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Beyond the Victim Lens: Exploring Conflict Management Style among Domestic Violence Offenders

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Abstract

Domestic violence is a prevalent social issue worldwide, often occurring within family contexts, such as between married couples, parents, and children. While numerous studies have focused on victims, limited attention has been given to perpetrators. This study explores the dominant conflict management styles among perpetrators of domestic violence. Employing a qualitative research design, the study involved 18 informants selected through purposive sampling and interviewed using in-depth methods. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Findings reveal three dominant components of conflict management styles: avoidance, superiority, and collaboration. Although perpetrators express love toward their spouses, they struggle with effective conflict resolution. The study offers important implications from a psychological perspective by highlighting the need for emotional regulation, empathy development, and moral reasoning among perpetrators. Additionally, it underscores the role of social work in designing targeted interventions that promote behavioural change and relational healing.

Keywords: Domestic Violence, Perpetrator, Love, Conflict Management, Social Intervention

Introduction

Domestic violence cases have been on the rise during the COVID-19 pandemic across the country. In Malaysia, the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) since March 2020 has contributed to the continued increase in domestic violence incidents. The stress caused by concerns over safety, health, finances, and social restrictions during the pandemic has significantly contributed to this trend (Kumar, 2020). A total of 5,260 cases of domestic violence were reported in 2020, highlighting the severity of the issue within a single year. This number rose by 2,208 cases in 2021, bringing the total to 7,468 cases (WCC, 2022).

The Domestic Violence Act (Amendment 2017) defines domestic violence as any intentional act to physically intimidate, coerce, confine, commit betrayal, cause damage to property, inflict psychological harm, use prohibited substances, or cause physical harm to a victim. The Act also specifies the categories of protected individuals, including spouses, ex-spouses, children under 18 years old, other household members such as elderly residents, incapacitated adults, and relatives.

This systematic review focuses on the conflict management styles among perpetrators of domestic violence. The study aims to provide critical insights and foundational data for future research in this area. The central research question guiding this review is: *What are the conflict management styles used by perpetrators of domestic violence?* In response to this research question, the main objective of this study is to identify and analyze these conflict management styles.

Literature Review

In most marriages, couples typically undergo several stages including crisis, adjustment, and stress phases. Successfully navigating these phases is crucial for ensuring marital stability and the continuity of the family institution (Hamid et al., 2021). However, unresolved conflicts between couples are a significant factor that can lead to domestic violence (Mariam et al., 2018). Household conflicts arise when there are disagreements or differing opinions, desires, and expectations between spouses, ultimately disrupting family harmony (Mariam et al., 2022). While conflict is a natural part of human interaction (Lokman, Mohd Anuar & Normah, 2008), individuals with past traumatic experiences such as childhood abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect often face challenges in managing conflict. Hence, conflict management has been proposed as a vital intervention for reducing violent behavior among perpetrators (Thomas et al., 2021).

According to Hamid et al. (2021), three major triggers of marital conflict include financial difficulties, communication issues, and family interference. Similarly, Mariam et al. (2018) identified both external and internal causes of domestic conflict. External factors include economic challenges, sexual dissatisfaction, third-party interference, social problems, and health issues, whereas internal factors involve a lack of religious knowledge, emotional instability, jealousy, differing perspectives, and poor communication. Lavner, Kamey, and Bradbury (2016) emphasized that differing communication styles between men and women often lead to marital dissatisfaction. On the other hand, effective interpersonal communication fosters marital satisfaction (Farah & Aneesh, 2018). These findings underscore the importance of communication within families, as communication patterns learned in the family influence interpersonal relationships (Noller, 1995).

Conflict behaviors are also shaped by socialization processes, especially how individuals are taught to handle conflict in their families. Family environments play a critical role in teaching individuals how to respond to conflict (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Research by Follingstad et al. (1992) and Stets (1988) indicates that individuals may resort to violence when other methods of control fail. A lack of conflict resolution skills has been identified as a root cause of aggression (McCorkel & Resse, 2017). Conflict management styles significantly influence the dynamics between partners and family members (Roberts, 2000). According to Siti Marziah et al. (2018), a successful marriage requires couples to adopt "win-win" and "give-

and-take" approaches. Effective conflict management acts as a mediator that reduces psychological pressure and helps maintain marital quality.

