# The SAGE Handbook of Conflict Communication

Conflict in Dating and Marital Relationships

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With good reason, conflict in dating relationships and marriages has generated enormous scholarly and popular interest. When handled well, conflict in romantic unions can enable relational partners to learn about each other and foster a sense of cohesion and commitment (Siegert & Stamp, 1994). When not managed well, conflict can have negative implications for the relationship and for the relational partners (Fincham & Beach, 1999). Conflict in romantic relationships also has implications for individuals beyond those directly involved. Marital conflict, for instance, is an even more important predictor of negative outcomes for children than is parental divorce (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995; Booth & Amato, 2001; Jekielek, 1998). Indeed, children whose parents divorce tend to benefit compared to children whose parents stay married but engage in frequent and intense marital conflict (Morrison & Coiro, 1999).

Figure 5.1 Framework for Organizing Questions About, and Research on, Conflict in Romantic Relationships
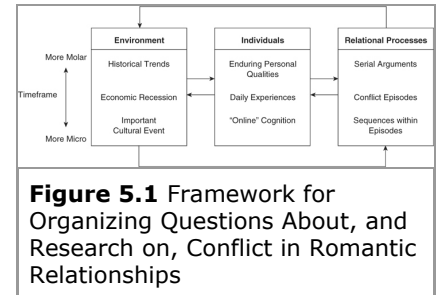
Given the significance of conflict in romantic relationships, it is not surprising that the literature in this area is enormous. By necessity, any review of this area will be selective. With the breadth and complexity of the work on this topic, it was useful to organize our review around a framework that we adapted from Huston's (2000) social ecological model for understanding marriage and similar unions (see Figure 5.1). We employed this framework because it was applicable to a wide variety of close dyadic unions, it provided a general schema for understanding conflict in romantic relationships, and it highlighted some potentially important issues and questions that appear to be understudied (e.g., the impact of the social context on relational conflict).

Following Huston (2000), we consider three interconnected levels of analysis: (a) the environment, which ranges from broad societal influences to a couple's specific social and physical context; (b) the individuals, including the enduring characteristics that people bring to their relationship and attitudes and beliefs they develop during the relationship; and (c) the relational processes, which are composed partly of relational conflict behaviors and conflict patterns. This perspective highlights the dynamic nature of the individuals and their relationship, including the conflict behaviors and patterns in that relationship (Huston, 2000).

The dynamic aspect of relational conflict implies that questions about conflict can reflect various timeframes. Indeed, as depicted from top to bottom in each of the boxes in Figure 5.1, all three levels of analysis can be examined over different temporal periods. In the environment, one could take a molar temporal perspective and consider the impact of historical changes on marital conflict; for example, Gadlin (1977) suggested that many issues that would now be considered private were subject to community intervention in Colonial America. One could also examine a shorter timeframe; for example, when a culture celebrates a holiday that often involves family gatherings (e.g., Thanksgiving in the U.S.), relational conflict may be affected (e.g., by highlighting an existing conflict pertaining to in-laws). Varied timeframes also can be considered when examining individuals engaging in conflict; for example, individuals' attachment styles may influence conflict over a fairly long time period (Feeney, Noller, & Roberts, 2000), but scholars may also be interested in the specific "online" thoughts that individuals have during a particular conflict (e.g., Sillars, Roberts, Dun, & Leonard, 2001; Sillars, Roberts, Leonard, & Dun, 2000). Finally, with the relational process level, one could examine relational conflicts that

occur over long time periods spanning many specific encounters (Johnson & Roloff, 2000), but one could also study specific, microscopic sequences of conflict behaviors (Buysse et al., 2000).

Although the conceptual model summarized in Figure 5.1 indicates that there is interplay among the various levels, the main research foci of relational conflict researchers have been on relational behaviors and the individuals who enact them (rather than on connections to environmental factors). The largest portion of the relationship conflict literature has examined connections between conflict behaviors and relational outcomes (Bradbury, Cohan, & Karney, 1998; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Sillars, Canary, & Tafoya, 2004). The phrase *relational outcomes* refers both to aspects of relationships (e.g., whether the dyad remains intact or breaks up) and to properties of individuals (e.g., partners' evaluations of, and satisfaction with, the relationship).

Because research on the connection between conflict behaviors and relational outcomes has been such a focus of the literature, we begin by reviewing this research. Next, we examine how individual dyad members influence the behavioral system (and particularly conflict) in a relationship. Finally, we examine how the larger environment influences conflict processes in romantic relationships.

CONFLICT BEHAVIORS AND RELATIONAL OUTCOMES

The notion of relational outcomes is a broad-based one, but the primary outcomes of interest have been individuals' satisfaction with their relationships and relational instability (i.e., breakups among dating couples and divorce among married dyads). The prototypical studies in this genre are based on the problem-solving paradigm, which involves dyads engaging in relatively brief discussions of issues that they nominate as problematic and then researchers examining the conversations to determine if the partners' behaviors are associated with relational outcomes (e.g., Billings, 1979; Gottman, 1979). Until the early 1990s, most of this research compared the behaviors of satisfied couples to those of couples who were dissatisfied (for a review, see Robinson & Jacobson, 1987). Since then, there has been a surge in longitudinal studies examining whether conflict behaviors predict changes in relational satisfaction and relational dissolution (e.g., Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995; Karney & Bradbury, 1997).

Individual Behaviors

The specific behaviors examined in studies of relational conflict are myriad (see Sillars et al., 2004). However, scholars frequently conceptualize the various behaviors in terms of two dimensions. The first is most commonly discussed in terms of positive or negative affect (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995; Heavey et al., 1995; Sillars & Weisberg, 1987), but is sometimes labeled valence or cooperation versus competition (Sillars et al., 2004). The second dimension is engagement versus avoidance (Canary et al., 1995; Sillars & Weisberg, 1987) or directness (Sillars et al., 2004).

Negativity and positivity. Scholars frequently conceptualize positive and negative affect in conflict along a single dimension, but most coding systems distinguish between behaviors that are viewed as cooperative and those that are seen as competitive. Researchers using Sillars' (1986) Verbal Tactics Coding Scheme or similar measures, for example, usually make separate assessments of integrative and distributive strategies, which are viewed as having positive and negative affect, respectively (e.g., Canary & Cupach, 1988; Meeks, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1998). Similarly, coding schemes that incorporate nonverbal assessments (e.g., Gottman, 1994; Matthews, Wickrama, & Conger, 1996) typically include categories of positivity (i.e., expressions of warm or positive affect) and negativity (i.e., expressions of hostile or negative affect).

Numerous studies have shown that negativity and similar constructs are associated inversely with concurrent relational satisfaction (for reviews, see Fincham & Beach, 1999; Robinson & Jacobson, 1987). This association has been found with a variety of different methods, including observations of laboratory conflict discussions (Koren, Carlton, & Shaw, 1980; Levenson & Gottman, 1983; Newton & Burgoon, 1990), retrospective reports of relational conflict (Birchler & Webb, 1977; Meeks et al., 1998), and daily diary ratings of negative behaviors that

are associated with conflict (Caughlin, Huston, & Houts, 2000; Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; Wills, Weiss, & Patterson, 1974). Negativity also frequently predicts declines in relational satisfaction over time (Heyman, 2001; Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). There are a few studies suggesting "reversal effects" (Fincham & Beach, 1999, p. 52), in which some form of negativity is associated concurrently with dissatisfaction but predicts increases in satisfaction (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey et al., 1995; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993). However, such effects generally have not been confirmed in attempted replications (Fincham & Beach, 1999), and due to ambiguities in the analyses, the reversal effects may reflect extremely unhappy couples becoming somewhat less unhappy—rather than couples becoming satisfied due to negativity (Caughlin, 2002; Woody & Costanzo, 1990). In short, the preponderant evidence indicates that negativity often predicts decreasing satisfaction (Fincham & Beach, 1999; Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

Compared to the findings pertaining to negativity, the connection between expressions of positive affect during conflict and satisfaction is more muted. In many studies, it is difficult to determine whether expressions of positive affection matter, because the researchers combine positive and negative affect into a single score (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Markman, 1979; Matthews et al., 1996). When studies do distinguish between positivity and negativity, they tend to indicate that negativity is a more consistent and powerful predictor of relational satisfaction than is positivity (Gottman, 1994; Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; Kurdek, 1995; Wills et al., 1974). However, Karney and Bradbury's (1995) meta-analysis indicated that couples' positivity predicts relative increases in satisfaction (i.e., either actual increases or at least slower declines in satisfaction), which suggests that positivity is important to marital satisfaction, even if the effect is smaller than that due to negativity.

