

frequency and negativity of family conflict would lead to similar reductions in relationship satisfaction and related psychological outcomes as conflict in the marital relationship. There is, however, almost no empirical evidence available supporting this assumption. Clearly, this is an area where future research will have to provide the answers.

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See also Abuse and Violence in Relationships; Conflict, Marital; Conflict Resolution; Divorce, Children and; Family Communication; Sibling Relationships

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CONFLICT, MARITAL

Marital conflict refers to overt opposition between spouses that is identified by the spouses as disagreement or a source of difficulty in the relationship. Couples complain about sources of conflict ranging from verbal and physical abusiveness to personal characteristics and behaviors. Perceived inequity in a couple's division of labor also is associated with marital conflict and with a tendency for the male to withdraw in response to conflict on this topic. Conflict over power is strongly related to marital dissatisfaction. Finally, conflicts relating to extramarital sex, problem drinking, and drug use have been shown to predict divorce.

Implications of Conflict

Conflict between spouses is among the most frequently investigated topics in marital research, and this research focus is understandable given its implications for mental, physical, and family health. Marital conflict has been linked to the onset of depressive symptoms, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, episodic drinking, binge drinking, out-of-home drinking, and male alcoholism. Although married individuals are healthier on average than the unmarried, marital conflict is associated with poorer health and with specific illnesses such as cancer, cardiac disease, and chronic pain perhaps because hostile behaviors during conflict are related to alterations in immunological, endocrine, and cardiovascular functioning. Physical aggression occurs in about 30 percent of married couples in the United States, leading to significant physical injury in about 10 percent of

couples. Marriage is also the most common interpersonal context for homicide, with more women being murdered by their partners than by anyone else. Finally, marital conflict is associated with important family outcomes, including poor parenting, poor adjustment of children, increased likelihood of parent-child conflict, and conflict between siblings. Marital conflicts that are frequent, intense, physical, unresolved, and child-related have a particularly negative influence on children.

Behavior During Conflict

Much of the research on marital conflict has been motivated by the goal of helping couples to deal effectively with conflict. This research has focused on the observation of discussions in the laboratory where couples are asked to try and resolve a problem in the relationship. Typically, couples also complete an inventory assessing marital quality (e.g., Dyadic Adjustment Scale, DAS) and those scoring below the cutoff for marital distress (DAS score <97) are compared to nondistressed couples. Using these methods, researchers have provided detailed information about how marital distressed and nondistressed couples behave during conflict.

During conflict, distressed couples make more negative statements and fewer positive statements than nondistressed couples. They also are more likely to respond with negative behavior (e.g., put downs, whining) when their partner behaves negatively. Indeed, this negative reciprocity, as it is called, is more consistent across different types of situations than is the amount of negative behavior, making it the most reliable overt signature of marital distress. Negative behavior is both more frequent and more frequently reciprocated in couples who engage in physical aggression than in other couples. Nonverbal behavior (e.g., posture, gaze aversion, voice tone), often used as an index of emotion, reflects marital satisfaction better than verbal behavior and, unlike verbal behavior, does not change when spouses are asked to try to fake good and bad-distressed marriages in the laboratory.

In some research studies, couples have been asked to keep daily records of positive and negative behaviors. Daily negative behaviors predict

variability in day-to-day marital satisfaction. That is, on days when there are more negative behaviors reported, marital satisfaction is lower. The association between behaviors recorded and marital satisfaction is stronger for distressed than for nondistressed spouses. Overall, the data from diary studies yield findings that are very similar to those obtained in the laboratory and described above. In both laboratory and diary studies, negative spouse behavior accounts for approximately 25 percent of the variability in the spouse's marital satisfaction. Among newlyweds, wives' reports of husbands' negative behaviors predict wives' satisfaction with the marriage 2 years later.

Although direct observation of conflict that takes the form of physical aggression (ranging from slapping the partner to use of a weapon) in marriage is not possible, studies have been conducted on interactional styles in violent and nonviolent marriages. Even when compared to distressed couples who are not violent, for example, the interactions of distressed violent couples are marked by higher levels of negative reciprocity, anger, and contempt. Alcohol use is associated with increased levels of physical aggression. Surprisingly, a few studies find that some form of physical aggression is present in a majority of newlywed marriages, and both physical and psychological aggression predicts divorce among newlyweds.

