

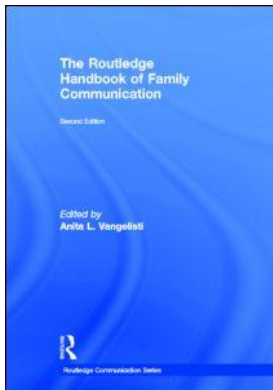
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### **Conflict and Relational Quality in Families**

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# Conflict and Relational Quality in Families

*Alan L. Sillars and Daniel J. Canary*

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Conflict is one of the most studied aspects of family relationships (Bradbury, Rogge, & Lawrence, 2001), with the dominant concern being relational quality (i.e., satisfaction, stability, adaptability, nurturance). Although the amount or severity of conflict is one marker of relational quality, many authors foreground the response to conflict (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995). Charny (1980) exemplifies this spirit by declaring that: “what really becomes important in family life is not the ability to stay out of trouble but to get out of trouble, that is, the ability to process conflicts and dilemmas and unfairness constructively” (p. 43). Such a perspective highlights communication processes; communication being the principal means by which conflicts are managed to the benefit or detriment of families.

While undoubtedly central, the role of communication in family conflict is complex. As this review illustrates, a number of factors influence how communication is used, what it signifies, and how family members respond. Thus, family conflict communication should not be reduced to a dichotomy between constructive and destructive forms. The impacts of communication on family well-being do not rest so much on messages or message patterns in isolation but on the interplay of messages, relational contexts, and interpretive frameworks.

In the first section of the chapter, we examine communicative acts and patterns and summarize research on relational impacts of communication. Next, we highlight contextual factors that shape communication and moderate associations with relational quality. Last, the review considers interpretive processes that affect the meaning and outcomes of communication.

## **Conceptualizing Conflict Communication**

### *Typology of Communicative Acts*

Communication during family conflict can be described at the level of broad styles (e.g., to compete or compromise) or specific acts and patterns (e.g., criticism or negative reciprocity). Two dimensions identified by van de Vliert and Euwema (1994)—activeness and agreeableness—can organize both general styles and most communicative acts identified

by family researchers. We re-conceptualize these dimensions as qualities of messages, namely: (1) directness (i.e., engagement versus avoidance), and (2) valence (i.e., positive/negative, or face-attacking versus face-honoring moves; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). By crossing the two dimensions, van de Vliert and Euwema (1994) derived four overarching conflict strategies: negotiation, nonconfrontation, direct fighting, and indirect fighting. Using the same categories, Table 21.1 synthesizes communicative codes from several observational coding schemes for couple conflict.

Table 21.1 Communication Codes in Observational Marital Research

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*Negotiation: Direct and Face Honoring*

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*Accept Responsibility* (Weiss, 1993)

(statement that “I” or “we” are responsible for the problem)

*Approve* (Weiss, 1993)

Statement that favors couple’s or partner’s attributions, actions, or statement

*Analytic Remarks* (Sillars, 1986)

Descriptive Statements; Disclosive Statements; Qualifying Statements; Soliciting Disclosure; Soliciting Criticism

*Cognitive Acts* (Raush et al., 1974)

Opening the issue/probe; Seeking information; Giving information; Suggesting course of action; Giving reasons; Exploring consequences

*Conciliatory Remarks* (Sillars, 1986)

Supportive remarks; Concessions; Acceptance of responsibility

*Mindreading/Positive* (Gottman, 1979)

Beliefs about the partner’s internal states, said with positive or neutral effect

*Problem Description* (Weiss, 1993)

*Problem-solving/Information Exchange* (Gottman, 1979)

*Propose Change* (Weiss, 1993)

Compromise; Negative Solution (proposal for termination or decrease of behavior);

Positive Solution (proposal for initiation or increase of behavior)

*Reconciling Acts* (Raush et al., 1974)

Accepting blame or responsibility; Showing concern for other’s feelings; Seeking reassurance; Attempting to make-up; Offering help or reassurance

*Resolving Acts* (Raush et al., 1974)

Accepting the other’s plans, ideas, feelings; Introduce compromise; Offer to collaborate in planning

*Summarizing Self/Summarizing Other* (Gottman, 1979)

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*Direct Fighting: Direct and Face Attacking*

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*Blame* (Weiss, 1993)

Criticize; Mindread Negative (statement assuming a negative mindset or motivation of the partner); Put Down; Threat; Hostile or Negative Voice Tone

*Coercive Acts/Personal Attacks* (Raush et al., 1974)

Using external power; Commanding; Demanding compensation; Inducing guilt or attacking other’s motives; Disparaging the other; Threatening the other

*Confrontative Remarks* (Sillars, 1986)

Personal Criticism; Rejection; Hostile Imperatives; Presumptive Remarks

*Denying validity of other’s arguments* (Raush et al., 1974)

*Interrupt* (Weiss, 1993)

*Mindreading/Negative* (Gottman, 1979)

Beliefs about the partner’s internal states, said with negative effect

*Rejecting Acts* (Raush et al., 1974)

Recognizing other’s motive as a strategy or calling the other’s bluff; Rejection

Table 21.1 (continued)

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*Nonconfrontation: Indirect and Face Honoring*