Methods of Study

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing a phenomenological approach. In-depth interviews were conducted to explore the lived experiences of domestic violence perpetrators. The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon from the perspective of the offenders themselves, with the ultimate goal of informing effective social interventions to mitigate violent behaviour. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants, comprising 18 incarcerated individuals convicted of domestic violence. The number of participants was determined based on data saturation.

Data Collection Method

The study adopted a qualitative design underpinned by a phenomenological approach, which seeks to explore the shared meaning of experiences among individuals regarding a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2024). In-depth interviews were the primary data collection method, chosen for their capacity to elicit rich, detailed narratives from the informants.

Sampling

Eighteen participants were purposively selected for this study. All informants were male prisoners who had been convicted under Section 326 of the Penal Code for offences related to domestic violence. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (i) male gender, (ii) legally married, (iii) currently incarcerated, and (iv) convicted specifically for domestic violence-related crimes. Identification of suitable participants was facilitated with the assistance of prison counselling personnel, who recommended individuals known to be cooperative and capable of self-disclosure**.**

Data Analysis

Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the interview data. The analytical process involved transcription of the interview recordings, followed by the development of codes, sub-themes, and overarching themes, which were then used to support the interpretation and discussion of the research findings.

Ethical Considerations

Participation in this study was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. Prior to data collection, the researcher clearly explained the objectives, procedures, potential benefits, and risks associated with the study to ensure that informants made an informed decision about their participation. Ethical approval was secured from both the relevant prison authorities as well as the Ethics Committee of The National University of Malaysia. Written consent was obtained via a formal declaration form provided to each participant. As noted by Fritz (2008), informed consent is a critical element in respecting participants' autonomy and privacy.

Findings

This study involved 18 male informants who had previously committed acts of violence against their wives. Most of the informants were employed as lorry drivers and were frequently away from home. The table below presents the demographic background of the participants involved in this study.

Table 1
Demographic Background of Informants

Informant	Ethnicity	Age	Number of Children	Occupation Prior to Imprisonment
1	Chinese	35	2	Mechanic
2	Malay	43	3	Unemployed
3	Indian	36	1	Self-employed
4	Indian	41	3	Scrap metal shop worker
5	Malay	39	3	Security guard
6	Indian Muslim	62	4	Human resource management
7	Malay	37	4	Security guard
8	Indian	56	3	Self-employed (contract-based)
9	Indian	28	-	Lorry driver
10	Malay	35	4	Cleaning worker
11	Indian	49	4	Cleaning worker
12	Malay	35	3	Cleaning worker
13	Malay	43	3	Factory worker
14	Indian	29	4	Electrical wiring technician
15	Indian	42	3	Unemployed
16	Indian	40	3	Lorry driver
17	Malay	44	5	House renovation worker
18	Malay	37	1	Tuition centre entrepreneur

The demographic revealed a diverse ethnic representation, including Malay, Indian, Chinese, and Indian Muslim backgrounds, reflecting the multicultural context of Malaysia. The informants ranged in age from 28 to 62 years, with the majority falling between their 30s and 40s, age range often associated with active familial and economic responsibilities. Most participants had between one and five children, indicating that their acts of violence occurred within established family structures and likely had broader consequences for dependents. The presence of children further underscores the intergenerational risk associated with domestic violence and highlights the importance of addressing familial dynamics in intervention efforts.

In terms of employment prior to incarceration, the informants came from various occupational sectors, with a noticeable concentration in low to middle income jobs such as cleaning workers, security guards, factory workers, and lorry drivers. A few were self-employed or held technical roles, while two were unemployed at the time of their offense. The data also indicate that most of the informants were primary breadwinners, which may have reinforced traditional gender roles and expectations of control or dominance, contributing to their conflict management styles. Overall, the demographic profile provides valuable context for understanding the intersection of economic, cultural, and familial factors in shaping the behaviours and relational patterns of domestic violence perpetrators.

Conflict Management Styles

The study identified three primary conflict management styles among perpetrators of domestic violence: avoidance, superiority, and collaborative.

Avoidance

The theme of *Avoidance* emerged as a prominent strategy used by the informants to manage conflict within intimate relationships. This coping mechanism manifested in two distinct forms: direct avoidance and indirect avoidance, both reflecting efforts to prevent the escalation of conflict but with differing levels of engagement and intent.

Direct Avoidance

Informants described physically removing themselves from the conflict scene as a way to de-escalate tension and manage their emotional responses. For these men, avoidance was not merely an escape, but a self-regulation strategy to prevent potential harm toward their partners.

