

BARRIERS IN COMMUNICATION AND CONFLICT SOURCES IN MARRIED COUPLES

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Abstract

The objective of this study is to identify the origin of conflict in married couples. The first step that is followed in this study was to review the literature and to identify the factors that favor the conflict in married couples. According to that, there have been found some barriers in communication and conflict sources. Barriers in communication have been grouped under five categories: *physical and environmental* (factors as the size and arrangements of living spaces and the location of furniture in those spaces has an influence on interaction), *situational barriers* (if employment separates couples frequently the tendency is for communication to break down; also when couples live together with others in the same spaces, lack of privacy becomes a major factor in making intimate communication more difficult), *cultural barriers* (couples with divergent ethnic backgrounds also have more difficulty understanding one another), *gender barriers* (men and women are socialized to be interested in different things), *psychological barriers* (fear of rejection, ridicule, failure, alienation, lack of trust between two people). Also, conflict has its origin in *intrapsychic sources* (conflicts that originate within the individual when inner drives, instincts and values pull against each other), *intrasomatic sources* (refer to inner tensions having a physical origin), *interpsychic sources* (neglect or lack of love, sexual satisfaction, understanding, appreciation, companionship), *situational sources* (include living conditions in the household, societal pressures on family members). The second step it was a meta-analysis; to analyze how these factors affect the communication and the relationship of the married couple.

Keywords: *married couples, barriers in communication, conflict sources.*

Communication between human beings may be defined as a message one person sends and other receives. It is also the process of transmitting feelings, attitudes, facts, beliefs and ideas between persons. Communication is not limited to words, but also occurs through listening, silences, facial expressions, gestures, touch, body stance and all other non language symbols and cues used by persons in giving and receiving meaning. In short, it may include all the means by which people exchange feelings and meanings as they try to understand one another and as they try to influence one another (Rice, 1983).

Understanding one another is an important element in marital satisfaction (Honeycutt, 1986; Tiggler, Peters, Kelley & Vincent, 1982). Understanding, in turn, depends on the extent and nature of the communication among the parties involved (Allen & Thompson, 1984; Montgomery, 1981). Many authorities contend that good communication is the key to intimacy and to family interaction and is the lifeblood of the marital relationship (Powers & Hutchinson, 1979; Stephen, 1985; Witkin, Edleson, Rose & Hall, 1983).

Some researchers have found that for wives, especially, good communication is more related to general satisfaction with marriage than is sexual satisfaction (Wachowiak & Bragg, 1980). Clinicians talk about the psychologically deserted wife who is denied the comfort of discussing her problems with her husband and whose constant lament is “he never talks to me” (Mace & Mace, 1974; Mornell, 1979). Women are more satisfied with their marriages when they can talk about their problems with their husbands and have control over the resolution of conflicts (Madden & Janoff Bulman, 1981).

This does not mean, however, that all communication is helpful to marriage. The act of communicating does not always lead to a resolution of problems. Talking things over and expressing feelings may make things worse. As one author expressed it “Engagement... can result in escalation” (Raush et al., 1974, p.307). couples who openly share negative feelings the other can’t handle may increase tension and alienation (Billings, 1979). As a result, some couples avoid such disclosure, feign agreement or deliberately lie as a means of maintaining marital harmony. Just communicating is not enough; communication must be constructive, with words and timing carefully selected. One study showed that marital happiness was greater when couples employed relaxed, friendly, open, attentive, expressive and precise styles of communication (Honeycutt, Wilson & Parker, 1982).

Barriers to communication in married couples

Barriers to communication may be grouped under five categories: physical and environmental, situational, cultural, sexual and psychological.

Physical and environmental barriers: There is a close relationship between physical proximity and social interaction. In general, closer physical distances are associated with more intimate relationships. This means that such factors as the size and arrangements of living spaces and the location of furniture in those spaces has an influence on interaction. The closer people sit around a table the more likely that they will be friendly, talkative and intimate. Whether couples sleep together in the same bed or in separate bedrooms influences the extent of their interaction. Physical confinement is associated with accelerated self-disclosure, particularly in intimate areas of exchange. This means that the longer couples are together the

greater the possibility that intimacy will develop. Of course, there is also the possibility that conflict and tension will arise.