Whereas countless studies have examined connections between expressions of affect and relational satisfaction, fairly few have examined negativity or positivity as predictors of relational stability. Those that have, indicate that negativity during conflict predicts divorce—at least over periods of a few years (Gottman, 1994; Karney & Bradbury, 1995; Lindahl, Clements, & Markman, 1998; Matthews et al., 1996). Most notably, Gottman's (1994) cascade model proposes that the trajectory toward divorce is driven by a progression of increasingly alienating conflict behaviors. Although Gottman (1994) suggested that the trajectory is related to a balance between positive and negative affect, the key predictors of the cascade involve negativity and uncooperative avoidance (i.e., stonewalling) rather than positive affect.

Engagement versus avoidance. There is a cultural bias in the United States against avoiding conflict (Parks, 1982), and some scholars are so accepting of this bias that they consider withdrawal to be a form of negativity (e.g., Lindahl et al., 1998). On the surface, such parsimony appears reasonable. Overall, there is an inverse association between relational satisfaction and various measures of conflict avoidance, including perceptions of mutual conflict avoidance (Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, & Callan, 1994; Noller & White, 1990), perceptions of the partner's avoidance (Kurdek, 1995; Meeks et al., 1998; Roberts, 2000), and perceptions of one's own avoidance (Canary & Cupach, 1988; Kurdek, 1995; Meeks et al., 1998).

However, this overall inverse association probably is modified by a number of factors. Roberts (2000) and Sillars et al. (2004), for example, argued that there are qualitatively different forms of conflict avoidance, with some forms being more hostile and other forms being more neutral or cooperative. Roberts found that conflict avoidance that included negative affect was related more consistently to marital dissatisfaction than was neutral avoidance (e.g., husbands' angry avoidance was associated with wives' later dissatisfaction, but other conflict avoidance by husbands was not).

Moreover, Roloff and Ifert (2000) noted that conflict avoidance can occur in different circumstances. Individuals may withhold a complaint to avoid a conflict episode before it begins, suppress further discussion of an issue that has already been introduced, or agree to make a topic taboo. These various forms of avoidance may have different relational implications; for example, if one is able to avoid a conflict before it is ever discussed, the partner may remain unaware and unaffected by this avoidance (Caughlin & Golish, 2002).

In addition, Roloff and Ifert (2000) hypothesized that the success of avoiding conflict likely depends on several conditions. First, they noted that avoiding conflict can be associated with satisfaction if couples are comfortable with avoidance and tolerate differences between the partners (Sillars et al., 2004). Research with M. A. Fitzpatrick's (1988) couple types, for example, suggests that there is a positive association between conflict avoidance and relational satisfaction among people who believe conflict avoidance can be helpful for maintaining relationships. Sillars, Pike, Jones, and Redmon (1983) found that for couples classified as separates (who tend to believe that avoiding overt arguments allows problems to disappear), relational satisfaction was associated with denials of conflict and diversions from conflict topics.

Second, Roloff and Ifert (2000) suggested that various coping strategies can help couples successfully avoid conflict. Maintaining positive affect while avoiding, for instance, can diminish any negative impact of avoidance (Raush, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974). Third, conflict avoidance is most likely to be successful if it is used selectively, as in cases when the issue is not considered important (Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Roloff & Ifert, 2000).

Fourth, individuals probably find conflict avoidance satisfying only if they choose to avoid without excessive pressure to do so (Roloff & Ifert, 2000). Research on the chilling effect suggests that people avoid conflicts if they fear that expressing a complaint would lead to negative consequences from their partner (Cloven & Roloff, 1993; Roloff & Cloven, 1990). Although there is a tendency for individuals experiencing a chilling effect to downplay the importance of the topic (Solomon & Samp, 1998), if they avoid due to pressure and still feel that the issue is important, they may be dissatisfied with their avoidance (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004).

Finally, conflict avoidance is most likely to be successful if the relational partners have important competencies like communication skills and perspective-taking ability (Roloff & Ifert, 2000). Gottman (1994) observed that satisfied married individuals who engaged in frequent avoidant behavior also engaged in positive behaviors and attempted to understand their partner's views. In addition, Caughlin and Afifi (2004) found that the usual inverse association between topic avoidance and relational satisfaction in dating couples was moderated by girlfriends' perceptions of their own and their boyfriend's communication competence.

Dyadic Patterns

Although most behavioral research on conflict in romantic relationships has focused on frequencies of individuals' behaviors, research influenced by a systems perspective has focused on the interdependence of relational partners' behaviors (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967). This more systemic view of conflict behaviors has led some scholars to study various patterns of behaviors, including negative reciprocity and demand/withdraw (for a more complete review of conflict patterns, see Messman & Canary, 1998).

Negative reciprocity. Numerous studies, using a wide variety of coding systems and definitions, have established that exchanging negative behaviors (e.g., complaints, defensiveness, expressions of negative affect) is associated with dissatisfaction, even after controlling for the overall rates of negativity (Gottman, 1979; Margolin & Wampold, 1981). The link between negative reciprocity and dissatisfaction has been observed with measures focusing primarily on nonverbal behaviors (Krokoff, Gottman, & Roy, 1988; Levenson, & Gottman, 1983), ones focusing mainly on verbal behaviors (Alberts, 1989; Alberts & Driscoll, 1992; Ting-Toomey, 1983), and schemes mixing verbal and nonverbal assessments (Billings, 1979; Margolin & Wampold, 1981). There is some evidence that the affective aspect of negative reciprocity is more important than the verbal exchanges: Pike and Sillars (1985) replicated the usual findings pertaining to negative reciprocity with affect codes but found contrary findings with verbal codes. Overall, however, the connection between negative reciprocity and dissatisfaction is quite robust. Negative reciprocity also presages declines in satisfaction and relational dissolution (Filsinger & Thoma, 1988; Gottman, 1994).

Demand/withdraw. Demand/withdraw involves one partner nagging, complaining, or criticizing and the other partner avoiding. The label does not imply a particular order; in fact, sequential analyses have shown that withdrawal can lead to demands, just as demands can lead to withdrawal (Klinetob & Smith, 1996). Also,

although some research does not explicitly note the affective component of demanding, Heavey et al. (1995) suggested that the concept of demanding involves only negative engagement tactics (e.g., criticisms) rather than more positive or neutral ones (e.g., trying to discuss a problem).

Despite variations in the specific measures of demand/withdraw, both observations and participant reports have indicated that demand/withdraw is associated inversely with concurrent relational satisfaction (Caughlin & Huston, 2002; Heavey et al., 1993; Noller et al., 1994). However, the prospective outcomes associated with demand/withdraw are less clear. Some studies indicate that demand/withdraw (especially woman-demand/man-withdraw) predicts declining satisfaction (Heavey et al., 1995) and dissolution (Gottman & Levenson, 2000). Other studies have failed to replicate such findings (Heavey et al., 1993; Noller et al., 1994) and still others suggest that demand/withdraw can foreshadow increasing relational satisfaction (Caughlin, 2002; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey et al., 1995; Heavey et al., 1993).

Also, there is evidence that a rigid pattern of husbands' demanding while wives withdraw may be associated with spousal abuse (Eldridge & Christensen, 2002). Gottman, Driver, Yoshimoto, and Rushe (2002) suggested that violent husbands sometimes use coercive verbal tactics to gain short-term compliance, even if they cannot actually influence their wife's beliefs. Gottman et al.'s (2002) explanation is consistent with Johnson's (2001) contention that battered wives are often subjected to verbal and physical coercion that is part of a coherent pattern of control.

Critique of Research on Conflict Behaviors and Outcomes

Research in this general area has produced many impressive results. Despite huge variation in how constructs like negativity have been measured (Heyman, 2001), there is ample evidence that negativity predicts outcomes like dissatisfaction and divorce. In many cases, this general conclusion has been accompanied by detailed descriptions of conflict behaviors that have become the basis for a number of interventions to improve courting and married couples' relationships. Although one cannot assume that teaching couples to emulate satisfied couples will be an effective intervention (Stanley, Bradbury, & Markman, 2000), systematic studies of interventions based on the problem-solving paradigm demonstrate that teaching couples to enact constructive strategies and avoid excessively negative ones (e.g., criticisms of the partner's character) can prevent distress and improve strained relationships (Hahlweg, Markman, Thurmaier, Engl, & Eckert, 1998; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Storaasli, 1988).