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*Changing the Subject* (Raush et al., 1974)  
*Denial and Equivocation* (Sillars, 1986)  
 Direct or Implicit Denial (that a conflict exists); Evasive Remarks (failure to acknowledge or deny the presence of a conflict following a prompt)  
*Disengage* (Weiss, 1993)  
 Expressing the desire not to talk about an issue  
*Off Topic* (Weiss, 1993)  
*Topic Management* (Sillars, 1986)  
 Topic Shifts (terminating discussion before it has reached natural completion)  
 Topic Avoidance (statements that explicitly avoid or limit discussion)

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*Indirect Fighting: Indirect and Face Attacking*

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*Avoiding Blame or Responsibility* (Raush et al., 1974)  
*Denial of Responsibility* (Sillars, 1986)  
*Dysphoric Affect* (Weiss, 1993)  
 Affect communicating depression, sadness, self-complaint, or whiny voice  
*Excuse* (Weiss, 1993)  
*Giving up or Leaving the Field* (Rausch et al., 1974)  
*Hostile Jokes and Questions* (Sillars, 1986)  
*Turn Off* (Weiss, 1993)  
*Withdrawal* (Weiss, 1993)

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*Polysemous: Variable Meanings*

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*Agreement/Disagreement* (Gottman, 1979; Rausch et al., 1974; Weiss, 1993)  
*Appealing Acts* (Raush et al., 1974)  
 Appeals to fairness; Appeals to other's motives; Offering something else to win one's goal; Appealing to other's love; Pleading or coaxing  
*Communication Talk* (Gottman, 1979)  
 Communication about communication  
*Compliance/Non-compliance* (Gottman, 1979; Weiss, 1993)  
*Expressing Feelings about a Problem* (Gottman, 1979)  
*Facilitation* (Weiss, 1993)  
 Assent (listener states "yeah," nods head); Humor (lighthearted, not sarcasm); Metacommunication (statements that direct the flow of conversation); Question; Paraphrase/Reflection  
*Friendly Joking* (Sillars, 1986)  
*Noncommittal Remarks* (Sillars, 1986)  
 Noncommittal Statements; Noncommittal Questions; Abstract Remarks; Procedural Remarks

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In the first edition of this anthology, all codes were subsumed under van de Vliert and Euwema's four categories. However, some acts, referred to here as *polysemous*, have variable meaning and may fit multiple categories. For example, verbal metacommunication (talk about communication) can serve negotiation by clarifying ground rules and areas of misunderstanding. Yet, preoccupation with metacommunication may indicate relationship trouble (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). In Gottman's (1979) research, distressed married couples became mired in extended chains of negative metacommunication, in contrast to the brief and intermittent metacommunicative exchanges of nondistressed

couples. Similarly, joking can act as nonconfrontation that deflects attention from an issue, a form of indirect fighting, or a way to build consensus and reduce negative effect (Alberts, 1990).

### *Conflict Patterns*

People do not simply choose one type of message over others; instead, they construct messages in situ while reacting to others. Most research in this regard involves the sequential structure of conflict—how one message elicits an immediate response.

An over-riding tendency is to respond in kind; for example, when one person speaks in a confrontational fashion, odds increase of the next speaker doing likewise (Sillars & Wilmot, 1994). When responses are highly predictable, the interaction contains a “static” quality with recurring arguments or escalating denial (Raush, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974). This is reflected, for example, in negative reciprocity; a pattern characteristic of distressed couples (see Caughlin, Vangelisti, & Mikucki-Enyart, in press). Negative reciprocity may occur symmetrically, as in “cross-complaining” (complaint/counter-complaint; Gottman, 1979) and “squabbling” (disagreement followed by disagreement; Schaap, Buunk, & Kerkstra, 1988), or asymmetrically, as in attack–defend. In interactional systems characterized by high negative reciprocity, conversations may begin positively but become progressively more negative after the first provocation, reflected in extended chains of reciprocal negative messages. That is, negativity represents an “absorbing state” (Gottman, 1994). In contrast, family systems characterized by greater variety control escalation by counterbalancing confrontation with questions, jokes, or brief avoidance before re-engaging an issue (Sillars & Wilmot, 1994).

A common nonreciprocal pattern is the “demand–withdraw” pattern, whereby one person attempts to discuss an issue and the other person avoids (see Eldridge & Christensen, 2002). Demand–withdraw patterns predict marital dissatisfaction beyond overall negativity in the home, although this association weakens when partners show affection (Caughlin & Huston, 2002).

In marriage, wife–demand/husband–withdraw is more common than the reverse, one explanation being inequity in housework and child care; that is, women have greater reason to seek change and men to maintain the status quo (e.g., Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993). Other interpretations concern biological differences in reactivity to stress (i.e., males withdraw to contain emotional flooding; Gottman, 1994) and gender socialization; for instance, girls often engage in interactive forms of play where relational talk is formulated; thus, better preparing them to address conflict in adult relationships (Gottman & Carrere, 1994). However, sex differences in demand–withdraw roles often reverse, especially when discussion involves husbands’ complaints (Eldridge & Christensen, 2002).

Caughlin and Ramey (2005) examined demand–withdraw in parent–adolescent relationships, finding parallels to marital research. Although parent–demand/adolescent–withdraw was more common than the reverse, there was again a shift in roles depending on whose complaint was discussed. Caughlin and Malis (2004) found lower adolescent satisfaction when adolescents demanded and parents withdrew; whereas parental dissatisfaction related to both adolescent and parent demand–withdraw patterns. These findings held true even after controlling for the total amount of conflict.