Patterns of Conflict Behavior

The sequences of behavior that occur during conflict are more predictable in distressed than in nondistressed marriages and are often dominated by chains of negative behavior that usually escalate and are difficult for the couple to stop. One of the greatest challenges for couples locked into negative exchanges is to find an adaptive way of exiting from such cycles. Couples usually try to get out of the negative exchanges with responses designed to repair the interaction (e.g., "You're not listening to me"), but these exchanges are delivered with negative affect (e.g., irritation, sadness). The partners tend to respond to the negative affect, thereby continuing the cycle. This cycle makes their interactions structured and predictable. In contrast, nondistressed couples appear to be more responsive

to attempts at repair and are thereby able to exit from negative exchanges early on. For example, a spouse may respond to “Wait, you’re not letting me finish” with “Sorry, please finish what you were saying.” Their interaction, therefore, appears more random and less predictable.

A second important conflict behavior pattern exhibited by marital distressed couples is the demand-withdraw pattern in which one spouse pressures the other with demands, complaints, and criticisms, while the partner withdraws with defensiveness and passive inaction. Specifically, behavior sequences in which the husband withdraws and the wife responds with hostility are more common in distressed than in satisfied couples. This finding is consistent with several studies showing that wives display more negative affect and behavior than husbands, who tend to not respond or to make statements suggestive of withdrawal, such as irrelevant comments. Disengagement or withdrawal is, in turn, related to later decreases in marital satisfaction. However, inferring reliable gender differences in demand-withdraw patterns would be premature, as recent research shows that the partner who withdraws varies according to which partner desires change. So, for example, when a man desires change, the woman is the one who tends to withdraw.

It is noteworthy that neither distressed nor non-distressed spouses reciprocate positive behavior. This finding challenges the widespread view that satisfied couples are characterized by a *quid pro quo* that involves the exchange of positive behaviors. Instead, they are better described as behaving according to a bank account principle to the extent that they expect positive behaviors to be reciprocated; the reciprocation occurs over the long term.

Does marital conflict studied in the artificial setting of the laboratory capture what happens in the real world outside the laboratory? Couples who participate in laboratory studies report that their interactions in the laboratory are reminiscent of their typical interactions. Research also shows that conflict behavior in the laboratory is similar to conflict behavior observed in the home; however, laboratory conflicts tend to be less severe, suggesting that research findings underestimate differences between distressed and nondistressed couples.

Is There a Simple Way to Summarize Research on Marital Conflict?

One way to summarize the extensive literature on marital conflict behavior is in terms of a simple ratio. For happy couples, the ratio of agreements or positive behaviors to disagreements or negative behaviors is greater than one, and for unhappy couples, it is less than one. John Gottman identifies this ratio more precisely for what he calls regulated and nonregulated couples. These couples were identified by calculating for each spouse the cumulative difference between positive and negative behaviors across the course of an interaction. Using the patterns in these difference scores, he distinguished regulated couples (increase in positive speaker behaviors relative to negative behaviors for both spouses over the course of conversation) from nonregulated couples (all other patterns). Regulated couples displayed positive problem-solving behaviors and positive affect approximately 5 times as often as negative problem-solving behaviors and negative affect, whereas the corresponding ratio was approximately 1:1 for nonregulated couples. This distinction is important because regulated couples, compared to nonregulated couples, were more satisfied in their marriage and were less likely to divorce.

In sum, marital satisfaction and marital stability does not reflect the absence of marital conflict but rather a relatively higher level of positive behavior compared to negative conflict behaviors. Concretely illustrating this point is the finding that the ratio of sexual intercourse to arguments, rather than their base rates, predicts marital satisfaction.

Intrapersonal Processes Related to Conflict

Beginning in the 1980s, recognition emerged that a purely behavioral account of conflict was limited and gave rise to the study of intrapersonal variables such as thoughts and feelings that might give rise to and maintain conflict behavior.

Thinking

In regard to interpretations or thoughts about conflict, researchers have focused on two questions presumed to arise regarding relationship

conflict: “Why is the conflict occurring?” and “What can I do to resolve the conflict?” The first question has to do with the attributions for the conflict, and the second deals with efficacy expectations or the extent to which a spouse believes that he or she can perform the behaviors necessary to resolve the conflict.

