonal conflict resolution strategies. The original instrument was developed by Rahim (1983) and examined conflict resolution strategies in the workplace. Later, Sharir (1996) found the questionnaire to be effective for evaluation of conflict resolution strategies in spousal relationships. Following Rahim (1983) and Sharir (1996) as well as other researchers in the field of conflict resolution strategies (e.g., Kulik & Havusha-Morgenstern, 2010), the items in the questionnaire were divided into five factors, which describe the five above-mentioned spousal conflict resolution strategies: *integration* (e.g., "I try to discuss the issue with my spouse in order to find an idea that will be acceptable to both of us"); *avoidance* (e.g., "I try to avoid confrontations with my spouse, and keep my problems to myself"); *concession* (e.g., "I usually accept my spouse's suggestions"); *dominance* (e.g., "Sometimes I try to use force to win my spouse over in a situation of conflict"); and *compromise* (e.g., "I usually try to find an alternative way to break the impasse"). Responses were based on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*to a very great extent*). One score

was derived by computing the mean of the items on each strategy: The higher the score, the more the participants tended to adopt the conflict resolution strategy reflected in the statement. The Cronbach's alpha reliabilities of the five factors in the questionnaire were: integration, .88; avoidance, .84; concession, .79; dominance, .83; and compromise, .70.

### *Marital quality*

Marital quality was evaluated through the Israeli Marital Quality Scale (IMQS), a short form of Fowers and Olson's (1993) American Marital Quality Scale that was translated into Hebrew and adapted by Lavee (1995). The questionnaire used in this study consisted of 10 items that examined the extent of the participants' marital satisfaction, consensus, and compatibility in dimensions that were found in the clinical literature to be significant for assessing marital quality (e.g., "Our relationship is a success"). Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which each statement reflects their feelings about their marriage. Responses were based on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*to a great extent*). One score was derived by calculating the mean of the responses on all of the items: The higher the score, the higher the participants' assessments of marital quality were. The Cronbach's alpha reliability of the questionnaire used in this study was .88.

### *Trust in the spouse*

Trust in the spouse was examined on the basis of the trust scale, which was developed by Rempel et al. (1985) and consisted of 26 items that aimed to assess trust in interpersonal relationships. Based on the original questionnaire, Altous (2004) developed a short form of the questionnaire consisting of 12 items, which was used in this study (e.g., "I can rely on my partner to keep the promises made to me"). Responses were based on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*to a great extent*). One score was derived by calculating the mean of the responses on all of the items: The higher the score, the greater the participants' trust in their partner. The Cronbach's alpha reliability of the questionnaire used in this study was .90.

### *Marital burnout*

Marital burnout was assessed on the basis of a questionnaire developed by Pines (1987), which consisted of 21 items representing three components of burnout: the physical component (e.g., fatigue), the mental component (e.g., depressed), and the emotional component (e.g., happy). Participants were asked to indicate how frequently they experience the feelings described in the questionnaire in the daily marital life. Responses were based on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 7 (*always*). One overall score was derived by calculating the mean of the scores on all of the items: The higher the score, the greater the participants' burnout in marriage. The Cronbach's alpha reliability of the questionnaire used in this study was .90.

### *Thoughts about separation*

Thoughts about separation were assessed by one question: How frequently does the thought about divorce enter your mind at the present time?" Responses were based on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*very often*).

### *Data collection*

Data were collected at social meetings for older couples. The meetings took place at private homes or at community centers in urban and communal localities throughout the country. Both spouses attended these activities together. At the beginning of the meeting, questionnaires were distributed to the participants. The research assistants made sure that each of the participants filled out the questionnaire themselves, without any interference from their partner. All of the questionnaires were collected by the researchers immediately after they were filled out at the meeting. To combine the questionnaires for spousal units, they were numbered so that each couple received the same number. The time required to fill out the questionnaire was about 15 min, and the response rate was about 80%. In cases where only one partner filled out the questionnaire and the other partner refused to participate in the study, the questionnaire was not included in the sample.

