Contextual Conflict Analysis: Marital Conflict and

Its Theories and Applications

Savannah Nelson

University of Colorado Denver

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Dr. Larry Erbert

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Abstract

This paper explores the identification of marital conflict, the four-part definition of conflict, how marriage is defined, the analysis of several communication theories, the consequences of negative conflict, and real-life approaches to marital conflict resolution. The theoretical approaches discussed are family systems theory, role theory, social exchange theory, theory of marital types, and attribution theory. Both the advantages to a successful marriage and the damaging effects of stress-filled marriages are discussed. The approaches to marital conflict resolution are split into two categories—short term and long term. They include conversational approaches, focusing on reconnecting emotionally, and goal making. Both categories aim to give an affordable option outside of mediation to marital conflicts. This paper includes research from several different in-class and online journal resources.

Key words: marriage, conflict, theory, solution

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Marital conflict is a well-studied and relevant topic of discussion, as conflict is present in all relationships. Research on married couples and their specific conflicts started in 1938, as researcher and author Louis Terman interviewed couples and studied their answers to questionnaires (Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2014). Since then, the available research has expanded, and has developed several professional fields surrounding the issues facing couples. The information available has expanded as issues of health have shown a strong correlation with marital satisfaction—the findings have shown a growth in stress-related illnesses, which can lead to death. The purpose of this report, because of the severe impact and negative health effects of negative marital conflict, is to identify concepts of marital conflict, analyze perceived theoretical perspectives, and to discuss both the real-life consequences and solutions regarding communication in order to maintain a healthy marital relationship.

Marital Conflict Defined

Marital conflict is understood through a series of concepts. Before specifying marital conflict, it is essential to understand the foundational frameworks of conflict. First, conflict is defined by four specific categories: nonepisodic/nonspecific, episodic/nonspecific, nonepisodic/specific, and episodic/specific (Cupach, Canary, & Messman, 1995). The first category describes conflict as pervasive—"not confined to a particular kind of interaction episode, nor do they limit conflict to specific kinds of behavior" (p. 5) The second is seen as a type of episode—"conflict is sometimes defined as an interaction episode, typically marked by significant disagreement indicated by negative emotions…known as a clash of strong feelings of

resentment" (p. 5). The third is interpreted as occurring whenever particular kinds of behavior

occur" (p. 8). The last category is described as specific communication behaviors, involving

disagreement—"conflict, in contrast opposition, entails greater hostility, aggression, and emotion

than does disagreement. Conflict between a parent and a teenager means disagreement coupled

with hostilities" (p. 10). In terms of marital conflict, Barry (1970) gives a more specific

definition of the two categories of conflict: "existing whenever incompatible activities occur

within the individual (intrapersonal conflict) or between two or more persons (interpersonal

conflict)" (p. 47). The latter, interpersonal conflict, is the category under where marital conflict

lies.

Marriages are judged on a specific scale: either they are successful or unsuccessful

(Barry, 1970). Successful marriages, Barry (1970) continues, are judged "on the basis of

endurance, absence of marital counseling, or reported or judged happiness" (p. 43). However, it

is worth stating that many marriages never reach failure, yet do not consider themselves

successful. He continues to categorize marital relationships into five categories: "the conflict-

habituated, the devitalized, the passive-congenial, the vital, and the total" (Barry, 1970, p. 43).

These categories have helped researchers to better understand the types of couples who have

faced marital conflict, satisfaction, and dissatisfaction, and have considered themselves either

successful or unsuccessful in each category.

Marital conflict, though normal, can lead to the end of a marriage. The average amount of

conflict within marriages takes place about once or twice a month, and not all are overt (Fincham

& Beach, 1999). There are several examples of the different types of marital conflict that exist.

Fincham, et al., (1999) discussed the range of conflict in married couples, from verbal and

physical abuse to personal traits and behaviors, with a focus on division of labor and conflict

over power. When dealing with marital conflict, there needs to be a definition of conflict without

the need for hostility, a sense of importance toward assessing cognitive events so as to paint a

more complete picture of the conflict process, and a recognition that there is an inadequacy of

behavior during problem solving (Fincham, et al., 1999).

