A Grounded Theory on Conflict Management in Long-Distance Relationships

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May 03, 2019

Abstract

The literature on interpersonal conflict management is already extensive and theories have been forwarded since the 1960s. However, these theories were created with proximal couples in mind. They do not address the situation of partners in long-distance relationships (LDRs). Thus, a grounded theory study was done among 10 Filipinos in LDRs. They were individually interviewed for about an hour per session and the interviews were transcribed. The transcriptions were then subjected to open coding, which yielded 18 open codes. During the selective coding, these were pared down to five categories. Their relationships were identified during the theoretical coding, which resulted in a grounded theory on conflict management in LDRs. This theory posits that the reason for the LDR; long-term relationship plans; communication practices; and the values, behaviors, and other attributes of the couple all shape long-distance conflicts. The computer-mediated communication technologies used by the long-distance couples were factors in relational maintenance.

INTRODUCTION

In any interpersonal relationship, conflicts are unavoidable. This is because individuals differ in their needs, beliefs, goals, and behaviors (Canary, 2003). Since the middle of the 20th century, perspectives on interpersonal conflicts have been explored and examined. The most widely used among them are the studies of Blake and Mouton (1964) and Hall (1969), who identified five conflict management styles based on a person’s assertiveness and cooperativeness (Ruble & Thomas, 1976). Assertiveness is a behavior intended to satisfy one’s own concerns, while cooperativeness is a behavior intended to satisfy the other individual’s concern. This viewpoint is now known as the Conflict Styles Perspective (Folger et al., 2005). The styles have changed names through the decades, but the most popular appellations were the ones by Kilmann and Thomas (1977). Their version is used throughout this paper.

When a person’s levels of assertiveness and cooperativeness are combined, he or she can have one of the following conflict management styles:

1. A **competing** style is high in assertiveness and low in cooperativeness. The person places a great emphasis on his or her own concerns and ignores those of the other party.
2. An **accommodating** style is low in assertiveness and high in cooperativeness. The person gives in to the other party at the cost of his or her own concerns.
3. An **avoiding** style is low in assertiveness and low in cooperativeness. The person simply withdraws and refuses to deal with the conflict.
4. A **collaborating** style is high in assertiveness and high in cooperativeness. The person works to attain a solution that will meet the needs of both parties.
5. A **compromising** style has intermediate levels of assertiveness and cooperativeness. Both parties agree to meet halfway; thus, giving up something without losing everything.
Although the Conflict Styles Perspective started out as an organizational communication theory, it did not take long for interpersonal communication researchers to adapt it to their subfield. Today, it is widely used in contexts other than organizational communication (Folger et al., 2005).

However, although the above typology is widely accepted worldwide, there are certain Philippine conflict management practices that are not covered by the five styles. For instance, *palaaway*, *tampo*, and *sumpong* (Kintanar, 2010) cannot be accounted for by any of the said styles.

According to Kintanar (2010), being *palaaway* means exploding, losing control, and attacking one’s partner. Meanwhile, *tampo* is characterized by sulking, giving the cold shoulder, remaining silent, and acting distant. Finally, *sumpong*, which is classified into two types. The first one is aggressive *sumpong*—characterized by hostile facial expressions, banging and throwing things, crankiness, and being difficult to understand and deal with. There is an opposite kind of *sumpong* that Kintanar called withdrawing *sumpong*. This is characterized by being sulky and silent, as well as communication avoidance.

Kintanar (2010) explained that the choice of conflict management style is explained by Attachment Theory. Once people see signs of threat, they immediately seek out their primary attachment figure to solve their problems. However, for most adults, this attachment figure is not available, so they experience attachment anxiety. To manage conflicts, they either react emotionally or minimize their emotions. When emotions are heightened, individuals may either show it or not. The former exhibits *palaaway*, while the latter displays *tampo*. Meanwhile, when emotions are minimized, they are naturally not shown but the persons may display other overt actions not normally attached to these emotions to show their displeasure. Those who “engage” demonstrate aggressive *sumpong*, while those who “withdraw” express withdrawing *sumpong*.