In short, research on the connections between conflict resolution behaviors and relational outcomes has proved quite useful. Nevertheless, there are concerns about the research in this area. Because the extant literature is so large and varied, no particular concern applies to all the specific studies, but each is prevalent. These concerns pertain to studies that predict divorce, research on the affect dimension of conflict engagement, and some general assumptions of the problem-solving paradigm.

Research on predictors of divorce. The research demonstrating that negativity predicts divorce has been very fruitful, with some studies indicating the ability to predict divorce at a rate greater than 90% (e.g., Gottman, 1994). Not surprisingly, such findings have generated much popular and scholarly attention, but there are also reasons for this enthusiasm to remain somewhat tempered (Bradbury, Rogge, & Lawrence, 2001). First, the statistical analyses used to predict divorce are optimized for a particular sample; unless the same prediction equations are validated with another sample, it is impossible to know how many divorces can actually be predicted. Heyman and Smith Slep (2001), for example, used half of a nationally representative sample to compute a prediction equation that correctly labeled 90% of participants as married or divorced. When they applied the same equation to the other half of the sample, however, the overall accuracy in predicting which people would divorce was only 69%, and among the individuals who had been predicted to be divorced, the equation was correct in only 29% of the cases. This suggests that previous claims of being able to predict divorce with 90% accuracy are, at best, exaggerated.

Second, even if negativity predicts relational dissolution, this does not prove a causal relationship (Glenn, 1998). Indeed, the existing evidence suggests that part of the association between negativity and divorce may be an artifact of including couples who are already moving toward dissolution. Negativity appears to be a reliable predictor of divorces in the short term but not in the longer term. Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, and George (2001) found that newlywed levels of negativity were significantly higher in couples who divorced in the first 2 years of marriage than for couples who divorced after at least 2 years. Similarly, in their 14-year longitudinal study, Gottman and Levenson (2000) found that negativity predicted divorces during the first half of the study but not in the second half. Given that relational dissatisfaction predicts heightened negative conflict resolution behaviors (Noller & Feeney, 1998), it is plausible that at least part of the association between negativity and relational dissolution is a reflection of general behavioral and psychological distress rather than evidence that negativity causes divorce.

Although there is little evidence that negativity can predict divorce over more than a few years, there are behavioral predictors that do foreshadow divorces that happen later. Huston et al. (2001) found that couples who stayed married at least 7 years and then divorced before 13 years were distinct from couples who divorced earlier or who were still married after 13 years. As newlyweds, couples who divorced after at least 7 years were higher than other couples in terms of affectional expression; then, over the next 2 years, the later divorcing couples evinced greater declines in affectional expression than did other couples. Gottman and Levenson (2000) reported that expressions of positive affect during conflict did not predict divorce over a 7-year period, but the absence of positive expressions predicted divorces that happened more than 7 years after the original observation. In short, the few studies that have examined predictors of divorce over more than just a few years suggest that the predictors of short-term outcomes are different from the predictors of long-term outcomes. A prime goal of future research in this area should be to confirm and elaborate on this general conclusion.

Research on the affect dimension of conflict behaviors. A number of critiques have been made of research that focuses on the affect dimension of conflict behaviors. First, the well-documented finding that "negativity" is associated with relational dissatisfaction and relational dissolution may seem "obvious and uninteresting" (Sillars et al., 2004, p. 432). One counterargument to this point is that the general category of negativity summarizes a number of specific behaviors, some of which may be more important correlates of dissatisfaction and dissolution than are others (Gottman, 1994). Alberts (1988), for example, reported that satisfied couples were more likely than dissatisfied ones to focus on behaviors when complaining, whereas dissatisfied partners were more likely to complain about each other's personal characteristics. Also, Gottman, Coan, Carrere, and Swanson (1998) distinguished between low-intensity negativity (e.g., expressing anger) and high-intensity negativity (e.g., expressing criticism, contempt, defensiveness, or belligerence) and found that husbands' high-intensity negativity was a statistically significant predictor of divorce over a 6-year period, but husbands' low-intensity negativity was not. Such findings suggest that it may be important for future research in this area to focus more on distinctions among types of negativity than has been common until now.

A second group of critiques regarding the affect dimension of conflict behaviors questions the appropriateness of the dimension. Erbert (2000) argued that couples' conflicts are often dialectical (i.e., the conflicts are shaped by the interaction between forces that are simultaneously unified and opposed). Erbert found that married couples viewed the contradictions of autonomy-connection and openness-closedness as important to a number of common conflict issues (e.g., personal criticisms, finances, household tasks). To the extent that such dialectics are salient in a particular conflict, conflict behaviors may function as both positive and negative at the same time. Even behaviors that often are considered negative may serve useful functions in romantic relationships; for example, although expressing a criticism may diminish connection between partners in many instances, it also may allow attention to the autonomy pole of the autonomy-connection contradiction. Similarly, given the general preference for openness in close relationships in North American culture (Parks, 1982), open criticism could be viewed as reflecting relational strength.

In addition to such theoretical arguments questioning whether conflict behaviors should be conceptualized along a positive-negative continuum, there is empirical evidence that negativity and positivity cannot be adequately described with a single dimension. Indeed, a review by Gable and Reis (2001) indicates that positive and negative behaviors in romantic relationships are "functionally independent dimensions" (p. 169). If a single dimension accounted for negativity and positivity, these behaviors would have a strong inverse correlation across all studies. However, the observed correlations are often quite small, and factor analyses support treating positive and negative behaviors separately (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; Smith, Vivian, & O'Leary, 1990). Gottman's (1994) findings that a significant proportion of couples are high in both negativity and positivity also illustrate the lack of a strong inverse correlation. Conversely, couples can be low in both negativity and positivity. Such marriages can be described as affectively neutral or bland, and they are distinct from marriages with greater levels of negativity and positivity—even when the ratio of negative to positive affect is similar (Caughlin & Huston, in press). Moreover, positive and negative interaction behaviors often moderate each other's association with relational satisfaction (Huston & Chorost, 1994; Smith et al., 1990), a finding that would be unlikely if a single dimension adequately captured these constructs. Finally, as noted above, Gottman and Levenson (2000) and Huston et al. (2001) found that the relational outcomes associated with positive and negative interaction behaviors are distinct (i.e., negativity and positivity do not demonstrate parallelism).

In short, the empirical evidence provides a compelling case for recognizing that negativity and positivity often function as two separate dimensions. Although it may be useful for some purposes to conceptualize positive versus negative affect along a continuum, this does not mean that it is useful or appropriate to collapse behaviors with positive and negative affect into a single measure (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1997; Matthews et al., 1996). Because positive and negative behaviors are known to have different associations with relational outcomes, collapsing them into a single measure can create serious difficulties in interpreting findings.

Assumptions of the problem-solving paradigm. Notwithstanding the considerable methodological diversity in this area, the prototypical study of conflict and relational outcomes involves observing a single episode of problem solving (Noller & Feeney, 1998). Findings using other methods often are considered suspect unless they converge with observational research (Noller & Feeney, 2004). Obviously, there are some important advantages to observational studies; for example, biases in self-reports are well documented (Metts, Sprecher, & Cupach, 1991). Nevertheless, the problem-solving paradigm implies several questionable theoretical assumptions about relational conflict.

First, research in this area often assumes that conflict is inevitable (Beach, 2001). Whereas it may be reasonable to assume that almost all close relationships experience *some* conflict, this assumption is often taken to mean that the amount of conflict and the difficulty of the issues do not matter; for example, Clements, Cordova, Markman, and Laurenceau (1997) argued, "the number and type of conflict areas… are less important than how couples handle these conflicts" (p. 342). The countless studies asking couples to discuss their most contentious issues implicitly assume that frequency and difficulty are unimportant. Also, using the behaviors produced in these episodes as indicative of "how couples handle" conflict presumes that couples actually discuss their disagreements and that all couples have equally troubling yet solvable conflict issues. This implies a theoretical perspective of how conflict operates in romantic relationships that is, at best, suspect.

In contrast to the assumption that managing conflict is more important than the difficulty and frequency of conflicts, experienced relationships counselors attribute the majority of couples' troubles to fundamental problems that often cause communication difficulties, rather than to problems managing conflict per se (Vangelisti, 1994). Also, Sanford (2003) showed that the difficulty of married couples' conflict issues is related positively to observations of negativity and related inversely to relational satisfaction. Thus, the observed connections between negativity and dissatisfaction may be somewhat spurious and driven by the difficulty of the conflict.

