

Conflict Resolution in Romantic Relationships: Comparing Gottman Method Couples Therapy &
Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy

by

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Abstract

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of romantic relationships. How couples manage relational conflict significantly influences relationship satisfaction, relationship health, and individual well-being. This capstone explores the complexities of relational conflict and examines two leading therapeutic models for conflict resolution: Gottman Method Couples Therapy (GMCT) and Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT). Drawing from a comprehensive literature review, this work compares and contrasts the theoretical foundations, core interventions, and practical applications of each model. Within the Gottman method, structured behavioral interventions and communication strategies are prioritized, while EFCT uses emotional expression, attachment needs, and the transformation of maladaptive emotional cycles. Though distinct in approach, both models aim to foster healthier relational dynamics and enhance emotional security. By analyzing the strengths and limitations of each method, this research highlights their respective efficacy in addressing various forms of relationship conflict and identifies opportunities for integrative practice. Additionally, cultural and ethical considerations are explored, emphasizing the need for contextual and inclusive applications of both models in diverse relational settings. The findings culminate in a set of best practices for therapists engaging with couples conflict resolution. These insights contribute to the field of counselling psychology by offering evidence-informed strategies that promote relational resilience, emotional attunement, and long-term relational health.

Keywords: conflict resolution, romantic relationships, Gottman Method, Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT), couples therapy

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The field of psychotherapy and counselling has grappled with the complexities of navigating conflict within romantic relationships; researchers have provided various theories and approaches to better understand this relational dynamic. Yet, there are still many questions about how to address the specific challenges and nuances of romantic partnerships. However, while there are many different styles, sources, and explanations of conflict and conflict behaviour, it is well-understood that conflict is an inevitable part of all intimate relationships (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Saltman et al., 2006; Weeks & Fife, 2014). As Weeks and Fife (2014) state, “The question is not whether couples will have conflict, but how they manage conflict when it arises” (p. 160). Conflict exists at all stages of romantic relationships, regardless of relational status or duration, and early conflict is often thought to be predictive of future relational health and success (Caughlin et al., 2006; Creasey, 2002; Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Peetz et al., 2023). Forms of conflict may be overt, covert, and vary in intensity (Weeks & Fife, 2014). Conflicts can be resolved quickly, require ongoing management, or undergo patterns of escalation wherein couples move from mild negative affect into more extreme patterns of behaviour. Gottman and Gottman (2008) argue that “most relationship conflict is not solvable, but it is ‘perpetual,’ based on lasting personality differences between partners” (p. 140). Wile (1988) wrote, “choosing a partner is choosing a set of problems” (p. 12), suggesting that individual problems will inevitably become sources of conflict within their respective romantic relationships. As conflict is an unavoidable aspect of relationships, conflict resolution becomes an important facet for navigating the challenges of romantic relationships.

Conflict resolution skills represent a key indicator of relationship health and satisfaction (Havaasi et al., 2018). Couples that can resolve or manage conflict constructively are often able

to deepen the relationship, increase relationship health, and are better equipped to maintain relationships long term (Havaasi et al., 2018). Constructive strategies are generally characterized by flexibility, openness, acceptance of partner's perspectives, and commitment to working through the problem (Delatorre & Wagner, 2019; Hysi, 2015). Couples engaging in constructive conflict often interact with the intention to learn and understand one another rather than protect self interests (Hysi, 2015). Constructive conflict resolution has been demonstrated to enhance self-esteem, cooperation, and lead to a greater sense of shared meaning that can facilitate greater emotional trust and stability (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Hysi, 2015). Destructive or unconstructive conflict can be damaging to relationship health and lead to frustration, dissatisfaction, burnout, and potentially divorce (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Havaasi et al., 2018; Papp, 2018; Peetz et al., 2023). Such strategies may be characterized by manipulation, threat, and coercion (Hysi, 2015), and include hostile or competitive behaviours, avoidance and withdrawal, or apathy (Delatorre & Wagner, 2019; Havaasi et al., 2018).

The source of conflict also has a demonstrated correlation to the health and longevity of relationships (Meyer & Sledge, 2022; Peetz et al., 2023), where conflicts about topics such as parenting, finances, and sex are negatively associated with relationship satisfaction (Meyer & Sledge; 2022; Peetz et al., 2023) and can be destructive for both the quality and longevity of relationships. With the immense potential for conflict to affect relational health and well-being, effective conflict resolution is an incredibly important process for couples wishing to preserve or improve their romantic relationships. Fortunately, such effective conflict resolution skills can not only be taught, learned, and utilized to resolve conflict, but have also been shown to increase connection and improve relationship satisfaction (Caughlin et al., 2006; Gottman, 1994; Knee et al, 2005; Meyer & Sledge, 2022; Weeks & Fife, 2014).

The following Capstone examines two theories, the Gottman Method Couples Therapy (GMCT) and Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT), both of which have played an important role in our current understanding of conflict in romantic relationships and have been used in practice to support couples in conflict management and resolution. Each of these theories are expanded upon to deepen the reader's understanding of how they are applied in practice and the empirical research supporting their application. While both theories offer valuable insights into conflict resolution in romantic relationships, they approach this work through distinct perspectives. Exploring cultural and ethical considerations further highlights the importance of applying these models in ways that are inclusive and contextually sensitive. This analysis focuses on how practitioners might integrate the Gottman Method and EFCT to develop a robust, comprehensive approach to conflict resolution—one that can inform best practices in diverse relational settings.

Research Problem Statement

Based on the complexities and nuances of relationships, conflict in romantic relationships, regardless of individuals' identity, is inevitable (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Saltman et al., 2006; Weeks & Fife, 2014). Conflict is intricately correlated with relationship satisfaction, health, and well-being (Meyer & Sledge, 2022; Peetz et al., 2023) and can be predictive of relationship longevity and divorce (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Havaasi et al., 2018; Papp, 2018; Peetz et al., 2023). Given that conflict is unavoidable, inherently complex, and associated with various health outcomes, it is not surprising that conflict remains a core issue within romantic relationships and, thus, a common reason for therapeutic intervention. While numerous theories and interventions have been developed to support couples in navigating conflict, relational conflict continues to persist and is becoming more complex in our ever-evolving world as new

issues and sources of conflict arise. Couples therapy provides excellent support in helping to expand couples' abilities to engage in successful conflict resolution and increase relationship satisfaction, health, and well-being for individuals and their partners.

In summary, the goal of this work is to:

- 1) explore couples' conflict resolution from the lens of two main couples therapy theories, Gottman Method Couples Theory and Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy
- 2) identify the strengths and limitations of each theory in order to
- 3) provide a functional set of therapeutic best practices for effective conflict resolution within romantic relationships.

Rationale and Justification for Literature Review

Conflict resolution is a critical component of successful romantic relationships and embodies a wealth of research to better understand and address the complexities and unique aspects of these interpersonal dynamics. Two prominent theoretical frameworks, the Gottman Method Couples Theory, based on the work of John Gottman and his wife Julie Gottman and Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy, developed by Sue Johnson, presently dominate the couple counselling field in the Western World. The extent and scope of their research underscored the need for models of practice to address conflict and emphasized the benefits of high-quality romantic relationships on individuals' health and well-being (Ayenew, 2016; du Plooy & de Beer, 2018; Wiebe et al., 2017). Conversely, the absence of intimate connections can lead to loneliness and reduced social support and life satisfaction (Fávero et al., 2021). While positive relationships confer health benefits, poorly functioning ones contribute to mental health challenges, including depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and even physical health problems

(Gurman, 2008; Snyder & Halford, 2012). Relationship distress not only affects individuals but can also negatively impact family systems, particularly children (Snyder & Halford, 2012), and often results in relationship dissolution (Wiebe et al., 2017). Estimates suggest that around 20% of individuals experience relationship distress at any time, and divorce rates increase depression risk by 188% (Hubbard & Harris, 2020). First marriages end in divorce roughly 40% of the time, with even higher rates among remarried and unmarried couples (Bradbury & Bodenmann, 2020). These findings underscore the need for evidence-based conflict resolution practices to support relational health and overall well-being.

The two dominant models of practice, the Gottman Model and EFT, are well-renowned sources of research and practice. The Gottman Method Couples Therapy (GMCT), developed by John Gottman and colleagues, is based on decades of research including longitudinal studies, capturing most major ethnic and racial groups, both married and unmarried couples, and both different and same-sex couples within the United States (Navarra & Gottman, 2013). Gottman and colleagues defined dysfunctional relationships as those consisting of recurring negative patterns of interaction and conflict (Navarra & Gottman, 2013). Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT) is an integrative approach that combines elements of attachment theory and Leslie Greenberg's emotion-focused therapy (EFT) (Goldman, 2019; Johnson, 2009) to address patterns of intrapersonal conflict within couples by working with the individuals' emotions (Goldman, 2018). In contrast to GMCT, which emphasizes skill training, EFCT focuses on building new emotional experiences between partners to foster attachment security (Wiebe & Johnson, 2016). Although these theories offer distinct and overlapping interventions, research on their integration into a comprehensive and culturally-inclusive framework for conflict resolution remains limited. This capstone project addresses a critical gap by examining empirical evidence

on the nature of conflict in intimate relationships and exploring how the Gottman Method and EFCT can be combined to develop a more holistic and effective approach to conflict resolution. It also considers cultural and ethical dimensions, emphasizing the importance of contextually grounded and inclusive applications across diverse relational settings. The findings culminate in a set of best practices for therapists, offering culturally-sensitive and evidence-informed strategies that promote relational resilience, emotional attunement, and long-term relational health.

Contribution to the Field of Counselling

Conflict resolution remains one of the primary reasons couples seek therapy. As such, therapeutic practitioners working with couples should be well equipped with a wide range of tools and strategies needed to help couples navigate disagreements, misunderstandings, and relationship distress in a diverse range of contexts. Based on the need for a more comprehensive approach to navigating conflict resolution within romantic relationships, a primary aim of this research is to provide a functional set of therapeutic best practices for effective conflict resolution within romantic relationships. In doing so, I will address the second goal of this paper, which is to compare two of the foremost theories of couples therapy, Gottman Method Couples Theory and Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy, in order to emphasize their strengths, identify limitations, and understand their unique interventions for conflict resolution.

By creating integrative and functional tools for conflict resolution, therapists can empower couples to proactively address issues before they escalate, which helps reduce the rising rate of relationship dissatisfaction, distress, and dissolution, and support couples in fostering long-term relationship health. The knowledge gained from this research will further contribute to the field of counselling by adding to the existing conflict resolution interventions

and advocating for this work to acknowledge crucial social and cultural contexts in order to more inclusively work with diverse couples. The best practices that emerge from this research can complement therapy sessions by providing couples with ongoing support and opportunities for skill development, enhancing their engagement, therapeutic progress, and overall relationship satisfaction. At the same time, these practices equip counsellors with strategies to better address inclusion and diversity within varied therapeutic contexts. By focusing on conflict resolution, this work aims to promote healthier, more resilient relationships. Conflict resolution research is not merely an academic pursuit—it has direct and practical implications for couples counselling, relational satisfaction, and the overall well-being of individuals in romantic partnerships (Fávero et al., 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Humanistic theory will serve as the lens through which this subject will be explored. Humanistic psychology offers a valuable framework from which to examine conflict within romantic relationships, as it affirms a holistic understanding of people and their relationships (Cain et al., 2016). As Daei Jafari et al. (2020) explain, as humans, we are in constant relation with each other and our environments to the extent that we are defined by our relationships and how we relate to our evolving context and interrelated systems. As a result, relationships are seen as central to the human experience and are thought to provide our lives with purpose and meaning (Daei Jafari et al., 2020).

Humanistic theory is based on several core themes which have valid application in the exploration of romantic relationships and conflict resolution. First, humanistic theory operates from a basis of optimism in which the client(s) are viewed as resourceful and capable of change, growth, and development towards their potential (Buhler, 1971; Cain et al., 2016). Both the

GMCT and EFCT align with this optimistic view of clients as they approach couples work from a client-centred perspective which values unconditional positive regard and seeks to help clients more deeply understand themselves and their partners (Buhler, 1971; Cain et al., 2016; Goldman, 2019). Second, autonomy is an important value within humanistic psychology as it seeks to prioritize and honor the client's sense of purpose and their autonomy in pursuing this sense of fulfillment (Scholl et al., 2014). Autonomy is particularly relevant in the context of romantic relationships, where partners are likely to experience differing goals, perspectives, and needs for autonomy and connection (Daei Jafari et al., 2020; Knee et al., 2005). If not mutually understood within the couple, conflict may arise when there is a discrepancy between partners' individual needs for autonomy and interdependence (Knee et al., 2005). Third, the client's subjective world, perceptions, and experiences are accepted as 'reality' and clients are encouraged to understand themselves and their relationships through these contexts in order to create meaning and purpose for their lives (Buhler, 1971; Cain et al., 2016; Daei Jafari et al., 2020; Moser & Johnson, 2008). The GMCT, and more specifically, the Sound Relationship House (SRH) theory, promotes the use of a "love map" which is designed to help provide a roadmap to partners' inner world as a means to cultivate mutual understanding of each partner's subjective reality (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). As partners develop a deeper understanding of one another, they are better equipped to empathize, provide positive perspectives, and respond to spouse's needs non-defensively, thereby creating space to develop shared meaning and values (Davoodvandi et al., 2018; Gottman & Gottman, 2008). According to the Gottman method, by working to construct a shared meaning system, couples can facilitate greater stability and relationship satisfaction (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). Similarly, EFCT emphasizes the emotional realities of each partner and actively works toward increasing mutual understanding and meaning-making as partners

attune to their own emotions and those of their partner (Goldman, 2019). During this emotional exploration, the emergence of new emotions and meanings provides clients with a broader emotional repertoire through which they are able to understand themselves, communicate their needs, and empathize with their partner. The integration of emotion and relational meaning-making are thought to be key processes within the process of change (Goldman, 2019). As couples work towards a deeper understanding of themselves and each other, they are encouraged to find common values, explore creativity, and develop shared meaning and goals. According to Daei Jafari et al. (2020), these efforts help to minimize tension and disagreement and enhance cooperation and benevolence.