Kintanar’s (2010) study showed that the extant (Western) conflict management framework that is popular worldwide fails to capture the Filipino experience. Although he was able to identify four unique conflict management strategies, Kintanar was still limited by his use of Attachment Theory—another theory from the West. What is needed is to break free from current biases and construct theories that are grounded on actual data from the Philippines.

Meaningful cultural differences have already been noted between the Philippines and the West (see for example Church, 1987; Church, Katigbak, & Del Prado, 2010). These differences have been seen in interpersonal and social relations, emotions, values, and power distance, among others. In addition, the Philippines—together with other Asian countries—is a collectivistic culture (Hofstede, 2001) as opposed to individualistic Western countries. In general, collectivists emphasize family and work group goals above individual needs or desires while individualists emphasize personal achievement.

Additionally, the existing frameworks on conflict management were designed for couples in geographically close relationships (GCRs). Thus, they may not be applicable to partners in long-distance relationships (LDRs). For the communication and technology fields to move forward, there is a need for theorizing on LDRs beyond the confines of the West.

**THE RESEARCH PROBLEM**

The Conflict Styles Perspective, arguably the most popular conflict management framework in the world, says that there are five conflict management styles that people use. However, due to differences between the cultures of the United States (where the perspective originated) and the Philippines, it may not be applicable to Filipinos. In 2010, a model of Filipino conflict resolution behaviors was developed. Yet, this model also suffers from a Western bias because it is based on Attachment Theory. Thus, the researcher came up with the following research problem: What truly Philippine conflict management theory on LDRs can be developed using the Grounded Theory approach?

**METHODOLOGY**

This is a qualitative study that utilized in-depth interviewing as the primary research method. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour in venues chosen by the study participants. The interviews were open-
ended and freewheeling. The participants were encouraged to narrate their experiences through careful probing by the researcher. As this is a research on human participants, approval was sought from the author’s dissertation committee at the University of the Philippines.

The verbatim interview transcripts were analyzed using the Grounded Theory Method (GTM). Starting from the data collection stage, the researcher engaged in constant comparison. He was already analyzing while collecting data, the hallmark of GTM. The gathered data were subjected to three stages of coding: open, selective, and theoretical. It is necessary to point out, however, that the sequence of open, selective, and theoretical coding is not clean cut. They are presented sequentially here for illustration purposes, but—in actual practice—there is a substantial overlap between the stages.

There were 10 interviewees: five males and five females. Among them, two were in LDRs when the interviews were conducted while eight were formerly in LDRs (they have either come home for good or were between contracts). Eight were married while in the LDR and two were not married, although they were in romantic relationships. Except for one couple, all had children while in the LDR. Half of the study participants were white-collar workers, while the other half were blue-collar. Five interviewees were former migrant workers and five were partners left behind in the Philippines.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Surfacing the Narratives: The Open Codes

Several common themes emerged in the conversations. These were the lack of financial and career opportunities in the Philippines; planning and preparing for the LDR; work while in LDR; frequency and length of visit; communication channel and frequency of communication; limitations of communication channels; cost of communication; effect of communication channel; privacy of communication; quality of communication; values and behaviors necessary for relational maintenance; cause of conflict; communication during conflict; conflict management style; frequency, intensity, and length of conflict; role of family and friends during conflict; age; and sex. The said themes, in GTM parlance, were the open codes.

Lack of Financial and Career Opportunities in the Philippines

All the study participants or their partners decided to work abroad due to financial reasons. Many had college degrees, but their income was small. According to them, going overseas was the only way she could provide for the needs of her family. Those that did not go to college had little career opportunities in the Philippines. Some had put up their own business, but the income was not enough for their families. Although it was hard for the mothers with small children to leave, they had to make the sacrifice for their families.

Planning and Preparing for the LDR

According to the study participants, the most important activity prior to their or their partner’s departure was preparing for the separation. It entailed setting expectations while far apart, what to do while in the LDR, and identifying relational goals.