### *Serial Arguments*

Roloff and Johnson (2002) note that many disputes end without resolution—people leave the scene, refuse to discuss an issue further, or simply stop arguing. Thus, the same issue

may become the basis for *serial arguments*. Serial arguments consist of clusters of episodes, with clusters dispersed over longer periods. Serial arguments are kept alive and episodes linked through rumination (Rolloff & Johnson, 2002), including imagined dialogue in which individuals replay past arguments and rehearse future ones (Honeycutt, 2010). Thus, previous arguments may resume with little apparent interruption, despite the time elapsed between episodes.

Relational quality relates to the frequency of argumentative episodes; however, the more crucial factor seems to be whether individuals perceive progress in resolving issues (Miller, Rolloff, & Malis, 2007). Partners in intimate relationships become pessimistic about resolvability when confrontations involve cross-complaining and demand-withdraw, the sequence is highly predictable, they dwell on what was said, and they cope by avoiding one another later (Johnson & Rolloff, 1998). Conversely, when individuals perceive constructive communication during episodes, they retain optimism that issues can be resolved (Bevan, Finan, & Kaminsky, 2008; Johnson & Rolloff, 1998). At the same time, Miller et al. (2007) note that some conflicts are not resolvable and, in such cases, optimism about resolution can simply lock partners into prolonged conflict.

## Relational Impacts of Family Conflict Communication

### *Directness of Communication*

Classic conflict theorists emphasize its positive functions, for example, in preventing stagnation, releasing tension, and airing and solving problems (Coser, 1956; Deutsch, 1973). Conversely, in social systems that suppress conflict, hostilities accumulate and become more threatening to the system (Coser, 1956). When applied to families, this suggests the importance of establishing a communication environment that tolerates expression of conflict and encourages direct negotiation of grievances. At the same time, the need to provide an outlet for expression is balanced by need for discretion. Direct speech acts compound the face-threats associated with conflict and risk retaliatory attacks on speaker identity (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). The style of speaking labeled *negotiation* anticipates this problem through direct but face-honoring communication. Yet, identity issues are so salient in conflict that even overtly self-effacing comments are sometimes construed as indirect criticism (see the later section on communicative attributions/frames). Further, as noted above, recurring negotiation of irresolvable issues can evolve into ritualized serial argument. Thus, some conflicts might be better managed by conciliation or acceptance (Miller et al., 2007).

Studies generally find negative associations between conflict avoidance and couple or family satisfaction (Caughlin et al., in press). However, most studies use self-report measures of conflict style. It is not clear how accurately individuals can report avoidance; although Roberts (2000) found only a weak correlation between reported and observed avoidance for wives and a null association for husbands. We suspect that people disengage from conflict in numerous routine ways with only partial awareness. As such, reported avoidance may be especially affected by implicit relationship theories (e.g., happy couples do not avoid).

Observational studies of avoidance are inconsistent but generally do not support a strong link between avoidance and concurrent or prospective relationship satisfaction (see Roberts, 2000). Moreover, some research suggests that avoidance can take different forms with different relational meanings. Raush et al. (1974), for example, noted that

spouses who avoided confrontation often colluded by supporting one another's denial and externalization of conflict. Moreover, this collusion had different consequences depending on the purpose of avoidance:

The conjoint defensive contract usually fails when avoidance is used for coping with an existent conflict. That is, when each partner denies any interpersonal implications of his own or his partner's behavior, yet by his actions implies fault in the other, the interpersonal tension mounts. And since the underlying interpersonal issue is avoided, there can be no genuine mutually satisfactory resolution.

(pp. 79–80)

On the other hand, when avoidance occurred in a context of clearly differentiated roles, a mutual bond of affection, and congruous intra-psychoic styles (e.g., a de-emphasis of feeling and introspection), then avoidance seemed to promote compatibility. Similarly, Gottman (1994) identified one type of happily married couple, called "conflict minimizers," who downplayed the importance of disagreements, engaged in little verbal give and take, and combined avoidance with positive affection.

One way to view these observations is that avoidance has different relational consequences when used to maintain positive and affectionate relationships than when it represents sullen withdrawal or refusal to address complaints. Smith, Vivian, and O'Leary (1990) found that disengagement during problem-solving was associated with decreased satisfaction over a 30-month period, except when disengagement was coupled with positivity, in which case disengagement predicted increased satisfaction. Similarly, Roberts (2000) found that reported avoidance and angry withdrawal correlated with concurrent and prospective satisfaction of both husbands and wives, but most of these associations were nonsignificant after controlling for hostility. Thus, much of the apparent impact of conflict avoidance may reflect message valence, not directness.

The meaning and impact of conflict avoidance also rest on the nature of the conflict issue. People sometimes use avoidance as a response to problems considered unimportant; at other times they cordon off issues that are irresolvable or too costly to confront (Rolloff & Ifert, 2000). In yet other cases, avoidance may represent self-defense (e.g., a "chilling effect") where partners withhold information because the other person is seen as more powerful and/or potentially aggressive (Solomon, Knobloch, & Fitzpatrick, 2004).

Several other factors moderate relational impacts of avoidance (see Rolloff & Ifert, 2000). Caughlin and Afifi (2004) considered how boundaries of privacy alter the effects of avoidance. They found that desire for privacy, reasons for avoidance (e.g., protection of the relationship), and assessments of partner communication competence moderated links between avoidance and satisfaction in relationships of parents and adult children. Afifi, McManus, Steuber, and Coho (2009) found that sex differences interacted with avoidance to affect relational satisfaction. For example, men's satisfaction was not linked to their partner's avoidance, whereas women's satisfaction was negatively affected by partner avoidance.