In regard to attributions, it is argued that explanations inferred for partner conflict behavior determine responses to the behavior. Certain kinds of explanations tend to promote conflict. For example, a spouse inferring that his or her partner’s critical comment was meant to be destructive (e.g., “She is trying to embarrass me”) rather than constructive (e.g., “She is trying to help me create a good impression”) is more likely to respond negatively to the comment. Consistent with this view, it is well established that conflict-promoting attributions are related to negative affects that occur during conflict interactions, especially anger and whining, rates of negative behavior, the effectiveness of problem-solving attempts, and the reciprocation of negative partner behavior. These relationships are stronger in distressed spouses than in nondistressed spouses. Finally, conflict-promoting attributions for marital problems have been associated with more negative conflict behavior over a 12-month period.

In a similar vein, a spouse’s belief that he or she can perform the behaviors necessary to resolve the conflict predicts his or her conflict behavior. When these efficacy expectations are stronger, higher rates of positive behavior during conflict are observed. Stronger efficacy expectations also predict use of higher-quality problem-solving approaches and observers’ rating of spouses’ satisfaction with conflict resolution attempts.

Feeling

A variety of indices of emotion have been examined in marital research including, as noted earlier, nonverbal behavior that is more powerful than verbal behavior in discriminating satisfied from dissatisfied couples. Other indices of emotion investigated include verbal reports and measures of autonomic nervous system activity such as heart rate. Online measurements of autonomic nervous system activity during the course of low and high conflict discussions show that physiological

interrelatedness (or physiological linkage) between partners occurs at the times when negative affect was reported as occurring and being reciprocated and is higher during high-conflict tasks compared to the low-conflict tasks. Higher physiological interrelatedness also is related to lower marital satisfaction.

From the foregoing, it is clear that intrapersonal processes such as thoughts and feelings are critical in providing a more complete account of marital conflict. Most recently, however, it has become clear that marital conflict can only be understood fully when considered in context, a realization that has emerged from the focus on longitudinal research in the past decade.

Contextualizing Conflict

Conflict behavior and conflict patterns seem to be relatively stable over time and to predict changes in marital satisfaction and marital stability. However, longitudinal findings show that conflict, taken by itself, accounts for a small portion of the variability in later marital outcomes, suggesting that other factors need to be considered in predicting these outcomes. This has led to an increasing interest in how conflict may vary according to contextual factors.

Stressors and Life Events

Diary studies illustrate that couples have more conflictual marital interactions at home on days of high general-life stress than on other days and at times and places where they are experiencing multiple competing demands; arguments at work are related to marital arguments, and the occurrence of stressful life events is associated with more conflictual problem-solving discussions. Ongoing stress, such as financial need or chronic illness, also is associated with marital conflict. Such considerations suggest that conflict may have little impact on a marriage in the absence of external stressors. There is a growing need to identify the stressors and life events that are and are not influential for different couples and for different stages of marriage, to investigate how these events influence conflict, and to clarify how individuals and marriages may inadvertently generate stressful events.

Spousal Support and Affectional Expression

The significance of conflict for marital outcomes also needs to be considered in relation to the occurrence of spouse support and emotional expression. Supportive spouse behaviors are only weakly related to the conflict behaviors observed during the problem-solving discussions used to study marital conflict, but they appear to play an important role in moderating the impact of conflict. The amount of supportive behavior partners exhibit predicts later marital stress (i.e., more supportive behavior correlates with less future marital stress), independently of conflict behavior. When support is low, there is an increased risk that poor skills in dealing with conflict will lead to later marital deterioration. Finally, in the context of high levels of affectional expression between spouses (e.g., saying, "I love you," and expressing physical affection outside of intercourse), the inverse relationship between conflict behavior and marital satisfaction decreases. In regard to conflict patterns, the demand-withdraw pattern is unrelated to marital satisfaction in the context of high affectional expression, but they are highly related in the context of average or low affectional expression. It is therefore apparent that attention to positive spouse behavior is essential for a correct characterization of the role of conflict in marital outcomes.

Spousal Background and Characteristics

Although initially ignored in research on marital conflict, there is increasing evidence that the background and characteristics of individual spouses play an important role in regard to marital conflict. The importance of spouses' backgrounds is illustrated by the finding that divorce is transmitted across generations. Divorce rates are higher for offspring whose parents report low marital conflict prior to the divorce and for offspring who behave in hostile, domineering, and critical ways compared to offspring who do not behave in this manner. Thus, while parental divorce places offspring at risk for marital conflict and divorce, such outcomes are not inevitable.