Planning not only entails what to do and expect during the LDR, but after it as well. The interviewees did not see the separation as permanent, but only a means to achieve their goals. Thus, they also prepared for the eventual coming together as couples. For instance, some of the couples had houses constructed while one partner was working abroad.

Work while in LDR

The occupations of the study participants were varied. The only commonality among them was their positive experience. No one among the migrant workers experienced abuse from their employers. Those who were left in the Philippines worked either full- or part-time, depending on time availability as most had childrearing responsibilities.

Frequency and Length of Visits
The migrant workers regularly came home to the Philippines for vacations. On average, they went home once a year with each visit lasting around a month. The study participant who had the most vacations did so several times a year, but this was a special case because he was a seaman who took only short contracts. In contrast, those who went home most infrequently were the domestic helpers.

Although this study does not aim to generalize to a larger population, it can be pointed out that the male interviewees visited the country more often than the females. It may be inferred that this was because the men were white-collar workers, while the women were blue-collar. It mirrors official statistics saying that female Filipino migrant workers were more likely to be engaged in “elementary occupations” that afforded them less control over taking time off from work than their male counterparts who were mostly doing skilled work (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2017).

Communication Channel and Frequency of Communication

Most of the study participants preferred using video calling apps, but some chose other communication channels due to various reasons. The researcher also interviewed people who were in LDRs when there was still no Internet, so a comparison could be made between the communication preferences of different generations of migrant workers.

Video calling was the choice of the participants because it allowed them to see their partners. Even if they have already finished talking for the day, they did not log out. They maintained the Internet connection so that they could still see each other while doing the things that they needed to do. For instance, one interviewee said that she usually focused the web camera on herself while washing the dishes, so that her husband could see her daily routine.

Prior to the availability of video telephony, the study participants used mobile phones to communicate. Since cellular services were expensive, they were not able to talk daily. Fortunately, when video calling apps became available, the couples were able to talk every day due to the low cost of these technologies.

Unfortunately, there were partners who were not able to make video calls even if they wanted to. This was because of access problems, as many villages in the Philippines still do not have Internet connections. For those living in these areas, the mobile phone was the communication channel of choice.

One migrant worker forbade her family to have an Internet subscription at even as she acknowledges the benefits of video calling. This was because she did not want her children to be going online and neglect their studies.

Occasionally, some couples—including their children—sent each other cards and handwritten letters. These were done during special occasions like birthdays, Christmas, and New Year. One interviewee insisted on this relatively old form of communication because she grew up exchanging letters and cards with loved ones. She wanted to pass on the tradition to her children.

Limitations of Communication Channels

According to the study participants, the main limitation of phone calls is the inability to see one’s partner. In addition, they are more expensive than Internet-based channels. However, even those who used video calling apps encountered limitations. The participants living in rural areas had very slow Internet connection. To have a steady connection, some would go to malls in the city to get a free and strong Wi-Fi signal. There, they would talk to their partners online without any interruption.

Cost of Communication

All the study participants said that the cheapest and richest way of communicating is via video calls. Indeed, most of the interviewees preferred video calling their loved ones in the Philippines. However, some of them had no choice but to make mobile phone calls due to the lack of Internet connection at home. Unfortunately, overseas calls are expensive.
The people most affected by pricey cellular services were the study participants who had low levels of education. They went abroad computer illiterate, so they relied on mobile phones. Fortunately, as years passed, they learned how to make video calls and reduce their communication expenses.

**Effects of Communication Channel**

There was a general consensus among the study participants that modern communication technologies have positive effects on LDRs. Since video calling apps allowed the partners to see each other, communication was enhanced. They were able to perform more communication acts due to the visual cues. Facial expressions and gestures were used to complement verbal communication.

Those who preferred making phone calls as the primary means of communication had to adjust to the channel’s lack of visual cues. Since there were limited nonverbal cues in the calls, they had to verbalize their feelings.

**Privacy of Communication**

Some of the study participants said that the way they communicated was affected by privacy concerns. They wanted their communication to be private because, oftentimes, sensitive and financial matters were discussed.

