



The role of positive problem-solving style on marital satisfaction in the early years of marriage

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 01 June 2025

Revised: 31 October 2025

Accepted: 06 November 2025

Available online: 14 November 2025

E-ISSN: 1858-0327

P-ISSN: 2549-2136

How to cite:

Dewi, G. A. S., & Valentina, T. D. (2025). The role of positive problem-solving style on marital satisfaction in early years of marriage. *Psikologia: Jurnal Pemikiran dan Penelitian Psikologi*, 20(2), 80–86. <http://doi.org/10.32734/psikologia.v20i2.21048>



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ABSTRACT

The early years of marriage often involve various adjustment challenges that may lead to conflict; however, research exploring the role of positive problem-solving styles in marital satisfaction remains limited. This study aims to examine the role of positive problem-solving style in marital satisfaction during the early years of marriage. A quantitative approach was conducted, involving 162 individuals who had been married for ≤ 10 years. The instruments used were a marital satisfaction scale based on aspects developed by Fowers & Olson (1993) and a positive problem-solving style scale constructed based on Kurdek's concept of Conflict Resolution Style. Results of a simple regression analysis showed that positive problem-solving significantly contributed to marital satisfaction ($p < .001$), accounting for 65.4% of the variance. This finding suggests that individuals who employ constructive and cooperative strategies in managing marital conflicts tend to experience higher satisfaction, underscoring the importance of favorable conflict resolution in maintaining a healthy and fulfilling marriage.

Keywords: conflict resolution style, early years of marriage, marital satisfaction, positive problem-solving style

1. Introduction

The early years of marriage are often described as the happiest period in married life. This may be due to the honeymoon effect, which is characterized by high levels of marital satisfaction (Lorber et al., 2015). Despite appearing joyful, the early years of marriage are also a crucial period. This is because issues that arise at the beginning of a marriage tend to persist and worsen over time (Lavner, 2014). Researchers differ slightly in defining this early stage. Indriani (2014) categorizes marriages of 1-5 years as the early phase, while Artamevia and Wrastasari (2021) define short-term marriages as those lasting 0-7 years. Rahmananda (2022) even includes marriages up to 10 years as part of the early stage. This range is considered reasonable, as marriage is typically expected to last in the long term, often for a lifetime. During these years, spouses face significant challenges as they undergo the adjustment process. Individuals who previously lived separately must now reconcile differences in values, habits, and shared responsibilities (Strong et al., 2011). Common challenges faced in early marriage include financial issues, adapting to the partner's family, differences in daily routines, unstable communication patterns, and differing views on parenting (Saidiyah & Julianto, 2016). If these challenges are not managed properly, the resulting conflict may accumulate, leading to marital dissatisfaction, which often ends in divorce.

In Indonesia, it has been found that 80% of divorces occur among couples who have been married for less than five years (Ministry of Religious Affairs, 2021). This is further supported by data from the Religious Court of Wonogiri (in Radar Solo, 2024), which shows that more than half of divorce cases (52.9%) occur among couples married for less than ten years, with 32.8% occurring within the first five years and 20.1% between six and ten years of marriage. These findings reinforce the notion that the first decade of marriage is a period highly vulnerable to conflict and marital dissatisfaction in Indonesia.

In maintaining the continuity of married life, marital satisfaction is an important element. A longitudinal study by Williamson and Lavner (2019) found that individuals with low marital satisfaction in the early years were three times more likely to divorce compared to those with moderate or high satisfaction during the same period. Marital satisfaction is defined as an individual's subjective evaluation of their marital relationship, characterized by feelings of happiness, satisfaction, and enjoyment (Fowers & Olson, 1993). Furthermore, Skolnick (2009) states that a satisfying relationship is characterized by warmth, affection, shared involvement, effective conflict resolution, and personality compatibility. From the perspective of the Goals Dynamics framework, marital satisfaction can occur when the expected goals of marriage are achieved (Li & Fung, 2011).