### *Message Valence*

Numerous studies confirm the ubiquitous presence of negative communication in mal-adjusted couples/families and greater incidence of supportive messages in well-adjusted relationships (see Caughlin et al., in press; Cummings & Patrick, 2010; Fincham & Beach,

1999; Gottman, 1994). The research includes a number of longitudinal studies, some reporting that negative communication in premarital and newlywed phases predicts divorce and marital distress over a decade later (Birditt, Brown, Orbuch, & McIlvane, 2010; Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004). Negativity is a stronger predictor of marital satisfaction and stability than positivity (Caughlin et al., in press; Gottman, 1994). However, positivity acts as a buffer to moderate impacts of negative conflict on satisfaction over time (Huston & Chorost, 1994; M. D. Johnson et al., 2005). Thus, couples who have intense, negative arguments may still have satisfying marriages if they are otherwise affectionate, as in the case of Gottman's (1994) "volatile" couples.

Although many studies support a link between message valence and relational quality, certain caveats apply. First, ostensibly "positive" communication can serve negative functions and vice versa, as when positive messages reproduce maladaptive accommodation or negative confrontation brings needed attention to problems. Arguing from a dialectical perspective, Erbert and Duck (1997) critique the tendency to search for ideal patterns of communication defined by their association with satisfaction. Fluctuating cycles involving negative/positive communication and satisfaction/dissatisfaction constitute normal adaptation to relational polarities and contradictions, such as the simultaneous need for connection/autonomy and stability/change (Ebert & Duck, 1997).

Longitudinal studies illustrate the potential for negative messages to have paradoxical effects. Most research supports the expected connection between negativity early in marriage and later dissatisfaction and divorce; however, several other studies report "reversal" effects, whereby negativity is associated with initial dissatisfaction but stable or improved satisfaction over time (see Fincham & Beach, 1999; McNulty & Russell, 2010). Some authors express skepticism about the interpretation of reversal effects (Caughlin et al., in press; Fincham & Beach, 1999); others suggest that negative confrontation motivates partners to make constructive changes (Gottman, 1994; McNulty & Russell, 2010). Adding further complexity, McNulty and Russell (2010) found evidence that reversal effects depend on the severity of couple problems. When couples had only minor problems initially, then negative messages (e.g., blame, rejection) were associated with decreased satisfaction later, suggesting that negative communication made minor problems worse. However, the same negative messages were associated with increased satisfaction in relationships facing more serious problems. Thus, McNulty and Russell argue that "behaviors that feel bad temporarily may demonstrate long-term benefits to the relationship if they help couples resolve important problems" (p. 588).

Second, the causal framework typically employed in family research assumes that negative communication causes dissatisfaction and instability; yet the research cannot rule out the possibility that existing incompatibilities cause negativity rather than the reverse (Bradbury, et al., 2001; Caughlin et al., in press). Likewise, recollections of conflict in positive terms can reflect a satisfying relational environment. Most likely, communication and satisfaction are mutually causal. Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, and Callan (1994) found that communication predicted satisfaction during the initial years of marriage; however, initial satisfaction also predicted later communication. Spouses high in satisfaction after two years were less likely to manipulate the partner, avoid dealing with conflict, behave coercively, or enact demand-withdraw patterns.

Third, it is not yet apparent that specific forms of negative/positive communication have unique effects as some authors claim. Gottman (1994, p. 45) acknowledges hearing criticism that the general connection between negativity and marital dissatisfaction is obvious and uninteresting. In response, Gottman (pp. 64–65) argues that the results are



not trivial when one examines specific codes and code sequences associated with dissatisfaction. However, this assumes that the same key predictors will emerge consistently across independent samples, which has not been the case. Gottman, Coan, Carrere, and Swanson (1998) replicated some elements of Gottman's (1994) "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse"—the observation that specific negative acts (complaint/criticism, defensiveness, contempt, and stonewalling) contribute to a process cascade that portends declining satisfaction and eventual marital break-up. However, Gottman et al. (1998) based their analysis on a revised set of "horsemen" (defensiveness, contempt, and belligerence) and milder forms of negativity also predicted divorce in this study (among wives). Negative reciprocity and anger, which predicted marital outcomes in other studies (see Bradbury et al., 2001; Caughlin et al., in press; Gottman et al., 1998), were not related to satisfaction or stability in Gottman et al. (1998).

Thus, *some* forms of negativity generally predict relational outcomes in a given study; intense and prolonged negativity being more problematic than occasional negativity balanced by positive interactions (Gottman, 1994). However, there is no compelling evidence that certain ways of being negative are uniquely toxic. Moreover, it can be misleading to speak of the effects of messages (either their valence or directness) independent of relational context that contributes to the meaning of communication.

### The Relational Context of Family Conflict

Relational context affects conflict in a number of ways (Bradbury & Fincham, 1991). Along with the contextual moderators noted above (e.g., reasons for avoidance, resolvability of issues, overall affection), we highlight three factors featured in communication research: relational standards, cultural differences, and family stages.

#### *Relational Standards*

Relational standards reference expected and preferred patterns of relating; for example, how much spouses believe that they should maintain personal boundaries or share decisions (Gordon, Baucom, Epstein, Burnett, & Rankin, 1999) and the extent to which family members believe in showing politeness or addressing problems openly (Caughlin, 2003). Relational standards are a source of conflict and dissatisfaction when individually held ideals do not match perceived reality (Caughlin, 2003) or are not shared (Acitelli, Kenny, & Weiner, 2001). It follows that individuals with extreme ideals are primed for disappointment and conflict. "Unrealistic" expectations for intimate relationships (e.g., disagreements are inherently destructive, mindreading is expected) are linked to instability, dissatisfaction, and negative communication in married and cohabiting, same sex couples (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Kurdek, 1991).