One participant said, “Video calling is not private. Others would see my partner and I arguing because the computer is in the living room of my mother’s house. The cell phone provides more privacy.” (Told that it is now possible to make video calls using mobile phones, she said that she was not aware of that when she was still abroad.)

Privacy issues were also faced by the seaman and his wife during the early years of their relationship. When there was still no Internet, he would occasionally call her through the ship’s communication system. However, there was no expectation of privacy using this channel because all calls were routed through the radioman.

**Quality of Communication**

All the study participants said that they had quality communication with their partners. They attributed the high quality of their communication to the fact that they communicated regularly. The regularity of communication allowed them to maintain emotional bonds. It was less about the topic of the conversations, but on the act of communicating itself. Just talking or writing to each other made them closer to each other whatever the topic was.

Most of the interviewees agreed that new technologies improved the quality of their communication. The older participants said that the advent of mobile phones resulted in more satisfying communication than simply writing each other. The same went for video calling apps. When the study participants started video calling each other, they reported having more meaningful conversations.

**Values and Behaviors Necessary for Relational Maintenance in LDRs**

All the study participants stressed open and regular communication as necessary for relational maintenance. Most noted that trust, humility, and patience should be practiced by long-distance couples. Many also said that conflicts must be solved immediately because festering and lingering issues are bad for any relationship.

**Causes of Conflict**

The most common cause of conflict among the study participants was childrearing. Mainly, this was due to the wives believing that their husbands were not hands-on enough in raising their children. This was followed by conflicts stemming from bad Internet connection and unsent or unreceived text messages. Some of the female interviewees complained about their husbands’ drinking. Other common reasons for the conflicts were financial matters and gossips.
Communication During Conflicts

The channels preferred by the study participants in their regular communication with partners were also the ones they preferred whenever there were conflicts. Thus, video calling apps and mobile phones were the ones used during conflict episodes.

Conflict Management Style

In general, due to the limitations of mediated communication channels, the study participants tended to verbalize their feelings more. Since nonverbal cues are limited in phone calls and even video calls, they had to put into words everything that they feel. These took the place of hugs, hand holdings, and other forms of physical affection that couples in GCRs usually practice when they want to make peace during conflict episodes.

Frequency, Intensity, and Length of Conflict

The study participants said that they had conflicts very infrequently. According to them, these conflicts were usually not intense. Except for one participant whose conflicts usually lasted for a week, all the interviewees said that the typical duration of their conflicts was only one day.

Role of Family and Friends During Conflict

All the study participants who had children at the time of their LDR said that their sons and daughters had a positive contribution to conflict management. Aside from children, other family members helped in conflict management. An interviewee said that she and her husband rarely had conflicts because they had strong social support. Another participant and her husband had many mutual friends that acted as peacemakers whenever they had conflicts.

Age

It is interesting to note that the study participants who said that they did not have or very rarely had conflicts were the ones who were older. It seems that maturity, in terms of age, predisposes a couple to have less conflicts.

Sex

It was noted that there was an issue that only the women raised: childrearing. The female migrant workers felt that their husbands in the Philippines were not as active in taking care of their children as they wanted them to be. They lamented that they were still expected to perform much mothering duties even if they were abroad.

Meanwhile, two of the male study participants had certain stereotypical assumptions about women. One of them advised men to shower their wives with flowers and chocolates because these are their “weakness.” Similarly, the other said that husbands should woo their wives because women expect it from men.

Probing the Narratives: The Selective Codes

The open codes discussed in the previous section were, then, transformed into selective codes. Among the open codes, two were converted to selective codes but were rephrased to become more abstract. Fourteen open codes were combined into two selective codes. Two open codes were dropped from the analysis because they proved to be unrelated to the research problem. The conversion of the codes yielded five selective codes. These are discussed below.

Reason for Being in the LDR

All the study participants who went abroad did so to earn more money for their families. The interviewees left in the Philippines said that their partners went overseas for the same reason. They battled homesickness just to make sure that their families back home are financially well provided for.
Long-Term Relationship Plans

Most of the study participants said that it is necessary for a couple to have a long-term plan about the relationship before one goes abroad. The most important aspect of this plan is deciding on when the couple will finally be together again. It can be a specific date or the achievement of a particular milestone, like having a family home constructed. Either way, having this gives the couple a specific goal that will motivate them to maintain the LDR. In addition, it provides them the assurance that the LDR is temporary and that they will be together again in the future.