**Table 1.** Means, standard deviations, and results of Bonferroni paired comparisons to examine the source of differences in spousal conflict resolution strategies

Conflict resolution strategies	Husbands		Wives		Total	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Integration	4.43 <sup>a</sup> <sub>a</sub>	0.42	4.35 <sup>a</sup> <sub>a</sub>	0.56	4.39 <sup>a</sup>	0.49
Compromise	4.27 <sup>a</sup> <sub>a</sub>	0.46	3.90 <sup>b</sup> <sub>b</sub>	0.59	4.08 <sup>b</sup>	0.56
Concession	3.83 <sup>b</sup> <sub>a</sub>	0.52	3.47 <sup>c</sup> <sub>b</sub>	0.66	3.65 <sup>c</sup>	0.62
Avoidance	3.71 <sup>b</sup> <sub>a</sub>	0.70	3.23 <sup>c</sup> <sub>b</sub>	0.99	3.47 <sup>d</sup>	0.89
Dominance	2.37 <sup>c</sup> <sub>a</sub>	0.75	2.63 <sup>d</sup> <sub>a</sub>	0.95	2.50 <sup>e</sup>	0.86

*Note.* The means appearing with superscripts in the column of the table represent significant differences in the spousal conflict resolution strategies used by each partner and among all of the participants. The means appearing with subscripts in the rows of the table represent differences between the husbands and wives. The significance of the difference is at least  $p < .05$ .

*Data analysis*

We employed analyses of variance (ANOVAs) as well as the APIM (Cook & Kenny, 2005) in an attempt to examine the research hypotheses. We examined the relations between conflict resolution strategies and the different dimensions of marital life as well as the relations between the strategies used by spouses as a preliminary analysis for the APIM. To fill in missing data, we used stochastic regressions (Enders, 2010). According to this method, a linear regression line is calculated, and random values are produced around the regression line to replace missing values.

**Results**

*Gender differences in spousal conflict resolution strategies (Hypothesis 1)*

To examine whether there are differences between women and their husbands in spousal conflict resolution strategies, two-way ANOVAs (Strategy  $\times$  Gender) with repeated measurements were conducted. Spousal conflict resolution strategies were entered into the analysis once for the husband and once for the wife. The results revealed a main effect for gender and for conflict resolution strategy,  $F(1, 75) = 11.30$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.13$ , and  $F(4, 300) = 194.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.72$ , respectively. We evaluated the source of the differences in the use of different conflict resolution strategies by conducting

Bonferroni posthoc pairwise comparison tests. The results of those tests revealed that for both spouses, each specific strategy differed significantly from all of the other strategies (see Table 1). The most prevalent strategy was integration, followed by compromise, concession, avoidance, and dominance, which was the least prevalent strategy. In addition, the analysis revealed an interaction between gender and conflict resolution strategies,  $F(4, 300) = 10.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.12$ . Bonferroni comparisons of the use of each strategy by the partners revealed that the husbands showed a greater tendency than their wives to adopt the strategies of compromise, concession, and avoidance. However, no differences between the partners were found with regard to the use of dominance and integration (failing to confirm Hypothesis 1).

*Relation between the actor's spousal conflict resolution strategies and the actor's own assessments of marital life*

Table 2 indicates several correlations between conflict resolution strategies and the dimensions of marital life that are common for both spouses. The more the husbands and wives used the strategy of integration to resolve spousal conflicts, the higher their assessments of marital quality and the greater their trust in the spouse were, and the less they experienced marital burnout. Moreover, the more the husbands and wives used the strategy of



**Table 2.** *Pearson's correlation coefficients between the research variables: For men and women*

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Integration	–	.56***	.38**	–.25*	.07	.49***	.47***	–.45***	–.04
2. Compromise	.42***	–	.55***	–.11	.43***	.36**	.32**	–.17	–.09
3. Concession	.36**	.36**	–	.11	.60***	.24*	.26*	–.09	–.09
4. Dominance	–.27*	.02	.16	–	.21	–.07	–.02	.33**	–.15
5. Avoidance	.07	.38**	.62***	.24*	–	.10	.09	.09	.08
6. Marital quality	.58***	.11	.21	–.29*	–.21	–	.68***	–.50***	–.32*
7. Trust in spouse	.29*	.03	.27*	–.21	.01	.34**	–	–.35**	–.17
8. Burnout	–.37**	–.09	–.08	.32**	.20	.59***	.14	–	.28*
9. Thoughts about separation	–.39**	–.12	–.07	.21	.12	–.60***	–.26*	–.15	–

*Note.* Correlations for men are above the diagonal, and correlations for women are below the diagonal.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

concession, the higher their levels of trust in each other were; however, the use of dominance was related to the participants' sense of marital burnout.

Besides the similarities in the relations between spousal conflict resolution strategies and positive/negative dimensions of marital life among the husbands and wives, several gender differences were also revealed. The more the wives used the strategy of integration, the less they thought about separation from the spouse, and the more they used the strategy of dominance, the lower their assessments of marital quality were. Several correlations between spousal conflict resolution strategies and assessments of marital life were found only among husbands. The more the husbands adopted the strategy of compromise, the higher their assessments of marital quality and the higher their levels of trust in their wives were. In addition, the more the husbands used the strategy of concession, the higher their assessments of marital quality were.