Moreover, research outside laboratories suggests that the frequency of conflict is an important predictor of relational outcomes. Diary studies of dating and married couples have suggested that, on average, conflict episodes are experienced once every few days (Ayduk, Downey, Testa, Yen, & Shoda, 1999; Caughlin & Huston, 1996) or at least several times monthly (Fitzpatrick & Sollie, 1999; McGonagle, Kessler, & Schilling, 1992). Although some scholars have suggested that the infrequent occurrence of conflict episodes means that conflict is not particularly important (Bradbury et al., 2001), variations in the frequency of conflict are associated with relational outcomes. Among dating couples, the amount of conflict is associated with dissatisfaction (Cramer, 2000) and predicts dissolution (Surra & Longstreth, 1990). Premarital conflict also foreshadows dissatisfaction after marriage (Kelly, Huston, & Cate, 1985). The amount of conflict experienced by couples is a concurrent correlate of marital dissatisfaction (Noller & Feeney, 1998; Orbuch, Veroff, Hassan, & Horrocks, 2002), and newlywed levels of conflict presage dissatisfaction 13 years later (Caughlin & Huston, 1996). The clear links between frequency of conflict and important relational outcomes highlight the theoretical importance of understanding why some couples encounter more conflicts that do others. This issue is addressed below in the section about explanations for conflict.

A second questionable theoretical assumption in the problem-solving paradigm is evident in the typical design of such studies. Most of this research, even investigations that assess other constructs longitudinally, measures conflict behaviors only once (Noller & Feeney, 1998). This is potentially problematic because behaviors in a particular episode are likely to have a greater association with judgments of a similar timeframe (e.g., satisfaction with the interaction) than with more molar judgments like overall relational satisfaction. Thus, single-episode measures must assume that the observed behaviors reflect what generally occurs in the relationship and that these behaviors are stable over time. This theoretical assumption obscures the potential importance of changes in conflicts, despite the evidence that relational conflict is linked to changes in partners' interdependence (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). The few studies that have assessed conflict at multiple points in time indicate that dissatisfaction can predict increases in negativity and the amount of conflict (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; Noller & Feeney, 1998), suggesting that it may be best to conceptualize the connection between conflict and relational outcomes as involving reciprocal effects.

Also, in a study using both diaries and self-reports, Caughlin and Huston (1996) found that marital stability over a 13-year period was related to changes in the experiences of conflict over the first 2 years of marriage. According to daily diary reports of conflicts, dyads who divorced and those who stayed married were similar in the first 2 years in terms of the number of conflict episodes. Divorced and married couples did not differ significantly in conflict frequency, and the frequency declined over the first 2 years of marriage, regardless of whether a couple eventually divorced or not. However, retrospective reports taken first when the couples were newlyweds and again after one and 2 years indicated that couples who eventually divorced reported significant increases in conflict over time, whereas couples who stayed married reported stable levels of conflict.

Our conceptual framework (see Figure 5.1) implies one possible explanation for the discrepancy between the two assessments of conflict. The two different measures ask people to report on different timeframes, with retrospective reports reflecting a 2-month period and the diaries a single day. Although one might assume that the retrospective reports would reflect accumulated perceptions of the daily experiences, considering the different timeframes might cue individuals to count conflicts differently. Consider, for example, Johnson and Roloff's (2000; Roloff & Johnson, 2002) notion of serial arguing, which recognizes that conflict about a particular issue can extend past a single episode, with dyads revisiting an issue repeatedly. For a diary measure of conflict on a given day, participants may report only the overt conflict episodes, which means they would exclude ongoing serial arguments that were not explicitly discussed that day. When asked about the amount of conflict over the past 2 months, however, spouses likely would include ongoing serial arguments, even if they are rarely discussed on a given day. Having many (or particularly frustrating) serial arguments could explain why dyads who end up divorcing reported fewer daily episodes of conflict over time while also reporting that the amount of conflict in their relationship was increasing. Even if a couple does not discuss an issue often, the knowledge that

the issue is ongoing and difficult to resolve may be just as important as overt conflict episodes (Lloyd, 1990; Roloff & Johnson, 2002). Obviously, this explanation is speculative, but it illustrates the point that theories of conflict in romantic relationships must consider more than a single episode. Patterns of conflict can develop and unfold over periods of time much longer than the typical observational study (Christensen & Heavey, 1993; Roloff & Johnson, 2002). Future research and theory should pay more attention to the broad temporal issues that are obscured in most observations of conflict episodes.

A third assumption of the problem-solving paradigm is that the sample of conflict behaviors obtained during a laboratory encounter is valid and representative. Much has been written about the external validity of typical observational studies (for review, see Heyman, 2001). The general conclusion typically is that laboratory behaviors are not as negative as conflict behaviors at home (e.g., Gottman, 1979), but given that observational methods reliably predict important outcomes like dissatisfaction and dissolution, there is some predictive validity to observational methods (Heyman, 2001).

Nevertheless, there are growing concerns about the utility of the typical observational study for addressing a number of important questions about relational conflict (Noller & Feeney, 2004). Consider, for example, the difficulties of studying conflict avoidance in a laboratory setting. Individuals are less likely to withdraw if they are directed by a researcher to discuss an issue for a preset amount of time (Kluwer, Heesink, & van de Vliert, 1997; Roberts, 2000). Moreover, much conflict avoidance occurs before an issue is even introduced (Roloff & Ifert, 2000), making it difficult to observe such avoidance.

Even if behaviors can be validly assessed in a single observational episode, there are questions about whether a single assessment is always adequate (Fincham, 2004). Retrospective reports of relational change suggest that particular conflict episodes can be critical events or turning points in a relationship (Baxter & Bullis, 1986). A couples' "first big fight," for instance, can have a large impact on the development of a relationship, leading to dissolution of some dyads and heightened interdependence in others (Siegert & Stamp, 1994). It is unlikely that a single observational period would capture episodes that happened to be the most critical ones; thus, the conflicts that most affect relationships are unlikely to be observed. Unless scholars assume that there are no behavioral differences between the most crucial conflicts and ones observed in research, laboratory studies are likely to miss some of the most important aspects of conflict.

Also, research using diary and log methods has shown that relational partners' moods influence how negatively they treat each other (Schulz, Cowan, Cowan, & Brennan, 2004). Having a negatively stressful day at work, for example, is associated with more marital conflict (Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989), greater expressions of anger from wives, and more withdrawn behavior from husbands (Schulz et al., 2004). Such variation in participants' moods probably adds a source of unreliability to assessments that rely on a single encounter. Given this potential for unreliability, analyses based on these measures may actually underestimate the association of conflict behaviors with relational outcomes.

In short, the aforementioned theoretical assumptions of the problem-solving paradigm may obscure important aspects of relational conflict. In the future, we need more work that (a) recognizes the importance of variations in the frequency of conflict and in the difficulties of problems that couples face, (b) examines temporal features of conflict (e.g., how conflict patterns change over time, how serial arguments are addressed over multiple episodes, and how particular conflict episodes can serve as critical turning points in relationships), and (c) attempts to document everyday experiences of conflict in relationships. It is important to emphasize that we are not just making a call for multiple methods. Instead, we suggest that a commitment to the typical observational design involves making several theoretical assumptions that are untenable and makes it impossible to address many of the questions that are important to relational conflict scholars (e.g., how do patterns of conflict unfold over long periods of time, and how do such patterns influence relationships?).

It is possible that new emphases on issues like the frequency of conflict, temporal issues surrounding conflict,

and everyday experiences of conflict can help address an emerging controversy in the literature. Based primarily on data generated by the problem-solving paradigm, some scholars have argued that the longitudinal impact of conflict is exaggerated (Beach, 2001; Bradbury et al., 1998, 2001). Indeed, Bradbury et al. (2001) suggested that "conflict may play a more restricted role than is commonly believed" (p. 69). These authors' solution is to shift attention to other aspects of relationships, like social support and stressful life events (Bradbury et al., 1998; Bradbury et al., 2001). Although more research in these areas certainly is needed, it is important not to treat the results from the problem-solving paradigm as representative of the overall impact of conflict on romantic relationships. Indeed, the aforementioned concerns about this paradigm suggest that previous studies may have underestimated the complete impact of relational conflict.