"*Initially, I would avoid the fight. I'd leave the house, go hang out somewhere anywhere, just so I didn't have to keep arguing with her. At least by the time I come back, I can act like nothing happened*." (Informant 2)

This behavior suggests a deliberate intention to cool down rather than confront the problem head-on. Informant 5, for instance, demonstrated heightened self-awareness and a sense of responsibility: "*When I got angry, I would leave the house. Sometimes I wouldn't come back for a day. I was scared I might hurt her, so I left. I'd go to my father's house with my little daughter. The next day, we'd both just stay silent*." (Informant 5)

Informant 6 echoed a similar sentiment, emphasizing the need to disengage physically in order to avoid making things worse: "*Rather than face the issue, if I couldn't control myself, I'd go out for a smoke or ride my bike. I'd avoid the confrontation rather than escalate it. That's just human nature.*" (Informant 6)

These discovery reflect a pattern of using physical distance as a buffer against emotional volatility, with informants choosing to temporarily detach rather than confront the conflict while emotionally charged.

Indirect Avoidance

In contrast to direct avoidance, *indirect avoidance* involved a more passive response to conflict where informants choose not to engage or communicate, often due to poor emotional expression, learned helplessness, or breakdown in relational communication.

Informant 10 illustrated this lack of communicative reciprocity: "*My wife never talked about her problems. She would talk to her relatives instead. So, I didn't even know what was wrong. In the end, I just stayed quiet and went back home like nothing happened." (In*formant 10)

Similarly, Informant 13 spoke of physical separation and gradual emotional disengagement, particularly after the loss of his father, who had previously served as a source of emotional

support*: "Fights would only last an hour or two. I'd sit under a tree or with my father. But after he passed away, I distanced myself. She did her thing, I did mine."* (Informant 13)

This emotional silence was often chosen as a protective mechanism to avoid mutual escalation, as described by Informant 3: *"My wife had a sharp tongue. She would get angry, but I stayed quiet. If both of us lost our temper, things would escalate. I chose to be silent."* (Informant 3)

Indirect avoidance, therefore, can be interpreted as a reflection of conflict fatigue, a lack of emotional safety, or limited interpersonal skills in navigating disagreements, leading to passive withdrawal and unresolved issues.

Both direct and indirect forms of avoidance represent strategies of self-preservation and conflict de-escalation, but they also point to underlying issues such as emotional suppression, poor conflict resolution skills, and deteriorating communication patterns in intimate relationships. While some informants perceived avoidance as a means to maintain peace, the narratives also indicate that repeated avoidance may lead to emotional distancing, relational disconnection, and the persistence of unresolved conflict.

Superiority

The second dominant conflict management style identified among domestic violence perpetrators was superiority. This style is characterised by the need to dominate, assert control, and respond to conflict with physical or emotional intensity. It emerged in two distinct but overlapping sub-themes: aggressive behaviour and emotional dysregulation.

Aggressive Behaviour

For many informants, the use of physical aggression was not random or senseless, but a response to perceived threats to their authority or pride within the relationship. The aggression often stemmed from feeling challenged, provoked, or disrespected by their partner.

Informant 11 shared how his aggression was quickly followed by avoidance, suggesting a cycle of aggression withdrawal as a means of managing relational stress:*"I hit her, then I left. When I returned, I tried to calm her down. If I felt angry, I'd go fishing with my kids to cool off."*

Informant 7 revealed how he perceived his wife's remarks as a deliberate provocation. His reaction highlights how ego and perceived threats to masculinity can escalate conflict into violence: *"She dared me to slap her. 'if you dare, slap me.' I knew it was a challenge. Eventually, I realized she was playing a game with me."*

For Informant 15, the normalization of violence in the relationship was deeply concerning. Physical altercations had become a routine part of conflict, suggesting mutual aggression and learned relational dysfunction: *"We both hit each other. We're used to that. She even lifted things to hit me with. That was our norm."*

Together, these result reflect a power struggle within the relationship dynamic, where violence becomes a tool for establishing control or asserting dominance.

Emotional Dysregulation

The second sub-theme under superiority was emotional dysregulation, where perpetrators lost control of their emotions, particularly in moments of exhaustion, provocation, or humiliation. Unlike the calculated aggression seen earlier, this form was often impulsive and reactive, revealing the fragile emotional states behind violent behaviour.

