Conflict Communication in Early Indian Marriages: A Qualitative Study of Emotional

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Abstract: Despite a growing body of research on marital conflict and emotional processes, relatively little is known about how recently married individuals themselves experience and interpret emotional expression, restraint, and emotional safety as conflict unfolds in everyday marital life. Addressing this gap, the present qualitative study explores how individuals in the early years of marriage in India make meaning of marital conflict, with particular attention to emotional safety and authenticity. In-depth, semi-structured interviews are conducted with 24 individuals (12 heterosexual couples) married for one to three years. Data are analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings reveal four interrelated experiential patterns: (a) emotional calibration through negotiated expression and restraint, wherein individuals regulate emotional disclosure based on perceived relational vulnerability; (b) emotional safety as a situational and interaction-dependent condition shaping openness during conflict; (c) conflict communication as an accumulative emotional process, with unresolved disagreements leaving emotional residues that influence subsequent interactions; and (d) cultural interpretations of emotional restraint as adjustment, respect, and maturity, particularly within extended family contexts. Across themes, authenticity is reflected not in unfiltered emotional expression, but in participants' ongoing negotiation between remaining true to their emotional experience and maintaining relational harmony within culturally situated expectations. Together, these findings conceptualise marital conflict as a dynamic, emotionally mediated, and culturally embedded relational process, offering implications for theory, prevention, and clinical work with couples in early marriage.

Keywords: Marital conflict, early marriage, emotional safety, authenticity, reflexive thematic analysis

1. Introduction

1.1 Marital Relationships and Early Marriage

Romantic relationships, and marriage in particular, represent some of the most intimate and emotionally significant human bonds, shaping individuals psychological well-being

and relational functioning (Lavner et al., 2016). The early years of marriage constitute a critical developmental phase, marked by shifts in identity, role expectations, emotional closeness, and communication patterns as partners negotiate shared life together (Krokoff & Gottman, 1989; Markman et al., 2010). Research across cultural contexts consistently demonstrates that this initial stage of marriage is characterised by heightened relational vulnerability, with early interactional patterns often laying the foundation for long-term marital stability or distress (Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Markman et al., 2010). In the Indian context, reports of marital strain, dissatisfaction, and separation during the early years of marriage have increased, particularly among younger couples, underscoring the importance of examining relational processes during this formative period (IIPS & ICF, 2021).

1.2 Conflict in Marital Relationships

Conflict is an inevitable component of intimate relationships and plays a central role in shaping emotional closeness, trust, and relational continuity (Gottman & Silver, 2015). Indian research similarly identifies marital conflict as a significant determinant of relational well-being, linking persistent or poorly managed conflict with psychological distress, adverse health outcomes, and marital dissatisfaction (Singh et al., 2023). Recent Indian studies increasingly attend to emotional processes in marriage, particularly emotion regulation and emotional intelligence. Pandey and Choudhury (2024) report that attachment styles significantly predict interpersonal emotion regulation strategies among married couples, influencing how partners manage emotional stress and relational challenges. Sharma (2024) finds that emotional intelligence is associated with preferred conflict resolution styles, suggesting that emotional awareness and regulatory capacities shape how conflict is enacted within marriage. Importantly, conflict is not inherently detrimental. The ways in which partners experience, interpret, and respond to disagreement determine whether conflict contributes to relational growth or erosion (Kurdek, 1995b; Overall et al., 2013). This distinction is particularly salient during the early years of marriage, when partners are still learning to regulate emotions, communicate vulnerability, and make sense of one another's intentions.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Internal Relational Processes: Authenticity and Emotional Safety

Relationship research increasingly emphasises internal relational processes such as emotional regulation, openness, and perceived partner responsiveness in explaining marital functioning (Laurenceau et al., 1998; Overall et al., 2013).