Individuals' Influences on Relational Conflict

Conflict scholars investigating how individuals shape their conflicts have sought to explain how conflicts emerge and develop, and have investigated how individuals' cognitions influence the course and outcomes of relational conflict. Again, the literature in this general area is enormous, even rivaling the research on associations between conflict behaviors and relational outcomes. Our focus here is on reviewing several common explanations for conflict and on briefly discussing the importance of interpretations of relational conflict.

Explanations of Conflict and Conflict Behaviors

Much of the work relevant to explaining conflict in romantic relationships does not refer to explicit theoretical models (Fincham & Beach, 1999), but several common explanations exist (even if sometimes implicitly). The common accounts include references to skills, gender differences, other individual differences, stressors, and goals. Each of these explanations has a number of variants; due to space considerations, we focus on general themes rather than the variations. Also, these explanations are not mutually exclusive; for example, Canary's (2003) model of strategic conflict incorporates individual differences, interpretations, and goals.

Skills. One of the most common accounts of why couples engage in communication behaviors that are associated with dissatisfaction is a skills-based one (e.g., Clements et al., 1997; Halford, Hahlweg, & Dunne, 1990; Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). The skills metaphor is implied in the behavioral models of conflict that have been the dominant perspective on marital conflict (Fincham & Beach, 1999). In fact, the assumed connection between skills and conflict behaviors is so pervasive that many scholars treat the phrases *conflict skills* and *conflict behaviors* synonymously (e.g., Cohan & Kleinbaum, 2002; McNulty & Karney, 2004). Explaining dissatisfying conflict behaviors in terms of skills allows for a straightforward translation of research on behavioral correlates of relational distress to applied interventions. If one assumes that distressing behaviors result from a lack of skill, teaching conflict resolution skills (e.g., learning to withhold expressions of anger) seems like a reasonable remedy (Notarius, Lashley, & Sullivan, 1997).

Despite the ongoing pervasiveness of the skills explanation, there are theoretical and empirical reasons to believe that the role of communication skills as a cause of aversive relational conflict behaviors has been overstated (Canary, 2003). Sillars and Weisberg (1987) noted that communicators' goals in conflict are often "complex and ephemeral" (p. 141). This makes it difficult to judge whether a conflict behavior was effective; it is possible, for instance, that a behavior that is considered negative might be functional in a given conflict or might effectively serve a goal other than relationship enhancement (Sillars & Weisberg, 1987).

Moreover, Burleson and Denton (1997) argued that the skills deficiency approach fails to make the important conceptual distinction between ability and motivation. Burleson and Denton conducted a study in which they measured skills directly with a cognitive complexity measure and assessments of spouses' effectiveness during particular communication encounters. They found that communication skills were not reliably associated with marital distress, but expressions of negativity were. Such findings suggest that the behaviors frequently linked to dissatisfaction in relationships "may result more from ill will than poor skill" (Burleson & Denton, 1997, p. 897). Similar conclusions can be drawn from studies showing that dissatisfied spouses evince communication

skills with strangers that they do not with their partner (Birchler, Weiss, & Vincent, 1975; Noller, 1984).

Gender differences. Many explanations of conflict behaviors involve research on gender differences. Two types of gender differences are potentially important: differences in the extent to which men and women enact particular behaviors and differences in terms of the associations between conflict and other constructs. Beginning with differences in behaviors, women in heterosexual dyads, as compared to their partner, exhibit more of several forms of negativity, including demands (Mikolic, Parker, & Pruitt, 1997), overt hostility (Zuroff & Duncan, 1999), criticisms (Kelley et al., 1978), and distributive tactics (Messman & Mikesell, 2000). Men tend to be more likely than women to avoid (Denton, Burleson, Hobbs, Von Stein, & Rodriguez, 2001; Gottman & Levenson, 1988; Kelley et al., 1978). Not surprisingly, woman-demand/man-withdraw occurs more frequently than does man-demand/woman-withdraw (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 1999; Christensen & Shenk, 1991; Vogel, Wester, & Heesacker, 1999).

Although less common than studies examining behavioral frequencies, some investigations have suggested that the covariance between conflict behaviors and other constructs varies by sex. Du Rocher Schudlich, Papp, and Cummings (2004), for example, reported that husbands' depression was associated more strongly with negativity than was wives' depression. Also, women's experiences in their family of origin (e.g., parental divorce) may be more strongly related to negativity during conflict discussions than are men's experiences (Levy, Wamboldt, & Fiese, 1997; Sanders, Halford, & Behrens, 1999).

Researchers and theorists have explained such gender differences in a number of different ways. One set of explanations involves enduring differences in male versus female dispositions. Some scholars have suggested that compared to men, women are socialized to focus more on relationships, which explains why women tend to approach conflicts more while men avoid them (e.g., Napier, 1978). Others have attributed sex differences to evolution (Buss, 1989) or to discrepancies in how men and women respond to arousal (Gottman & Levenson, 1988; cf. Denton et al., 2001). Another set of explanations focuses on the social structure or the power structure of heterosexual relationships, particularly marriages (for reviews, see Eldridge & Christensen, 2002, and Klein & Johnson, 1997). This social structural model suggests that men's greater power relative to women in heterosexual relationships means that relationships tend to favor men's wishes. Women, as a consequence, often are put in a position of advocating for change while men resist change (Jacobson, 1990). A related view posits that gender differences are modified by the nature of specific conflicts; for instance, the usual gender difference in demand/withdraw is evident in discussions of issues in which women typically have the primary complaint (e.g., housework) but less so during discussions of topics that are more symmetrical in terms of who has complaints (Kluwer, Heesink, & van de Vliert, 2000; cf. Caughlin & Vangelisti, 1999). Similarly, when husbands desire more change on an issue than do wives, the tendency for wives to demand more often than do husbands disappears (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey et al., 1993), and sometimes reverses so that husband-demand/wife-withdraw is more common than wife-demand/husband-withdraw (Klinetob & Smith, 1996).

Circumstances in which usual gender patterns are reversed highlight arguments that sex differences in conflict behaviors are often exaggerated (Canary et al., 1995). Effect sizes for gender differences tend to be small, and even where there are significant sex differences, there also are similarities; for example, even though Messman and Mikesell (2000) found that women in dating dyads engaged in more distributive tactics than did men, both women and men engaged in more integrative tactics than distributive ones. Such findings are not surprising given the growing evidence that male and female communicators in relationships are more similar than they are different (e.g., Canary & Hause, 1993; Vangelisti & Daly, 1997).

Despite the evidence that gender differences in conflict sometimes are exaggerated, researchers often inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes about men and women. For example, some researchers have failed to analyze conflict behaviors that run counter to stereotypes (e.g., husbands demanding and wives withdrawing), even though attending to such behaviors can be theoretically important (see Caughlin, 2002). In the case of

demand/withdraw, the pattern of wives' demanding and husbands' withdrawing is more common, but a substantial minority of couples fall into a pattern of husbands' demanding and wives' withdrawing (Denton et al., 2001; Feldman & Ridley, 2000; Vogel et al., 1999). Further, husband-demand/wife-withdraw is associated with consequential outcomes like relational dissatisfaction (Caughlin, 2002; Caughlin & Huston, 2002; Heavey et al., 1995) and relational violence (Eldridge & Christensen, 2002; Feldman & Ridley, 2000).

Given the findings suggesting that gender differences in conflict are often exaggerated, what accounts for the persistent belief that the discrepancies between men and women in conflict are large? One possible explanation is that marital conflict behaviors are usually similar but certain conditions amplify the small differences that do exist. This possibility is suggested by Schulz et al.'s (2004) diary study, which found no overall differences between husbands' and wives' expressions of anger, but found that husbands and wives responded differently to difficult workdays. Compared to their usual behavior, on stressful workdays, husbands expressed less anger and criticism but wives acted more angry and critical. This suggests that tension may amplify gender differences that are small under most conditions. Although this explanation needs confirmation, it is consistent with Allen's (1998) contention that small average sex differences can be important—and even seem large—due to salient, extreme cases.