Fowers & Olson (1993) identified ten aspects that shape marital satisfaction, including personality issues, role equality, communication, conflict resolution, financial management, family and friends, leisure activities, sexual relationships, children and parenting, and religious orientation. Globally, various factors have been found to relate to individuals' levels of satisfaction, such as economic status, religiosity, education, age, and gender (Dobrowolska, 2020). In line with this research, it has been found that there are differences in marital satisfaction levels based on gender, with men reporting higher levels of satisfaction compared to women (Fowers, 1991; Kharipuri, 2019).

Previous studies (Ginarta & Setiawan, 2022; Rahmananda, 2022) indicate that individuals in the early years of marriage tend to report high marital satisfaction. However, other research has also found a tendency for marital satisfaction to decline as the marriage progresses. A longitudinal study by Kurdek (1998) revealed that marital satisfaction decreased for both men and women during the first four years of marriage. This aligns with findings from another longitudinal study by Lavner & Bradbury (2010), which found that 9-26% of participants who initially reported being satisfied within the first four years of marriage eventually divorced between the fourth and tenth year. This decline is believed to stem from the accumulation of unresolved conflicts, poor communication, complaints, excessive roles, demanding work schedules, and child-rearing responsibilities that have built up since the early years of marriage (Strong et al., 2011). Thus, the early years of marriage are a crucial period for establishing the foundation of future marital satisfaction.

Unfortunately, conflict is an inevitable part of marital life. The more intimate a relationship becomes, the greater the likelihood of interpersonal conflict (Olson, DeFrain, & Skogrand, 2019). Poorly managed conflicts can lead to persistent feelings of dissatisfaction within the relationship (Muhid, 2019). In Indonesia, ongoing conflict has remained the leading cause of divorce for several years (BPS, 2024). This phenomenon suggests that some couples struggle to resolve their conflicts and ultimately choose to separate.

Nevertheless, conflicts within marriage do not always have a negative impact. Their effects largely depend on how individuals and their partners handle them adaptively and constructively. However, not all individuals respond to conflict in the same way. Kilmann & Thomas (in Olson, 2003) identify several common behavioral patterns individuals exhibit when facing conflict. Kurdek (1994) classifies these patterns into four conflict resolution styles: positive problem solving, conflict engagement, withdrawal, and compliance. Individuals generally lean toward one of these styles when addressing conflicts, and their preferred style tends to remain consistent for over a year (Kurdek, 1994).

Among the four conflict resolution styles identified by Kurdek (1994), positive problem solving is considered the most adaptive and constructive. This style involves actively seeking to understand the partner's perspective, compromising, and finding mutually satisfying solutions (Kurdek, 1994; Muttaqin, 2022). Individuals who adopt this style prioritize balancing their own interests with those of their partner and tend to resolve conflict without creating negative emotional impacts. Prior research has consistently found that positive problem-solving is the style most strongly associated with marital satisfaction (Kurdek, 1994; Ünal & Akgün, 2020). The use of this style has also been shown to predict a lower risk of separation.

Although the link between a positive problem-solving style and marital satisfaction has been explored in several studies, research that explicitly examines positive problem-solving as an independent variable and directly tests its role in marital satisfaction remains limited. A more detailed understanding of this style could provide valuable insights to help individuals manage marital conflicts in adaptive and healthy ways. Furthermore, studies focusing on positive problem-solving and marital satisfaction in the early years of marriage are critical, as this period is critical in laying the groundwork for a lasting marital relationship. In the Indonesian context, direct quantitative studies on positive problem-solving style as a single predictor of marital satisfaction are still limited. Therefore, this study aims to examine the role of positive problem-solving in marital satisfaction during the early years of marriage. The hypotheses proposed in this study are H0: A positive problem-solving style does not predict marital satisfaction, and H1: A positive problem-solving style predicts marital satisfaction.