Gottman (1995b) developed six signs of divorce: the harsh set up, the four horsemen

(including criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling), flooding, body language, failed

repair attempts, and bad memories (p. 26). These different conflicts represent a sliding scale,

each more damaging than the previous. However, "perceived conflict of interest, incompatible

goals, wishes and expectations, and perceived interference with goal-directed behavior all

provide starting points for the analysis of conflict" (Fincham, et al., 1999, p. 1).

There is variety between the different types of marital conflict. For example, there is both

destructive and constructive conflict. Barry (1970) states that "the former occurs when the

conflict is over basic principles and is considered dysfunctional for a relationship. The latter

occurs where the conflict is over matters which presuppose adherence to the same basic

principles" (p. 47). It is also important to know that conflict types change over time (Fincham, et

al., 1999). There are shifts in perspectives, as both the couple and the interest in the conflict

develop and evolve. Behaviors and understandings, as well as human personalities, are subject to

constant change.

Theoretical Approaches

There are several different theories to approach the understanding of marital conflict.

These are used to guide researchers and those within marital conflict careers, such as mediators,

scholars, or counselors. The different theories discussed in this paper are: family systems theory,

role theory, social exchange theory, theory of marital types, and attribution theory. As stated by

Fincham (2003), " 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" (p. 1). By understanding theories, couples can better stop their cycles of distress in marital conflict.

Empirical data has also had an effect on theoretical approaches: Gottman's own testing was directed by his research and findings. For example, according to Deutsch, et al., (2014), "Gottman and Levenson discovered that couples interaction had enormous stability over time (about 80 percent stability in conflict discussions separated by three years). They also discovered that most relationship problems (69 percent) never get resolved but are perpetual problems based on personality differences between partners" (p. 903) and from there, the duo could predict both divorce and future happiness (Deutsch, et al., 2014). After doing the initial research, Gottman was able to understand his empirical predictions through building and testing his own theory (the Sound Relationship House Theory), which involved hosting clinical interventions (Deutsch, et al., 2014). The following theories began under the same pretenses, as empirical findings that were later studied and tested from different conflict approaches.

Family systems theory explains that specific elements, such as wholeness, interdependence, hierarchy, change and adaptability, and relationships between family members are how families are studied and understood (Vangelisti, 2004). This theory acts as a guide to understand the complex interworking of daily life, and what it means to be a family. Married couples, as part of a family, face conflicts that can be defined under this umbrella of familial definition.

Role theory can have a direct effect on married couples, especially as conflict can sprout from the merging of ideologies. A role, defined by Vangelisti (2004), "describes the set of prescribed behaviors that a family member performs in relation to other family members" (p. 20). Discussing the perceptions of the couples' roles within the family can lead to a better understanding of the marital conflict and the best approaches to finding a solution.

Social exchange theory can be thought of as economic; according to Cupach, et al., (1995), "Social exchange theories adopt a financial metaphor to explain people's disagreement about scarce resources…interdependent parties share outcomes and depend on each other's actions to achieve valued resources" (p. 15). In terms of marriage, exchange theory can act as a system of keeping track—or having a running tally, much like a form of economic competition. This exchange can be of any type of family resource, including love, money, serves, or information (Vangelisti, 2004). The conflict often arises when there is pressure placed to even the score, along with the "assessment of rewards and costs within the relationship" (Vangelisti, 2004, p. 21).

Theory of marital types categorizes married couples into three specific groups: traditionals, independents, and separates (Vangelisti, 2004). The categories are essentially how they sound—"traditionals tend to be more conventional, independents tend to be more unconventional, and separates tend to be more ambivalent about their marriage" (Vangelisti, 2004, p. 21). Each of the marital types comes with certain expectations and potential conflicts; another set of issues arises when one of the spouses does not conform to the other's marital type.