The planning should also serve as an expectation-setting activity, so that each partner would know how to act in specific circumstances. The interviewees said that this pre-departure talk is a way to reduce uncertainty. Previous studies have shown that two major sources of conflict among romantic partners in LDRs is uncertainty about the relationship (Dainton & Aylor, 2001; Maguire, 2007; Sahlstein, 2006) and unmet expectations (Guldner, 2003). Thus, when the couple talk about their relational expectations, uncertainty is reduced—which results in less conflict. This may be a reason most of the study participants claimed that they had conflicts only infrequently.

Communication Practices

Communication practices include communication channel and frequency of communication, limitations of communication channels, cost of communication, effects of communication channels, privacy of communication, and quality of communication.

Most of the study participants made video calls every day. They did this because the technology allowed them to see their partners. In addition, echoing the observations of previous researchers, the cost of video calls is virtually zero once the necessary equipment and connections are installed. Moreover, even if the couple had nothing to talk about, they could let the connection linger and see each other doing mundane everyday tasks.

The experience of the participants proves Pertierra’s (2008) observation a decade ago that modern communication technologies have been a big help to long-distance couples because they have made long-distance interaction cheaper and easier. Additionally, consistent with Aguila’s (2006) findings, the interviewees were convinced that new communication technologies were vital to the maintenance of their LDRs. In fact, the growth of Internet use in the Philippines is propelled by the need of Filipinos to go online to connect with family and friends (Garcia, Arizabal, & Tuazon, n.d.).

However, even those who did not make video calls every day would have done so if given the chance. They said that the spotty Internet connection in their homes prevented them from using the applications. Thus, they relied on phone calls. Since mobile phone services in the Philippines are more expensive, it was the partner abroad who usually initiated the calls—much like the findings of Aguilar (2009) and Nagasaka (2007).

However, even those who lived in rural areas still succeeded in making video calls once a week on average. They would go to the city proper and visit kin who have good Internet connections and use their computers. Meanwhile, one interviewee said that he and his children would go to a mall to take advantage of the free Wi-Fi. This complements past research that said, all things being equal, people would always choose the richest medium in communicating with their partners (Sellen, 1995).

The mediated communication patterns of the study participants were similar to that of the interviewees of Aguila (2006, 2009). She found that long-distance couples depended on computer-mediated communication (CMC) to communicate with their partners. Other communication channels, like landline and postal mail, were not entirely forgotten. They were still used, but only for special occasions.

The way the study participants chose communication channels is consistent with previous studies. According to Rabby (1997) and Stafford, Kline, and Dimmick (1999), people use the cheapest and most convenient communication method on hand. Video calling has now become very cheap despite being the richest medium.
available, so it is the choice of the majority of the interviewees. However, those who live in rural areas and experience connectivity problems choose the cell phone because it is the most convenient channel for them.

Due to the low cost and convenience of new communication technologies, even the participants who were blue-collar workers and were already old—groups of people who are traditionally late adopters of innovations—learned how to use computers, tablets, and smartphones. This goes against the findings a decade ago (Miyasaka, 2009) that overseas Filipinos with a low educational attainment prefer to simply call and text, while those with a college education or better primarily use the Internet.

**Conflicts in LDRs**

The most common cause of conflict identified by the study participants was childrearing. That half of the interviewees mentioned this was not surprising because only one participant had no child while in an LDR. It was also understandable that childrearing was important for the couples because providing a good future for their children (or would-be children in the case of the one interviewee who had no child prior to going abroad) was the main reason the interviewees decided to go abroad. They were correct in believing that going overseas would improve their children’s education because research has shown that a high household wealth contributes to school achievement, suggesting that economically better off families are in a better position to enhance children’s academic performance (Asis & Ruiz-Marave, 2013).