2. Method

The data collection method employed in this study was a quantitative approach using simple linear regression to examine the role of positive problem-solving style in marital satisfaction. The survey was conducted online via Google Forms. This study employed two measurement instruments: the Marital Satisfaction Scale and the Positive Problem-Solving Style Scale. The Marital Satisfaction Scale and the Positive Problem-Solving Style Scale. Both scales differentiated individual responses from highly positive to highly negative. The response categories were presented on a 4-point scale, where one represented "strongly not in accordance with the respondent's condition", two represented "not in accordance with the respondent's condition", three represented "in accordance with the respondent's condition", and four represented "strongly in accordance with the respondent's condition".

The population of this study comprised individuals in the early years of marriage, with a marital duration of up to 10 years. The inclusion criteria for this study were: a) currently married, b) within a marital duration of 0-10 years, and c) having children. The last criterion was chosen because one of the aspects in the marital satisfaction scale used relates to child parenting. The sample was obtained using a non-probability sampling method with an incidental sampling technique. In incidental sampling, the sample is selected based on individuals who happen to meet the researcher by chance and are deemed suitable as data sources (Sugiyono, 2018). The minimum sample size in this study was determined using Cochran's formula (Sugiyono), with a 95% confidence level and a 10% maximum margin of error. Based on this calculation, a minimum of 96 respondents was set as the required sample size.

The research procedure began with identifying the background of the problem through a literature review to understand the issue being examined, specifically the role of a positive problem-solving style on marital satisfaction, and to identify gaps in previous studies. Next, relevant theories were searched and selected as the conceptual foundation of the study. Based on these theories, the researcher developed research instruments in the form of psychological scales that reflected the indicators of the variables studied. After the instruments were developed, a pilot test was conducted, which included content validity testing through expert judgement by subject-matter experts, as well as reliability and item discrimination analyses using pilot test data. The pilot study was conducted with 61 respondents (16 men and 45 women) who had been married for less than 10 years, aged between 24 and 48 years, via Google Forms between March 23 and March 30, 2025. Items were screened, and only those deemed valid and reliable were retained for further analysis.

Data collection was then conducted with participants meeting the inclusion criteria. At the beginning of the questionnaire, participants were provided with an informed consent statement that outlined the study's objectives, assured confidentiality, and declared that the data would be used solely for academic purposes. Data analysis included assumption testing for normality and linearity to ensure statistical requirements were met before proceeding to hypothesis testing using simple linear regression.

This study utilized two instruments: the Marital Satisfaction Scale and the Positive Problem-Solving Style Scale, both developed by the researcher based on theoretical reviews. Each scale included both favorable and unfavorable statements, using a modified 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly not in accordance with the respondent's condition) to 4 (strongly in accordance with the respondent's condition). The Marital Satisfaction Scale was constructed based on the 10 aspects of marital satisfaction proposed by Fowers & Olson (1993), which include personality issues, role equality, communication, conflict resolution, financial management, family and friends, leisure activities, sexual relationships, children and parenting, and religious orientation. Example items include: "I appreciate my partner's traits as they are" (favorable) and "I find it difficult to handle my partner's traits that do not suit me" (unfavorable). Item validity scores for the retained items were all above 0.88, and the reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of $\alpha = 0.987$ ($\alpha \geq 0.70$).

The Positive Problem-Solving Style Scale was developed based on aspects derived from Kurdek's (1994) definition of positive problem-solving, namely collaborative discussion and solution-focused interaction. The scale consisted of 34 items reflecting individuals' tendencies to use high or low levels of positive problem-solving style in addressing marital issues. Example items include: "I feel comfortable expressing my opinions to my partner" (favorable) and "I feel the need to defend myself when my partner criticizes me" (unfavorable). Validity scores for the retained items were all above 0.88, and the reliability analysis yielded a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of $\alpha = 0.952$ ($\alpha \geq 0.70$).