When applied to conflict resolution, a fourth theme of humanistic theory emphasizes the importance of the ‘self’, where one’s self-concept is thought to have a significant influence on their behaviour. As a result, growth is thought to occur through the process of enhancing self-exploration, knowledge, acceptance, and efficacy, to reach towards self-actualization (Cain et al., 2016; Rusu, 2019). This inherent human drive towards personal growth, self-actualization, and the fulfillment of their unique potential (Cain et al., 2016; Moser & Johnson, 2008) provides theoretical underpinnings for both the GMCT and EFCT as each theory views clients as unique, multifaceted, and ever-evolving as they strive to grow and make meaning of their experiences (Cain et al., 2016; Prochaska & Norcross, 2018).

From a therapeutic lens, humanistic therapy was derived as an alternative to existing practices of psychoanalytic and behavioural approaches (Buhler, 1971). Humanistic therapy sought to prioritize the “healthy human being’s functioning” (Buhler, 1971, p. 378) through non judgment, care, acceptance and respect (Moser & Johnson, 2008). Humanistic therapy shares similarities with existentialism, as each aims to understand clients within the context of their

experience, environment, and subjective reality (Buhler, 1971; Moser & Johnson, 2008). The client-centred nature of this approach emphasizes the importance of the quality of the therapeutic relationship and the therapist's role in fostering an environment of empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuine understanding (Goldman, 2019; Moser & Johnson, 2008). Within the relationships themselves, these relational qualities can be invaluable in helping couples navigate the complexities of their relationship and find mutually satisfying solutions to their conflicts (Bradbury & Bodenmann, 2020; Gottman & Gottman, 2008). Humanistic theory asserts that secure emotional connection forms the foundation for a sense of safety and personal empowerment, both of which are central to the effectiveness of EFCT (Johnson, 2009). The holistic approach of humanistic psychology offers a valuable framework for helping individuals to understand their partners and address romantic conflict (Buhler, 1971; Elliot, 2002).

A humanistic approach considers the couple as a whole, rather than isolating individual pathology, and helps partners explore the ongoing cycles of conflict and the contextual factors that fuel them. This perspective encourages couples to work collaboratively toward restoring harmony and mutual fulfillment. As Aanstoos (2003) explains, humanistic psychology emphasizes process, personal growth, and self-actualization, based on the belief that individuals are driven by values and goals and seek fulfillment beyond themselves—a force that powerfully shapes their romantic relationships.

Researcher's Positioning Statement

The decision to focus my research on conflict resolution within romantic couples is deeply rooted in my personal experiences. Being in a long-term, monogamous relationship of 10 years, I have firsthand experience with the challenges that come with navigating perpetual relationship issues, relational security, and emotional regulation and affect, as described by the

GMCT and EFCT. These challenges have often led to conflict between my partner and I as our upbringing, gender, perspectives, conflict styles, and personalities are notably different. During the first few years of our relationship, we experienced a great deal of relationship distress and sought support through individual and couples counselling where we were able to develop our own conflict resolution skills. These experiences were immensely helpful in establishing our connection, deepening our understanding of self, and creating more empathy for one another. Given the impact this has had on my own relationship, I frequently wonder about the potential for more proactive learning and how cultivating a greater understanding of conflict and developing the skills to constructively resolve conflict could have an immense impact on romantic relationships, relationship satisfaction, and our overall well-being as a society.

Growing up I rarely, if ever, witnessed my parents or other couples actively work through relational struggles to a constructive or positive outcome. Instead, what I observed generally led to destructive arguments and relational ruptures that were never explicitly repaired. Through such experiences, I learned that engaging in conflict was potentially dangerous and as a result, I tended to avoid conflict in most of my early relationships. Rather than participating in constructive and mutually supportive conflict, I often ended relationships at the first sign of struggle. I did not begin to confront my conflict avoidance or learn how to engage in conflict constructively until my current relationship became serious. I remain curious of the impact of my early experiences in shaping my understanding of conflict and wonder if the conflicts my partner and I experienced in our relationship would have been more successfully addressed had I witnessed constructive conflict resolution within a safe and supportive environment?

Beyond my desire to improve the health of my own relationship, I recognize the broader implications of relationship satisfaction on individual well-being. Knowing that conflict and

relational distress are significant contributors to relationship dissatisfaction, dissolution, and decreased mental health and well-being, I feel a strong drive to contribute to this area of research. Academically, my interests have always leaned towards frameworks that empower couples and address the various components of the individual, such as emotion, attachment, communication, and behaviour, all while acknowledging the broader context in which we live and love. My exposure to theories like EFCT and the GMCT have been instrumental in shaping my research direction. I am particularly drawn to the dynamic nature of couples' therapy and the complexity of navigating high-conflict scenarios. My academic background not only drives my research but also influences my approach to therapy, where I aim to integrate these frameworks into practical, accessible, tools for couples. Professionally, my goal is to work in private practice, primarily with couples, and thus I am driven to contribute to the field of conflict resolution. My aim is to provide both myself and other practitioners with valuable resources that can be used to enhance inclusive and diverse practices in couples therapy or as supplementary tools for future clients. I view conflict resolution through a humanistic lens, in that I believe it is a skill, and like any other, can be learned and acquired through intentional practice. I tend to agree with the sentiment from Weeks and Fife (2014) who state, "The question is not whether couples will have conflict, but how they manage conflict when it arises" (p. 160), and have experienced "choosing a partner is choosing a set of problems" (Wile, 1988, p. 12) to be true. In understanding conflict as inevitable, it seems more realistic to create a culture of openness, understanding, and courage in the face of conflict. As such, though I appreciate that relational conflict is extremely vulnerable and challenging, relationships and the well-being of partners within them will be better off if conflict is addressed through caring, respectful, and constructive practices instead of engaging in avoidant or destructive patterns.

Though conflict is a universal experience, the topic, style, and outcome of conflict varies widely among couples. Caughlin et al. (2006) outline several common factors among conflict behaviours, including conflict resolution skills, gender differences, individual differences, stress, and goals. However, the context and setting of conflict (Caughlin et al., 2006; Hojjat, 2000), cultural and religious backgrounds, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation of partners are additional factors that must be examined in the process of explaining conflict and associated behaviours (Caughlin et al., 2006). Furthermore, couples may experience conflict related to a wide variety of topics such as partner habits, household responsibilities or division of labor, finances, decision-making, quality time, sex, screen time, family and family interferences, role expectations, time management, communication, and parenting (Gottman, 1994; Meyer & Sledge, 2022). Though the reasons for conflict are diverse, the way in which couples navigate conflict remains an important determinant of relationship health, regardless of the conflict itself (Ayenew, 2016; Havaasi et al., 2018). For instance, two couples could experience conflict in the realm of quality time, and yet their cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic status, or privilege might result in each couple having a completely different experience of conflict.

Throughout this paper, I will need to be aware of biases that stem from my cultural background and lived experiences. I have many privileges of a white, educated, cis-gender female, and must be cognizant to avoid centering my singular experiences in this research. At the same time, I have a vested interest in this subject and a strong belief in the potential for individuals to make choices about their own well-being, within and outside of romantic relationships. Therefore, while I aim to be acutely aware of my biases, I will also advocate for the importance of constructive conflict resolution within romantic relationships and remain critical of the limitations of the research within this topic and throughout my review. Ultimately,

keeping diversity in mind, I hope to help remove the stigma often associated with conflict, and encourage couples and practitioners to view conflict as a potential avenue for strengthening romantic relationships and develop a greater repertoire of diverse functional conflict resolution skills in order to derive greater meaning and purpose for themselves and their relationships.

Definition of key terms

Conflict refers to a phenomenon that occurs in all relationships, where divergent opinions, beliefs, needs, or values are in opposition (Havaasi et al., 2018). Conflict is thought to be an inevitable and predictable aspect of relationships and is not inherently negative. However, the way in which we manage conflict can shape psychological and relational outcomes (Hysi, 2015). Conflict may be overt or covert and vary in intensity and frequency (Weeks & Fife, 2014).

Constructive Conflict refers to a style of conflict in which the mutual aim is to come to a greater understanding in order to solve a problem. Constructive conflict is generally characterized by openness, cooperation, flexibility, and interaction with the intent to learn instead of protect or defend (Hysi, 2015; Weeks & Fife, 2014). Strategies within constructive conflict include regulated communication, demonstrations of support and affection, attempts at problem solving, and goals of resolution (Papp, 2018).

Destructive Conflict refers to a style of conflict in which differences or disagreements gravitate towards antagonism and dysfunction (Delatorre & Wagner, 2019). Destructive conflict is often characterized by inflexibility, rigidity, and hostility and may include manipulation, threat or coercion, avoidance, withdrawal, and degrading communication patterns (Delatorre & Wagner, 2019; Hysi, 2015).

Conflict Resolution involves reaching mutual agreement on a specific disagreement or issue and serves as a central goal for couples aiming to preserve or improve their relationship satisfaction (Delatorre & Wagner, 2019; Weeks & Fife, 2014). Certain behaviours such as contempt, criticism, defensiveness, and stonewalling are thought to undermine predictive conflict resolution (Gottman, 1994). Further, constructive conflict behaviours are more likely to result in conflict resolution (Delatorre & Wagner, 2019).

Marital Adjustment refers to a couple's ability to adjust to external shifts over the course of their relationship. Such adjustment is thought of as an adaptive behaviour through which couples learn to cooperate and meet the needs of one another in an effort to adjust to the changing circumstances. Marital adjustment requires intentional effort and may impact the quality of marital conflict and degree of marital satisfaction (Davoondvandi et al., 2018).

Marital Satisfaction is an aspect of marital or relational functioning and represents the degree to which an individual's needs, expectations, and desires are being satisfied throughout their marriage (Davoondvandi et al., 2018; du Plooy & de Beer, 2018). Couples with higher levels of marital satisfaction tend to report lower stress, greater ability to cope with adverse living conditions, and higher levels of social support. Greater marital satisfaction is strongly correlated with higher physical health and personal well-being (du Plooy & de Beer, 2018). Marital satisfaction is commonly referred to as relationship satisfaction and the two terms can be considered to be synonymous in this work.

Romantic Relationship refers to any intimate relationship, outside of platonic or familial, between two people. For the purpose of this paper, the length of the relationship, relationship orientation, gender identity of partners, and marital status of the couple is irrelevant.

Summary

Chapter 1 introduces the core aspects of this research inquiry and assert the importance of this topic both in research and practice. Chapter 2 expands on research in the area of relationship conflict. The insights gained from research directly inform the approaches and interventions that therapists use when working with couples. Since conflict is one of the most common reasons couples seek therapy, therapeutic practitioners working with couples should be well equipped with a wide range of tools and strategies needed to help couples navigate disagreements, misunderstandings, and relationship distress. Practitioners are also advised to give great care in approaching this work through a culturally responsive lens, as the diverse backgrounds of each couple will be necessary to integrate into this work. Gottman Method Couples Therapy and Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy are expanded upon, and empirical evidence that supports these two approaches is analyzed critically. The literature review aims to compare and contrast the unique and overlapping interventions of the GMCT and EFCT to develop a comprehensive understanding of conflict resolution and provide a more effective, inclusive, and diverse set of best practices for navigating conflict in romantic relationships.

In this Capstone I will recommend evidence-based practices that can be utilized to promote more effective conflict resolution for romantic couples. By creating integrative and usable tools for conflict resolution, therapists can empower couples to proactively address issues before they escalate, which may help reduce the rising rate of relationship dissatisfaction, distress, and dissolution and support couples in fostering long-term relationship health. The best practices that emerge from this research can complement therapy sessions, providing couples with continuous support and practice opportunities, which can enhance their progress and engagement in therapy and relationship satisfaction in general. By focusing on conflict

resolution, this work will help to advocate for healthier, more resilient relationships. This advocacy extends beyond the therapeutic setting, shaping broader social understandings of how to manage conflict in constructive and meaningful ways. Ultimately, the goal of this research is to offer direct, practical implications for couples counselling and the health of romantic relationships in a way that is grounded in cultural responsiveness and is adaptable for use in diverse relational and therapeutic contexts.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Conflict is an inevitable aspect of all romantic relationships, and how couples navigate and resolve these conflicts plays a critical role in their overall relationship satisfaction and longevity (Weeks & Fife, 2014). Given that unresolved or poorly managed conflict can lead to relationship distress, dissatisfaction, and even dissolution, understanding effective conflict resolution strategies is necessary for fostering healthy and resilient romantic partnerships (Havaasi et al., 2018). The purpose of this literature review is to provide a comprehensive examination of research on conflict resolution in romantic relationships, specifically through the lens of the Gottman Method of Couples Therapy (GMCT) and Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT). This review will explore the theoretical foundations, interventions, and practical applications of current research and offer insights into how these frameworks address the complexities of conflict in romantic relationships and contribute to relationship satisfaction and well-being. The review process involved a systematic search and analysis of peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and other scholarly sources, with a focus on studies published within the last five years. Older foundational works were used to provide the necessary theoretical context. This chapter will guide the reader through key themes that emerged from the literature on relationship conflict and resolution. These are then reflected upon through a comparative

analysis of the GMCT and EFCT frameworks and a critique of the research methodologies and cultural competency, setting the stage for developing practical recommendations for conflict resolution practices in romantic relationships outlined in Chapter 3.