Situational barriers: Situations can also enhance communication or make it more difficult. If employment separates couples frequently or for long periods of time, the tendency is for communication to break down, with a resultant loss of intimacy. When couples live together with others in the same spaces, lack of privacy becomes a major factor in making intimate communication more difficult. The situational context changes during different periods of marriage and affects communication. For example, husbands tend to make far more effort to give emotional support to their wives do not require the same special support. As a result, the increased closeness reported during pregnancy then declines, resulting in the increased dissatisfaction that some wives feel after childbirth (Raush et al, 1974).

Cultural barriers: Wild cultural differences impose difficulties in communication (Hawkins, Weisberg, Ray, 1977). Such factors as educational and age differences affect the ability of the couple to communicate with one another. The graduate student and elementary school graduate think on different levels and about different things. One possibility, of course, would be for the wife to enroll in college too. Couples with divergent ethnic backgrounds also have more difficulty understanding one another. Words have different meanings, as do actions. People are socialized differently. Persons who are taught to be more reserved have more difficulty communicating in marriage than do others.

Gender barriers: Some barriers to communication are a result of socialized masculine-feminine differences. Men and women are socialized to be interested in different things. Not as many wives as husbands are interested in talking about the Sunday afternoon football game. Men and wives are also socialized to express different degrees of sensitivity. When those who are emotionally sensitive and responsive try to communicate with those who are not, the results can be frustrating. 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).

Psychological barriers: The most important barriers to communication are psychological; fear of rejection, ridicule, failure or alienation or lack of trust between two people (Lazer & Huston, 1980). Husbands and wives will not share experiences if they are unrewarding, threatening or downright painful. They need to be sure of an empathetic reply.

What is marital conflict?

What constitutes *marital conflict* has often been assumed to be self-evident (but see Fincham & Bradbury 1991, Margolin 1988), a circumstance that can be explained by reliance on observed spouse behavior during problem solving as the primary source of data for understanding marital conflict and by a movement away from the idiographic approach characteristic of early behavioral interventions. Two important problems that have resulted are complacency in identifying mechanisms of change, and a presumption that behavioral differences between the average conflictual and nonconflictual couple reflect the destructive characteristics of conflict.

The literature reviewed above, particularly that on reversal effects, has been useful in disabusing the field of these misconceptions. However, the atheoretical bias inherent in the purely behavioral approach to conflict persists. Indeed, the absence of strong links with a broader interdisciplinary literature on conflict is striking (for an introduction, see Hocker & Wilmot 1995), but there are suggestions that this might change. Indeed, several excellent, integrative analyses of conflict have appeared in recent years (e.g. Christensen & Pasch 1993, Weiss & Dehle 1994, discussing marital conflict; Holmes & Murray 1996, discussing conflict in close relationships; Emery 1992, Pruitt & Olczak 1995, offering a systems model of conflict; Rubin & Levinger 1995, comparing interpersonal and international conflict; Pruitt 1997, discussing social conflict more generally). Although they differ in foci and definitions of conflict, these analyses share several points of agreement.

First, not all conflicts are overt. Marital conflict can go undetected by one of the partners and have minimal impact on them. Indeed, early in marriage and premaritally, self-reported conflict is unrelated to satisfaction (Kelly et al 1985), and partners may often make virtues out of faults (Holmes & Murray 1996), rendering potential sources of conflict moot. This observation is critical because it highlights (a) the need to define conflict without a requirement of overt hostility, (b) the importance of assessing cognitive events to obtain a more complete portrait of the conflict process, and (c) the inadequacy of behavior during problem solving as the sole measure of conflict behavior.

Second, 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. However, not all conflicts of interest result in conflict but are instead successfully transformed into opportunities for cooperative interaction (see Kelley & Thibaut 1978). This observation is important in that it highlights (a) the potential for spouses to inhibit or modify initial reactions, thereby transforming hostile impulses in a variety of ways, and (b) the potential

for partners to approach conflict with a variety of goals and strategies, potentially influencing the course of a conflict episode.