Individual differences. The largest group of studies examining individual differences (other than sex) has linked attachment styles or dimensions to conflict behaviors (Feeney et al., 2000). According to attachment theory, experiences with important others are internalized so that individuals develop various working models or attachment orientations (Feeney et al., 2000). Individuals with secure attachment orientations (i.e., they feel comfortable in relationships) are more likely than people with other attachment styles to enact conflict behaviors such as compromises, validation, and other behaviors that are usually considered constructive (Creasey, 2002; Feeney, 1998). An avoidant orientation (i.e., the extent to which one is uncomfortable with closeness and finds it difficult to depend on others) has been linked to low levels of warmth and supportiveness (Feeney et al., 2000; Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996) and high levels of negativity (Creasey, Kershaw, & Boston, 1999). Finally, anxious-ambivalent orientations (which involve strong desires for closeness with fears of rejection) have also been linked to negativity and to dominating and coercive tactics (Creasey et al., 1999; Simpson et al., 1996), particularly when the person is rejected during the interaction (Feeney, 1998). Although attachment orientations typically are conceptualized as having an enduring influence on relationships and behaviors in those relationships, there is evidence that the association between conflict and attachment is reciprocal. Ruvolo, Fabin, and Ruvolo (2001) found that the extent to which women reported avoiding conflicts with their dating partner was significantly related to declines in attachment security over a 5-month period.

Consistent with attachment theory's tenet that individuals' views of current relationships are rooted in prior important relationships, individuals' conduct during conflict is related to how they view their family of origin. Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002) studied college students' perceptions of their family of origin and their reports of conflict behaviors in current romantic relationships. Having a family of origin with a conformity orientation (i.e., one that stressed homogeneous attitudes, harmony, and obedience) was associated with avoiding conflicts and with negative behaviors during conflicts. Also, reports of parental violence in the family of origin are associated with negativity during engaged couples' conflicts (Halford, Sanders, & Behrens, 2000). Such studies suggest that experiences in one's family of origin have an enduring impact on how one engages in conflict.

Also, a number of personality constructs are associated with conflict behaviors. The Big Five personality factor of agreeableness, which refers to qualities such as being likable and good-natured, is related inversely to coercive conflict tactics and expressions of negative affect (Graziano & Tobin, 2002), related negatively to demand/withdraw in marriage (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000), and associated positively with affectively positive strategies like affirmations and appeasements (Gonzaga, Keltner, Londahl, & Smith, 2001). The Big Five neuroticism factor, which refers to qualities like proneness to anxiety and negative moods, is correlated positively with escalating conflicts, negativity, and demand/withdraw (Bolger & Zuckerman, 1995; Caughlin et al., 2000; Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000).

Another personality construct that has been linked to conflict is locus of control, which refers to the extent to which individuals attribute outcomes to their own internal qualities (e.g., their efforts and abilities) or external qualities (e.g., situational factors). Canary, Cunningham, and Cody (1988) developed a measure to assess locus of control pertaining to conflicts, and found that an internal conflict locus of control is associated positively with the use of integrative conflict strategies, whereas an external locus of control is associated positively with avoidance tactics and forms of negativity like sarcasm and extended denial. Along similar lines, Miller, Lefcourt, Holmes, Ware, and Saleh (1986) found that internal marriage locus of control (which concerns the locus of control regarding marital satisfaction) was related positively to open, direct conflict engagement and to judges' ratings of the effectiveness of solutions to a problem-solving exercise. Also, married partners' internal conflict locus of control is inversely related to the extent to which they engage in demand/withdraw (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000).

Stress. Although less common than the other explanations listed here, there is growing interest linking romantic partners' experiences of stressful circumstances to conflict. As noted above, spouses' experiences of work stress affect conflict (Bolger et al., 1989; Schulz et al., 2004). Some researchers have begun to link experiences of stress to environmental predictors of that stress. Karney and Bradbury's (1995) vulnerability-stress-adaptation (VAS) model of marriage is an example. Because the specific stressors are environmental factors, they are discussed below. However, there is evidence that the influence of such environmental factors often is mediated by individuals' experiences with stressors. For example, when Conger and his colleagues (Conger et al., 1990; Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999) distinguished between external economic pressures and experiences of economic strain, they found that the connection between economic pressure and conflict behaviors was mediated by subjective strain.

Goals. The notion that one's goals are associated with relational conflict has a long history (e.g., Lewin, 1948). Common definitions of interpersonal conflict refer to incompatible goals, and the relational conflict literature includes many references to related constructs (Fincham & Beach, 1999). Still, the goals explanation of conflict behaviors has been overshadowed by a focus on behavioral models, and many references to goals remain implicit (Fincham & Beach, 1999).

Prevalent explanations for the demand/withdraw pattern are a good example of how references to goals are often implied. As noted above, gender differences in demanding and withdrawing are often attributed to women wanting change while men favor the status quo (Jacobson, 1990; Klein & Johnson, 1997). Although the term *goal* usually is not used explicitly (cf. Kluwer, 1998), the clear implication is that conflict behaviors are related to one's goals.

One possible objection to an explicit goals model is that the goal construct may appear to imply that individuals in conflict always are aware of clear goals. Such an assumption would be problematic given that explicit goals probably are not a salient part individuals' cognitions during conflict (Sillars et al., 2000). Although an approach to conflict that emphasizes goals implies that people are strategic, it does not necessarily imply that people are aware of all their goals or that they define their goals clearly (Canary, 2003). Kellermann (1992) argued that the strategies involved in communication are typically automatic. Also, even if an individual is not personally concerned with a goal, many communicative episodes are inherently linked to certain types of goals. As Wilson, Aleman, and Leatham (1998) noted, the possibility of appearing nosy is pertinent when one attempts to give advice whether the advice-giver recognizes this or not. This does not mean that appearing nosy is inevitable; in fact, individuals who attend to the goal of not appearing nosy likely have a better chance of avoiding that fate than do people who remain unaware of the possibility or who do not care about that goal. Thus, the goals people do not have may be as informative about their behavior in a situation as are the goals they do pursue.

Explicit discussions of goals in relational conflict suggest that multiple goals are relevant in conflict episodes (Canary, 2003; Fincham & Beach, 1999). Although there is no single correct way to classify such goals, common

types of goals include (a) instrumental or content goals, such as what outcomes or resources are desired; (b) relational goals, such as the desire to maintain or change a particular quality of a relationship; (c) identity goals, including desires to portray oneself in a positive manner and to allow one's partner to maintain a positive identity; and (d) process goals, including the desired manner of conflict management (Canary, 2003; Fincham & Beach, 1999).

Fincham and Beach (1999) argued that the relative importance of various goals can shift during an episode; for instance, identity issues may emerge during interaction. A disagreement that begins with married spouses both trying to determine how to find their destination after getting lost can shift to one in which spouses are concerned primarily with protecting their own identities by blaming each other. Based on such examples, Fincham and Beach (1999) suggested that one useful intervention would be to counsel romantic partners to recognize when a shift to identity issues is likely to lead to defensiveness and to learn to continue paying attention to more positive goals.

Similar arguments often are made about multiple goals in research on interpersonal influence (e.g., Dillard, 1990). This research suggests that dealing with multiple goals involves more than shifting goals within a conversation: Multiple goals usually operate simultaneously. Although a focus on multiple goals has not been salient in the relational conflict literature, conflict situations can be characterized by multiple goals (Canary, 2003). Newell and Stutman (1991), for example, noted that individuals' confronting somebody about a violation may have the goal of "cessation of an annoying problem, an improved relationship, and a better understanding of each other" (pp. 383-384).

A multiple goals perspective of relational conflicts may be important in two respects. First, considering multiple goals provides an opportunity for a more theoretically grounded notion of communication skills in relational conflicts. As noted above, most conflict scholars referring to skills equate expressions of negativity with a lack of skill, regardless of one's goals (cf. Burleson & Denton, 1997). In contrast, a multiple goals perspective might define skills in terms of the ability to attend to multiple goals simultaneously or in terms of the ability to reframe the situation so that the various goals are more compatible (O'Keefe, 1988).