#### *Relation between the actor's spousal conflict resolution strategies and the partner's assessments of marital life*

We examined the relation between the actor's use of conflict resolution strategies and the partner's assessments of the marriage as a basis for analyzing actor–partner interrelationships (see Table 3). The more the husbands used the strategy of concession, the higher the wives'

assessments of marital quality and the less the wives had thoughts about separation. Moreover, the more the husbands adopted the strategy of integration, the higher the wives' levels of trust in them were. As for the husbands, the more the wives used the strategy of integration, the higher the husbands' assessments of marital quality. Finally, the more the wives adopted the strategy of dominance, the lower the husbands levels of trust in them were.

#### *Relation between the partners' use of conflict resolution strategies*

The only positive correlation between the partners' use of conflict resolution strategies was in the use of avoidance: The more one partner used the strategy of avoidance, the greater the other partner's tendency to use this strategy was (Table 3). However, no significant correlations were found between partners in the use of the other conflict resolution strategies.

#### *Analysis by the APIM*

Through the APIM (Cook & Kenny, 2005) employed in this study, it is possible to examine a variety of associations between the independent variables (conflict resolution strategies) and the outcome variables (assessments of the positive and negative dimensions of marital life) for each of the partners, as well as associations between the strategies used by one partner to resolve spousal conflicts and the other partner's assessments of marital life. This analysis

**Table 3.** *Pearson’s correlations between the research variables for men and the research variables for women (N = 76)*

Research variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Integration	.21	.02	−.08	−.21	−.01	.31**	.28*	−.23	−.04
2. Compromise	.11	.08	−.10	−.05	−.05	.00	.15	−.17	−.01
3. Concession	.18	.20	.06	−.11	.07	.14	.09	−.06	.12
4. Dominance	−.05	.00	.16	.12	.15	−.09	−.35***	.19	−.03
5. Avoidance	.04	.05	.16	.04	.24*	.11	.12	−.02	.05
6. Marital quality	.21	.04	.28*	.09	.00	.51***	.37**	−.32**	−.24
7. Trust	.32**	.10	.20	−.16	.07	.46***	.33**	−.43***	.12
8. Burnout	−.18	−.08	−.15	.03	−.08	−.33**	−.28*	.39**	.10
9. Thoughts about separation	−.20	−.08	−.36**	−.14	.03	−.31**	−.20*	.17	.50***

*Note.* Rows report results for men, and columns report results for women.  
\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

enables examination of the associations between different variables while reducing the internal dyadic associations (Figure 1). In the dyadic model, the responses of each partner constitute a Level 1 observation (i.e., the level of measurement), whereas each dyad constitutes a Level 2 observation (i.e., the dyadic level). Each Level 1 variable is measured twice (once for the husband, and once for the wife), whereas each Level 2 variable is measured once (i.e., for the dyadic unit). In this study, there were no variables in Level 2. The dyadic model was measured against the four dependent variables that characterize marital relationships: marital quality, trust in the partner, marital burnout, and thoughts about separation. To explain each of the dependent variables, the actor effect and the partner effect were measured simultaneously. The APIM was examined using a three-model taxonomy (Singer & Willett, 2003)—the unconditional model (Model 1), the main effects model (Model 2), and the interaction model (Model 3).

In Model 1, the “unconditional model,” the change in observations is presented around the average value of the dependent variable (in this case the four dimensions of marital life), without adding explanatory variables. The model is called the “unconditional model” because it is not contingent on any explanations deriving from other variables. The model allows for

division of the variance at the level of observations and at the level of dyads. Table 4 presents the percentages of explained variance in each of the dependent variables (marital quality, trust in the spouse, marital burnout, and thoughts about separation), and expresses the rate of potential explanations for the outcome variables deriving from the variance. It also presents the intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs).

In Model 2, the “main effects model,” the independent variables (gender and the five conflict resolution strategies adopted by the actor and the partner) were added; in Model 3, the “interaction model,” interactions between gender and spousal conflict resolution strategies adopted by the actor and the partner were added. This model is not presented in Table 4 due to its marginal contribution to explaining the variance in the outcome variables. However, the interactions that contributed substantially to explaining each of the dimensions of marital life are presented in Figure 2a–e.