Foundations of Conflict in Romantic Relationships

Nature and Inevitability of Conflict

Conflict is a natural and unavoidable aspect of all romantic relationships, emerging from differing needs, values, and expectations between partners (Bradbury & Bodenmann, 2020; Weeks & Fife, 2014). Weeks and Fife (2014) assert that the question is not whether conflict will arise, but how effectively couples manage and resolve it when it does. As a result, many couples seek therapeutic support to address ongoing cycles or current states of conflict (Weeks & Fife, 2014). Because conflict may present itself overtly through arguments or covertly through patterns of withdrawal and avoidance, and its intensity can range from mild disagreements to heightened emotional exchanges, some couples may not realize the relational issues they are experiencing as a result of conflict (Weeks & Fife, 2014). Given its prevalence, therapists play a crucial role in normalizing conflict and reducing the resulting fear or shame. Couples frequently enter therapy under the misconception that relationships should be conflict-free or that conflict signals relational failure. Such misconceptions can often generate avoidant or destructive patterns. By reframing conflict as an opportunity for growth, therapists can help clients view conflict as a means of strengthening their relationship (Bradbury & Bodenmann, 2020; Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Weeks & Fife, 2014). This perspective encourages couples to explore the root causes of their disputes, identify maladaptive patterns, and work collaboratively to develop healthier conflict resolution strategies (Weeks & Fife, 2014). Conflict resolution is a skill that couples can learn and develop over time (Davoodvandi et al., 2018; Moser & Johnson, 2008;

Weeks & Fife, 2014). In cases where conflict escalates to high intensity, therapists may need to begin with de-escalation strategies to create emotional safety, often requiring each partner to do individual work before resuming joint sessions (Weeks & Fife, 2014). Traditional couples therapy may also be unsuitable in situations involving abuse, violence, or coercion, where safety must take priority (Weeks & Fife, 2014). Recognizing the inevitability of conflict, along with understanding its dynamics and severity, enables therapists to determine the most appropriate form of support and establish a foundation for effective resolution and healthier relational outcomes.

Common Sources of Conflict

Conflict in romantic relationships often arises from the diverse and sometimes conflicting needs, values, and expectations of partners. Research identifies various topics that can become sources of contention, including communication, finances, parenting, intimacy, household responsibilities, and personal habits (Gottman, 1994; Meyer & Sledge, 2022). While some conflicts are situational and fleeting, others are deeply rooted in personal or relational dynamics and can become persistent stressors if unresolved (Papp, 2018). Understanding these common sources of conflict is essential for developing effective interventions to support couples in navigating their challenges.

Finances represent one of the most persistent and potentially destructive relationship areas of conflict. Disputes over income, spending behaviors, debt management, and financial decision-making often evoke strong emotions and undermine relational stability (Peetz et al., 2023). Financial disagreements are particularly significant, as they are closely associated with decreased relationship satisfaction and are one of the leading predictors of divorce (Peetz et al., 2023). Similarly, conflicts over parenting styles, family dynamics, and daily responsibilities are

frequently reported, especially among couples with children (Meyer & Sledge, 2022). These disputes can exacerbate stress and dissatisfaction if partners struggle to align their values, discipline approaches, or caregiving roles (Meyer & Sledge, 2022).

Communication also plays a central role in relational discord, both as a conflict topic and as a determinant of how disagreements unfold (Delatorre & Wagner, 2019). Misunderstandings, unmet expectations, and perceived criticism are common conflict triggers (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). When coupled with negative communication behaviours such as defensiveness, contempt, or stonewalling, these issues can escalate into more significant relational distress (Gottman, 1994). Such challenges are further intensified by differences in personality, habits, or values, which can be difficult for partners to reconcile given their unique perspectives and daily routines (Vanhee et al., 2018).

Beyond specific topics, unmet relational needs often underlie conflict. According to the self-determination theory, partners have fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and frustration with these needs can increase the likelihood of conflict and dissatisfaction (Knee et al., 2005; Vanhee et al., 2018). Individuals may experience frustration, resentment or relational distress if they perceive their needs as unsupported or actively undermined by their partner (Knee et al., 2005; Weeks & Fife, 2014). Notably, the frustration of relatedness—a deep need for connection and emotional intimacy—has been identified as particularly impactful, influencing how conflicts arise and how partners communicate and resolve them (Hill, 2022; Johnson, 2003; Vanhee et al., 2018). Overall, as these findings illustrate, the sources of conflict in romantic relationships are varied and complex. Recognizing and addressing these underlying dynamics is critical for fostering relational health and equipping couples with the tools to constructively navigate differences.

Role of Emotion and Attachment Style in Conflict

Sue Johnson, a graduate student of Leslie Greenberg, is referred to as playing a focal role in applying EFT for therapeutic couples' intervention. When applied to couples, this approach emphasizes the importance of fostering emotional intimacy, empathic attunement, and the expression of vulnerable emotions as a means of resolving conflicts and strengthening the couple's bond (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Through this framework, conflict is understood as emotional dysfunction, arising as the result of an individual's lack of emotional processing, emotional avoidance, failure to regulate one's own affect or interpret partner's affect, fear of emotional expression, or traumatic emotional learning experiences (Goldman, 2019). The process of emotional change and conflict resolution in EFCT is based on three principles of emotional change: awareness, regulation, and transformation through the process of accessing alternative emotions (Greenberg, 2004; Goldman, 2019). In a therapeutic setting, EFCT is delineated into nine stepwise treatment protocols designed to engage both partners, increase emotional awareness and understanding, and improve emotional responses and affect regulation (Goldman, 2019; Johnson, 2008). EFCT has been shown to be effective in improving relationship satisfaction, reducing emotional distress, and enhancing the partners' ability to navigate conflicts constructively. Spengler et al. (2024) conducted a meta-analysis of EFCT and its effectiveness as an evidence-based couples therapy approach. The results of this study confidently concluded that EFT is an effective modality, even when compared to alternative forms of treatment such as pharmacological interventions (Spengler et al., 2024). Furthermore, Havaasi et al. (2018) demonstrated that EFCT was more effective than GMCT couple therapy in reducing marital burnout and changing conflict resolution styles within couples therapy interventions. EFCT is an empirically-supported modality with broad application for conflict

resolution in couples therapy. The emotional dynamics between partners and their underlying attachment styles also shapes the nature, frequency, and resolution of conflict in romantic relationships (Johnson, 2009).

How Emotions Influence Conflict. Emotions are central to the experience of conflict, driving both the content and process of disagreements as they influence how partners perceive and respond to disagreements (Elliot & Greenberg, 2007; Greenberg, 2004). Negative emotions such as anger, frustration, and fear frequently emerge during conflict and can escalate tensions if not managed constructively (Lindner, 2006; Weeks & Fife, 2014). Susan Johnson notes that anger is often described as a secondary emotion that masks feelings of hurt, fear, or rejection (Johnson, 2004). When anger dominates, it can elicit defensive or dismissive responses from the other partner, further exacerbating the conflict and reducing the likelihood of productive resolution (Weeks & Fife, 2014). Conversely, when partners can access and express primary emotions such as vulnerability, fear, or sadness, empathy and connection may be fostered, creating opportunities for mutual understanding and resolution (Johnson, 2008). The reciprocal relationship between emotions and conflict means unresolved disagreements can amplify negative emotions, creating cycles of distress and dissatisfaction (Lindner, 2006). For example, feelings of humiliation or shame during a disagreement can lead to withdrawal or aggression, perpetuating a destructive conflict pattern (Goldman, 2019; Weeks & Fife, 2014). Therapists often work to help couples identify and regulate these emotional responses, facilitating healthier interactions and reducing the intensity of conflict (Elliot & Greenberg, 2007).

How Attachment Styles Influence Conflict. Attachment theory, originally developed by John Bowlby and expanded by Mary Ainsworth, provides a valuable lens for understanding how early relational experiences shape adult behavior in romantic relationships, particularly in the

context of conflict resolution (Bretherton, 1992; Fraley, 2019; Hill, 2022). Bowlby posited that humans are biologically predisposed to form close, loving bonds with primary caregivers to ensure safety, support, and connection (Bretherton, 1992; Hill, 2022). These bonds lay the foundation for identity development, emotional regulation, and interpersonal attitudes, collectively forming an “internal working model” that influences relationship patterns throughout life (Bowlby, 1977). Secure attachments arise when caregivers consistently meet physical and emotional needs, allowing infants to perceive their caregivers as a “safe haven” during distress and a “secure base” for exploration (Bowlby, 1977; Levy & Johnson, 2019). Conversely, insecure attachment patterns develop when primary caregivers fail to provide consistent support, leaving individuals prone to challenges with emotional regulation and intimacy in later relationships (Hill, 2022). Decades of research confirm that secure attachments remain essential throughout an individual’s lifespan, and early insecure attachments often predispose individuals to insecure patterns in adult relationships (Johnson, 2008; Prochaska & Norcross, 2018).

The application of attachment theory to adult relationships gained prominence with the work of Hazan and Shaver (1987), who identified parallels between infant-caregiver bonds and adult romantic relationships. Adult attachment theory posits that the drive for emotional connection is biologically ingrained and continues from infancy into adulthood, shaping how individuals seek safety and security within their romantic bonds (Lindner, 2006; Hill, 2022). Initially, attachment styles were categorized into three types: Secure, Anxious-Ambivalent, and Avoidant, based on Ainsworth's "Strange Situation" experiments (Bretherton, 1992). However, as the theory evolved and was applied to adult relationships, researchers introduced a fourth style: Disorganized Attachment, also known as Fearful-Avoidant. This development reflected a more nuanced understanding of how childhood attachment patterns manifest in adult romantic

relationships and highlighted the complexity of attachment behaviors under the influence of trauma and relational dynamics (Pollard et al., 2023).

Attachment styles significantly influence how individuals manage emotional intimacy and relational discord in adulthood (Johnson, 2009). Securely attached individuals are typically able to regulate their emotions, hold positive beliefs about themselves and others, and communicate openly, which supports effective conflict resolution. In contrast, Anxious-Ambivalent Attachment (or Preoccupied Attachment) is characterized by heightened emotional reactivity and fear of abandonment, leading to behaviors such as excessive demands, blame, or clinginess during conflict. These responses can overwhelm partners and escalate disagreements (Feeney & Karantzas, 2017; Meyer & Sledge, 2022). Avoidant Attachment (also known as Dismissive-Avoidant) manifests as emotional withdrawal and a reluctance to engage in conflict. Individuals with this style may minimize or dismiss emotional needs, creating a dynamic of pursuit and withdrawal that perpetuates relational distress (Bretaña et al., 2020; Hojjat, 2000). Disorganized Attachment (or Fearful-Avoidant Attachment), involves inconsistent and erratic behaviors often linked to trauma or neglect. These individuals may vacillate between seeking closeness and pushing partners away, reflecting their underlying struggle with both intimacy and autonomy (Pollard et al., 2023). The shift toward refined attachment categorizations reflects a deeper understanding of how complex and varied attachment styles can be, especially under the influence of adult relational dynamics and trauma (Feeney & Karantzas, 2017; Hill, 2022). Acknowledging these emotional and attachment-based factors is crucial for comprehending the complexities of conflict and guiding couples toward effective resolution strategies.

Interplay Between Emotional Dynamics and Attachment Styles in Conflict. The intersection of emotional dynamics and attachment styles often creates predictable conflict

patterns within couples. For instance, the “demand-withdraw” cycle—commonly observed in relationships where one partner has an anxious attachment style and the other an avoidant style—illustrates how attachment insecurities can fuel ongoing conflict (Caughlin et al., 2006; Weeks & Fife, 2014). The anxious partner’s pursuit of emotional reassurance is met with the avoidant partner’s emotional withdrawal, leading to frustration and further entrenchment of these roles (Caughlin et al., 2006; Wiebe et al., 2017). Attachment styles also shape how partners perceive and respond to each other’s emotions during conflict. Those with secure attachments are more likely to view their partner’s emotional expression as an opportunity for connection, whereas individuals with insecure attachments may interpret the same behaviors as threatening or critical (Johnson, 2008). These differing perceptions underscore the importance of addressing emotional and attachment-based dynamics in conflict resolution.

Constructive vs. Destructive Conflict Resolution

How couples handle conflict is critical to relationship satisfaction and stability (Havaasi et al., 2018). Constructive conflict resolution fosters understanding, emotional connection, and problem-solving, while destructive conflict resolution often leads to relational distress, dissatisfaction, and, in some cases, dissolution (Delatorre & Wagner, 2019; Gottman, 1994; Meyer & Sledge, 2022). Recognizing and addressing the differences between these two approaches is essential for helping couples navigate challenges and improve relational health.

Characteristics of Constructive Conflict Resolution. Constructive conflict resolution emphasizes open communication, emotional regulation, and mutual respect (Delatorre & Wagner, 2019; Papp, 2018). Couples who engage in constructive conflict demonstrate behaviours such as active listening, empathy, and a willingness to compromise (Delatorre & Wagner, 2019). These behaviors allow partners to approach disagreements with a problem-

solving mindset, fostering collaboration rather than competition (Delatorre & Wagner, 2019; Hysi, 2015; Weeks & Fife, 2014). One key aspect of constructive conflict resolution is the ability to validate a partner's emotions despite disagreeing with their perspective. This validation creates a sense of emotional safety and reduces the defensiveness that often escalates conflicts (Weeks & Fife, 2014). Additionally, partners who adopt a win-win attitude, are committed to problem-solving, and prioritize shared goals over individual interests are more likely to achieve positive outcomes (Delatorre & Wagner, 2019; Gottman & Gottman, 2008).