Informant 7, for instance, minimized his act of aggression, yet also exposed how words especially those linked to shame and betrayal cut deeply: *"With my ex-wife, it wasn't brutal, I threw a pillow. But she provoked me, saying I should go find a prostitute. That really hurt."*

Informant 10 reflected on how physical fatigue and accumulated stress contributed to his violent outburst, showing the interplay between mental overload and the inability to self-regulate: *"I hit my wife because I was exhausted mentally and physically. I struck her on the forehead, it bled. Then I stopped. I didn't hit her again."*

Meanwhile, Informant 12 shared a situation where emotional buildup and boundary violation led to him "losing patience," which then spiralled into physical violence:
"She left for her mother's house without telling me. I tried advising her, but she did it again. I lost patience and we ended up fighting."

These result suggest that many perpetrators lacked the tools to manage intense emotional states. Rather than verbalizing frustration or seeking resolution, they responded with physical dominance or impulsivity, leading to escalation and harm.

Collaborating

A less dominant, yet emotionally significant, conflict management style observed among some perpetrators was collaborative, a form of relational repair marked by attempts to initiate communication, acknowledge personal wrongdoing, and offer apologies. This style stood in contrast to the more defensive or aggressive responses seen in other themes, suggesting a momentary shift from control to vulnerability. This theme manifested through two sub-themes; reconnect through communication and remorse and apology

Reconnect through Communication

Several informants demonstrated a conscious effort to address the conflict through verbal dialogue. These attempts, although not always reciprocated, reflected a degree of self-awareness and a desire to de-escalate the situation.

Informant 3 offered a deeply personal reflection on his past mistakes and the behavioural change he underwent to rebuild trust: *"Maybe it was my fault. I used to drink and be with other women. But once I committed to her, I stopped all that. I went back to work and focused."* This quote shows an internal acknowledgement of accountability and a turning point in behaviour, suggesting that for some, the conflict led to introspection and positive change.

Informant 11 described a painful interaction, where his attempt at reconciliation was met with public shame and rejection. Despite this, he tried to involve his children in efforts to mediate the conflict: *"After I hit her and left, I returned to try and calm her down. She*

screamed in front of others, it was embarrassing. My children also tried to talk to her, but she wouldn't listen." This example highlights the relational complexity of domestic conflict, where remorse may exist but healing is hindered by emotional wounds and breakdowns in trust.

Similarly, Informant 10 emphasized the barrier of silence, describing his frustration when attempts to communicate were ignored: *"I tried to talk, but she wouldn't respond. She never apologized or opened up. She talked to relatives but never to me. If she had, I could have helped."*

Remorse and Apology

Some perpetrators went a step further by not only recognizing their wrongdoings but also offering verbal apologies, a significant behavioural shift, especially in the context of power and pride.

Informant 8 gave a layered and emotional account of his apology, expressing guilt and shame: *"I admitted my fault. I told her, 'I'm part of your life, and I shouldn't hurt you. I'm sorry. It's my mistake.' I still don't know what got into me, but I apologized."*

This result suggests a rare moment of moral self-awareness, opening the door for therapeutic work around empathy and moral responsibility. Informant 6 illustrated how his apology was often accompanied by physical reassurance, such as holding hands, a symbolic act of repair and intimacy: *"I usually stay calm. But if I realize I'm wrong, I'll apologize. I'll say, 'I'm really stressed, I'm sorry. Then I'll try to rebuild physical closeness, like holding hands."*

These expressions of apology, though not universal, offer valuable insight into how some perpetrators possess the emotional capacity for change, a point that can be harnessed by professionals in rehabilitative programs. While less frequently reported, the collaboration style represents a meaningful behavioural shift from confrontation to reflection.

These findings suggest that not all perpetrators are rigid in their conflict responses. Some display moments of remorse, communication, and desire for reconciliation, particularly when they are aware of the impact of their actions.

Discussion

This study explored the conflict management styles of male perpetrators of domestic violence, highlighting three major patterns: avoidance, superiority, and collaboration. These styles offer critical insights into the psychological and relational dynamics underlying intimate partner violence (IPV), and hold important implications for interventions in both the fields of psychology and social work.