*Explanation of the dimensions of marital life using the APIM (Hypotheses 2–5)*

*Marital quality*

In Model 1, the intercept for marital quality was 4.23. The percentage of variance explained by differences between partners

**Table 4.** *Coefficients of the actor–partner interdependence model: Effects of gender and conflict resolution strategies on assessments of marriage*

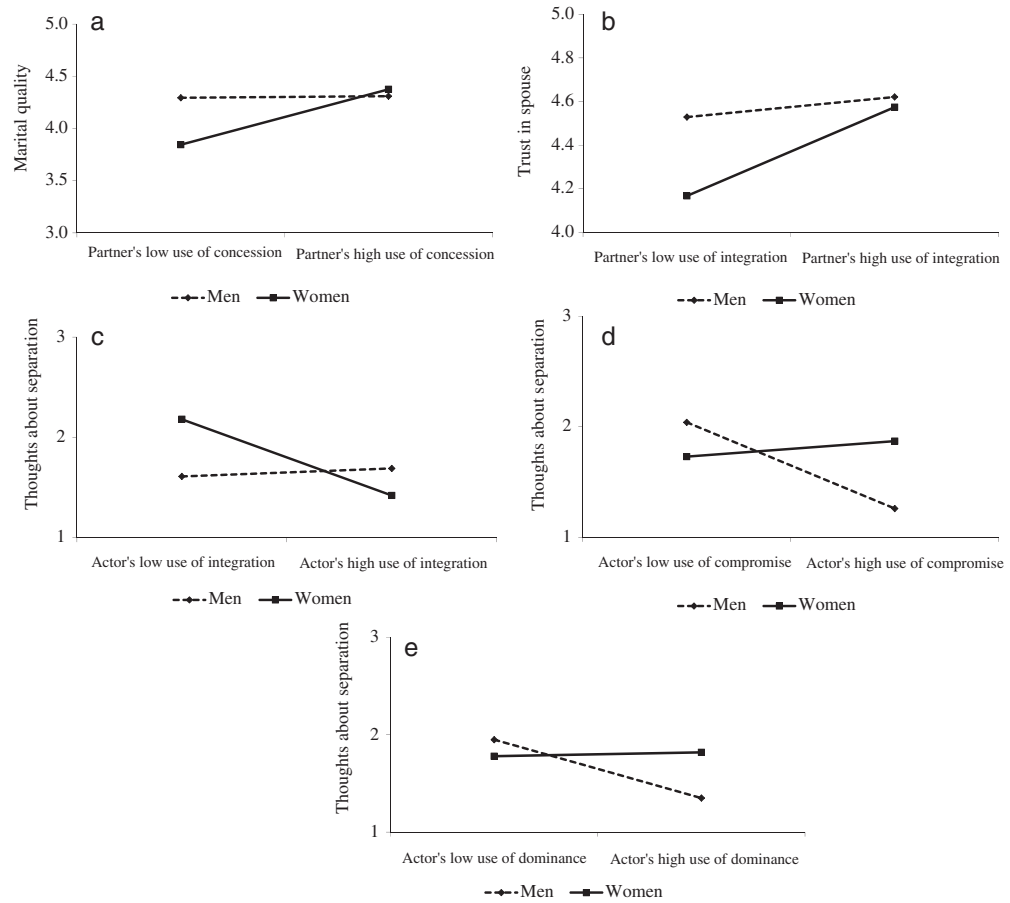
	Marital quality		Trust in the spouse		Marital burnout		Thoughts about separation	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Constant effects								
Constant	4.23 (0.06)	4.33 (0.05)	4.78 (0.04)	4.57 (0.04)	2.09 (0.09)	1.85 (0.08)	1.72 (0.11)	1.64 (0.12)
Gender		−0.19** (0.07)		−0.19** (0.07)		0.48*** (0.14)		0.15 (0.16)
Actor effect								
Integration		0.59*** (0.12)		0.26** (0.08)		−0.61** (0.20)		−0.56** (0.18)
Compromise		−0.03 (0.10)		−0.03 (0.08)		−0.04 (0.21)		−0.14 (0.19)
Concession		0.14 (0.14)		0.09 (0.11)		−0.15 (0.22)		0.04 (0.16)
Dominance		−0.01 (0.04)		−0.02 (0.04)		0.14 (0.10)		−0.08 (0.12)
Avoidance		−0.14 (0.08)		−0.05 (0.07)		0.22 (0.13)		0.19 (0.13)
Partner effect								
Integration		0.21* (0.09)		0.20** (0.06)		−0.19 (0.15)		0.03 (0.17)
Compromise		−0.13 (0.08)		−0.06 (0.08)		−0.14 (0.14)		0.05 (0.17)
Concession		0.16 (0.09)		−0.02 (0.07)		−0.01 (0.17)		−0.62** (0.21)
Dominance		0.08 (0.04)		−0.06 (0.04)		0.01 (0.08)		−0.18 (0.12)
Avoidance		0.02 (0.05)		0.10* (0.04)		−0.06 (0.08)		0.31* (0.15)
Components of variance								
Level 1—participants	0.19 (0.44)	0.11 (0.34)	0.14 (0.37)	0.11 (0.34)	0.67 (0.82)	0.48 (0.69)	0.81 (0.90)	0.66 (0.81)
Level 2—dyads	0.15*** (0.39)	0.09*** (0.30)	0.07*** (0.26)	0.04*** (0.04)	0.28*** (0.53)	0.22*** (0.47)	0.45*** (0.67)	0.40 (0.63)
Unconditional ICC	.44	—	.34	—	.30	—	.36	—
Deviance	253.22	173.60	182.11	143.00	417.44	369.66	455.68	428.10
$\Delta\chi^2$	—	70.62***	—	39.11***	—	47.78***	—	27.58**
Pseudo $R^2$	—	.41	—	.24	—	.27	—	.16