Characteristics of Destructive Conflict Resolution. In contrast, destructive conflict resolution is characterized by negative communication patterns, emotional dysregulation, and adversarial behaviors (Delatorre & Wagner, 2019; Hysi, 2015). Behaviors such as criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling—identified by Gottman (1994) as the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”—undermine relational health and increase the likelihood of relationship dissatisfaction and instability. These behaviors often create cycles of negativity that are difficult to break, further entrenching partners in conflict (Delatorre & Wagner, 2019; Gottman, 1994). Destructive conflict resolution can also include avoidance behaviors, where partners withdraw from disagreements rather than addressing them (Papp, 2018). While avoidance may reduce conflict intensity temporarily, it often leads to unresolved issues that resurface later, potentially in more damaging ways. Other destructive strategies, such as manipulation, coercion, and threats, erode trust and emotional safety, further destabilizing the relationship (Hysi, 2015). The distinction between constructive and destructive conflict resolution highlights the importance of how couples approach disagreements. While conflict is inevitable in romantic relationships, adopting constructive strategies can transform conflict into an opportunity for growth and connection. By addressing the underlying factors that contribute to

destructive conflict and fostering skills for constructive resolution, couples can create a more resilient and satisfying relationship.

Factors Influencing Conflict Resolution Approaches. Several factors influence whether a couple will engage in constructive or destructive conflict resolution. Emotional regulation plays a central role, as partners who manage their emotions are better equipped to communicate effectively and de-escalate tensions (Cain et al., 2016). Emotional factors, such as emotional awareness, regulation, and attunement, are emphasized within Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT), which draws heavily on attachment theory to address underlying insecurities and relational dynamics (Hojjat, 2000; Johnson, 2008). In contrast, behavioural factors, such as communication patterns and interaction strategies, are the cornerstone of Gottman's work, focusing on actionable methods to enhance positive interactions and mitigate destructive behaviours (Caughlin et al., 2006; Hill, 2022; Papp, 2018). These distinct approaches highlight the interplay between emotional and behavioural influences in shaping conflict resolution outcomes.

Therapeutic Implications for Conflict Resolution

Given that conflict is a main reason that couples seek therapy, therapeutic practitioners working with couples must have a keen understanding of the nature of conflict, the common sources of conflict in romantic relationships, and an understanding of the influence of emotional dynamics and attachment styles on conflict (Johnson, 2009). Interventions such as EFCT emphasize helping partners access and express their primary emotions in a safe and supportive environment. By fostering greater emotional attunement and addressing attachment insecurities, therapists can help couples break destructive patterns and build healthier relational dynamics (Johnson, 2008; Johnson, 2009). The interplay between emotional dynamics and attachment

styles significantly impacts how couples experience and resolve conflict. By addressing these underlying factors, therapists can support couples in developing more empathy, improving communication, and strengthening their emotional bonds, to ultimately enhance their ability to navigate relational challenges.

Therapists can play a crucial role in helping couples improve their transition from destructive to constructive conflict resolution. Interventions such as the Gottman Method and EFCT provide tools and frameworks to support this transition. For example, the GMCT emphasizes building positive interaction patterns and addressing the “Four Horsemen,” while EFCT focuses on fostering emotional attunement and addressing underlying attachment insecurities (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Johnson, 2008). Couples can also benefit from learning specific skills for constructive conflict resolution, such as active listening, “I” statements, and self-regulation techniques (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). By practicing these skills within and outside therapy, partners can build healthier relational dynamics and strengthen their emotional connection.

Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT)

Theoretical Foundations

Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT) draws its foundation from attachment theory and incorporates key elements of humanistic, experiential, and systemic traditions (Elliot & Greenberg, 2007; Goldman, 2019; Spengler et al., 2024). As a non-pathologizing and growth-oriented approach, EFCT positions emotions as central to shaping both the self and relational dynamics, highlighting their adaptive and organizing role in human functioning (Elliot & Greenberg, 2007; Mendelson, 2024). Originating from the work of Sue Johnson and Leslie Greenberg, attachment theory informs EFCT, which conceptualizes adult romantic relationships

as secure bonds essential to emotional well-being and connection (Johnson, 2009; Greenberg, 2004). EFCT draws on emotional awareness, regulation, and transformation principles, emphasizing the here-and-now processing of emotion to enable couples to identify and address attachment insecurities and unmet emotional needs that often underpin relational distress (Mendelson, 2024). By emphasizing the intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of emotional experience, EFCT provides a comprehensive framework for understanding and reshaping couples' interactional patterns.

In EFCT, attachment insecurity is a root cause of relational conflict and emotional disconnection (Johnson, 2003). Partners often exhibit behaviors such as emotional withdrawal or heightened reactivity when they perceive threats to their bond (Goldman, 2019; Johnson, 2003). These behaviours are understood not as flaws but as adaptive strategies developed to cope with earlier relational experiences (Johnson, 2009). By identifying these patterns, EFCT helps couples recognize their negative interaction cycles, reframe them as expressions of unmet attachment needs, and respond to one another with empathy and support.

Emotional Regulation and Attunement as Conflict Resolution Tools

A hallmark of EFCT is its focus on emotional processing, regulation, and attunement as mechanisms for enhancing attachment security and resolving conflict (Goldman, 2019; Timulak & Keogh, 2022; Spengler et al., 2024). Therapy seeks to help partners access and articulate primary emotions, such as fear or sadness, that often lie beneath secondary emotions like anger or defensiveness (Dailey et al., 2024; Johnson, 2008). Emotional exploration fosters empathy and strengthens attachment bonds, enabling partners to transform maladaptive emotional processing and engage with one another more constructively (Dailey et al., 2024; Greenberg, 2004; Johnson, 2008; Timulak & Keogh, 2022). Therapists facilitate this process through structured

interventions, primarily adopted from experiential theory, that promote emotional safety and responsiveness (Johnson, 2008; Timulak & Keogh, 2022). For example, partners are guided to recognize and validate each other's vulnerabilities, disrupting negative interaction cycles, such as demand-withdraw patterns, and creating opportunities for new, supportive dynamics (Dailey et al., 2024; Johnson, 2003). The research underscores the efficacy of EFCT in enhancing emotional intimacy and improving conflict resolution, with studies demonstrating its effectiveness in reducing marital distress and fostering lasting relational change (Spengler et al., 2024).

Principles of Emotional Change in EFCT

As individuals, our emotional experience is in constant ebb and flow, where our emotions are both highly influenced by our past experiences and attachments and are susceptible to change and growth through new experiences and interactions (Dailey et al., 2024; Johnson, 2008). Emotion guides our interactions, makes meaning from our experiences, influences our cognitions, motivates attachment responses, and acts as a powerful communication tool (Johnson, 2008; Timulak & Keogh, 2022). However, certain emotions and emotional experiences can create patterns of emotional dysfunction (Dailey et al., 2024; Johnson, 2003; Johnson, 2008; Johnson, 2009; Timulak & Keogh, 2022). Such dysfunctions stem from a lack of emotional experiencing or the development of problematic emotional schemes that if persistent, may create maladaptive cycles of interpersonal interaction or relational conflict (Dailey et al., 2024; Johnson, 2008; Timulak & Keogh, 2022).

Based on this understanding, EFCT distinguishes between primary adaptive and maladaptive emotions, emphasizing their critical role in emotional functioning and relational patterns. Primary adaptive emotions, such as fear in response to danger or sadness in the face of

loss, are immediate and healthy reactions that guide individuals toward constructive action, such as seeking safety, comfort, or protection (Dailey et al., 2024; Elliot & Greenberg, 2007; Goldman, 2019; Timulak & Keogh, 2022). These emotions provide valuable information about the individual's current context, preparing them to respond effectively. In therapy, facilitating and nurturing these adaptive emotional responses allows clients to access the inherent wisdom of their emotions, enabling meaningful growth and improved functioning (Timulak & Keogh, 2022). In contrast, primary maladaptive emotions are also immediate but stem from past painful experiences that have left individuals with rigid emotional schemas. These responses, like chronic shame or fear, are triggered even in benign situations, interfering with the individual's ability to act adaptively (Dailey et al., 2024; Elliot & Greenberg, 2007; Goldman, 2019; Greenberg, 2004; Timulak & Keogh, 2022). The EFCT framework accesses and transforms these maladaptive emotional states by fostering the emergence of primary adaptive emotions, allowing clients to reprocess their experiences to promote healing and emotional balance (Dailey et al., 2024; Johnson, 2009). In EFCT this process is grounded in three key principles of emotional change:

1. *Emotional Awareness*: Helping partners identify and articulate their emotions, particularly primary emotions like fear, sadness, or longing, which often underlie secondary emotions like anger or frustration.
2. *Emotional Regulation*: Supporting partners in managing their emotional responses to reduce reactivity and enhance constructive communication.
3. *Emotional Transformation*: Encouraging partners to engage with alternative emotional responses that foster empathy, understanding, and connection

By focusing on these principles, EFCT aims to create a safe and supportive environment where couples can explore their emotions and develop healthier interaction patterns toward secure attachment (Goldman, 2019; Greenberg, 2004; Johnson, 2009).

The Therapeutic Process of EFCT

EFCT follows a structured, stepwise process designed to guide couples toward emotional change while supporting emotional reconnection and conflict resolution. Johnson (2004) delineates nine treatment steps within three overarching stages:

1. *De-escalation*: Identifying negative interaction cycles and reframing the problem as rooted in unmet attachment needs. This stage involves reducing immediate conflict and creating a foundation for change.
2. *Restructuring Bonding Interactions*: Facilitating the expression of primary emotions and unmet needs, fostering emotional attunement, and creating new patterns of engagement that enhance connection and trust.
3. *Consolidation*: Reinforcing new interaction patterns and developing strategies to maintain emotional intimacy and effectively navigate future conflicts among couples.

Through these stages, EFCT seeks to transform negative interactions into positive interactions that strengthen the couple's emotional bond and enhance their ability to resolve conflicts constructively (Allan et al., 2021; Dailey et al., 2024; Johnson 2004).

Applications of EFCT in Conflict Resolution

EFCT is particularly effective in addressing conflicts that stem from emotional disconnection and unmet attachment needs. By helping partners access and express their primary emotions, EFCT fosters empathy and understanding, which are essential for resolving relational disputes (Dailey et al., 2024; Johnson, 2003). For instance, a partner expressing vulnerability and

fear of abandonment may elicit a compassionate response rather than defensiveness, paving the way for collaborative problem-solving. Research supports the efficacy of EFCT in improving relationship satisfaction and reducing relational distress. Spengler et al. (2024) conducted a meta-analysis demonstrating that EFCT is highly effective in fostering emotional intimacy and enhancing conflict resolution outcomes. Additionally, studies have shown that EFCT outperforms behavioural approaches, including the GMCT, in reducing marital burnout and shifting conflict resolution styles (Havaasi et al., 2018). The work of Beasley and Ager (2019) and Allan et al. (2021) has concluded that EFCT effectively facilitates the improvement of relationship satisfaction during and after treatment.

Strengths and Limitations of EFCT

Strengths. One of the primary strengths of EFCT is its emphasis on the emotional and relational aspects of conflict, which are often overlooked in more behaviourally focused approaches. Rather than focusing solely on communication skills or conflict management techniques, EFCT transforms the underlying emotional experiences that drive relational distress, fostering deep and lasting change (Allan et al., 2021; Beasley & Ager, 2019; Dailey et al., 2024; Wiebe et al., 2017). This emotionally attuned approach allows couples to recognize and express their deeper attachment needs, breaking negative cycles of disconnection and promoting emotional security. EFCT also follows a transparent and replicable process for therapists, consisting of three key stages: de-escalation of negative cycles, restructuring of emotional interactions, and consolidation of relational gains (Allan et al., 2021; Johnson, 2004). Another major strength of EFCT is its robust empirical support. Studies indicate that 70-75% of couples recover from relationship distress after 10-12 sessions, with 90% reporting significant improvement in their relationship quality (Johnson, 2008; Beasley & Ager, 2019).

Additionally, Spengler et al. (2024) conducted a meta-analysis of EFCT's effectiveness, demonstrating that it remains an evidence-based treatment compared to alternative approaches, including pharmacological interventions. Notably, another advantage of EFCT is its applicability across diverse populations. Unlike some therapeutic approaches that may be more rigid in their interventions, EFCT is highly adaptable to different relationship dynamics, including same-sex couples, intercultural relationships, and partners with diverse attachment styles. Power (2020) highlights that because EFCT focuses on the attachment system rather than rigidly diagnosing attachment styles, it can be effectively applied to couples regardless of gender or sexual orientation. Thus, EFCT is an inclusive, flexible approach that prioritizes each couple's unique emotional and relational needs rather than fitting them into a predetermined framework. Finally, EFCT aligns closely with humanistic principles, emphasizing empathy, validation, and emotional presence in the therapeutic relationship (Moser & Johnson, 2008). The model encourages partners to develop greater emotional awareness, regulation, and attunement to each other's needs, fostering a sense of security and mutual understanding. By transforming maladaptive emotional responses into adaptive, growth-oriented interactions, EFCT helps couples navigate conflict more constructively and build a stronger relational foundation (Goldman, 2019; Greenberg, 2004; Johnson, 2009). Overall, EFCT is a highly effective, empirically supported, and emotionally transformative approach to couples therapy. The ability of EFCT to help foster deep emotional connection, restructure negative interaction patterns, and create lasting relational change makes it a powerful tool for couples navigating conflict and relationship distress.