Filipinos are known to regard education as a primary avenue for upward social and economic mobility (US Department of the Army, 2017), so the couples were very much concerned with their children’s education. The migrant workers decided to go overseas to be able to send their sons and daughters to good schools. Hence, it was inevitable that most of their conflicts on childrearing had something to do with the children’s schooling. A majority had frequent conflicts regarding the picking up of sons and daughters after class. The migrant workers would get angry whenever their partners failed to pick up the children from school. In their defense, the partners in the Philippines said that these happened rarely and that they instructed other trusted individuals to get the children.

Another conflict related to education was the fathers’ inability to tutor their children and help make their school projects. The concern of the mothers regarding their partners’ lack of motivation to help the children in their schoolwork is not unfounded. Past studies (e.g., Asis, 2006; Battistella & Conaco, 1998; Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, 2004) have shown that young children in households where the father was the one left at home were worse off than children in other households when it came to school indicators.

The couples’ concern for education was very much in line with previous studies showing that supporting the education of children was one of the major uses of remittances (Aguilar, 2009; Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, 2004; Yang, 2006). Yang found that additional unexpected income was used for the children’s education and for business ventures. Meanwhile, the Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People noted that the percentage of migrants’ children attending private schools was higher compared to non-migrant families. Children of migrant workers also tended to receive more school awards than other students (Edillon, 2008).

However, although the general consensus is that having a parent working abroad has a positive net effect on the children’s education, such outcome is tempered when it is the mother who is abroad (Asis, 2006; Battistella & Conaco, 1998; Episcopal Commission for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, 2004). This is because it is the mother who is expected to be hands-on with the children’s education. This was also noted in the present study. Even if it was the mother who went abroad, the father still asked her for advice on the children’s school-related concerns.

Another common cause of conflict mentioned by the study participants was the failure to communicate. This usually happened whenever the Internet connection went bad, which occurs frequently in rural areas. Conflicts were also caused by delayed and unsent text messages. The couples knew that these were not the fault of their partners, but they still ended up getting angry. The interviewees said that it was the frustration
and impatience that got to them. Being far from their loved ones was already stressful, so anything that impeded their communication was a potential cause of conflict.

One more reason for the failure to communicate was the unexpected changes in the schedule of the partners. These have resulted in situations where one partner failed to appear during a previously appointed time to communicate. Past researchers have advised long-distance couples to communicate regularly, even about nonconsequential topics, to maintain the relationship. Any deviation from this regular communication pattern leads to anxiety. Unfortunately, being anxious has negative effects on conflict management. Individuals with low levels of anxiety expressed positive conflict resolution behaviors, while those with high levels of anxiety showed the opposite (Shi, 1999, 2003).

Other common conflicts were brought about by drinking and gossips related to infidelity. Only males were the objects of these arguments as no female interviewee or partner was accused of alcoholism and having an affair. This is not surprising because, throughout the world, men consume more alcohol than women. In fact, Wilsnack, Wilsnack, and Obot (2005) noted that “this gender gap [in alcohol consumption] is one of the few universal gender differences in human social behavior” (p. 1).

Likewise, the female interviewees were not the object of gossips regarding infidelity. Among the study participants, two men were accused of having affairs—accusations that they denied. The fact that only males were suspected of infidelity mirrors the situation in the Philippines where almost all cases of extramarital affairs were committed by the husband (Gonzales, 2003).

What was surprising was that only two study participants admitted to having conflicts about money. This went against many previous studies saying that financial matters were common problems of migrant families. The results of the present study may have been affected by the fact that most interviewees may be described as coming from successful LDRs. Eight out of 10 participants were formerly in LDRs and are now physically together with their partners, except for one whose husband has died. The fact that they survived the LDR and did not break up has made them successful couples.

One factor in the couples’ success was their shared social networks. One couple decided to leave Manila and go back to the province where they grew up, so that they could be with family and friends. Two study participants narrated that their children acted as go-betweens whenever they had conflicts with their partners. An interviewee said that he asked for the help of his partner’s siblings during times of conflict. Yet, another couple are members of an online group of close friends who can see whenever they have a conflict. The role of social networks in conflict management cannot be underestimated, especially in collectivist countries like the Philippines. In such cultures, network members “have a say about the ways in which our relationships turn out and are continued” (Duck, 2007, p. 114). Thus, if family and friends urge a couple to resolve their differences, they will be motivated to solve the conflict promptly.