*Note.* Standard errors are presented in parentheses for constant effects, and standard deviations are presented in parentheses for the components of variance.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

in assessments of marital quality was 44%. According to Model 2, the husbands' assessments of marital quality were higher than those of their wives,  $b = -0.19$ ,  $p = .005$ . In addition, an actor effect was found for the strategy of integration: The more the actor (husband or wife) used this strategy to resolve spousal conflicts, the higher his or her assessments of marital quality were,  $b = 0.59$ ,  $p < .001$ . Furthermore, a partner effect was found for

the strategy of integration: The more the partner (husband or wife) used this strategy to resolve spousal conflicts, the higher his or her assessments of marital quality were,  $b = 0.21$ ,  $p < .001$ . According to Model 3 (not presented in Table 4; see Figure 2a), an interaction was found between the partner's use of concession and gender, which affected the actor's assessments of marital quality,  $b = 0.42$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ,  $p = .012$ . To examine the



**Figure 2.** (a) Interaction of gender and partner's use of the concession strategy on actor's marital quality. Whereas a positive relation was found between the husbands' use of concession and the wives' assessments of marital quality, no significant relation was found between the wives' use of concession and the husbands' assessments of marital quality. (b) Interaction of gender and partner's use of the integration strategy on the actor's trust in spouse. Whereas a positive relation was found between their husbands' use of integration and the wives' levels of trust in the partner, no significant relation was found between the wives' use of integration and the husbands' levels of trust in the partner. (c) Interaction of gender and actor's use of the integration strategy on the actor's thoughts about separation. Whereas a negative relation was found between the wives' use of integration and thoughts about separation, this relation was not found among the husbands. (d) Interaction of gender and actor's use of the compromise strategy on the actor's thoughts about separation. Whereas a negative relation was found between the husbands' use of compromise and thoughts about separation, this relation was not found among the wives. (e) Interaction of gender and actor's use of the dominance strategy on the actor's thoughts about separation. Whereas a negative relation was found between the husband's use of dominance and thoughts about separation, this relation was not found among the wives.

source of this interaction, the procedure proposed by Preacher, Curran, and Bauer (2006) was used. Among the wives, a positive association was found between the husbands' use

of concession and their own assessments of marital quality,  $b = 0.43$ ,  $t(55) = 3.65$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, no significant association was found between the wives' use of concession and the

husbands' own assessments of marital quality,  $b = 0.01$ ,  $t(55) = 0.11$ ,  $p = .91$  (see Figure 2a).

### *Trust between partners*

In Model 1, the intercept for trust between partners was 4.78. The percentage of variance explained by differences between partners in this dimension was 34%. According to Model 2, the husbands' levels of trust in their wives were higher than the wives' levels of trust in their husbands,  $b = -0.19$ ,  $p = .008$ . In addition, an actor effect was found for the strategy of integration: The more the actors (husbands or wives) used this strategy to resolve spousal conflicts, the higher their levels of trust in their partner were,  $b = 0.26$ ,  $p = .003$ . A partner effect was also found for the strategy of integration: The more the partners (husbands or wives) used this strategy to resolve spousal conflicts, the higher their levels of trust were,  $b = 0.20$ ,  $p = .003$ . Furthermore, a partner effect was found for the strategy of avoidance: The more the partners (husbands or wives) used this strategy, the higher their levels of trust,  $b = 0.10$ ,  $p = .025$ . According to Model 3, a marginal interaction was found between the partner's use of integration and gender,  $b = 0.32$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ,  $p = .053$ . Among the wives, a positive association was found between their husbands' use of integration and their own levels of trust in the partner,  $b = 0.42$ ,  $t(55) = 2.85$ ,  $p = .006$ . However, among the husbands no significant association was found between their wives' use of integration and their own levels of trust in the partner,  $b = 0.09$ ,  $t(55) = 1.28$ ,  $p = .20$  (see Figure 2b).