Limitations. While EFCT is a highly effective and evidence-based approach to improving relational satisfaction and emotional bonds, it has notable limitations in the context of conflict resolution. One key limitation is its heavy reliance on emotional accessibility and

expression, which may be challenging for individuals who struggle with emotional awareness or regulation (Weeks & Fife, 2014). Partners with avoidant attachment tendencies or those conditioned to suppress emotions may find it difficult to engage fully in EFCT interventions, potentially slowing progress (Şenol et al., 2023). Similarly, individuals with trauma histories, particularly those involving emotional neglect or abuse, may require additional therapeutic support before they can effectively participate in EFCT's emotionally intense processes (Hill, 2022; Johnson, 2008; Weeks & Fife, 2014). Clients may become overwhelmed or disengage without sufficient emotional regulation skills, limiting the therapy's effectiveness in resolving conflict. Another limitation is that EFCT does not focus explicitly on communication skills or behavioural strategies, which is often crucial for conflict resolution. While EFCT helps couples access and transform underlying emotional responses, it does not provide structured guidance on conflict negotiation, problem-solving techniques, or practical strategies for managing recurring disputes (Feeney & Karantzas, 2017). Couples dealing with ongoing external stressors—such as financial strain, parenting disagreements, or cultural differences—may benefit from incorporating cognitive-behavioural or solution-focused techniques alongside EFCT to address these issues more concretely (Meyer & Sledge, 2022; Peetz et al., 2023; Timulak & Keogh, 2022). The feminist perspective criticizes EFCT for not adequately emphasizing broader sociocultural and power dynamics within relationships. While EFCT is rooted in attachment theory, which aligns with feminist values by emphasizing relational bonds and emotional connection, it does not always account for the larger societal structures that influence attachment processes, such as cultural expectations and power imbalances (Knudson-Martin, 2012).

Additionally, critics argue that attachment theory, and by extension EFCT, operates within a framework that assumes relational dynamics exist in a vacuum, potentially overlooking

how systemic oppression, patriarchal structures, and cultural expectations shape emotional needs, responses, and relational security (Guttmann-Steinmetz & Crowell, 2006). However, to address these concerns, Knudson-Martin (2012) proposes five guidelines for integrating a feminist perspective into attachment-based therapies like EFCT. These guidelines emphasize the importance of contextualizing attachment behaviors and recognizing how power and privilege shape relational experiences. As further highlighted by Mendelson (2024), without the application of intentional cultural competency and a sociocultural lens, EFCT may inadvertently reinforce existing relational dynamics that disadvantage one partner, particularly in heterosexual relationships where gendered expectations around caregiving, emotional expression, and dependency often differ.

Lastly, Daryaye et al. (2022) note that EFCT may be less effective for couples in which one or both partners perceive the other as unavailable or rejecting. In such cases, emotional regulation strategies can unintentionally heighten existing relational distress. EFCT highlights the central role of emotional experiences in shaping relational health and conflict dynamics. By helping couples identify and address unmet attachment needs such as security, connection, and trust, therapists use EFCT to guide partners in breaking free from negative interaction cycles that fuel emotional disconnection and distress (Johnson, 2008). As a humanistic and experiential model, EFCT reorganizes emotional experiences, fostering secure attachment through exploring and transforming primary emotion states. Through this process, partners gain greater emotional awareness, acceptance, and regulation, allowing them to replace dysfunctional patterns with more constructive emotional responses (Mendelson, 2024). By nurturing emotional safety, vulnerability, and intimacy in an adaptable way, EFCT equips couples with the tools to navigate diverse conflict patterns more effectively and build stronger, more resilient relationships.

Gottman Method Couples Therapy

The Gottman Method Couples Therapy (GMCT), developed by John and Julie Gottman, stands as one of the most extensively researched and empirically supported approaches to relationship counselling. Drawing on over four decades of research, GMCT examines relational dynamics through behavioural patterns, physiological responses, and conflict resolution strategies (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). This integrated method incorporates principles from systemic, existential, psychoanalytic, and behavioural theories to help couples shift unhelpful thoughts, perceptions, and behaviours (Daryaye Lal et al., 2022; Tarkeshdooz et al., 2021). Grounded in the understanding that conflict is inevitable in romantic relationships, GMCT emphasizes how couples manage and respond to conflict as a key factor in long-term relational health and stability (Gottman & Gottman, 2013).

Findings demonstrated that couples' interactions tend to be stable over time, insofar as their relational problems are perpetual in nature (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018). It has been noted that it is often the ratio of positive to negative interactions, rather than the frequency of conflict itself, as the key predictor of relationship satisfaction and stability (Gottman & Gottman, 2008, Navarra & Gottman, 2013). High degrees of negativity hinder couples' ability to connect and repair conflict, thus leading to greater likelihood of divorce. Gottman coined the term, "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" to represent frequent use of blaming and withdrawal patterns that include: criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling, and contempt, which are proposed as the strongest indicators of relational dysfunction (Navarra & Gottman, 2013). From this work, Gottman and his wife, Julie Schwartz Gottman, developed the Sound Relationship House (SRH) theory which aims to demonstrate characteristics of healthy relationships, present the main findings of Gottman's research regarding what makes relationships succeed or fail, and provide

applicable interventions for for therapeutic and couples' use (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Navarra & Gottman, 2013). The GMCT and thus the SRH theory are based on an integrated approach that relies on several theories including systems, existential, psychoanalytical, and behavioural theory (Davoodvandi et al., 2018). In practice, the SRH theory supports couples in cultivating healthy communication patterns within romantic relationships (Gottman & Silver, 1999), and has been demonstrated to strengthen the couple's friendship through the upregulation of positive affect, and rebuild the relationship on the basis of constructive conflict management skills and creation of shared meaning systems (Davoodvandi et al., 2018; Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Havaasi et al., 2018). Drawing from experiential theory, SRH emphasizes 'here and now' interventions and skill-building that might include practices such as turning toward partners and bids for attention, taking turns listening and expressing subjective experiences, and developing mutual goals, in order to generate behavioural change (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). The GMCT is based on the notion that by creating opportunities for couples to improve their communication and interactions they will thereby increase their intimacy and potential for marital adjustment over time (Davoodvandi et al., 2018). In this way, the GMCT views conflict resolution as a process of behavioural interventions. Despite evidence of its effectiveness for improving intimacy, adjustment, and marital distress (Davoodvandi et al., 2018; Tarkeshdooz et al., 2021), the Gottman method is not without its limitations. Beyond the need for additional empirical study among diverse populations, larger sample sizes, and controlled trials (Davoodvandi et al., 2018; Prochaska & Norcross, 2018; Tarkeshdooz et al., 2021), the GMCT prioritizes behavioural methods for increasing positive affect over methods intended to improve emotional awareness, understanding, or regulation as primary interventions (Davoodvandi et al., 2018).

Much of what we currently know as the GMCT was built upon extensive observational research conducted by John Gottman and Robert Levenson, beginning in 1975, which utilized multimethod and longitudinal approaches to studying relationships (Navarra & Gottman, 2013). Their research involved observing couples in the “Love Lab,” where partners engaged in daily conversations, discussed conflicts, and spent extended time together in a controlled setting (Navarra & Gottman, 2013). Through this research, Gottman identified key distinctions between what he termed the “masters of relationships,” or couples who maintained stable, happy partnerships, and the “disasters of relationships,” those who exhibited patterns leading to dissatisfaction and dissolution (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Gottman & Gottman, 2013). Integrating research-based models and clinical application revealed that relationships maintain a delicate balance between positivity and negativity, with successful couples actively fostering friendship, emotional attunement, and shared meaning (Gottman, 2004). These insights laid the foundation for the structured interventions of the Gottman Method, designed to enhance relationship stability and resilience.

Theoretical Foundations

Research on relationship sustainability suggests that most conflicts in romantic partnerships are not solvable but rather “perpetual,” rooted in fundamental personality differences between partners (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). If not managed properly, these conflicts can become destructively “gridlocked,” leading to increased negative emotional responses and communication breakdowns (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Salehi et al., 2024; Zahl-Olsen et al., 2024). Gottman identified two primary destructive conflict patterns: escalating negative affect, characterized by the presence of the Four Horsemen (criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling), and emotional disengagement, where both negative and positive

affect are absent during conflict (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Gottman & Gottman, 2013; Holman & Jarvis, 2003; Navarra & Gottman, 2019; Rajaei et al., 2019).

In order to be effective, conflict management should utilize a gentle approach that includes accepting influence, compromise, humour, and affection, all of which contribute to lower physiological arousal and greater relational stability (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). Physiological soothing, as opposed to diffuse physiological arousal, has been found to predict long-term relationship improvement. Beyond conflict management, building general positivity—through friendship, intimacy, playfulness, humour, and shared meaning—is essential for fostering lasting relationship satisfaction. A couple’s ability to construct a “shared meaning system” enhances their relational stability and happiness, underscoring the importance of integrating conflict management, friendship, and shared meaning into a comprehensive approach to relationship health (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Salehi et al., 2024).

Sound Relationship House Theory

The Sound Relationship House Theory (SRH) is at the core of the GMCT, providing a framework for understanding and strengthening relationship stability (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Havaasi et al., 2018; Navarra & Gottman, 2013; Navarra & Gottman, 2019). This model consists of several interconnected principles:

1. *Building a Love Map*: This principle suggests that it is necessary to develop a deep understanding of one’s partner’s inner world, including their dreams, fears, and preferences.
2. *Fondness and Admiration System*: Expressing appreciation, respect, and gratitude for one’s partner helps counteract negativity and fosters connection.

3. *Turning Toward Instead of Away*: Partners should recognize and respond positively to bids for attention, emotional support, and engagement.
4. *Positive Sentiment Override*: Building a relationship in which positive experiences and emotions outweigh negative interactions allows couples to better handle conflict.
5. *Managing Conflict*: Given that research suggests 69% of conflict is perpetual, effective conflict management rather than absolute resolution is key.
6. *Creating Shared Meaning*: Establishing common values, rituals, and life goals contributes to relational stability.
7. *Trust and Commitment*: These fundamental components reinforce a secure and lasting bond between partners.

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

A central component of Gottman's theoretical framework is the identification of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse—communication patterns that reliably predict relationship distress and, ultimately, dissolution (Gottman & Gottman, 2013; Gottman, 2017; Havaasi et al., 2018; Navarra & Gottman, 2019). The first, criticism, involves attacking a partner's character instead of addressing specific behaviors. To counter this, partners are encouraged to use "I" statements to express feelings without assigning blame. The second, defensiveness, reflects self-protective responses that deflect responsibility. Taking ownership of one's actions serves as the key corrective. The third, contempt, includes expressions of superiority, sarcasm, or disrespect and poses the greatest threat to relational stability. Replacing contempt with respect and appreciation helps repair this dynamic. Lastly, stonewalling occurs when one partner emotionally withdraws or disengages from interaction. Practicing self-soothing techniques can help individuals stay present during difficult conversations (Gottman & Gottman, 2013; Holman et al., 2003; Rajaei et

al., 2019). These four patterns tend to escalate negativity and contribute to relational dysfunction. However, according to the Gottman Method, if couples can replace these destructive habits with healthier communication strategies, they will build greater connection and resilience.

Behavioural Interventions for Conflict Resolution

As part of the GMCT, there are several structured interventions which can result in improved conflict resolution as well as relationship satisfaction for couples. These interventions focus on down-regulating negative affect, up-regulating positive affect, and fostering effective communication (Daryaye Lal et al., 2022; Gottman & Gottman, 2008). Repair attempts are crucial in distinguishing successful couples from those in distress, as mending misunderstandings through humor, apologies, and reassurances helps prevent escalation (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Navarra & Gottman, 2013; Sarchuni, 2024). Processing fights and regrettable incidents is another key component, where couples are encouraged to discuss conflicts without reliving emotional distress, map the anatomy of the fight, identify triggers, and validate each other's perspectives (Gottman, 2017). Additionally, the Two-Circle Method allows partners to identify non-negotiable core needs while recognizing areas where compromise is possible, fostering mutual understanding (Havaasi et al., 2018). When conflicts become gridlocked, they often signal deeply held values or aspirations. In such cases, exploring each individual's goals and dreams enables partners to foster empathy and connection rather than compromising fundamental aspects of their identity (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Navarra & Gottman, 2019). Addressing emotional mismatches is another essential intervention, as individuals have different emotional responses to conflict. Using this intervention, partners work toward understanding and respecting each other's emotional worlds (Gottman & Gottman, 2013). Lastly, enhancing positive interactions through daily stress-reducing conversations, practicing affection, and

cultivating shared meaning reinforces relational resilience beyond conflict (Navarra & Gottman, 2013).

Strengths and Limitations of the Gottman Method

Strengths. The Gottman Method is highly regarded for its empirical validity and supported by decades of longitudinal and verifiable studies that have relied on validated questionnaires (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Gottman & Gottman, 2013; Havaasi et al., 2018; Holman et al., 2003; Sarchuni, 2024). This extensive body of work has incorporated a diverse range of participants, including gay and lesbian couples and most major ethnic and racial groups in America (Gottman & Gottman, 2013). As such, this work has enabled the development of a predictive framework that allows therapists to identify dysfunctional patterns early on. By catching these negative cycles before they become entrenched, couples can receive timely interventions that help restore stability and connection in their relationships (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Gottman & Gottman, 2013). Khatibi (2024) highlights the potential for improved family functioning and marital adjustment with couples applying for divorce as this method can support the reduction of burnout and increase resilience of couples in conflict.

Additionally, the GMCT is largely behavioural and skills-based, equipping couples with practical and concrete tools to improve communication, manage conflict, and enhance intimacy through structured exercises and guided discussions that can be integrated outside of therapy, increasing its accessibility (Khatibi, 2024; Navarra & Gottman, 2019; Salehi et al., 2024). Furthermore, the holistic approach of the GMCT emphasizes fostering friendship, shared meaning, and emotional attunement as fundamental elements of relationship success (Gottman, 2017).

Limitations. Despite its strengths, the GMCT is not without limitations. One of the primary critiques is that it leans heavily on behavioural interventions rather than emotional processing. Unlike EFCT, which centers on deepening emotional bonds and working through attachment wounds, the GMCT may not fully address the underlying emotional injuries that contribute to relationship distress (Rajaei et al., 2019). This focus on observable behaviours rather than underlying emotional dynamics could be a disadvantage for couples dealing with unresolved trauma or deep-seated attachment insecurities. It also means that GMCT practitioners must be culturally responsive in their work in order to avoid pathologizing culturally-specific behaviors or ways of being, as cultural identity plays a significant role in shaping behaviours related to conflict styles (Eftekhari et al., 2018; Giri, 2006; Ubando, 2016).