Authenticity is commonly conceptualised as the capacity to express one's thoughts, emotions, and needs in ways that are congruent with one's internal experience and sense of self, without excessive fear of rejection or judgment (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Within close relationships, authenticity involves maintaining personal values and

emotional coherence while engaging with a partner (Lopez & Rice, 2006). Empirical evidence links greater authenticity in romantic relationships with higher levels of relational satisfaction, emotional intimacy, and psychological well-being (Brunell et al., 2010).

Much of the existing literature on authenticity relies on quantitative designs examining associations between predefined constructs and relational outcomes. While informative, such approaches offer limited insight into how authenticity is experienced, constrained, or negotiated within everyday relational interactions, particularly during emotionally charged situations such as conflict (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Communication theories, including relational dialectics, emphasise that close relationships involve ongoing negotiation between competing relational needs, such as openness versus protection and expression versus restraint (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Authentic self-expression is closely shaped by relational context, with emotionally responsive and non-threatening environments fostering greater openness and vulnerability (Hodges et al., 2013). Despite its relevance, authenticity remains underexamined within Indian marital research, particularly as a relationally negotiated and culturally situated experience.

Emotional safety is closely related to authenticity and is recognised as a foundational condition for vulnerability, openness, and constructive engagement within intimate relationships. Within attachment-based and clinical frameworks, emotional safety refers to the experience of being emotionally accepted, validated, and protected from psychological threat (Bowlby, 1969; Johnson, 2004, 2008).

Research on perceived partner responsiveness indicates that individuals are more likely to disclose emotions and engage authentically when they feel understood, cared for, and emotionally supported by their partner (Laurenceau et al., 1998; Reis et al., 2004).

During conflict interactions, emotionally safe relational environments characterised by responsiveness and reduced defensiveness facilitate constructive dialogue and relational repair (Overall et al., 2013).

2.2 Conflict Management and Cultural Context

Conflict management practices further shape how disagreements are experienced. Interactional patterns such as active listening, mutual compromise, and collaborative problem-solving are associated with supportive relational climates, whereas behaviours such as criticism, withdrawal, contempt, or avoidance are linked to heightened relational strain (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Kurdek, 1995a).

From this perspective, the way couples engage in conflict may influence whether disagreement is experienced as emotionally safe or threatening. However, most existing research examines these processes through predefined conflict styles and outcome measures, offering limited insight into couples lived experiences.

In India, early marriage often involves adjustment not only to a spouse but also to extended family systems and culturally embedded expectations surrounding harmony,

respect, and role-based conduct (Seth, 2011). These broader social and familial contexts likely shape how emotions, disagreement, and self-expression are managed within marital relationships.

Despite growing international interest in emotional safety, this construct has rarely been examined qualitatively or within the Indian marital context.

2.3 Gaps and Rationale for the Study

Existing literature highlights the importance of emotional regulation, communication, and conflict processes in marital relationships, including within India. However, several gaps remain:

(a) A paucity of qualitative research examining how recently married individuals experience and interpret emotional expression, restraint, and safety during conflict.

(b) Constructs such as authenticity and emotional safety are often conceptualised as individual traits rather than relationally negotiated processes embedded within cultural contexts.

(c) Early marriage remains an underexplored phase despite evidence that relational patterns established during this period have enduring consequences.

In response to these gaps, the present study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach to examine how recently married individuals in India experience and make meaning of marital conflict in everyday life. By foregrounding participants lived experiences, the study attends to how emotional expression, restraint, and emotional safety are negotiated within relational and cultural contexts.

2.4 Research Question

The study is guided by the following research question:

How do recently married individuals in India experience and make meaning of emotional expression, restraint, and emotional safety during marital conflict?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, exploratory design using reflexive thematic analysis to examine how recently married individuals in India experience and make meaning of marital conflict. The approach is grounded in an interpretive-constructivist paradigm, viewing meaning as co-constructed between participants and the researcher through narrative engagement (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Analysis is inductive, yet guided by conceptual sensitivity to relational, emotional, and cultural frameworks, including attachment-informed and emotion-focused perspectives. The aim is to capture the dynamic interplay of emotional expression, restraint, and relational negotiation as it unfolds in everyday marital life.