Second, considering multiple goals can provide a more complete account of conflict behaviors than do studies that only implicitly refer to goals. Consider, for instance, the account of demand/withdraw that attributes avoidance to the goal of maintaining the status quo and demanding to the goal of changing the partner (Klein & Johnson, 1997; Kluwer, 1998). Although empirical examinations suggest that this is a partial explanation, the distinction between wanting change versus wanting the status quo cannot account for the fact that differences in desire for change do not inevitably lead to demand/withdraw. Sometimes the partner wanting change refrains from raising the issue (Roloff & Ifert, 2000), and sometimes this partner may discuss the topic without the negative affect implied by demanding (see Heavey et al., 1995). Also, why might some people who want to maintain the status quo withdraw while others defend themselves? A multiple goals perspective has the potential to address issues such as these. From the perspective of the person wanting change, for example, demanding might result not just from wanting to change the partner, but from a combination of goals that are being pursued and those that are not (e.g., because one is frustrated by the partner's avoidance; Kelley et al., 1978). In addition to the instrumental goal involving behavioral change, people who demand (compared to those who do not) may attend (a) less to relationship goals like maintaining harmony, (b) less to their own positive identity goals (e.g., one might refrain from demanding to avoid seeming overbearing), (c) less to the partner's positive identity goals (e.g., demanding might question the partner's character), (d) less to the partner's identity goals involving maintaining autonomy, and (e) more to process goals pertaining to the value of frank communication during conflict. Obviously, this list is not exhaustive and is somewhat speculative, but it demonstrates the potential utility of a multiple goals perspective at providing a more thorough account of conflict behaviors.

Cognition and Relational Conflict

Because there are excellent extant reviews of cognition in interpersonal conflict (e.g., Roloff & Waite Miller, Chapter 4 in this volume), our discussion is limited to three points that are particularly pertinent to our framework for understanding conflict in romantic relationships (see Figure 5.1). First, although the ample evidence of links between observable conflict behaviors and relational outcomes is impressive, it is crucial to augment such findings with an understanding of how relational partners interpret these behaviors. Individuals' perceptions of conflict behaviors mediate much of the connection between manifest conflict behaviors and relational outcomes (Canary, Cupach, & Serpe, 2001; Matthews et al., 1996). Also, individuals' evaluations of what they perceive during conflict depend on cognitive constructs like their values and their standards for what constitutes good communication (Caughlin, 2003; Sillars et al., 1983).

Second, it is important to recognize the complex interconnections among cognitive elements of varying timeframes. More molar perceptions are not necessarily the simple sum of more microscopic experiences (Caughlin & Huston, 1996). In fact, once broad perceptions are formed, they probably shape more specific evaluations, which would explain why overall relational dissatisfaction predicts negative thoughts about one's partner during specific interactions (Sillars et al., 2000; Vangelisti, Corbin, Lucchetti, & Sprague, 1999).

Third, cognition is usually conceptualized in terms of how people interpret conflicts; for instance, attributions and biases concerning conflict have received considerable attention (see Roloff & Waite Miller, this volume). It is important to recognize, however, that such interpretations influence subsequent conflict interactions, although not necessarily in a straightforward manner. Consider, for example, instances when individuals perceive that their partner has been hostile in previous conflict encounters and believe that the partner will be hostile in future encounters. In some cases, the expected hostility may lead the individuals to begin conflicts in an antagonistic manner, but in other cases the expected hostility may lead the individuals to be particularly positive or to avoid conflicts altogether (see Miller & Turnbull, 1986). Many factors may influence the different reactions to expected hostility; for instance, people who lack dependence power in their relationship (e.g., they are strongly committed to the relationship but perceive their partner to be only weakly committed) may consider potential conflict issues not to be important enough for a potentially risky confrontation (Solomon & Samp, 1998). Regardless of the particular reasons why people would act differently in such circumstances, it is important to recognize that cognitions influence conflict behaviors in potentially complex ways.

THE ENVIRONMENT OF CONFLICT IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

The framework depicted in Figure 5.1 suggests that is it important to consider the broader context of conflict in romantic relationships, but there is far less research on environmental influences than there is on individuals and on dyads' behaviors. When the environment is considered, it is usually conceptualized as operating through individual differences, such as ethnicity and sexual orientation.

Ethnicity

The majority of research on conflict in romantic relationships has used samples that were mostly White. One notable exception is the Early Years of Marriage (EYM) Project (Veroff, Douvan, & Hatchett, 1995), a longitudinal study that examined both African American and White married couples. The EYM project suggested many similarities between White and Black dyads in terms of conflict, but also indicated some important differences. As newlyweds, Black and White couples report similar frequencies of conflict, but compared to their White counterparts, Black spouses report a significantly smaller number of areas of disagreement (Oggins, Veroff, & Leber, 1993) and significantly fewer conflict issues pertaining to their partner's family (Timmer, Veroff, & Hatchett, 1996). Also, marital discord (e.g., frequency of conflicts) is a predictor of divorce for both Black and White couples (Orbuch et al., 2002), but the connection between discord and having a shorter marriage may be stronger for Black couples than for White couples (Adelmann, Chadwick, & Baerger, 1996).

White and Black couples also differ in terms of specific conflict behaviors. Black spouses are significantly more likely to report that they withdraw from conflicts than are White spouses (Oggins et al., 1993). Furthermore,

whereas wives' negativity predicts declining marital quality for White couples, Veroff et al. (1995) found no evidence of a similar association for Black dyads. Orbuch and Veroff (2002) suggested that this finding makes sense because ethnic background not only influences behavioral tendencies, but also shapes what behaviors mean in a particular conflict. Specifically, Orbuch and Veroff argued that Black spouses are more accepting of negativity than are Whites; thus, whereas White couples "might be especially put off" (p. 557) by negativity, Black couples might view negativity as a normal part of a close relationship.

Obviously, there is tremendous room for more research on the influence of ethnicity on relational conflict. Research with the EYM project demonstrates that ethnic background is important, but other groups also should be examined. The limited research on dating in Latino populations, for instance, suggests that traditional values often lead families to restrict young women's dating, which can be a source of conflict for dating dyads (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2001). Moreover, although research on interracial couples tends not to focus on conflict within the relationship, many interracial dyads face challenges like unsupportive families (McNamara, Tempenis, & Walton, 1999), which would undoubtedly influence relational conflict (see the section on the social environment, below).

Sexual Orientation

The limited research on conflict in gay male and lesbian unions suggests that conflict in these relationships often functions similarly to the way it does in heterosexual dyads (Patterson, 2000). For instance, Kurdek (1994) found that negativity (e.g., "throwing insults and digs") was associated inversely with concurrent satisfaction and predicted declines in satisfaction for heterosexual, gay male, and lesbian relational partners. In addition, Kurdek (1994) found no differences in reported conflict behaviors among gay male, lesbian, and heterosexual dyads.

Despite such similarities, there is a need for more research in this area. As Peplau and Beals (2004) noted, "little is known about the patterns of interaction in gay and lesbian couples—the specifics of how gay and lesbian partners talk to each other and seek to resolve the conflicts of interest that inevitably arise in close relationships" (p. 240). More important, the environment for conflict is probably different for gay male and lesbian partners as compared to heterosexual ones. This environment can be a source of conflict that is probably unique for lesbian and gay couples, such as conflicts over how much to tell others about their sexual identity (Patterson, 2000). Gay male and lesbian couples may encounter prejudice from their families and others in their social network (Peplau & Beals, 2004), and compared to individuals who are married, gay male and lesbian partners feel less social pressure against dissolving their relationships (Kurdek, 1998). Given Solomon and Samp's (1998) research suggesting that perceptions about a partner's ability to leave a relationship can affect one's willingness to raise potential conflict issues, the comparatively low barriers to dissolution may affect conflict engagement in gay male and lesbian couples.

Conceptualizing the environment in terms of individual differences has yielded important findings about the influences of particular relational contexts on conflict. However, it does not provide a comprehensive understanding of conflict environments in romantic relationships. Of course, defining the environment and identifying the various ways it affects conflict is no easy task. One way to proceed is to consider the environment on five different levels: the cultural, social, dyadic, physical, and temporal levels.

The Cultural Level

Although there is a great deal of literature concerning cultural influences on conflict (see Part III, Community Conflict, in the current volume), relatively little research addresses the effects of culture on conflict between romantic partners. Indeed, the majority of studies on conflict in romantic relationships have been conducted in the United States. Most of the remaining research had been done in Western Europe, and this work is generally consistent with research that uses U.S. samples (e.g., Bodenmann, Kaiser, Hahlweg, & Fehm-Wolfsdorf, 1998; Hahlweg, Kaiser, Christensen, Fehm-Wolfsdorf, & Groth, 2000; Halford et al., 1990).

Some studies done outside the United States and Western Europe also complement the results of investigations done in the United States. For instance, a study of married Blacks in South Africa revealed that satisfaction was related positively to reports of collaborative conflict and negatively associated with competitive conflict (Greeff & de Bruyne, 2000). Other investigations conducted with non-U.S. samples suggest that culture may shape couples' conflict in subtle ways. In one study, undergraduate students in the United States and Japan were asked to describe recent interpersonal conflicts (Ohbuchi & Takahashi, 1994). Although Japanese individuals were more likely to avoid conflicts, both groups noted that more direct strategies (e.g., bargaining, compromise) were preferable to avoidance.