Another limitation is that the approach requires consistent motivation and commitment from both partners. The structured nature of the interventions demands active participation and regular practice, which may be challenging for couples in high-conflict situations or those experiencing emotional withdrawal (Salehi et al., 2024). Without sustained effort from both partners, the effectiveness of the Gottman Method may be diminished, particularly for those who struggle with emotional regulation or resistance to change.

Additionally, while the Gottman Method demonstrates effectiveness in many cases, its applicability to high-conflict or trauma-based relationships is somewhat limited (Tarkeshdooz et al., 2021). Couples dealing with severe relational trauma, emotional abuse, or deeply entrenched conflict may require more intensive therapeutic support that incorporates trauma-informed techniques. In these cases, an integrative approach that combines elements of the GMCT with emotion-focused or trauma-specific therapies may be more beneficial (Tarkeshdooz et al., 2021).

The Gottman Method Couples Therapy provides a robust, research-based framework for improving relationship dynamics. By addressing destructive conflict patterns, reinforcing positive interactions, and fostering deeper emotional connections, this approach offers significant benefits for couples seeking to strengthen their relationships. However, while it excels in providing structured interventions and behavioural strategies, it may benefit from greater integration of emotion-focused techniques to address deeper attachment wounds and trauma (Zahl-Olsen et al., 2024), and a more robust emphasis on cultural responsiveness (Pederson, 2011). Future research and clinical applications may include hybrid approaches incorporating behavioural, emotion-focused, and multicultural methodologies for a more comprehensive model of couples therapy (Pederson, 2011; Zahl-Olsen et al., 2024).

Comparative Analysis of Gottman Method and EFCT Approaches

The Gottman Method Couples Therapy and Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy represent two of the most prominent approaches to couples therapy. Both methods offer empirically supported frameworks for improving relationship dynamics but differ in their theoretical foundations, intervention strategies, and primary objectives. In the next section, similarities as well as differences between these approaches will be explored. In particular, a focus on the analysis of strengths and limitations in addressing relational conflict and their effectiveness in diverse relational contexts will be provided.

Theoretical Underpinnings

While the GMCT is rooted in deductive research and emphasizes structured, behavior-focused interventions, EFCT is grounded in inductive research and centers on emotional processes and attachment (Havaasi et al., 2018). GMCT integrates systems theory, existential and narrative frameworks, and behavioral change models, and uses empirical data to test and

validate hypotheses about relationship stability and conflict dynamics (Davoodvandi et al., 2018; Salehi et al., 2024). In contrast, the theoretical foundation underpinning EFCT is based on clinical observations, prioritizing emotional bonding and the reorganization of affective experiences. Where Gottman emphasizes teaching communication skills and behavioral regulation within a cognitive-systemic model, EFCT operates from an attachment-based, neo-humanistic perspective that values emotional accessibility, the therapeutic relationship, and experiential change (Elliot & Greenberg, 2007; Salehi et al., 2024; Timulak & Keogh, 2022). This contrast reflects a broader difference in orientation: GMCT focuses on what couples do, while EFCT is concerned with how couples feel and connect at the emotional core.

Addressing Relational Conflict

Despite their distinct theoretical underpinnings, the GMCT and EFCT share common ground in their emphasis on understanding and addressing relational conflict. In both approaches, conflict is considered to be a natural and inevitable component of romantic relationships and as such, stress the importance of managing conflict rather than eliminating it (Weeks & Fife, 2014). Additionally, a goal of both methods is to strengthen the emotional bond between partners and enhance communication skills to foster healthier interactions (Johnson, 2008; Gottman & Gottman, 2013). Both approaches acknowledge maladaptive patterns that contribute to relational distress. The Gottman Method identifies the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” (criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling) as predictors of relationship deterioration (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). Similarly, in EFCT distress is conceptualized in terms of negative interaction cycles, wherein partners engage in repetitive patterns of emotional withdrawal and reactivity that reinforce attachment insecurity (Johnson, 2009). Both approaches interrupt and replace these negative cycles with constructive relational patterns. Another similarity lies in their structured

intervention strategies. The GMCT and EFCT models provide therapists with specific stepwise techniques to guide couples in improving their relationships. For example, both approaches encourage partners to engage in conversations that deepen emotional connection and facilitate repair after conflicts. The GMCT's "repair attempts" and EFCT's "softening events" serve a similar function in reducing relational distress and fostering emotional safety (Gottman & Gottman, 2013; Johnson, 2008).

Behavioural vs. Emotional Focus in Conflict Resolution

While both models aim to help couples navigate conflict, they diverge in their primary focus and mechanisms of change. The GMCT is based on a primarily behavioural approach, emphasizing observable relationship dynamics, communication strategies, and conflict management skills (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). It operates on the premise that couples can create a more stable and fulfilling relationship by modifying interactional behaviors and reinforcing positive communication patterns (Navarra & Gottman, 2019). The SRH theory, which underpins the GMCT, outlines concrete steps couples can take to build friendship, manage conflict, and develop shared meaning (Gottman & Gottman, 2017).

In contrast, EFCT is rooted in attachment theory and prioritizes emotional processing and deepening emotional bonds (Johnson, 2008). Instead of emphasizing behavioural change, it focuses on the underlying emotions and attachment needs that drive relational distress. Therapists using EFCT guide couples to recognize and express their primary emotions—such as fear, hurt, or longing—which often appear as secondary emotions like anger or defensiveness (Greenberg, 2004; Johnson, 2009). By promoting emotional accessibility and responsiveness, EFCT helps partners strengthen their emotional connection, which in turn supports more effective conflict resolution and greater relationship satisfaction (Beasley & Ager, 2019).

Another key distinction is how each approach conceptualizes conflict resolution. The GMCT emphasizes the importance of effective communication strategies, such as “soft start-ups” and “accepting influence,” to de-escalate conflicts and promote constructive dialogue (Gottman & Gottman, 2013). On the other hand, an EFCT approach encourages partners to explore the deeper emotional wounds and attachment injuries that underlie conflicts, guiding them through transformative bonding experiences that reshape their relational dynamic (Johnson, 2008). In this way, EFCT seeks to create lasting emotional change, whereas the GMCT aims to enhance relational stability through skill-building and behavioural interventions.

Effectiveness in Different Relational Contexts

The effectiveness of the GMCT and EFCT varies depending on the specific needs of couples and the nature of their relational challenges. The GMCT is particularly effective for couples who benefit from structured, skills-based interventions focusing on practical strategies for managing conflict and enhancing relationship satisfaction (Navarra & Gottman, 2019). Research indicates that the GMCT is especially useful for couples experiencing moderate relational distress, communication difficulties, or conflict resolution challenges (Davoodvandi et al., 2018). In contrast, EFCT is highly effective for couples struggling with deep-seated emotional wounds, attachment insecurities, or relational trauma (Johnson, 2009). Studies have shown that EFCT is particularly beneficial for couples facing high levels of emotional disconnection or unresolved attachment injuries (Beasley & Ager, 2019). Because EFCT emphasizes the reprocessing of emotional experiences and the development of a secure attachment bond, it is well-suited for couples seeking to heal from past relational traumas and foster greater emotional intimacy (Johnson, 2008). Cultural and individual differences also play a role in determining which approach may be more suitable. The GMCT’s structured, skills-based

framework may be more accessible to couples who prefer concrete, action-oriented strategies for improving their relationship (Salehi et al., 2024). EFCT, with its focus on emotional expression and attachment needs, may be more appropriate for couples who value emotional exploration and deeper relational bonding (Spengler et al., 2024).

The comparative analysis of the GMCT and EFCT highlights their shared commitment to improving relationship dynamics while underscoring their distinct theoretical orientations and intervention strategies. Ultimately, both approaches offer valuable contributions to couples therapy, and their effectiveness depends on each couple's unique needs and preferences. While the GMCT emphasizes behavioural change, communication strategies, and conflict management, EFCT focuses on emotional processing, attachment security, and deep relational bonding. Each approach has demonstrated effectiveness in different relational contexts, making them valuable tools for couples therapy. Integrating the strengths of both models may offer a more holistic approach to addressing relational conflict and fostering long-term relationship satisfaction (Zahl-Olsen et al., 2024). Chapter 3 will explore how these two frameworks, when effectively integrated, enhance therapeutic outcomes for diverse couples.

Critique of the Gottman Method and EFCT

Researchers and clinicians have widely studied and implemented the Gottman Method Couples Therapy (GMCT) and Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT) in couples work. While both approaches show strong effectiveness, they also face important critiques related to cultural applicability, research methodologies, and ethical considerations. The following section examines the strengths and limitations of each approach in these key areas.

Cultural Considerations

One of the most significant critiques of the GMCT and EFCT is their primarily Western-centric development, which raises concerns regarding cultural competency and applicability. The models developed through research conducted in Western societies, particularly among predominantly white, middle-class, heterosexual couples (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Johnson, 2008). As a result, their frameworks may not fully address the complexities of relational dynamics in diverse cultural contexts. Cultural identity plays a significant role in shaping conflict styles and resolution strategies (Eftekhari et al., 2018; Giri, 2006; Ubando, 2016). Research suggests that collectivist cultures may emphasize harmony and indirect communication, whereas individualist cultures often prioritize direct expression and personal autonomy (Pederson, 2011). The GMCT's emphasis on direct communication strategies, such as soft start-ups and accepting influence, may not align with cultural norms prioritizing deference and group cohesion (Navarra & Gottman, 2019). Similarly, EFCT's focus on emotional vulnerability and attachment security may not fully account for cultural values emphasizing emotional restraint and family obligations over individual emotional expression (Johnson, 2009). Moreover, applying these models to non-Western or marginalized communities can pose challenges. Couples from minority backgrounds may face systemic stressors such as discrimination, financial instability, or intergenerational expectations that influence their relational conflicts (Weeks & Fife, 2014). Thus, culturally responsive adaptations of these approaches are necessary to ensure their effectiveness across diverse populations. Integrating multicultural perspectives, acknowledging intersectionality, and incorporating culturally relevant interventions may enhance their applicability in global contexts (Tarkeshdooz et al., 2021).

Methodology

The empirical validation of both the GMCT and EFCT has been a significant strength, but their research methodologies are not without limitations. Much research supporting the GMCT relies on observational studies conducted in laboratory settings, such as the “Love Lab,” where couples’ interactions are analyzed under controlled conditions (Gottman & Gottman, 2013). While these studies have yielded valuable insights into relationship dynamics, they may lack ecological validity, as couples may behave differently in artificial environments compared to their everyday lives (Zahl-Olsen et al., 2024). Similarly, EFCT research has heavily relied on randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and self-reported measures of emotional connection and attachment security (Johnson, 2008; Beasley & Ager, 2019). While RCTs provide strong evidence for treatment efficacy, they often exclude couples experiencing severe relational distress, trauma, or external stressors, limiting the generalizability of findings. Additionally, many EFCT studies use small sample sizes and homogeneous participant pools, which may not adequately represent diverse populations (Spengler et al., 2024). Another critique pertains to the reliance on self-reported data, which may be susceptible to biases such as social desirability or memory recall errors (Salehi et al., 2024). Moreover, longitudinal studies examining the long-term effectiveness of both approaches are still relatively limited, leaving questions about sustained relational improvements over time. Future research should prioritize more diverse sampling, naturalistic observational studies, and long-term follow-ups to strengthen the empirical foundation of these approaches.

Ethical Considerations in Conflict Resolution

Ethical issues arise when navigating conflict resolution within couples therapy, particularly concerning therapist neutrality, confidentiality, power imbalances, and informed

consent (BCACC, 2010; Gottlieb et al., 2008). One ethical concern is the potential for therapist bias to influence interventions (Prochaska & Norcross, 2018). Given that both the GMCT and EFCT have structured approaches, therapists must be cautious not to rigidly apply interventions without considering the unique needs and values of each couple (Buhler, 1971; Cain et al., 2016; Weeks & Fife, 2014). Power dynamics within relationships can complicate therapeutic interventions (Caughlin et al., 2006; Weeks & Fife, 2014). For instance, in cases where one partner has greater control over finances, decision-making, or emotional expression, conflict resolution strategies must be adapted to prevent reinforcing existing imbalances (Gurman, 2008; Pederson, 2011). The GMCT's emphasis on mutual influence may not be practical in relationships with significant power disparities, such as those involving emotional abuse or coercion (Gottman & Gottman, 2013; Weeks & Fife, 2014). Similarly, EFCT's focus on emotional vulnerability must be approached with caution when working with couples who have histories of trauma or intimate partner violence (Johnson, 2009; Weeks & Fife, 2014).

Informed consent is another critical ethical consideration (BCACC, 2010). Given the structured nature of both approaches, therapists must ensure that clients fully understand the goals, techniques, and potential emotional risks involved in therapy. For example, EFCT's deep emotional exploration may evoke distressing memories or unresolved traumas, necessitating careful assessment and pacing (Beasley & Ager, 2019). Similarly, the GMCT's interventions, such as conflict management exercises, may inadvertently intensify relational discord if not appropriately facilitated (Navarra & Gottman, 2019). As per the BCACC (2010), because of the evolving nature of therapeutic content, focus, and interventions, consent must be ongoing, and "the counselor must ensure that informed consent continues throughout the counseling relationship" (p.2).

A humanistic framework can help address many of these ethical concerns by emphasizing client autonomy, self-determination, and a holistic understanding of relational dynamics.