3.2 Participants

The sample comprises 24 individuals (12 heterosexual couples) aged 23–35 years, married for one to three years, residing in the Delhi National Capital Region. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, including both arranged (n = 8) and love marriages (n = 4). Fourteen participants live in extended family households, while ten reside in nuclear households. Inclusion criteria required current cohabitation and fluency in English or Hindi, while individuals with children, prior therapy for relationship issues, or serious health conditions affecting relational functioning were excluded.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews designed to elicit narratives of marital conflict, emotional expression, and communication patterns. Open-ended questions included: "Can you describe a recent disagreement with your spouse and how it unfolded?" and "How do you usually express or hold back your thoughts and emotions during conflicts?" Follow-up prompts allowed clarification and elaboration. Interviews were conducted individually, either in person or via secure online platforms, lasting 45–75 minutes. Recordings were transcribed verbatim, anonymized, and securely stored.

3.4 Researcher Reflexivity

The first author, a clinical psychologist, led data collection and analysis, with oversight from two senior researchers. Reflexive notes documented assumptions, emotional responses, and analytic decisions throughout the process. Collaborative review ensured themes remained grounded in participants accounts rather than shaped by researcher preconceptions.

3.5 Data Analysis

Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic approach. Transcripts were read repeatedly to develop familiarity, and initial codes were generated inductively from participants language and descriptions. Codes were then examined for patterns of shared meaning and grouped into broader categories. For example, segments describing "waiting before speaking" and "holding back emotions" were initially coded as delayed expression and later clustered under the broader theme of emotional calibration. These categories were iteratively reviewed and refined through constant comparison with the data to ensure coherence and accuracy. Themes were developed to represent distinct aspects of participants experiences of marital conflict, emotional expression, and relational dynamics, with attention to both convergence and variation across narratives. Recruitment continued until no substantively new experiential patterns emerged, ensuring data saturation.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the Institutional Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms and secure data storage.

4. Results

Thematic analysis of the individual interviews produced four interrelated findings that describe how recently married individuals experience and make meaning of marital conflict. Analysis reached thematic saturation, with later interviews largely reiterating previously identified patterns rather than introducing substantively new distinctions. The findings presented below reflect shared experiential qualities across participants' narratives, while acknowledging contextual variation. For each theme, the qualitative distinction is defined, an illustrative excerpt is presented, and analytic commentary demonstrates how the excerpt evidences the theme. Participant descriptors contextualize the excerpts and do not represent individual profiles.

4.1 Finding 1: Emotional Calibration through Negotiated Expression and Restraint

Qualitative Distinction:

This theme captures participants active regulation of emotional expression during conflict. Restraint is not described as avoidance or incapacity, but as a deliberate strategy informed by perceived relational risk, partner sensitivity, and anticipated consequences of disclosure.

Data Excerpt

A 29-year-old woman, married for two years and living in a nuclear household, described her approach during disagreements:

"I feel a lot inside, but I don't always say it immediately. If I speak in that moment, it can become very big. So, I wait, even though it is uncomfortable."

Analytic Comment

The participant distinguishes between feeling and expressing emotions. Her decision to "wait" reflects a calculated assessment of timing and impact, rather than withdrawal. The discomfort she reports indicates that restraint requires emotional effort, supporting the interpretation that early marital conflict involves ongoing negotiation between expression and restraint as relational risk management.

4.2 Finding 2: Emotional Safety as a Situational Condition for Openness

Qualitative Distinction:

This theme reflects emotional safety as **situational and interaction-dependent**, rather than a stable characteristic of the relationship. Participants reported feeling safe

in some conflicts but not others, depending on partner responsiveness, tone, and defensiveness.

Data Excerpt

A 32-year-old man, married for three years and living in an extended family household, explained:

"If she listens and doesn't interrupt or get defensive, then I can say what I actually feel. Otherwise, I just stop talking."