3. Result

This study involved 162 individuals in the early years of marriage, with a maximum marital duration of 10 years. The average age of the respondents was 31.46 years ($SD = 4.64$), indicating that the majority of respondents were within the young adulthood range (Santrock, 2009). The majority of respondents were female

(123 individuals, 75.93%), while male respondents comprised 39 individuals (24.07%). Most respondents had a bachelor's degree, totalling 112 individuals (69.14%).

Based on the descriptive statistical results, the data were categorized to determine the respondents' levels regarding the measured psychological construct. The descriptive analysis revealed that the empirical mean score for marital satisfaction ($M = 198.77$) was significantly higher than the theoretical mean ($M = 150$), indicating that the majority of respondents experienced a high level of satisfaction with their marital life. The categorization of the marital satisfaction variable is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Data Categorization on the Marital Satisfaction Variable

Score Range	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
$x < 113$	Very Low	6	3.70%
$113 < x < 138$	Low	5	3.09%
$163 < x < 188$	High	22	13.58%
$x > 188$	Very High	129	79.63%

Based on Table 1, it can be seen that the majority of respondents are classified in the very high level of marital satisfaction, accounting for 79.63%, followed by those in the high satisfaction category, at 13.58%. Meanwhile, the descriptive statistical results for positive problem-solving style showed an empirical mean ($M = 105.46$) that was higher than the theoretical mean ($M = 85$), indicating that respondents tend to use a high level of positive problem-solving style when dealing with marital conflicts or challenges. The categorization of the positive problem-solving style variable is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Data Categorization on the Positive Problem-Solving Style Variable

Score Range	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
$x < 68$	Very Low	4	2.47%
$68 < x < 85$	Low	6	3.70%
$85 < x < 102$	High	57	35.19%
$x > 102$	Very High	95	58.64%

Based on the data categorization results in Table 2, more than half (58.64%) of the research subjects demonstrated a very high level of positive problem-solving style (95 individuals). Additionally, 57 respondents (35.19%) were in the high positive problem-solving style category. This suggests that respondents generally adopt positive problem-solving approaches when resolving marital conflicts.

This study employed simple linear regression analysis to examine the role of positive problem-solving style in marital satisfaction. Before conducting the regression analysis, assumption testing was performed to ensure the appropriateness of the analysis method. The assumption tests included normality and linearity tests. All assumption tests were conducted using SPSS Version 26 for Windows. The normality test was used to determine whether the data for both the independent and dependent variables were normally distributed. This study used the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, where the data distribution is considered normal if the significance value $p > .05$. The results indicated that the residual data were normally distributed, with a significance value of $p = .060$ ($p > .05$). The linearity test was conducted to determine whether a linear relationship existed between the independent and dependent variables. The test was carried out using the Test for Linearity, with the rule that if $p < .05$, the relationship is considered non-linear. The results showed that the linearity coefficient for the positive problem-solving style variable had a significance value of $p < .001$ ($p < .05$), indicating that the independent and dependent variables in this study exhibit a linear relationship.

After fulfilling the assumption tests, a simple linear regression analysis was performed to determine the contribution of positive problem-solving style to marital satisfaction. If the significance value was $p < .05$, the alternative hypothesis (H_a) was accepted, and the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected, indicating that the independent variable significantly affects the dependent variable. The regression analysis results showed that the F-value was 302.081 with a significance value of $p < .001$ ($p < .05$). Based on these results, it can be concluded that a positive problem-solving style significantly contributes to marital satisfaction among individuals in the early years of marriage. The results of the simple linear regression analysis are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Results of the Simple Linear Regression Hypothesis Test

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
<i>Regression</i>	97596.864	1	97596.864	302.081	.000
Residual	51693.136	160	323.082		
Total	149290.000	161			