Humanistic psychology affirms the inherent resourcefulness of clients, promoting a strengths-based perspective that aligns with the GMCT and EFCT (Buhler, 1971; Cain et al., 2016). By prioritizing subjective experiences and personal meaning-making, humanistic approaches help ensure that therapy remains client-centered and adaptive to diverse needs (Daei Jafari et al., 2020). Such humanistic frameworks acknowledge the balance between autonomy and interdependence, recognizing that relational conflicts often stem from differing needs for connection and individuality (Knee et al., 2005). Additionally, humanistic principles of unconditional positive regard and empathy reinforce ethical best practices by fostering a nonjudgmental, supportive therapeutic environment (Scholl et al., 2014). Integrating humanistic principles and ongoing ethical reflection into couples therapy enhances ethical responsiveness by ensuring that interventions respect cultural, emotional, and personal complexities while mitigating potential risks and empowering clients to navigate relational challenges in a way that aligns with their values and lived experiences (Tarkeshdooz et al., 2021).

The strengths and weaknesses of the GMCT and EFCT highlight the complexities of applying structured therapeutic models across diverse contexts. While both approaches offer valuable frameworks for improving conflict resolution and relationship satisfaction, they require cultural adaptations, methodological refinements, and ethical safeguards to maximize their effectiveness. Addressing these limitations through future research, practitioner training, and culturally responsive interventions can enhance the accessibility and applicability of these approaches. The intent of Chapter 3 is to utilize the findings of this literature review in order to

create a set of best practices for helping couples work through conflict resolution in an increasingly diverse and evolving therapeutic landscape.

Chapter 3: Discussion and Applied Practices

Conflict resolution in romantic relationships is both an essential and challenging component of relationship satisfaction and longevity. The inevitability of conflict in intimate relationships—regardless of relationship length, orientation, or identity—necessitates the development of effective conflict management strategies. Previous research has shown that conflict is intricately correlated with relationship satisfaction, health, and well-being, and can even predict relationship longevity and divorce (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Havaasi et al., 2018; Papp, 2018; Peetz et al., 2023). Conflict is closely tied to cultural identity in that one’s culture plays a crucial role in shaping their approach to conflict as well as the potential resolution strategies (Eftekhari et al., 2018; Giri, 2006; Ubando, 2016). Though numerous theories and interventions have been developed to intervene, conflict continues to be a pervasive concern among couples and requires ongoing research and application in order to support diverse couples.

The purpose of this study was to explore conflict resolution through the lens of two prominent therapeutic approaches: the Gottman Method Couples Therapy (GMCT) and Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT). The goal was to identify the strengths and limitations of each approach, ultimately forming a set of best practices for effectively navigating conflict in romantic relationships. The literature review in Chapter 2 examined the foundations of conflict in romantic relationships and the theoretical underpinnings of both the GMCT and EFCT. Chapter 2 further explored how each model addresses relational conflict, highlighting their differing emphases on behavioral versus emotional mechanisms for resolution.

A comparative analysis assessed the effectiveness of each method in varied relational contexts, evaluating the strengths and limitations of each. The review outlined several cultural considerations, methodological constraints, and ethical implications associated with both models. Chapter 3 will discuss the findings from the literature review, outline limitations, and suggest future research directions. The chapter will conclude with a synthesis of key takeaways and provide recommendations for therapeutic best practice.

Discussion

The primary aim of this project was to evaluate conflict resolution methods in romantic relationships through the lens of the GMCT and EFCT. This section discusses how the findings from the literature review contribute to the current knowledge of conflict in romantic relationships and offer practical implications to improve conflict resolution. Additionally, the limitations of the study and factors influencing interpretation will be addressed. This discussion is grounded in the first research question that guided this capstone:

How do the Gottman Method and EFCT compare in addressing conflict in romantic relationships?

The GMCT and EFCT approach conflict resolution through fundamentally different theoretical and clinical lenses, offering complementary—but distinct—pathways for couples navigating relational distress. The Gottman Method is rooted in deductive reasoning, drawing from longitudinal studies that identify patterns predictive of relational stability or breakdown (Havaasi et al., 2018). This method is anchored in systems theory, behavioral change models, and elements of existential and narrative frameworks, with a heavy emphasis on empirically validated strategies such as reducing the “Four Horsemen” behaviors (criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling) and enhancing positive interactions during conflict

(Davoodvandi et al., 2018; Salehi et al., 2024). The GMCT model uses structured, skill-based interventions to improve communication, build shared meaning, and enhance emotional attunement through behavioral regulation.

In contrast, Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT) is grounded in inductive reasoning based on clinical observation that draws heavily from attachment theory and emotion theory (Havaasi et al., 2018). Rather than focusing on observable behaviors alone, EFCT uncovers the emotional processes and unmet attachment needs that underlie conflict (Mendelson, 2024). This model promotes emotional bonding, the reorganization of affective experiences, and experiential change through vulnerable emotional expression and a secure therapeutic alliance (Elliot & Greenberg, 2007; Timulak & Keogh, 2022).

This divergence in theoretical orientation—behavioral-cognitive versus emotion-attachment—highlights a fundamental difference between the two theories where GMCT which is primarily concerned with what couples do—their behaviors, skills, and interaction patterns—whereas EFCT is focused on how couples feel and emotionally connect, prioritizing internal experience over external behavior. For example, while the GMCT may coach partners on how to soften a conflict startup or use a repair attempt during conflict, EFCT would guide partners toward exploring the deeper emotional meanings of their distress, such as fears of abandonment or unmet needs for reassurance.

Both approaches offer valuable tools, but their effectiveness may vary depending on the presenting issues and relational dynamics. For couples needing tangible, structured interventions for high-conflict patterns, the GMCT may be more applicable (Khatibi et al., 2024). For couples struggling with emotional disconnection or attachment wounds, EFCT may be more appropriate due to its focus on relational security and emotional depth (Khatibi et al., 2024). As such,

therapists may consider an integrative approach to address both surface-level conflict behaviors and deeper emotional processes.

The second research question that guided this study explored:

What are the strengths and limitations of both methods in diverse relational contexts?

Both methods have demonstrated strong empirical support and clinical utility in resolving conflict within romantic relationships. However, their respective strengths and limitations reflect fundamental differences in theory, therapeutic focus, and applicability across diverse relational dynamics. The Gottman Method is particularly strong in its structure and empirical foundation, offering therapists a clear roadmap to identify and interrupt destructive conflict patterns through validated assessment tools and decades of longitudinal research (Navarra & Gottman, 2013; Navarra & Gottman, 2019). The practical, skills-based interventions help couples build communication strategies, manage conflict, and enhance intimacy—tools that are especially helpful for motivated couples seeking structured guidance. However, the focus on behavior over emotional processing may limit its effectiveness for couples dealing with unresolved trauma or attachment-related distress (Tarkeshdooz et al., 2021). The approach also presumes high engagement from both partners, which may be challenging in high-conflict or emotionally withdrawn dynamics (Salehi et al., 2024). While broadly applicable, the model is less explicit in addressing culture-specific behaviors, cultural power dynamics or trauma-informed considerations, areas that may benefit from further integration with multicultural modalities.

In contrast, EFCT excels in its focus on emotional processing and attachment needs, making it particularly effective for couples experiencing emotional disconnection, insecurity, or longstanding relational wounds (Beasley & Ager, 2019; Johnson, 2009; Khatibi et al., 2024; Spengler et al., 2024). The three-stage model of EFCT helps restructure negative emotional

cycles and fosters deeper emotional intimacy (Johnson, 2003). However, it may be less accessible for individuals who struggle with emotional expression or regulation, and it offers fewer concrete behavioral tools (Hill, 2022; Weeks & Fife, 2014). Additionally, EFCT has been critiqued for insufficiently addressing broader sociocultural and power dynamics, which can influence how emotional needs are expressed and understood in relationships (Knudson-Martin, 2012).

While both methods offer meaningful paths to healing, their differences highlight the importance of context. The GMCT is well-suited for couples who benefit from structured interventions and clear behavioral strategies, while EFCT provides depth and emotional attunement for those needing to repair emotional bonds. An integrated approach that balances behavioral structure with emotional depth may offer the most comprehensive support for couples navigating complex relational challenges (Khatibi et al., 2024; Zahl-Olsen et al., 2024). However, in order to increase the applicability of these methods, relational-cultural and intersectional considerations are especially important to include in future approaches.

Study Limitations

Despite the valuable insights gained through this project, several limitations must be acknowledged in interpreting the findings and their broader applicability. First, the nature of this study—as a literature-based analysis—limits its capacity to evaluate real-time therapeutic outcomes or assess the direct lived experiences of couples undergoing either EFCT or GMCT interventions. The conclusions drawn are based on secondary data, which may not fully capture the nuances of how these models function across varying relational, cultural, and clinical contexts. Furthermore, much of the existing research, while robust in design, relies heavily on self-report measures or therapist assessment, both of which are subject to bias.

A second key limitation lies in the cultural and contextual applicability of both models. While the GMCT has included a wider demographic range in its research samples compared to many approaches, both Gottman and EFCT were developed within Western, heteronormative frameworks that may not fully account for the relational dynamics present in non-Western, queer, or polyamorous relationships. Without deeper cultural adaptation and consideration of systemic factors—such as intergenerational trauma, immigration stress, racism, or heterosexism—these models risk applying a universal framework to problems that are often culturally specific. Additionally, EFCT’s theoretical base in attachment theory may not always align with cultural expressions of emotion or relational expectations, particularly in collectivist or emotionally restrained cultures.

Another significant constraint involves the lack of explicit integration of structural power and sociopolitical systems within either model. While EFCT emphasizes emotional safety and bonding, and the Gottman Method encourages positive behavioral interaction, neither framework fully addresses how systemic inequities—such as gender-based power imbalances, socioeconomic disparities, or patriarchal norms—can influence patterns of conflict, emotional expression, and relational safety. From a feminist or intersectional lens, the failure to integrate these contextual factors may result in missed opportunities to challenge oppressive dynamics or to support marginalized partners in therapy.

Lastly, the generalizability of the findings is constrained by the limitations of existing research. Many studies focus on short- to medium-term outcomes, with fewer examining long-term relational change beyond one to two years post-intervention. Additionally, the variability in therapist training, fidelity to treatment models, and integration of personal style or complementary techniques can all influence how effectively either method is applied. Without

consistent standards across clinical settings, it becomes difficult to isolate the unique contributions of each model, suggesting a need for continued research that addresses these practical complexities.

Comparison with Existing Research

The findings from this study align with previous research suggesting that both methods contribute positively to conflict resolution, albeit through different mechanisms. The GMCT's emphasis on communication skills is consistent with studies highlighting the importance of constructive dialogue (Gottman & Gottman, 2008). Similarly, EFCT's focus on emotional attunement supports the growing evidence of the role of secure attachment in conflict resolution (Johnson, 2009). Unexpectedly, however, neither method alone appeared fully sufficient for managing deeply entrenched relational patterns or conflict rooted in trauma or cultural discord.

EFCT has proven effective across diverse populations, especially in addressing emotional disconnection, attachment injuries, and relationship distress linked to infidelity, communication breakdown, or emotional dysregulation. However, for couples entrenched in patterns of hostility, contempt, or emotional volatility, EFCT's emotionally intensive work may be difficult to access without initial de-escalation. The GMCT, with its empirically validated techniques and structured format, has shown notable success in improving marital adjustment and reducing emotional burnout. The method's emphasis on behavior regulation, communication skills, and practical tools can help couples manage relational stress and reestablish trust and friendship. Yet, the GMCT's limited focus on underlying emotional dynamics may leave some attachment-based injuries unresolved, reducing the model's depth for couples with more complex emotional needs.

In this context, the integrated use of EFCT and GMCT offers a more comprehensive, dual-focus intervention that addresses both emotional attunement and behavioral regulation

(Khatibi et al., 2024; Zahl-Olsen et al., 2024). Several studies, including those by Gharmkhani (2017) and Zuccarini et al. (2013), support the effectiveness of this integrated approach in increasing marital satisfaction, enhancing emotional bonding, and reducing conflict-related burnout. By blending EFCT's focus on emotional accessibility and secure attachment with the GMCT's tools for managing conflict and fostering relational stability, therapists can meet couples where they are—emotionally and behaviorally.

Recommendations for Practice: Best Practices for Integrative Couples Therapy

Although EFCT and GMCT each independently demonstrate strong efficacy in enhancing relationship satisfaction and well-being by improving marital adjustment and emotional connection, emerging research indicates that combining these approaches may produce even more robust therapeutic outcomes. According to Ghahari et al. (2021), addressing both emotional and behavioral aspects of relational distress is important for creating lasting relational change. By uniting EFCT's emphasis on attachment and emotional safety with GMCT's structured strategies for conflict resolution and relational stability, an integrated model offers a more comprehensive framework for addressing both the emotional and behavioral dimensions of conflict resolution (Gharmkhani, 2017; Khatibi et al., 2024; Zuccarini et al., 2013).

Adopt an Integrated Therapeutic Approach as Standard Practice

Given the growing body of research supporting the unique yet complementary strengths of Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT) and the Gottman Method Couples Therapy (GMCT), an integrative model that draws from both frameworks offers a robust and comprehensive approach to addressing relational conflict (Khatibi et al., 2024). EFCT is particularly effective in working with the emotional undercurrents and attachment-based

vulnerabilities that contribute to distress (Beasley & Ager, 2019; Johnson, 2009), while GMCT provides couples with concrete, structured strategies for managing conflict, enhancing communication, and reinforcing relationship stability (Davoodvandi et al., 2018; Khatibi et al., 2024). Based on the literature I have outlined several best practices to enhance current methods for supporting couples in effective conflict resolution.