### *Marital burnout*

In Model 1, the intercept for marital burnout was 2.09. The percentage of variance explained by differences between partners in this dimension was 30%. According to Model 2, the wives' levels of marital burnout were higher than the husbands' levels,  $b = 0.48$ ,  $p < .001$ . In addition, an actor effect was found for the strategy of integration: The more the actors (husbands or wives) used this strategy to resolve spousal conflicts, the lower their levels of marital burnout,  $b = -0.61$ ,  $p = .004$ . No partner

effect was found for the explained variance in burnout, nor was there an interaction with gender.

### *Thoughts about separation*

In Model 1, the intercept for thoughts about separation was 1.72. The percentage of variance explained by differences between partners in thoughts about separation was 36%. According to Model 2, there were no significant differences between husbands and wives in thoughts about separation,  $b = 0.15$ ,  $p = .37$ . However, an actor effect was found for the strategy of compromise: The more the actors (husbands or wives) used this strategy to resolve spousal conflicts, the less they tended to have thoughts about separation,  $b = -0.56$ ,  $p = .004$ . Moreover, a partner effect was found for the strategy of concession: The more the partners (husbands or wives) used this strategy to resolve spousal conflicts, the less they tended to have thoughts about separation,  $b = -0.62$ ,  $p = .005$ . A partner effect was also found for the strategy of avoidance: The more the partners (husbands) used this strategy, the greater their tendency to have thoughts about separation,  $b = 0.31$ ,  $p = .049$ .

According to Model 3, an interaction was found between the partner's use of integration and gender as factors that explain thoughts about separation,  $b = -1.71$ ,  $SE = 0.65$ ,  $p = .011$ . Among the wives, a negative association was found between the use of integration and thoughts about separation,  $b = -0.77$ ,  $t(55) = -3.45$ ,  $p = .001$ . However, among the husbands, this association was not found,  $b = 0.09$ ,  $t(55) = 0.37$ ,  $p = .71$  (see Figure 2c). In addition, an interaction was found between the partner's use of compromise and gender, which explained thoughts about separation,  $b = 0.81$ ,  $SE = 0.32$ ,  $p = .014$ . Among the husbands, a negative association was found between the use of compromise and thoughts about separation,  $b = -0.69$ ,  $t(55) = 2.61$ ,  $p = .012$ . However, among the wives, this association was not found,  $b = 0.69$ ,  $t(55) = 2.61$ ,  $p = .012$  (see Figure 2d). Finally, an interaction was found between the actor's use of dominance and gender, which explained thoughts about separation,  $b = 0.37$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $p = .014$ .



Among the husbands, a negative association was found between the use of dominance and thoughts about separation,  $b = -0.35$ ,  $t(55) = 2.85$ ,  $p = .006$ . However, among the wives, this association was not found,  $b = 0.03$ ,  $t(55) = 0.20$ ,  $p = .845$  (see Figure 2e).

As for the research hypotheses, the findings presented above partially support Hypotheses 2 and 3, which related to the association of the strategies used by one spouse with that spouse's own assessments of marital life. In addition, the findings partially supported Hypotheses 4 and 5, which related to the association of the strategies used by one spouse with the partner's assessments of the dimensions of marital life.

#### *Percentage of variance explained by the model*

The percentages of explained variance for each of the dependent variables (marital quality, trust between partners, marital burnout, and thoughts about separation) are presented in Table 4. Regarding marital quality, the main effects in Model 2 explained 41% of the variance that was not explained by Model 1. The deviance difference between Model 2 and Model 1 was  $\Delta\chi^2 = 70.62$ ,  $p < .001$ . The main effects and the interactions in Model 3 together explained 46% of the variance that was not explained by Model 1. The deviance difference between Model 3 and Model 2 was  $\Delta\chi^2 = 23.61$ ,  $p < .01$ . That is, the addition of main effects and interactions combined to substantially increase the explained variance. However, regarding the dimension of trust between partners, although the main effects, as reflected in Table 4, significantly increased the percentage of explained variance,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 39.11$ ,  $p < .001$ , this was not the case for the interaction model, where the addition of trust between partners to the explained variance was not significant (but tended toward significance). In the dimension of trust, the percentage of variance explained by the interaction model was 24%, and the overall percentage of explained variance for the main effects and the interaction model was 30%. Regarding marital burnout, the percentage of explained variance was 27%. However, only the main effects model provided an

explanation for this variance,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 47.78$ ,  $p < .001$ , and the percentage of explained variance added by the interaction model (2%) was not significant. Finally, regarding thoughts about separation, the percentage of variance explained by Model 2 (the main effects model) was 16%,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 27.58$ ,  $p < .001$ , and the percentage of variance explained by the main effects and interaction model was 25%, constituting a significant addition to the variance explained by the base model,  $\Delta\chi^2 = 23.93$ ,  $p < .001$  (see Table 4).