Avoidance, the most commonly reported strategy, manifested through both physical withdrawal (direct avoidance) and emotional disengagement (indirect avoidance). Perpetrators often used avoidance as a form of emotional regulation, distancing themselves from the conflict to prevent escalation. While this strategy may temporarily reduce the risk of harm, it ultimately reinforces conflict suppression rather than resolution.

The theme of superiority captured the underlying power dynamics and emotional volatility in many perpetrators' relationships. Aggressive behaviour was often triggered by perceived challenges to their masculinity or control. This aligns with hegemonic masculinity theory, which posits that men socialized into dominant roles may use aggression to maintain authority when they feel disrespected or emasculated (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Furthermore, emotional dysregulation emerged as a significant subtheme, whereby exhaustion or provocation resulted in impulsive, often violent reactions. These responses indicate low distress tolerance and poor self-regulation abilities, echoing the tenets of general aggression theory (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Emotional dysregulation is also a common feature of individuals with early trauma, unresolved grief, or a history of violence exposure, making it essential to approach perpetrators not only through punitive means, but also trauma-informed care.

Although less dominant, the third theme; collaborative offered glimpses of emotional complexity and potential for rehabilitation. Some perpetrators attempted to communicate, acknowledge mistakes, or apologize to their partners, reflecting moral awareness and a desire to repair harm.

These behaviours resonate with Rest's Four-Component Model of Moral Behavior (1986), particularly in two key areas: moral sensitivity and moral motivation. *Moral sensitivity* involves the ability to interpret and recognize the moral implications of a situation specifically, an awareness of how one's actions impact others. In the context of this study, perpetrators who demonstrated reflection, acknowledged their wrongdoing, or expressed guilt were exhibiting early signs of moral sensitivity. They were not only aware that their actions had caused harm but also appeared to grasp the emotional consequences for their partners and families.

Furthermore, the presence of remorse and attempts at relational repair aligns with the construct of empathic concern, a foundational element in prosocial behaviour theories (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). Empathic concern is defined as an other-oriented emotional response involving feelings of compassion or sorrow for another's suffering. In this study, such emotional responses were reflected in informants who described feeling ashamed, expressing guilt, or recognizing their partner's pain. These internal processes are significant because they suggest the potential for emotional growth and behavioural change, which are essential components of effective intervention and rehabilitation.

For the helping professions, these findings are crucial. They indicate that some perpetrators may benefit from restorative justice frameworks, forgiveness interventions, or narrative therapy, all of which prioritize empathy, reflection, and accountability. Social workers, in particular, can play a pivotal role in creating safe spaces for perpetrators to process shame and trauma while committing to behavioural change.

From a psychological perspective, avoidance is consistent with emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), where individuals seek to manage the emotional distress of conflict rather than solve its root causes. This behaviour may also reflect insecure avoidant attachment styles, in which individuals struggle with intimacy and vulnerability (Mikulincer &

Shaver, 2007). For instance, the emotional silence described by informants reveals a pattern of communication breakdowns, possibly shaped by early attachment disruptions or social learning in conflict-avoidant environments.

In social work practice, such findings stress the importance of conflict communication skills training and emotion literacy programs. Practitioners can help clients recognize how avoidance sustains cycles of disconnection and instead encourage constructive dialogue, particularly through couples therapy, restorative family practices, or motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). From this finding, it also suggests the need for anger management interventions, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) for impulsivity, and group-based accountability programs that challenge toxic masculinity while developing non-violent conflict resolution skills (Pence & Paymar, 1993).

Conflict behaviours in perpetrators are not monolithic; they range from passive withdrawal to violent dominance, but also include moments of self-reflection. For practitioners in psychology and social work, this calls for a tailored, strengths-based approach, one that balances accountability with emotional healing. Prison-based rehabilitation programs should include modules on Conflict resolution and emotional regulation, masculinity and identity work, psychological trauma and attachment repair and restorative communication with partners and families.

In addition, community reintegration efforts must involve trained counsellors and social workers who can support behaviour change in a non-judgmental, structured environment. Finally, integrating perpetrators into family conferencing or community dialogues (with appropriate safeguards) may promote relational healing and reduce recidivism.

Conclusion

The three conflict management styles identified; avoidance, superiority, and collaboration and highlight the complex interplay of psychological defence, power, and moral agency in the lives of domestic violence perpetrators. Recognizing these dynamics allows the helping professions to move beyond purely punitive models and design holistic, evidence-based interventions that promote genuine transformation.

Award

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