Best Practice: Therapists are encouraged to implement an integrative treatment plan that thoughtfully combines EFCT and GMCT interventions, beginning with a collaborative assessment process that identifies the couple's relational dynamics, conflict patterns, and emotional needs. According to Khatibi et al. (2024), the first session should function as a comprehensive assessment, enabling the therapist to identify sources of emotional disconnection and conflict cycles. This may involve clinical observation as well as the use of validated psychometric tools—such as the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) and the Love Attitudes Scale (LAS)—to provide a clearer picture of the couple's attachment patterns, relational satisfaction, and love styles. The assessment phase not only informs the sequencing of interventions (e.g., whether to begin with emotional de-escalation or behavioral stabilization) but also allows the therapist to tailor their approach to the specific needs, strengths, and readiness of each partner. For instance, couples presenting with high emotional reactivity or hostility may benefit from initiating therapy with Gottman-based conflict regulation strategies before transitioning into deeper EFCT work focused on vulnerability and attachment repair (Khatibi et al., 2024).

Additionally, early assessment can help identify systemic or contextual factors (e.g., early marriage, socio-cultural stressors, trauma history) that may require adaptation of the standard protocols from each model (Goldman, 2019; Pederson, 2011; Khatibi et al., 2024). An integrative approach, when implemented with flexibility and clinical attunement, supports both

emotional healing and behavioral change, and can create the conditions for sustainable relational growth.

Tailor the Integration to Couple Needs and Conflict Levels

While an integrated approach offers a comprehensive framework for working with relational conflict, its effectiveness depends largely on how well it is tailored to the unique needs, emotional capacities, and presenting concerns of each couple. Couples enter therapy with a wide range of relational histories, attachment styles, and emotional regulation capacities. Some may seek help for long-standing emotional disconnection, while others are navigating acute crises, entrenched conflict cycles, or even ambivalence about continuing the relationship. As such, the sequencing and emphasis of interventions drawn from EFCT and GMCT must be adapted to fit the couple's specific readiness, relational patterns, and therapeutic goals (Khatibi et al., 2024). For instance, research has shown that couples experiencing volatile or high-conflict interactions—marked by contempt, hostility, or emotional reactivity—often require de-escalation strategies before they are able to engage in the more emotionally intensive work of EFCT (Hill, 2022; Johnson, 2008; Weeks & Fife, 2014). In these cases, beginning with Gottman-based interventions—such as identifying and replacing the "Four Horsemen" behaviors, establishing rituals of connection, and working within the Sound Relationship House framework—can provide the structure and emotional safety necessary for deeper emotional processing to take place later in therapy (Mandani et al., 2017; Gharmkhani, 2017).

Best Practice: Therapists are encouraged to use a phased intervention plan, such as the 10-session integrated model outlined by Khatibi et al. (2024), where earlier sessions often emphasize behavioral stabilization and conflict regulation (GMCT), followed by sessions that support emotional awareness and attachment repair (EFCT). This structured flexibility allows

therapists to dynamically adjust the emphasis of each phase based on clinical observation and client feedback. For example, when working with couples who display insecure attachment styles, emotional numbing, or low emotional attunement, EFCT principles can be introduced early to help partners identify patterns of emotional disconnection and begin rebuilding emotional accessibility. Conversely, when partners show significant emotional reactivity or defensiveness, the skill-based tools of the GMCT can provide a more accessible entry point into therapeutic work, reducing tension and encouraging engagement (Salehi et al., 2024; Sarchuni, 2024). The practical and action-oriented strategies of GMCT can foster early therapeutic buy-in (Navarra & Gottman, 2019), offering couples a tangible framework that builds confidence and prepares them for deeper emotional exploration through EFCT.

Ultimately, this dual and adaptive sequencing honors the reality that emotional and behavioral change are interdependent processes. Couples navigating high-conflict, trauma, or emotional disengagement often benefit from learning how to regulate conflict and communicate more effectively (GMCT), while also being guided toward understanding and expressing deeper emotional needs (EFCT). An attuned and flexible use of both models enhances the likelihood of sustained change and supports couples in building not only stronger communication patterns but also greater emotional intimacy (Khatibi et al., 2024; Zuccarini et al., 2013).

Incorporate Culturally Responsive and Contextually Grounded Practices

Both EFCT and GMCT were developed primarily within Western clinical contexts (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Johnson, 2008). While research has expanded its application to diverse relational configurations, they remain embedded within frameworks that reflect Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) cultural norms (Kelly et al., 2014), and culturally nuanced adaptations remain necessary (Kelly, 2024). Particularly in relationships

embedded in socio-culturally specific settings—where emotional expression, communication styles, and relational norms may differ—therapists must apply both models with sensitivity to contextual influences (Khatibi et al., 2024; Tarkeshdooz et al., 2021). As Kelly (2024) notes, therapists must attend to the multiple and intersecting dimensions of identity that shape relational experiences.

Culturally responsive practice is especially vital in relationships shaped by socio-cultural contexts such as early marriages, intergenerational households, and collectivist communities, where emotional expression and relational roles may differ significantly from Western norms (Khatibi et al., 2024; Tarkeshdooz et al., 2021). In such settings, EFCT's focus on individual emotional disclosure and GMCT's emphasis on direct communication may inadvertently conflict with cultural values that prioritize family loyalty, indirect conflict resolution, or collective decision-making. As Pederson (2011) notes, Western conflict resolution models overlook these cultural nuances, limiting both clients and therapists to familiar—but potentially ineffective—frameworks. By adopting a multicultural perspective, therapists can avoid pathologizing culturally normative behaviors and instead co-create interventions that honor the couple's worldview, values, and relational context (Kelly, 2024).

Best Practice: Clinicians should proactively explore the intersectionalities of each individual with the couple, assess culturally embedded relational expectations, identify sources of power imbalance or oppression, and consider differences in emotional socialization when applying EFCT and GMCT. This includes explicitly exploring how cultural beliefs, gender roles, family structures, and religious or spiritual frameworks influence the couple's approach to conflict, connection, and healing (Kelly, 2024). When appropriate, therapists may shift emphasis

toward extended family dynamics, adjust the language used around attachment needs, or reframe behavioral patterns through a culturally relevant lens.

Kelly (2024) emphasizes the importance of bridging differences in therapy across four key areas: worldviews, power, life context and experience, and the felt sense of distance in the room. These relational-cultural considerations are especially important in couples navigating historical oppression or systemic marginalization, where emotional safety may be more difficult to couples to access. While EFCT's emphasis on validation, emotional vulnerability, and therapist alliance offers a strong foundation, these principles must be paired with cultural humility and awareness to be truly effective (Kelly et al., 2014; Mendelson, 2024). Therapists must recognize that not all clients feel safe or comfortable expressing vulnerability in the same way, and that soft emotional expression may not be universally valued or accessible. Cultural responsiveness in EFCT and GMCT involves adapting emotional expression and communication styles and reframing vulnerability in ways that honor each client's unique background and lived experience (Kelly et al., 2014; Kelly, 2024). Though both EFCT and GMCT can be tailored to meet diverse client needs, doing so requires intentional training, reflection, and humility. Therapists cannot assume that clinical effectiveness translates across cultures without adaptation. As Kelly (2024) asserts, one of the most significant challenges in contemporary couples therapy is the assumption that therapists can identify and respond to diversity issues intuitively, without structured training. To offer truly inclusive care, practitioners must not only adapt interventions but also challenge the dominant norms embedded within them.

Recommendations for Future Practice and Ethical Considerations

While utilizing an integrative model of GMCT and EFCT offers a valuable framework for addressing conflict in romantic relationships, ethical practice necessitates an ongoing

awareness of each theory's limitations and the unique needs of each client system. As therapists apply structured approaches like the GMCT and EFCT, they must remain attentive to the ethical complexities inherent in couples' work. These include therapist neutrality, confidentiality, informed consent, and the potential reinforcement of power imbalances (BCACC, 2014; Gottlieb et al., 2008). Ethical care demands flexibility in how interventions are applied, ensuring they are attuned to each couple's dynamics, values, and cultural contexts (Cain et al., 2016; Weeks & Fife, 2014). Practitioners must also consider how structured interventions may unintentionally intensify distress or exacerbate relational inequities—particularly in cases involving emotional abuse, trauma, or coercive control (Johnson, 2009; Gottman & Gottman, 2013). For example, EFCT's emphasis on emotional vulnerability and the GMCT's focus on mutual influence may be inappropriate in high-conflict or unsafe dynamics without proper modification (Weeks & Fife, 2014). Informed consent must therefore be ongoing and include transparent discussion of therapeutic goals, risks, and the evolving nature of the process (BCACC, 2014).

A humanistic and relational ethics framework offers a guiding lens for navigating these challenges. By prioritizing autonomy, empathy, and the lived experiences of clients, therapists can better respond to the nuanced realities of couples in therapy (Truscott & Crook, 2021; Daei Jafari et al., 2020). By approaching couples work in this way, therapists reinforce the importance of client-centered care, cultural sensitivity, and a deep respect for the complexity of human relationships. To ensure ethical integrity, practitioners should engage in continuous self-reflection, seek supervision when needed, and remain aware of the legal and systemic dimensions of their work. Future practice should emphasize adaptability, cultural responsiveness, and ethical vigilance to support couples navigating conflict within increasingly diverse relational landscapes.

Recommendations for Future Research

Building on the findings and limitations explored in this research, the following recommendations highlight important directions for future study to further enhance the efficacy, accessibility, and applicability of couples conflict resolution interventions.

Expanding Cultural Considerations. Future research should prioritize the inclusion of more diverse populations to enhance the generalizability and cultural responsiveness of conflict resolution models. Much of the existing literature on both the GMCT and EFCT draws from Western, middle-class, predominantly white, and heterosexual samples (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Johnson, 2008). As a result, there are notable gaps in understanding how cultural values, identity, and relational norms influence conflict and its resolution. Future studies should explore how conflict manifests and is managed in relationships across different racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds, as well as within LGBTQIA+ communities and non-monogamous relationship structures. Incorporating culturally attuned frameworks and methodologies will strengthen the relevance of therapeutic approaches and help clinicians better meet the needs of diverse couples.

Integrated Model Development. Though the strengths of both the GMCT and EFCT as individual modalities for supporting couples in conflict resolution has been well supported, there is less research focused on the effectiveness of an integrated approach. Future research should build upon the existing research and explore the development and testing of an integrative conflict resolution model, potentially drawing from both behavioural and emotional frameworks. Future studies might examine how such integration affects treatment outcomes, particularly in terms of conflict resolution efficacy, emotional intimacy, and relational resilience. Additionally,

research should explore how this integration can be adapted across different levels of conflict severity, relational distress, and in diverse cultural contexts.

Addressing Societal Inequities. Finally, future research must move beyond the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics of couples to explicitly examine how societal and structural inequities influence relational conflict and its resolution. Power imbalances related to race, gender, class, ability, and other systemic factors often shape how couples experience conflict, communicate needs, and access therapeutic support (Guttmann-Steinmetz & Crowell, 2006). These broader sociocultural factors can either exacerbate or mitigate relational distress and must be accounted for in both research and practice (Kelly, 2024). Future studies should investigate how structural oppression and chronic stress intersect with relational dynamics and explore ways to adapt therapeutic interventions accordingly (Kelly, 2024; Mendelson, 2024). Addressing these systemic issues is critical for ensuring that conflict resolution strategies are equitable, inclusive, and responsive to the lived realities of all couples.

Conclusions

This capstone project explored the critical role of conflict resolution in romantic relationships, with a comparative analysis of two leading therapeutic frameworks: Gottman Method Couples Therapy (GMCT) and Emotion-Focused Couples Therapy (EFCT). The inevitability and complexity of conflict in intimate relationships significantly impact relational satisfaction, emotional well-being, and longevity, emphasizing the need for accessible, evidence-based tools to support couples in navigating conflict.

The aim of this study was threefold: to examine conflict resolution through the GMCT and EFCT; to identify their respective strengths and limitations; and to develop a set of integrative best practices, grounded in cultural competencies, for effective conflict resolution.

The GMCT offers practical, behaviour-focused interventions established from decades of empirical research, while EFCT emphasizes emotional awareness, regulation, and secure attachment. Together, these approaches provide a complementary framework for addressing relational distress.

This research highlights that conflict itself is not inherently harmful to romantic relationships; rather, it is the way conflict is managed that determines its impact. When addressed constructively, conflict can serve as a catalyst for emotional connection, intimacy, and mutual growth. The integration of behavioural strategies from the GMCT with the emotional attunement emphasized in EFCT offers a comprehensive and pragmatic approach to conflict resolution—one that attends to both interactional patterns and underlying emotional needs. As the field of couples therapy continues to expand in an increasingly diverse context, the ethical and cultural dimensions of conflict resolution must remain at the forefront of clinical practice. While both EFCT and the GMCT provide valuable frameworks for understanding and addressing conflict, their roots in Western, individualistic paradigms highlight the need for intentional cultural adaptation. Culturally responsive care involves more than applying established techniques—it requires therapists to explore how identity, power, and relational norms intersect with emotional expression and conflict styles. This includes attending to variables such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and cultural background, and reframing therapeutic interventions through the lived experiences of each couple. Ethical practice also requires vigilance around safety, therapist neutrality, and the risks of applying structured interventions inappropriately. A humanistic, client-centered lens can support this process by honoring the autonomy, values, and contextual realities of each couple. As such, culturally and ethically attuned practice is not a supplemental consideration but a foundational aspect of

effective conflict resolution and therapeutic care. The results of this capstone underscore the importance of tailoring interventions to the emotional and behavioural needs of each couple and invite future research to continue integrating diverse, culturally competent, and inclusive conflict resolution practices. Ultimately, this work contributes to the field of counselling by translating theory into practice—equipping therapists and couples alike with a richer, more flexible repertoire of strategies to navigate conflict with compassion, insight, and skill.

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