#### **Discussion**

Before discussing the research findings in relation to the specific hypotheses, it is noteworthy that based on the nature of the conflict resolution strategies adopted by the participants, it appears that spousal relationships in late adulthood are more congenial than in earlier stages of marriage (Kulik & Havusha-Morgenstern, 2010). These findings are consistent with the results of other studies in the field (e.g., Henry et al., 2007) and might be attributed to the ability of older adults to exert emotional control (Labouvie-Vief & DeVoe, 1991). Thus, in late adulthood couples show a greater tendency toward restraint, concession, and compromise in the attempt to resolve spousal conflicts than do couples in earlier stages. Therefore, it can be concluded that marital relationships in late adulthood are calm for the most part and that this period is relatively satisfactory for both spouses (Carstensen et al., 1995). Two explanations have been proposed for this conclusion. According to one explanation, couples who are dissatisfied with their marriage will not participate in studies on marital quality and will avoid talking openly about their problems. According to the other explanation, people who have stayed together in late adulthood are evidently satisfied with their marriage; otherwise, they would have ended it much earlier (Kulik, 2004).

Regarding the main topic of the study (i.e., differences between husbands and wives in the use of conflict resolution strategies), contrary to expectations, the findings indicate that husbands showed a greater tendency than their wives to use the strategies of concession

and compromise, which are soft and cooperative ways of resolving conflicts and are stereotypically viewed as feminine strategies. However, as expected, the husbands showed a greater tendency than the wives to use the strategy of avoidance, which may not promote actual resolution of the conflict but does prevent confrontation between the partners (partially confirming Hypothesis 1). The findings relating to gender differences in spousal conflict resolution strategies can be explained through well-known approaches, which argue that both men and women experience personality changes beginning with the midlife, mainly as a result of changes in gender roles (Gottman, 1994; Jung, 1971). Gottman (1994) has attributed this tendency to the end of active parenting, which allows each of the spouses to express the latent side of their personality in their daily life, for example, men express feminine traits, and women express masculine traits. According to this perspective, women become more powerful with age and show a greater tendency to insist on their wishes in social interactions. In line with this approach, the results of this study revealed that women act like men in their use of the dominance strategy, which is known as a rigid, noncooperative, and confrontational conflict resolution strategy, whereas men soften and use more cooperative strategies than their wives. An alternative explanation of the finding regarding gender differences in the use of conflict resolution strategies is that men tend to soften in late adulthood and therefore express their love and affection by accepting their wives' wishes. As such, the husbands prefer strategies of concession and compromise in settling spousal disagreements. In contrast, in light of the experience that aging women gain over the years, the wives become more aware of their own needs and therefore show a lesser tendency to compromise than they did at earlier stages of life.

Regarding the relations between spousal conflict resolution strategies and the four dimensions of marital life, the findings indicate that integration contributed most significantly to explaining positive dimensions of marriage for men and for women, irrespective of whether the actor or the partner used this

strategy. Notably, except for the strategy of integration, the other soft, cooperative strategies (concession and compromise) contributed less to explaining the positive and negative dimensions of marriage (partially confirming Hypothesis 2). However, as we hypothesized and based on the principles of family systems theory (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993), the explanation of marital relationships is not based exclusively on the conflict resolution strategies adopted by the actor, and it appears that the contribution of the partner's strategies is substantial. For example, the husbands' use of concession contributed significantly to explaining the wives' positive assessments of marriage, as reflected in high marital quality and trust in their husbands.

Taking a broad approach to interpreting the findings, the association between the husbands' use of concession and the wives' positive assessments of the marital relationship is related to the above-mentioned process of gaining power with age among women, which begins in midlife and continues in late adulthood. Accordingly, the husband's concession to the wife reflects acceptance of her view and derives from her power as the strong partner. This explanation is supported by the other finding mentioned above, which revealed that women show a lesser tendency to adopt strategies that reflect softness and pursue their own interests in the process of conflict resolution. Thus, it is possible that the husband's perceptions of the wife as the strong partner contributed to her experience of positive feelings about the marriage, as reflected in high assessments of marital quality and trust in the husband.