Based on the test results, it was found that the R value was 0.809 with a coefficient of determination (R-squared) of 0.654. This indicates that the positive problem-solving style accounts for 65.4% of the variance in marital satisfaction, while 34.6% of the variance is attributed to other variables not examined in this study. The contribution of the independent variable to the dependent variable is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Contribution of the Independent Variable to the Dependent Variable

R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error Estimate
97596.864	1	97596.864	302.081

Based on these findings, the alternative hypothesis (H_a), that positive problem-solving style predicts marital satisfaction during the early years of marriage, is accepted.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the role of a positive problem-solving style in marital satisfaction among individuals in the early stages of marriage. Based on the results of the simple linear regression hypothesis test, it was found that a positive problem-solving style significantly contributes to marital satisfaction ($p > 0.001$) with a contribution of 65.4%. This finding suggests that an individual's ability to resolve conflicts positively in the early years of marriage plays a crucial role in maintaining marital satisfaction. This style encourages effective communication and mutual understanding, which in turn enhances marital satisfaction (Muhid, 2019). This result supports previous research by Kurdek (1994), who found a positive relationship between a positive problem-solving style and marital satisfaction.

The early years of marriage are a crucial and vulnerable period, as couples face numerous challenges to adjustment. In the Indonesian context, marital adjustment in the first decade is often shaped by unique socio-cultural dynamics, such as living with extended family or in-laws, cultural background differences, and traditional gender role divisions (Saputra, Hartati, & Aviani, 2017; Putri & Lestari, 2015). These conditions make the adjustment process more complex and increase the potential for conflict.

Lavner (2014) states that marital problems tend to remain stable and persistent over time, and declines in marital satisfaction often result from the accumulation of unresolved issues that began in the early years of marriage. Therefore, addressing problems adaptively during this initial phase is crucial to prevent long-term negative consequences. The way individuals respond to and manage conflict significantly influences their level of marital satisfaction (Muhid, Nurmamita, & Hanim, 2019). Those who adopt a positive problem-solving style tend to maintain effective communication and foster mutual understanding with their partners. This approach allows couples to openly discuss issues and seek mutually beneficial solutions, thereby sustaining marital satisfaction even in the presence of conflict (Kurdek, 1994). These findings are further supported by Adriani & Ratnasari (2021), who found that a positive problem-solving style is the most significant predictor of individual marital satisfaction.

In this study, the majority of participants reported very high levels of marital satisfaction (74.1%), indicating that during the early years of marriage, couples tend to feel strongly satisfied with their relationships. The high marital satisfaction in the early years can be explained by the distinctive characteristics inherent to this phase of marriage. Lorber (2015) notes that this period is often marked by intense affection and an idealistic view of one's partner. Additionally, Lavner (2012; 2014) explains that early marriage is typically accompanied by idealistic expectations of marital satisfaction, resulting in high optimism and increased marital satisfaction.

However, marital satisfaction is dynamic and may change as the marriage progresses (Susanti, 2024). Gottman (2000) emphasized that unresolved conflicts can lead to relationship breakdowns, highlighting the importance of adopting constructive conflict resolution styles. This aligns with Fowers' (1993) view, which

considers conflict resolution to be one of the key aspects supporting marital satisfaction. In this study, the majority of participants were categorized as having very high (50%) and high (37.7%) levels of positive problem-solving style, suggesting that most individuals have already adopted constructive approaches in handling marital conflicts.

The findings of this study are expected to provide practical implications for marriage-related interventions, such as counselling or premarital education programs. The development of conflict resolution skills using the positive problem-solving style can be a key focus of intervention efforts, given its significant contribution to marital satisfaction. Although this study showed a significant effect, it was limited to examining only one conflict resolution style. Furthermore, the study involved individual respondents rather than couples. Future research is recommended to explore other conflict resolution styles, such as conflict engagement (negative problem-solving), withdrawal, and compliance, within the Indonesian family context, in order to compare their influence on marital satisfaction. Additionally, using couples as participants may provide a more comprehensive picture of marital dynamics from a two-way perspective.

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