Analytic Comment

The participant's contrast between openness and withdrawal demonstrates real-time assessment of emotional safety. His willingness to express himself is contingent on specific interactional cues, illustrating that openness during conflict emerges from moment-to-moment emotional conditions rather than stable relational traits.

4.3 Finding 3: Conflict Communication as an Accumulative Emotional Process
Qualitative Distinction:

Participants described conflict as **emotionally accumulative**, with unresolved disagreements leaving residual effects that shape future interactions. Conflict is experienced as an ongoing emotional trajectory rather than isolated events.

Data Excerpt

A 27-year-old woman, married for one and a half years, reflected:

"We stop talking about it, but it stays in the background. Next time something happens, it comes back again, stronger."

Analytic Comment

This excerpt illustrates the persistence of unresolved conflict. The phrases "stays in the background" and "comes back again, stronger" reflect emotional accumulation. This supports the interpretation that conflict patterns influence not only immediate outcomes but also future emotional readiness, framing conflict as a temporally extended relational process.

4.4 Finding 4: Cultural Framing of Restraint as Adjustment and Maturity
Qualitative Distinction:

This theme highlights how emotional expression and restraint are interpreted through **cultural and familial meanings**, particularly in extended family contexts. Restraint is often framed as adjustment, respect, or maturity rather than emotional suppression.

Data Excerpt

A 30-year-old woman residing in an extended family household explained:

"You cannot talk freely when elders are around. You have to adjust. That doesn't mean you don't feel hurt, it just means you control it."

Analytic Comment

The participant differentiates internal emotional experience ("you don't feel hurt") from outward expression ("you control it"), framing restraint as situationally appropriate rather than inauthentic. This illustrates that cultural norms shape both conflict behaviour and participants evaluations of their emotional responses, challenging assumptions that equate openness with relational health.

4.5 Summary of Findings

Collectively, these themes suggest that marital conflict in early Indian marriages is experienced as a relational space requiring ongoing emotional calibration, situational assessment of safety, and culturally informed interpretations of expression and restraint. Conflict is not a fixed style or trait; rather, participants describe evolving interactional patterns shaped by emotional learning, relational history, and sociocultural context.

5. Discussion

This study examined how recently married individuals in India experience and make meaning of marital conflict during the early years of marriage. The findings reveal that conflict is not simply a series of disagreements but an emotionally charged relational space in which expression, restraint, and safety are actively negotiated. By focusing participants lived experiences, the study highlights how emotional behaviours are shaped by situational, relational, and cultural factors, rather than by fixed personality traits or predetermined conflict styles.

5.1 Negotiating Expression and Restraint as Relational Work

Participants frequently described **deliberate regulation of emotional expression**, actively distinguishing between internal feelings and outward communication. Delaying expression was not avoidance but a relational strategy to prevent escalation and preserve harmony. This aligns with research on protective buffering, wherein withholding distress can serve to maintain relational stability (Winterheld, 2017). Emotion regulation theories further suggest that such strategic timing can be adaptive when immediate expression might intensify conflict (Kalokerinos et al., 2022). Together, these findings underscore that early marital conflict involves a continuous balancing of emotional intensity and relational caution.

5.2 Emotional Safety as a Dynamic, Interactional Construct

Participants emphasized that emotional safety emerges in response to partners' real-time behaviours, such as listening attentively or maintaining a calm tone. Openness was contingent on perceived responsiveness, with withdrawal occurring when partners were defensive or inattentive. These experiences illustrate that emotional safety is moment-to-moment and co-constructed, rather than a stable relational trait (Laurenceau et al.,

1998; Overall et al., 2013). Even those inclined toward self-expression reported silencing themselves in response to partner cues, highlighting the relational and situational nature of perceived safety.