In addition to being a potential source of conflict, relational standards shape the response to conflict. For example, parents, adolescents, and young adults from families who prioritize frequent and open communication (i.e., *conversation oriented* families) report direct conflict styles, especially when high conversation orientation is combined with low conformity (i.e., the *pluralistic* family type). Individuals report more avoidance and accommodation in conformity oriented families (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 1997; Shearman & Dumlao, 2008; Zhang, 2007). Similarly, couple conflict is influenced by implicit relationship models (Fitzpatrick, 1988). *Traditional* couples interact in a manner that reflects their emphasis on openness balanced with social restraint; for example, they discuss relationship

expectations and enact “validation” and “contract” sequences (e.g., husband offers information, wife agrees) (Fitzpatrick, 1988). Traditional couples endorse conflict rules more than other couples (e.g., “listen to partner,” “don’t get angry”), reflecting strong norms for what is permissible and appropriate (Honeycutt, Woods, & Fontenot, 1993). *Independents* stress verbal negotiation and thus, confront one another and share information. Wanting to remain autonomous, *separates* typically use indirect messages and withhold complaints (Solomon et al., 2004) but confront one another once complaints are introduced (Fitzpatrick, 1988).

Some research indicates that relational standards moderate connections between communication and relationship satisfaction. Gordon et al. (1999) found stronger correlations between communication and adjustment among wives who prioritized intimate and equitable communication. Caughlin (2003) found a positive correlation between “maintenance communication” (e.g., disclosure, discussion of problems) and family satisfaction among young adults who endorsed relationship-focused family standards (e.g., openness); however, the correlation reversed directions among those who did not endorse such standards. Sillars, Pike, Jones, and Redmon (1983) found that satisfied *independent* couples discussed conflicts directly; however, satisfied *separates* were avoidant and restrained in their communication.

The above studies suggest that family members communicate about conflict more directly when relational standards prioritize open communication; moreover, satisfaction reflects the congruence of perceived or actual communication with preferred patterns of relating. The same observations apply when relational standards are culturally based.

### Culture

U.S. based family research typically operates from an “open-affectionate” relationship ideal that prioritizes directness (Matsunaga & Imahori 2009). In contrast, many Japanese young adults endorse a “high-context” cluster of family standards (e.g., mindreading, avoidance, child obedience), which relates to their use of avoidance and conciliation in family conflicts (Matsunaga & Imahori 2009). As Matsunaga and Imahori observe, some high context family standards (e.g., mindreading) are among the beliefs characterized as unrealistic and dysfunctional in U.S. samples (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982).

Much of the culturally based family conflict research distinguishes individualist and collectivist patterns of conflict. Although a useful heuristic for organizing broad differences, this distinction masks complexity for a number of reasons, some of which we note below. Generally speaking, individualists are expected to express family conflict more openly than collectivists due to greater emphasis on expressing and defending self versus maintaining harmonious relations and honoring the face concerns of others (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). In collectivist, high power distance cultures (i.e., *vertical collectivism*), there are especially strong pressures to avoid face-threatening communication (Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Chew-Sanchez, Harris, Wilcox, & Stumpf, 2003). However, these norms seem to regulate parent–child communication to a greater extent than couple communication. In fact, belief in vertical collectivism was associated with greater serial arguing among Malagasy couples (Radanielina-Hita, 2010). Radanielina-Hita reasons that, in marriage, collectivist concerns for preserving face may be overridden by the need to talk things out, given the constant presence of the other.

Additionally, collectivist norms for parent–child conflict may be evolving as a function of globalization/modernization. In traditional Chinese culture, parents expect children to

perform filial piety (respect for parents and elders) and to obey and conform without question (Zhang, 2007). Yet, young Chinese adults report more conversation-oriented than conformity-oriented family communication patterns and more collaborating and accommodating during conflicts with parents than avoiding (Zhang, 2007). Zhang suggests that, while Chinese children continue to avoid direct confrontation with parents, there has been a cultural shift toward equality and independence, such that younger Chinese see a problem-solving approach as ideal.

The above findings suggest that it can be misleading to characterize family conflict patterns based on traditional values alone, given cultural change and within-culture diversity. The importance of within-culture diversity is illustrated by Oetzel et al. (2003). Overall, young adults from individualist, small power distance cultures (Germany, U.S.A.) reported more dominating and integrating facework strategies in conflicts with parents and siblings, and less avoiding facework, than young adults from collectivist, large power distance cultures (Japan, Mexico). However, individual self-construal styles (independent versus interdependent) had much stronger effects on facework than national culture.

Although certain culturally based relational standards (e.g., authority, restraint, harmony) reduce conflict expression, the same norms have the paradoxical effect of increasing the significance of conflict that does surface. In a diary study, Asian American adolescents reported less inter-parental conflict than European American adolescents, but Asian youth also felt more distressed when parental arguments occurred (Chung, Flook, & Fuligni, 2009). Another study found that Latina and African American girls showed more respect to mothers while discussing conflicts than European American girls. However, African American and Latina mothers reported more intense conflicts when expression of respect was low (Dixon, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). Conversely, cultural groups who express conflict freely seem to acquire tolerance for negative communication. Some studies have observed weaker associations between negativity and marital dissatisfaction in cultural groups who are less restrained in expressing negativity (Halford, Hahlweg, & Dunne, 1990; Krokoff, Gottman, & Roy, 1988; Winkler & Doherty, 1983). This suggests that negativity does not mean the same thing to groups with different norms for confrontation and emotional expression. Instead, negativity likely has a greater impact on family and individual adjustment to the extent that it violates cultural norms.