Attribution theory acts as an explanation for events, which "reinforces social actors" (Cupach, et al., 1995, p. 15). The theory essentially gives couples a way to assign meaning to both individual behavior and the behavior of their partner (Vangelisti, 2004). This theory is also

referred to as the "shared meaning system" by Deutsch, et al., (2014), where they argue that "A crucial aspect of any relationship is to create an atmosphere that encourages each person to talk honestly about his or her dreams, values, convictions, and aspirations and to feel that the relationship supports those life dreams… a relationship is about building a life together—a life that has a sense of shared purpose and meaning" (p. 908). When looked at through the lens of attribution theory, marital conflict can be broken down and made easier to approach or understand, by thinking critically about all perspectives within the conflict. However, many times accounts are judged through specific criteria, such as offering an explanation or justification (Vangelisti, 2004)—this becomes a less effective theory when participants encounter situations that are not easily explained or justified. An example of this is victim blaming or self-blaming that lead to destructive behaviors.

Consequences of Marital Conflict

When looking at marital conflict, there is overwhelming evidence that there are both perks to saving a marriage and consequences for living with extreme negative conflict. According to Gottman (1999a), "an unhappy marriage can increase your chances of getting sick by roughly 35 percent and even shorten your life by an average of four years" (p. 4). He further credits parabonding, a biological finding that supports the idea that people who are married live longer (Gottman, 1999a). A successful marriage that stays away from these percentages comes down to a fairly simple dynamic: couples must keep their negative thoughts and feelings toward the other from overwhelming their positive ones (Gottman, 1999a). This leads to a ratio, created by Gottman, which predicts the success of happiness within a marriage: the "ratio of agreements to disagreements is greater than 1 for happy couples and less than 1 for unhappy couples" (Fincham, 2003, p. 1).

Fincham and Beach (1999) also discussed the importance of marital satisfaction, by citing that marital conflict affects mental, physical, and family health. Mental impacts can be depression, drinking problems, eating disorders, and anxiety, physical consequences include a link to illness and "alterations in immunological, endocrine, and cardiovascular functioning," and family issues most often correlate to children (Fincham, et al., 1999, p. 1). Divorce, likewise, suppresses the function of the immune system (Gottman, 1999a). There is also alarming evidence that suggests that "marriage is also the most common interpersonal context for homicide" (Fincham, 2003, p. 1) which is both disturbing and motivating for many couples to sort through their conflicts. In totality, "distressed couples emit more negative-statements and fewer positive statements and show greater reciprocation of negative behaviors during problem-solving interactions" (Fincham et al., 1999, p. 1). The research all points to marital conflict resolution, for overall health and elongated life. Both the reasoning behind extending a marriage and avoiding divorce are motivations for married couples to sort through their conflict, to find solutions.

Real-life Solutions

The last major section of this paper is dedicated to real-life applications. Based on research, there are several different applications to sorting through marital conflict and reaching marital happiness. Here, they are sorted into short-term and long-term solutions: success is based on couples' treatment of each other, their engagement, and a system of goal-making. Conflict resolution has been defined as "the diverse ways in which conflicts are settled without violence; such ways include arbitration, conciliation, judicial or legislative action, negotiation and other approaches" (Deutsch, et al., 2014, p. 185). The solutions listed aid the resolution of marital

conflict with different approaches beyond mediation of any kind, that any married couple has access to.

One of Gottman's chapters is titled "Nurturing Your Fondness and Admiration" because the action described is a direct solution to marital conflict. Gottman (1999c) suggests that if a married couple still has a "functioning fondness and admiration system, their marriage is still salvageable" (p. 63). He lists that fondness and admiration are two main elements in a long and satisfying romantic relationship, because they are motivated by honor and respect (Gottman 1999c). It seems obvious: a happily married couple likes one another. However, daily stresses brought on by different facets of life lead to a chipping away of the once-idealistic bond of marriage for many couples, which can lead to tension and conflict. The way to bring the fondness back to the forefront begins with realizing how valuable the other person is, and staying in touch with the deeply seated feelings of positivity that the relationship was founded upon (Gottman, 1999c). The bond, which can get frayed and fragile over time after wearing and tearing, can be straightened by acknowledging and discussing positive aspects of both the partner and marriage (Gottman, 1999c). These interactions are both short term, as they happen within conversations in-the-moment, and long-term, as conversations are a deep-seated factor of relationships; they add up.