Most of the study participants who experienced conflicts while in an LDR claimed that problems were usually solved in just a day. This is consistent with the advice of many experts that long-distance couples should immediately talk about their problems, so that they can be solved promptly.

Most of the other study participants preferred video calling to manage conflicts because it let them see their partners. They said that being able to look at the expressions of their husbands or wives via video allowed them to gauge the sincerity of the other. However, there were interviewees who could not place video calls because of the lack of Internet connection in their homes. For them, the mobile phone was the channel of choice in managing conflicts.

Values, Behaviors, and Other Attributes Necessary for LDR Maintenance

Almost all the study participants said that open communication is necessary for relational maintenance and conflict management. They stressed that conversations about the mundane and “sweet nothings” are all right because it is the act of communicating that matters, confirming the findings of Arditti and Kaufmann.
(2004), Duck (2004), Licoppe and Smoreda (2005), and Stafford and Merolla (2007) that communication—no matter what the content—maintains relationships.

The regularity of communication also helps because it provides structure and routine to the lives of the partners. The regular time allotted for communication is something that they look forward to. In fact, Arditti and Kaufmann (2004) noted that everyday talk “was the essence of continued connection and inter-dependence” (p. 48) among couples in LDRs.

Indeed, experts (Arellano-Carandang, Solis, & Carandang; Caasi, 2014; Edillon, 2008; Fresnoza-Flot, 2009; Fuerbringer, 2007; Kauffman, 2000; Madianou, 2006; Madianou & Miller, 2012a; Miyasaka, 2009; Stephen, 1986; Uy-Tioco, 2004) argued that open and regular communication is necessary for relational maintenance. Consistent and frequent communication between migrant workers and their families left behind reinforces emotional ties. It also allows parents to fulfill parental duties despite the distance. In addition, openness has long been identified as necessary for solving conflicts productively (Gibb, 1961). It is also a major predictor of relational satisfaction (Maguire & Kinney, 2010).

Most of the study participants said that they try to be calm and composed during conflicts. They advised long-distance couples to swallow their pride, be humble, and always apologize.

A number of interviewees stressed the need for partners to trust each other. This dovetails with previous research saying that trust is necessary for the maintenance of LDRs (Dainton & Aylor, 2001). Since the couple cannot see each other and are unable to conduct constant surveillance, they just need to trust that their partner is not committing infidelity.

Another value that the study participants said is necessary is patience. Indeed, being patient results in positive relational outcomes (Meitzner & Li-Wen, 2005). In addition, culture may have predisposed Filipinos to value patience in relationships. According to Lavelock (2015), Asians have less individualistic tendencies, which predisposes them to be patient.

Humility was another value favored by the interviewees. This is similar to Van Tongeran, Davis, and Hook’s (2014) findings that being humble has social benefits. They found that humble individuals were rated more favorably and were more likely to elicit intentions to initiate a romantic relationship. In addition, humble potential dating partners were perceived to be more attractive than arrogant dating partners. Specific to LDRs, the researchers found that long-distance couples are less forgiving with their partners compared to couples in GCRs. However, this is mitigated whenever the other party shows humility.

Similarly, Davis et al. (2013) found that humility can promote strengthening social bonds. They conducted two longitudinal studies among college students whose romantic partners have hurt or offended them. Results showed that being humble helps in the repair and formation of relationships.

The foregoing are values and behaviors that can be controlled by individuals. One can choose not to be trusting, patient, and humble. A person may decide not to communicate openly and regularly, as well as refuse to be calm and composed during conflicts. However, people have demographic and biological characteristics that they cannot control. Those that have big impacts on relational maintenance and conflict management, according to the study participants, are sex and age.