### *Family Stages and Transitions*

Most studies suggest that conflict increases over the early years of marriage, reflecting adjustment to spousal and parenting roles (see Simpson, Rholes, Campbell, Wilson, & Tran, 2002), followed by decreased conflict and more stable pattern of adjustment at some point thereafter (Birditt et al., 2010; Silverstein & Giarrusso, 2010). Longer married couples have fewer disagreements (McGonagle, Kessler, & Schilling, 1992) and engage in less explicit negotiation of conflicts, less negativity, and more avoidance by comparison to young couples (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995; Zietlow & Sillars, 1988). These aggregate differences mask diversity, as some research identifies a conflicted subgroup among long married couples (Dickson, 1995; Zietlow & Sillars, 1988). Nonetheless, nondistressed couples married at least 40 years reported difficulty thinking of recent conflict and showed a tendency to de-emphasize, deflect, and make light of it (Dickson, Hughes, Manning, Walker, Bollis-Pecchi, & Gratson, 2002). By contrast, the couples recalled intense disagreements over individual differences, parenting, and other issues within the early years of marriage.

Aggregate trends in conflict experienced at different family stages are partly attributable to relationship re-negotiation that takes place during transitions. Life transitions (e.g., onset to marriage and parenthood, relocation, career changes) tend to be compacted in early marriage, so this can be a period of intense negotiation that places a premium on conflict management (Sillars & Wilmot, 1989). The same may be said for the onset to adolescence in parent-child relations, which typically brings an increase in petty conflicts (Branje, Laursen, & Collins, Chapter 17, this volume; Steinberg & Morris, 2001), followed by decreased conflict once more equal and adult-like relationships are established (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). The transition to retirement also seems to increase marital conflicts initially, especially when one spouse continues to work, although these conflicts typically subside after a few years (Moen, Kim, & Hofmeister, 2001).

In sum, research suggests that conflict tends to peak at transition points in family relationships and further, communication patterns are often more direct and confrontational reflecting the pressures associated with transitional phases. This picture is consistent with the *relational turbulence* model, which suggests that people are emotionally and behaviorally reactive during relationship transitions, due to heightened uncertainty and disruption of everyday goals (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; Solomon, Weber, & Steuber, 2010). Thus, conversations are more challenging and irritations more severe (Solomon et al., 2010). Problem-solving communication might be expected to have the greatest impact on relational quality during such periods of relationship renegotiation (Fincham & Beach, 1999; Solomon et al., 2010). Conversely, the significance of conflict management may recede during stable periods, as other facets of relationships assume greater importance than expressive communication and problem solving (e.g., satisfaction derived from companionship and “survivorship” in later marriage; see Sillars & Wilmot, 1989).

The research reviewed above suggests that communication patterns have variable meaning depending on relational context. In the next section we examine meaning from a different standpoint, focusing on individual attributions and interpretive frames for communication. Several lines of research suggest that difficult conflicts are characterized by lack of coordination over the meaning of messages and nature of conflict issues.

## Communicative Attributions and Frames

### *Information Versus Bias*

Intuitively, we expect people to understand one another better if they discuss conflicts directly instead of speaking evasively or withdrawing. Yet, several studies found little connection between how directly couples or families discussed conflicts and whether individuals could accurately describe the perspectives of other family members (see Sillars, 2011).

The weak connection between communicative directness and inter-subjective understanding might be explained, in part, by the cognitive environment of intimate conflict, which tends to reinforce perspective-driven processing of messages. Given the intense familiarity of family members and repetitiveness of many conflicts, individuals may view potential sources of information selectively, fail to monitor for new information, make new inferences conform to existing relationship theories, and attach a high degree of certainty to inferences about others, regardless of their actual diagnostic value (Sillars, 2011; Thomas & Fletcher, 1997). Further, cognitive demands during communication, particularly angry, stressful interactions, can increase selective attention to information

that serves persuasive and defensive goals; thereby limiting understanding of alternative perspectives (Sillars, 2011). Mood states and the emotional climate of relationships also affect selective attention to and interpretation of messages. For example, unhappy spouses are more cognitively and behaviorally reactive to partner negativity than happy spouses because the residue of negative thoughts and feelings from past conflicts affects processing of ongoing interactions (Bradbury & Fincham, 1991).

Thus, perspective-driven biases can affect message reception during family conflict, leading to incongruent perception of the stream of communication. As noted below, incongruent perception of communication seems especially characteristic of more intense conflicts and unhappy relationships.

### *Encoding–Decoding of Emotional/Relational Communication*

The interactional consequences of incongruent perception are discussed by Watzlawick, et al. (1967) in their landmark work on relational communication. These authors suggest that repetitive conflicts are perpetuated by an “inability to metacommunicate,” a condition characterized by incongruent relational meanings (e.g., a husband believes he is being helpful, his wife sees his statement as condescending). This condition is “binding” in that efforts to talk about conflict rely on the same patterns of communication and interpretation that are the source of difficulty. Thus, talking about the problem can exacerbate it (e.g., the husband’s self-explanations are taken as further condescension).