5.3 Conflict as an Accumulative Emotional Process

Conflict was experienced as cumulatively emotional, with unresolved disagreements leaving lingering effects that shaped future interactions. Participants described cycles of expression, restraint, and carryover influencing subsequent engagement. This processual perspective complements existing research on negative interaction patterns leaving enduring emotional traces (Gottman et al., 1998; Neff & Karney, 2005), emphasizing that conflict is temporally extended and relationally formative, rather than a series of discrete episodes.

5.4 Cultural and Familial Contexts Shaping Conflict Meaning

Emotional restraint was often interpreted as relational care, respect, or maturity, especially in joint family households. Cultural norms influenced when and how emotions could be expressed, with restraint framed as contextually appropriate rather than inauthentic. Gendered expectations further shaped these experiences, with women noting heightened pressures to modulate emotions and men negotiating personal expression within culturally prescribed norms (Choudhary & Singh, 2019; Gupta & Singh, 2018).

5.5 Integrative Interpretation

Overall, early marital conflict emerges as a dynamic, interactionally mediated, and culturally situated process. Emotional calibration and situational safety guide immediate behaviour, while accumulative emotional processes and cultural framing shape long-term relational trajectories. These findings illustrate that marital communication is not fixed but evolves through moment-to-moment decisions, partner responsiveness, and sociocultural expectations. By foregrounding lived experiences, the study contributes a process-oriented and culturally grounded understanding of emotional expression, restraint, and safety in early Indian marriages.

6. Clinical Implications

The findings of this study offer meaningful guidance for clinical and preventive work with recently married couples.

1. Emotional Calibration and Restraint (F1): Deliberate withholding or delayed expression during conflict should not be interpreted as disengagement but as a relationally strategic form of emotional regulation. Clinicians can provide psycho education to help couples distinguish between protective restraint and maladaptive

avoidance, fostering awareness of timing, intensity, and relational consequences of expression.

2. Enhancing Emotional Safety (F2): Therapists can promote emotionally safe interactional environments by cultivating partner responsiveness, including active listening, validation, and non-defensive engagement during disagreements. Supporting couples to recognize and reinforce cues of safety can increase openness and relational trust.

3. Addressing Accumulative Conflict (F3): Unresolved disagreements were reported to leave lingering emotional effects that shape future interactions. Structured interventionssuch as guided debriefs, reflection exercises, or emotion-focused therapy, can help couples process latent tensions and prevent escalation over time.

4. Cultural and Familial Context (F4): Emotional restraint often carries culturally embedded meanings of respect, maturity, and adjustment, particularly in collectivist and extended family systems. Therapeutic approaches should integrate these sociocultural norms, including gendered expectations and role dynamics, into intervention strategies.

Taken together, these recommendations suggest a process-oriented, culturally attuned approach, attentive to moment-to-moment interactions, cumulative emotional patterns, and sociocultural context. Such strategies may enhance adaptive communication, relational resilience, and marital satisfaction in early marriage. Aligned with qualitative epistemology, these insights are transferable rather than statistically generalizable, allowing practitioners to consider their applicability in similar relational and cultural contexts.

7. Contribution to the Literature

This study advances research on marital relationships and conflict in three principal ways:

- It provides a process-oriented understanding of conflict communication in early marriage, emphasizing how emotional expression, restraint, and safety are negotiated in real time, rather than relying on static conflict style categorizations.
- It conceptualizes authenticity and emotional safety as relationally co-constructed and culturally situated experiences, moving beyond trait-centered perspectives.
- By focusing on recently married individuals, a phase often underexplored in qualitative research, the study illuminates the lived negotiation of emotional regulation, openness, and relational safety, providing contextually grounded insights that inform both theory and clinical practice.

8. Limitations

This study reflects several limitations inherent in qualitative research. Participants were recruited from a single metropolitan region, potentially limiting transferability to other cultural or geographic contexts. Data relied on self-reported experiences, which may be subject to recall biases or social desirability effects. Despite these constraints, the study offers rich, in-depth insights into how newly married couples experience and interpret conflict, contributing valuable knowledge on emotional regulation, marital communication, and culturally embedded relational processes.

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