Two male interviewees said that being men, it is their responsibility to woo their wives. When asked what this means, one said, “suyuin ang asawa (woo the wife ).” “Suyo” does not have a direct translation in English, but it can roughly be described as the steps taken to win another person’s affection. In Philippine culture, it is the man who is expected to make “suyo ,” especially if the woman is making “tampo .” “Tampo” also does not have a direct English translation. The nearest word is “sulking.” It is perfectly acceptable for Filipino women to make “tampo ,” but not for men. The cultural expectation is for women to “tampo ” and for men to “suyo .”

Expectations on childrearing are also determined by sex. Indeed, the works of Arellano-Carandang et al., (2007), Fresnoza-Flot (2009), Madianou and Miller (2012b), Miyasaka (2009), and Parreñas (2001, 2005)
show that mothers are still expected to perform primary parental roles even if they are away from home. The social expectations from the fathers, even if they are the ones physically present with the children, are less.

The older study participants claimed that they did not or rarely had conflicts. This is in line with Jacobs’s (1992) findings that aging makes people more pragmatic in romantic relationships. Instead of romance, older people are more attuned to the practicalities of the relationship, such as security. This may be the reason the interviewees in the present study who were already in their 50s rarely had conflicts anymore.

**Stitching the Narratives: Theoretical Coding**

Through theoretical coding, the relationships between the selective codes were identified (see Figure 1). The researcher, then, advances a theory that conflicts in LDRs are shaped by four factors. These are (1) the reason for the LDR; (2) long-term relationship plans; (3) communication practices; and (4) the values, behaviors, and other attributes of the couple.

[Figure 1. A grounded theory on conflict management in LDRs among Filipinos]

The reason the partners are far apart, or the context of the relationship, affects the likelihood of conflict resolution. In the present research, all the study participants were thrust into the LDR because they wanted to earn more money for the future of their family. No wonder that whenever children intervened in their parents’ conflicts, the problems were usually solved. The LDR was frequently considered in the context of a family with children, so the chances of relational termination due to conflicts were lessened.

Having long-term relationship plans also helped in relational maintenance. Having goals while in an LDR and—more importantly—plans for what happens after the couple becomes physically together again, provides them with something to look forward to. In the case of the study participants, having a particular goal—like the partner coming home permanently after all the children finish college—makes them feel that they and their partners are a team working toward an objective. The team has to be sustained at all cost even if there are occasional conflicts because their goals set prior to the LDR have to be achieved.

In addition, the LDR couples’ communication practices influence their conflicts. As long as partners communicate regularly and openly, conflicts may be avoided. During conflict episodes, communication is necessary for conflict resolution because no conflict will be resolved without it. The study participants were able to solve their conflicts by verbalizing everything in their minds because of the reduced nonverbal cues in long-distance communication. There is no opportunity to hug and kiss, so everything has to be said or written. Those who are unable to verbalize their feelings and thoughts may find it harder to maintain their LDR.

Finally, the values, behaviors, and other attributes of the partners shape their conflicts. The study participants mentioned emotional strength, high regard for family ties, humility, less expectations, open-mindedness, patience, and trust as individual characteristics necessary for relational maintenance. One’s sex and age also affect conflict management. The female study participants were dismayed that they still had to perform primary caregiving functions even if they are abroad because their husbands were unwilling to step up. This has led to conflicts. Meanwhile, the older interviewees reported having less conflicts. They said that they were mature enough not to argue about little things.

**CONCLUSION**

This study is the first to theorize conflict management among Filipinos in LDRs. It was found that the reason for the LDR; long-term relationship plans; communication practices; and the values, behaviors, and other attributes of the couple all shape conflicts in LDRs. If the reason for going into the LDR was meant to maintain the relationship and the family, the relationship is more likely to survive, and conflicts mitigated. Similarly, having a long-term relationship plan improves relational maintenance because the couple has a specific goal. Furthermore, positive communication practices can foil conflicts. The use of rich communication channels, like video calling apps, enhance interaction due to the multiple cues they allow. Frequent and regular
communication ensures closeness, as well. Finally, the values, behaviors, and other attributes of the couple affect conflicts in a relationship.

REFERENCES