The level of engagement within couples matters. Connecting is essential to marital satisfaction, especially through conversation and chit-chat; these short-term connections are offers for a spouse's attention, affection, humor, or support (Gottman, 1999d). Dialogue is how these solutions are offered. Gottman (1999d) offers instructions for engaging in discussion when one partner is not the other spouse's target: "take turns, don't give unsolicited advice, show genuine interest, communicate your understanding, take your spouse's side, express a 'we

against other attitude,' express affection, validate emotions" (p . 88). Deutsch, et al., (2014) also

offer a set of principles to guide conversational marital conflict, which increase overall marital

satisfaction: "when listening, try to understand the intended meaning of what your counterpart is

saying; when formulating a message, consider what the listener will take your words to mean;

when speaking, take your listener's perspective into account; be an active listener; focus initially

on establishing conditions that allow effective communication to occur; the cooperation that

communication requires, once established, may generalize to other contexts" (p. 172). Deutsch,

et al., (2014) also cite Gottman's ideas of fostering friendship and intimacy, through building

love maps, sharing fondness and admiration, and turning toward rather than away (p. 907). After

a conflict, these authors suggest a specific five-step plan: "listing what each person felt without

explaining why by reading aloud the feelings one had from a list of fifty-three feelings; taking

turns as listener and speaker describing each subjective reality about what happened and what

each person needed during the incident; describing the triggers that escalated the conflict for

each person and the history of these triggers in one's past; taking responsibility for one's role in

the incident and apologizing; constructive plans for dealing with this kind of incident should it

arise again" (Deutsch, et al., 2014, p. 914). These are all examples of short-term solutions that

have the potential to be inducted into long-term behaviors.

  Goal creation is the most effective example of a long-term solution to marital conflict.

Defensiveness is a major issue in marital conflict, and goals work to dismantle it. There are also

four other key advantages for a goal-oriented conflict intervention system: talking about conflict

is as simple as it is beneficial, it provides an opportunity to assess while using strong

experimental research, there is literature available for couples to help adapt, and there is an

expanding network of research on goal-making as a marital conflict solution (Fincham, et al.,

1999). This solution inherently creates an environment of deeper understanding and a platform to

lesson difference. This is because "all behavior is goal-directed," spouses are not necessarily

always aware of the goal type, and goals are varied and cannot be understood in isolation from

each other or from the dynamics of goal system functioning" (Fincham, et al., 1999, p. 1). Many

issues might be motivated by underlying goal differences for both happily married and distressed

couples (Fincham, et al., 1999); "protective (e.g. re-establishing equity) and avoidance (e.g. of

harm) goals most likely give rise to conflict behavior (e.g. defensiveness) in distressed couples.

In contrast, problem-resolution and relationship-enhancement goals appear to underlie the

conflict behavior of nondistressed couples" (Fincham, et al., 1999, p. 1). If there are severe goal

differences, there are indications that the couple will not work out their marital conflicts. If goal

incompatibility lead to large amounts of distress and negative conflict, couples will face a

difficult conversation; they will have to decide whether or not to continue fighting for their

marriage, or end their marriage in separation or divorce. This method, however, is the strongest

in terms of a legitimate solution, rather than a short-term device used to make conversations

more pleasant on the surface-level.

Conclusion

Marital conflict is natural and has many elements that are both functional and positive.

Every marital relationship has an element of conflict. These conflicts are simply identified, and

can be better understood through both empirical findings and several theoretic perspectives. And

though these theories aim to give a broader understanding to the complex interworking of family

conflict, there are specific conflict approaches that can be used in daily life. According to

Deutsch, et al., (2014), the couples who are masters of conflict are understanding, they begin

conflict conversations without blame, accept responsibility, and take the proper and positive

steps to repair and de-escalate the situation, then end at a temporary solution of compromise or understanding (p. 908). Many of the marital conflict approaches are aptly described as surface-level solutions when they only include conversation. Based on the research discussed within this paper, goal-oriented approaches are both long-term and effective methods of every-day marital conflict solutions.

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