With regard to the husbands, the wives' use of the integration strategy was found to contribute significantly to their positive assessments of marriage, as reflected in the experience of high marital quality and trust in their wives. Thus, it appears that the husbands' assessments of the marital relationship were highest when the wives used balanced conflict resolution strategies, which take into account the needs of both partners. This finding portrays an image of the husbands in late adulthood that is in contrast to the stereotyped perspective of men as focusing on dominance

in social interactions and seeking to achieve goals by giving priority to their own needs and interests.

One of the main conclusions of the research is that the contribution of the conflict resolution strategies adopted by husbands to explaining the wives' assessments of the marital relationship was greater than the contribution of the wives' conflict resolution strategies to explaining the husbands' assessments (partially confirming Hypotheses 4 and 5). Assuming that conflict resolution reflects a type of interpersonal process, this finding is consistent with the results of other studies that indicate that women attribute more importance to interpersonal processes than do men (Nock, 2001). Notably, rigid, noncooperative spousal conflict resolution strategies (dominance, avoidance) adopted by both partners or by the actor contributed less to explaining the different dimensions of marital life than did softer conflict resolution strategies (failing to confirm Hypothesis 3).

Before concluding, some limitations of the study should be mentioned. First, data on the outcome variables (positive and negative dimensions of marital life) as well as the explanatory variables (spousal conflict resolution strategies) were collected at the same point in time. Thus, owing to the correlative nature of the study, although it is possible that conflict resolution strategies affect dimensions of marital quality, marital quality might also affect the conflict resolution strategies adopted by the partners. Another limitation of the study is that data on the independent variable (use of spousal conflict resolution strategies) and the dependent variable (assessments of marital life) were collected using self-report questionnaires. Hence, the correlations found between the use of adaptive strategies and positive assessments of marital life on the one hand, and between the use of maladaptive strategies and negative assessments of marital life on the other among each of the partners may not necessarily reflect the actual situation and may derive from the participants' need to provide consistent responses.

Finally, two limitations relating to the sample population should be mentioned. One of them relates to the participants' high level of education: As the distribution of the

participants shows, over 40% of the participants had an academic degree—a higher percentage than the rate of academic degree holders in Israel among people in this age group (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Another limitation relates to the unique sociocultural context of Israel, which is considered to be a familistic society that emphasizes the value of family unity (Lavee & Katz, 2003). Even though researchers in other countries have replicated the results of studies conducted in Israel (e.g., Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005), caution should be exercised in arriving at generalizations based on our findings due to the familistic orientation of Israeli society.

To conclude, the findings of the study revealed that couples in late adulthood who have had a long marital relationship prefer to use cooperative strategies to resolve spousal conflicts rather than confrontational strategies that aim to achieve dominance over the partner. In so doing, the expected gender differences diminished and some of the findings were contrary to expectations. The strategies adopted by husbands and wives to resolve spousal conflicts affected their assessments of positive and negative aspects of their marital life. Moreover, in this process their assessments were related to the partner's strategies, although this relation was more salient among wives than among husbands.

#### *Recommendations for research and theory development*

In future research on spousal conflict resolution, there is a need to take the above-mentioned limitations of this study into account. Thus, further research should be conducted in diverse cultural contexts, including modern as well as traditional cultures. Moreover, the research samples should be heterogeneous in terms of the participants' background variables (e.g., level of education, religiosity, and age) in order to enhance the generalizability of the findings to the overall population in late adulthood. Furthermore, an attempt should be made to conduct longitudinal studies in order to arrive at causal explanations for the relations between spousal

conflict resolution strategies and assessments of marital quality. Additionally, in light of the increase in life expectancy, and because the period of late adulthood can last as long as 30 years, future studies should distinguish between different stages of late adulthood in the process of spousal conflict resolution.

As for continued development of a theory regarding conflict resolution strategies used by spouses throughout the life cycle, an integrative conceptual approach should be adopted. Accordingly, the theoretical explanation of the strategies that partners adopt in the attempt to resolve disagreements should integrate major factors such as: gender, stage of marriage, and cultural context (e.g., familistic vs. nonfamilistic societies). Integration of all of these aspects into one theoretical framework can provide a comprehensive view of the factors that play a role in explaining the conflict resolution strategies adopted by couples.

### Practical recommendations

The research findings elicit several recommendations for practitioners working with couples in late adulthood. First, family therapists should bear in mind that in late adulthood, men tend to adopt more moderate strategies than their wives. Therefore, the therapists should avoid stereotyped perspectives, which might distort their view of the relationship and prevent the attainment of therapeutic goals. Second, family therapists should be aware of the differences in the relation between conflict resolution strategies and evaluations of marital quality among men versus women. Furthermore, in light of the findings of this study, therapists should bear in mind that the conflict resolution strategies adopted by husbands may affect the wives' experiences of marital life more than they affect the experiences of the husbands themselves.

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