The “inability to metacommunicate” phenomenon is parallel to misunderstanding of emotional communication found among distressed married couples. Several studies used a task in which one spouse expressed messages meant to convey positive, neutral, or negative meaning, while the other spouse decoded the messages. The verbal content was scripted and ambiguous (e.g., “What are you doing?” “You really surprised me this time!”), so meaning was entirely based on vocal and other nonverbal cues. High adjustment couples had greater encoding–decoding accuracy than low adjustment couples in this research (Gottman & Porterfield, 1981; Kahn, 1970; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Noller, 1980) and in analogous studies using the “talk table” procedure (Notarius, Benson, Sloane, Vanzetti, and Hornyak, 1989), suggesting that incongruent encoding–decoding contributes to conflict in unhappy couples (e.g., the listener assigns negative meaning to messages intended as neutral or positive). Notarius et al. (1989) found evidence of both “negative sentiment override” among distressed spouses (i.e., attributing negative meaning to outwardly neutral messages) and “positive sentiment override” among nondistressed spouses (attributing neutral or positive meaning to negative messages). Some research points to husbands in low adjustment couples as the primary source of encoding–decoding difficulty (Gottman & Porterfield, 1981; Noller, 1980) but this is not confirmed in other studies (e.g., Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002; Noller & Venardos, 1986).

### *Attributing Communicative Intent*

In two studies that supported the thrust of encoding–decoding studies, Noller and colleagues (Guthrie & Noller, 1988; Noller & Ruzzene, 1991) had spouses discuss a problem, then separately watch a videotape of the discussion and report on communicative intent. The intent of messages, as reported by the sender and inferred by receiver, was less similar in low versus high adjustment couples, as was the perceived message valence associated with intentions. Distressed spouses also made more negative inferences about

partner intent (Noller & Ruzzene, 1991), which is a trend borne out in other studies (e.g., Sillars, Roberts, Leonard, & Dun, 2000; Vangelisti, Corbin, Lucchetti, & Sprague, 1999).

Attributions about speaker intent help determine relational impacts of messages, as illustrated by research on *hurtful* communication in families and close relationships. When asked to identify hurtful messages or events from past experiences, individuals commonly reference direct, face-attacking messages, such as accusations and negative evaluations in adult relationships (Vangelisti, 1994) or disrespect, teasing, and criticism in mother-child relationships (Mills & Piotrowski, 2009). However, the sense of emotional injury that defines hurtful communication is a function of cognitive appraisal, not the message alone (Fitness & Warburton, 2009). Perceived intentionality has a strong effect on appraisal of messages as hurtful (Vangelisti & Young, 2000), as do receiver characteristics that create heightened vigilance toward hurtful intent, such as low self-esteem, rejection sensitivity, and anxious-ambivalent attachment style (see Fitness and Warburton, 2009). Thus, the same message might be construed as hurtful in one family context but not another (Mills & Piotrowski, 2009).

Aside from influencing the emotional response to communication (e.g., whether criticism is appraised as hurtful), attributions about speaker intent underlie interpretation of the message itself, including its pragmatic meaning (e.g., whether a statement represents criticism versus something else). Inferences about pragmatic intent are made continuously during communication and, although not routinely problematic (Jacobs, 2002), these inferences reflect distinct perspective biases during conflicts. Sillars et al. (2000) examined spontaneous thoughts about communication that spouses reported during video recall of conflict discussions; finding that spouses subjectively “coded” interaction in self-serving terms. That is, spouses attributed neutral and direct communication much more to self, and acts of avoidance and confrontation more to the partner. A similar study of parent-adolescent conflict using video recall identified generational biases in spontaneous inferences about communication (Sillars, Smith, & Koerner, 2010). Parents attributed negative emotions (e.g., feeling frustrated), confrontational intent (e.g., being deliberately manipulative), and avoidance thoughts (e.g., not wanting to talk) to children more than children reported having such thoughts. Conversely, adolescents over-attributed controlling thoughts to parents.

Extreme biases in attributions for communication may be a precipitating factor in marital violence (see Robillard & Noller, 2011). Schweinle, Ickes and Bernstein (2002) suggest that aggressive men are hyper-vigilant toward signs of rejection and therefore, attribute criticism to outwardly neutral messages. In support, the authors found that physically aggressive husbands over-attributed criticism and rejection to women they had not met. Using an adaptation of the encoding-decoding task, Robillard and Noller (2011), found that physically aggressive men, especially those high in rejection sensitivity, had a tendency to construe wives’ positive or neutral messages as negative and moreover, to see these messages as critical and rejecting. Nonviolent men, by contrast, showed a positive decoding bias. Sillars, Leonard, Roberts, and Dun (2002) also identified strong biases in the attributions that aggressive husbands made about their own and their wives’ communication during video recall of interactions.

Naturally, attributions for communication reflect both accuracy and bias (Segrin, Hanzal, & Domschke, 2009). Separate reports of conflict by husbands versus wives and parents versus adolescents tend to show moderate agreement (Noller & Callan, 1988; Rhoades & Stocker, 2006; Segrin et al., 2009). Further, summary self-reports of constructive

versus negative communication in marriage correlate with observational measures of the same (Hahlweg, Kaiser, Christensen, Fehm-Wolfsdorf, & Groth, 2000). However, a few studies indicate that perceptions of the spouse's conflict style relate more consistently to observer coding of marital interactions than self-perceived conflict styles (Rhoades & Stocker, 2006; Sanford, 2010; Sillars et al., 2000), suggesting that self-perceptions may be subject to greater bias relative to observer-defined codes.