An individual characteristic that is proving to be particularly informative for understanding marital conflict comes from recent research on attachment,

which aims to address questions about how the experience of relationships early in life affects interpersonal functioning in adulthood. For example, spouses who tend to feel secure in relationships tend to compromise and to take into account both their own and their partner's interests during problem-solving interactions, thus showing low conflict; those who tend to feel anxious or ambivalent in relationships show a greater tendency to oblige their partner and focus on relationship maintenance thereby showing less conflict than do those who tend to avoid intimacy in relationships. And spouses who are preoccupied with being completely emotionally intimate in relationships show an elevated level of marital conflict after an involuntary, brief separation from the partner.

Of particular interest for understanding negative reciprocity are the findings that greater commitment is associated with more constructive, accommodative responses to a partner's negative behavior and that the dispositional tendency to forgive is a predictor of spouses' responses to their partners' transgressions. In other words, spouses who have a greater tendency to forgive are less likely to avoid the partner or to retaliate in kind following a transgression by the partner. Forgiving may be a means of exiting from negative reciprocity as it is associated with later conflict resolution. Indeed, spouses themselves acknowledge that the capacity to seek and grant forgiveness is one of the most important factors contributing to marital longevity and satisfaction. Also relevant to understanding conflict is sanctification, a process whereby the marriage is perceived as having divine character and significance (e.g., "God is present in my marriage" and "My marriage is sacred"). The degree to which a spouse engages in this process is related to greater collaboration in resolving disagreements and less conflict. Importantly, this association is independent of degree of religiosity.

Conclusion

Guided by the view that marital distress results from ineffective handling of conflict, a substantial body of research has emerged on conflict behavior in marriage. Over time, this work was expanded to include intrapersonal processes related to conflict. With the recent attempt to place conflict in context,

there is an emerging consensus that its role in marriage needs to be reconsidered. Also, there is increasing recognition that marital conflict may be more complex than initially thought and that it needs to be accompanied by an understanding of marital strengths if researchers are to gain a more complete understanding of the marital relationship.

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See also Attribution Processes in Relationships; Conflict Resolution; Couple Therapy; Marital Satisfaction, Assessment of; Marital Satisfaction and Quality

Further Readings

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or feeling. When there is conflict between two people, they may argue, calmly discuss the issue, or avoid the topic altogether. Conflict is a key force that produces change in relationships, for better or worse, and therefore, researchers assess conflict to learn how relationships work. When two people are able to resolve conflict, they often make changes to accommodate each other, gain a better understanding of each other, and experience an increased level of closeness or friendship. When two people fail to resolve conflict, their relationship is likely to deteriorate. This entry describes how researchers assess conflict, the different components of conflict that are typically assessed, and important issues to consider regarding the validity of conflict assessment.

Ways of Assessing Conflict

There are several factors that make assessing conflict a challenge. Although conflict is a normal component of almost any interpersonal relationship, most people do not experience conflict on a daily basis, and when conflict does occur, people often try to keep it hidden from public observation. Therefore, it is especially difficult for researchers to directly observe conflict in a natural environment. Instead, researchers most typically assess conflict by making observations in a structured laboratory setting or by administering questionnaires that ask people to provide a self-report description of their conflict experiences.

Research with married couples has made extensive use of structured laboratory settings to assess conflict, and this method can be easily adapted to assess conflict in a wide variety of relationships. In the typical protocol, a couple visits a research laboratory where they are asked to identify an area of conflict. Partners may be separated and individually asked to describe a recent conflict episode, or they may be given a list and asked to identify issues that cause conflict in their relationship, or a researcher may interview the couple together and identify a common area of conflict. Using one of these techniques, a single area of conflict is selected as a topic for discussion, and the couple is then left alone in a room with instructions to attempt to resolve the issue. Typically, the couple is given 10 to 15 minutes for their conversation, and sometimes,

CONFLICT MEASUREMENT AND ASSESSMENT

It is common for friends, lovers, and family members to experience conflict from time to time. In an interpersonal relationship, conflict is defined as a situation in which at least one partner dislikes how the other appears to be behaving, thinking,