The Social Level

Within any culture, the social milieu influences romantic partners' conflicts. That is, the presence or absence of other individuals, as well as interactions with those individuals, affects romantic dyads' conflicts. For example, there are sanctions against raising complaints in public settings (Alberts, 1988), and married couples report that rules barring expressions of negative affect (e.g., raising one's voice, showing anger) are more important in public than in private settings (Jones & Gallois, 1989).

When individuals who are part of the social context interact with romantic partners, they influence partners' perceptions and responses to conflict in some interesting ways. Wilson, Roloff, and Carey (1998) found that people often had some negative impressions of their friends' romantic partners and that, about half of the time, they discussed those concerns with their friends. The most common topic of these discussions was conflicts between the dating partners. Klein and Milardo (2000) further found that women perceived their positions on issues to be more legitimate to the extent that they had support from people in their social network. Such perceptions may translate into conflict behaviors as well: Women who saw their own network as supportive were less willing to compromise than were women who thought their network was comparatively unsupportive.

Families offer yet another social context for couples' conflict. Conflict between dyads within the family influences other family members. Margolin, Christensen, and John (1996) found that tensions in parent-child and sibling relationships had a tendency to "spill over" into the marital relationship and that marital tensions spilled over into the other family subsystems as well. These spillover effects were particularly salient in distressed families.

The Dyadic Level

Dyads, like social groups, develop histories and patterns of behavior that influence their conflicts. Siegert and Stamp (1994) referenced the effect of couples' shared history on their subsequent conflict behavior when they discussed romantic partners' "first big fight." These researchers found that couples who survived their first big fight distinguished it from other fights based, in part, on the lack of shared history that preceded it. Siegert and Stamp noted that prior to the first big fight, couples "don't have the knowledge base that is possessed later or the arsenal of conflictual weapons and strategies that such a knowledge base engenders" (pp. 353-354). The shared knowledge that couples develop over time influences the way they cope with and interpret conflict in their relationships.

The patterns of behavior that couples enact also create a context that may shape the meaning partners assign to conflicts. For example, romantic partners who routinely express affection to each other appear to be less susceptible to any adverse impact of negativity and demand/withdraw on relational satisfaction (Caughlin & Huston, 2002; Huston & Chorost, 1994). Thus, the meaning assigned to negative behaviors appears to be influenced by the behavioral context that couples create together.

Moreover, this behavioral context need not be limited to behaviors that are usually thought of as communication. Caughlin (2002) argued that one reason why some couples may increase their satisfaction after engaging in demand/withdraw episodes is that the person being asked to change may do so over time, which would influence the ultimate meaning of the conversation. For example, if a husband withdraws while being

nagged to pick up his dirty socks, the actual interaction is likely to be unpleasant and associated with concurrent dissatisfaction. However, if this husband begins to put his dirty laundry away without being nagged (perhaps even as a strategy to avoid being nagged again), this may lead the wife to reappraise the conflict episode, downplaying its importance compared to the changed behavior. Furthermore, once the husband has demonstrated a willingness to change despite engaging in avoidance, subsequent episodes of demand/withdraw might be viewed differently (e.g., the complaining spouse may be less frustrated because she recognizes that withdrawal during a discussion does not necessarily imply that the spouse will not comply with a request for change).

The Physical Level

Conflict behavior and the interpretation of conflict behavior also are affected by various aspects of the physical environment. For instance, some studies show that aggressive acts are related positively to increases in temperature and humidity (Anderson, Bushman, & Groom, 1997). Other investigations suggest that certain variables (e.g., prior provocation, the perceived ability to leave the setting) may interact with temperature and humidity to encourage or discourage aggressive behavior (Baron & Bell, 1976). Although research has not been conducted examining the links between temperature, humidity, and aggression in dating and marital relationships, such studies could yield findings with very practical applications for couples.

Of course, the physical environment also includes architectural structures and movable objects. In their commentary on the influence of physical environments on personal relationships, Brown, Werner, and Altman (in press) provided a very interesting comparison of people's homes during different historical time periods. For example, they note that middle-class Colonial homes might have had only two lower rooms and an upper sleeping loft. As a consequence, families inhabiting these homes shared most of their daily experiences and had very little privacy. By contrast, Victorian homes were larger and had many separate spaces for family members. Clearly, the physical access that couples living in these two types of homes had to each other, and to other family members, differed. Although Brown and her colleagues did not address the influence of these home environments on conflict, it is very likely that the way couples conducted themselves during conflict episodes (e.g., the strategies they used to avoid conflict) was affected by the physical contexts in which they lived.

The Temporal Level

The analysis offered by Brown et al. (in press) suggests that historical periods indirectly affect the way couples communicate by influencing the physical environment. Historical periods also affect social interaction in more direct ways. Hatfield and Rapson (2002) offered an analysis of passionate love during different times in history. They noted that the norms associated with love and sexual desire at different points in time (e.g., norms concerning the degree to which women should enjoy sex, the double standard for extramarital affairs) greatly influenced couples' sexual relationships. Undoubtedly, these same norms and others (e.g., those concerning decision making and the use of physical violence) also affected the way couples handled conflict.

Within any given historical period, conflict is further shaped by the temporal rhythms of couples' day-to-day activities. Several studies have demonstrated that the experiences spouses have at work predict the tone of subsequent marital interactions (Doumas, Margolin, & John, 2003). Bolger et al. (1989), for instance, found that when husbands or their wives reported having an argument at work, husbands were more likely to report having an argument with their spouse at home the following day. Similarly, Schulz et al. (2004) found that women were more likely to express anger and men were more likely to withdraw if they had negatively arousing workdays. Other researchers have found that couples are more likely to engage in conflict during particular days of the week. For instance, Halford, Gravestock, Lowe, and Scheldt (1992) found that negative marital interaction was more likely to occur on weekdays than weekends—perhaps because of the heightened stress associated with the workweek.

CONCLUSION

The literature on conflict in romantic couples is enormous and, in many respects, impressive. Considerable advances have been made in identifying conflict behaviors and patterns that are associated with outcomes like dissatisfaction and dissolution. For instance, studies have repeatedly demonstrated that partners' negativity during problem-solving interactions is associated with lower concurrent relational satisfaction, declines in satisfaction, and less relational stability. Similarly, dyadic patterns such as negative reciprocity (exchanging negative behaviors) and demand/withdraw (the pattern in which one partner nags or criticizes while the other avoids) have been linked to dissatisfaction, decreases in satisfaction, and relational dissolution.

Scholars also have made important progress in understanding why conflict develops in particular ways and why relational partners enact some conflict behaviors rather than others. Researchers have begun to recognize, for example, that the role of communication skills as a cause of aversive conflict is not as strong as was once thought. They also have found that while sex differences in conflict behaviors sometimes can be explained by distinctions in the ways men and women have been socialized, the differences also can be elicited by discrepancies in the power that men and women typically wield in their romantic relationships. Studies examining individual differences other than those associated with biological sex have revealed that enduring personality traits such as attachment orientation, agreeableness, neuroticism, and locus of control can influence conflict behaviors. Further, more transient variables including the stressors that people experience and the goals that individuals bring to conflict episodes affect the behaviors that people enact.

Although researchers have made great strides in understanding conflict behavior as well as the possible causes and consequences of conflict in romantic relationships, our review and conceptual framework suggest two particularly important foci for future study. First, the impact of conflict on close relationships probably depends on a number of temporal issues that have received scant attention. Although there have been many studies on sequences within particular conflict episodes, understanding the impact of conflict on relationships likely will require more attention to issues involving broader timeframes (e.g., the daily rhythms of conflict, how serial arguments develop over time, how changes in conflict over time affect relationships).

Second, there are sound conceptual reasons—and some empirical ones—to believe that the impact of environmental factors on conflict in romantic relationships is greater than that implied by a typical laboratory study. The ideology that a particular culture holds concerning conflict, the social milieu in which conflict occurs, and the physical environment all probably influence the conflict behaviors enacted by relational partners as well as the effects those behaviors have on their relationship. Taking a more contextual perspective on conflict in romantic dyads is likely to offer many potentially important insights.

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