### *Family Conflict Frames*

Conflict frames represent distinct ways of defining what a particular conflict is about; such as a substantive disagreement, clash of values, or power struggle (see Drake & Donohue, 1996; Rogan, 2006). A key insight from literature on conflict frames is that conflicts involve implicit negotiation to define the issues underlying conflict, not just direct clash over those issues. In Drake and Donohue's (1996) approach, language choice frames a topic by highlighting certain qualities; in divorce mediation, a wife's framing of child support in terms of fairness serves as a proposal to discuss value aspects of the settlement. When partners converge on a particular way of talking about conflict (i.e., as hinging on facts, interests, values, or relationships), this represents a form of cooperation that allows negotiation to progress. Thus, the number of interim agreements forged by spouses during mediation relates to their convergence on common frames (Drake & Donohue, 1996).

A seemingly commonplace example of divergent frames is where one party applies a "content" frame; that is, interpreting conflict as a negotiation of overt, instrumental issues; whereas the other party applies a frame highlighting relational issues. Sillars et al. (2000) observed a tendency whereby one spouse (typically the husband) tracked communication primarily in terms of the ostensible topic of discussion (money, housework, etc.), whereas the partner focused on the process of interaction and implicit relationship messages contained therein (e.g., a husband reported thinking that his band could only practice on Tuesdays and Fridays, while his wife reported thinking that he does not listen to her). In such cases, one spouse often assigned poignant relational meaning to messages that the more literal spouse did not recognize.

A related phenomenon is that disputants may conceptualize issues at different levels of generality; for example, as isolated behavior (not listening) or as a broader pattern or personality problem (e.g., not listening relates to general insensitivity; Roloff & Johnson, 2002). Framing issues as personality problems escalates conflict and may contribute to relationship distress; for example, Alberts (1988) found that poorly adjusted married couples were apt to direct complaints at broad personal characteristics of the partner. Conflict is more easily discussed and managed when framed as a disagreement over specific behaviors or decisions versus abstract relational, identity, and value issues (Deutsch, 1973). Further, when these frames are invoked unevenly—one party frames a disagreement in concrete terms; the other regards it as symbolic of a general relational pattern—issue negotiation may be especially difficult to coordinate.

Research on interpretive frames and attributions for communication suggests that, in difficult cases of family conflict, individuals come to view communication in an incongruous manner, thus making verbal negotiation unreliable and potentially self-defeating. On the other hand, *transformative* psychological processes (e.g., forgiveness, commitment, sacrifice) can moderate reactivity to negative communication, thereby allowing conflicts to be aired with greater chance of constructive outcomes (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007).

This suggests that self-reflective reframing of conflict can promote flexibility and control over reactive impulses that might otherwise follow from negative attributions and frames (see, e.g., Canary & Lakey, 2006).

## Conclusion

The central idea anchoring this review is that relational quality reflects the interplay of messages, relational contexts, and interpretive frameworks. We began by examining communicative acts and patterns, noting the dominance of two dimensions—message directness and valence. In addition, *polysemous* messages represent communicative acts that may be interpreted in variable ways with alternative outcomes. To be clear, the distinction is relative—all messages are polysemous to an extent (e.g., Jacobs, 2002). For example, a single message (e.g., “That’s not going to work.”) could be criticism, stonewalling, or problem-solving depending on presumed speaker intent. Thus, the communication codes used in family conflict research, commonly referred to as “communication behavior,” are not behavior in a literal sense (i.e., mere sounds and gestures) but speech acts whose meaning is contextual, interpretive, and subject to negotiation. These codes—as with other social behaviors—evade strictly objective measurement and require the assumption that coders are at best inter-subjective agents who have a roughly equivalent take on the functions of messages.

The situation faced by coders is analogous to that of family members; however, meanings assigned by family members are shaped by relationship-specific theories, emotional investment, and participation in conflict communication. Thus, messages are less likely to be taken at “face value” by family members than neutral observers. Moreover, for family members, coordination of meaning is a delicate affair with important consequences. The research reviewed here identifies several perspective biases in the meanings assigned and inferences derived from couple and family communication. In some cases, these biases complicate conflict management by making communication unreliable and creating vigilance toward, and reactivity to, negative messages. Such dynamics seem especially significant in conflicts that prove difficult to manage, where talking directly fails to improve the situation or makes things worse.

An overriding goal of family conflict research has been to isolate patterns that contribute to relational quality, mainly through the strategy of contrasting communication characteristics of well-adjusted and distressed relationships. The research yields a few well-replicated results (i.e., high negativity, negative reciprocity, and demand–withdraw in distressed relationships), along with a number of provocative, if less robust, patterns of a more specific nature (e.g., the “four horsemen”). These findings help to inform clinical interventions; however, they represent extremes and disregard variation in relationships that hang around the mean. If we drop out cases of severe or chronic negativity, it is more difficult to say what patterns of communication are constructive or destructive to relationships in any absolute way. Rather, connections between communication and relational quality vary by relational context, including the overall affective climate of relationships, personally and culturally preferred patterns of relating, transitional pressures, and situational needs for accommodation or confrontation. In this sense, “constructive communication” is not a behavioral script but a process of adaptation that can assume multiple forms. Thus, readers must judiciously apply research on conflict patterns in a probabilistic and contingent manner to allow for situations that are modified by culture and context.



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