Third, conflict episodes change over time. Salient properties of the conflict process shift depending on when one looks. For example, effortful attributional activity is likely to be most pronounced after overt negative exchanges have stopped, whereas effortful inhibition of negative reactions may be most obvious among satisfied couples in response to negative partner behavior (Yovetich & Rusbult 1994), and much accommodative behavior may occur prior to any conflictual interaction (Rusbult et al 1998). Likewise, many conflicts do not involve overt disagreement and may be handled in ways that do not depend on verbal exchange (e.g. behaving solicitously, Rusbult 1993). Finally, overt marital conflict involves some level of negatively valenced behavior, whether this is directed toward engaging in the conflict or avoiding it. These considerations suggest the relevance of many different approaches to the study of marital conflict, ranging from interactional studies to diary methods and indirect assessments of cognition.

This brief examination of commonalities across analyses of conflict already identifies overlooked issues that need to be considered in developing a theoretical framework. For example, covert conflict is relatively understudied in marriage, and we know nothing about the relation between what happens during and between conflict episodes. Likewise, little is known about the way in which reactions to negative spouse behavior interact with recently or chronically primed attitudes or constructs. Nor is there information about emergent characteristics of conflict, such as the way spouses intentions for the interaction and view of the partner change after the conflict has begun.

Sources of conflict in married couples

Marital conflict may have its origin in: intrapsychic sources, intrasomatic sources, interpsychic sources and situational or environmental sources:

Intrapsychic sources: refer to those that originate within the individual when inner drives, instincts and values pull against each other. The conflict is basically not with one's mate but with one's self, so that inner tensions arise because of the inner battle. As a result of these inner tensions, the individual has disagreements or gets into quarrels in situations that stimulate that tension. Whenever any person has irrational fears, anxieties or neurotic needs, these can be the basic sources of husband-wife friction. For example, a wife who has a deep-seated fear of losing her husband becomes terrifically jealous of other women, even if her husband has only superficial contacts with them. She gets in an argument with her husband whenever she sees him talking with any member of the opposite sex. In each of these examples, the basic cause of the conflict lies deep within the psyche of the individuals involved. Usually, the anxieties have their origins in childhood experiences and early family relationships. For this reason, troubles that arise in marriage because of these previous experiences are difficult to deal with. Permanent solutions can be found only when the internal tensions within the individual are relieved (Feldman, 1982).

Intrasomatic sources: refer to inner tensions having a physical origin. Physical fatigue is one such source. Fatigue brings irritability, emotional upset, impatience, distorted reasoning and a low frustration tolerance. It causes people to say and do things that they wouldn't do ordinarily. Hunger and a low level of blood sugar are also potential sources of tension. A painful headache may be just as much a source of conflict as a serious disagreement. Emotional illness also is a major source of friction and arguments. Mentally ill people often behave in disruptive, bizarre ways, with the result that their marriages are often threatened (Rushing, 1979). Even emotionally healthy men and woman have fluctuations of mood that influence their behavior.

Interpsychic sources: of conflict are those that occur in relationships between people. All couples have marital problems, but unhappily married couples are more likely to complain of neglect and lack of love, affection, sexual satisfaction, understanding, appreciation and companionship than are the happily married. Furthermore, their self-image is attacked; their mate magnifies their faults, make them feel worthless, belittles their efforts and makes false accusations. These complaints become the focus of the conflict that ensues. Lack of communication, inability to resolve differences and withdrawal from one another also perpetuates the difficulties (Dhir & Markman, 1984). The intimate interaction patterns and relationships between mates far outweigh other major sources of conflict. Couples begin to feel hurt, resentful and frustrated when they are not meeting one another's socio-psychological needs. Relationships with kin, the community or others outside the family do not affect the couples as much as their relationships with one another do. When 108 couples who had come for marriage counseling were asked what they considered to be their basic problem in marriage, 38% of the husbands and 46% of the wives indicated they had one or more unsatisfied socio-psychological needs, such as the need for understanding, communication, love, affection or companionship as their basic problem (McMillan, 1969). Research also indicates that it is difficult to sort out cause and effect of conflict because of the interrelationship of multiple problems. A husband's lack of sexual interest in his wife has been found to be correlated with quarreling, lack of communication, his social habits, infidelity, his wife's loneliness and his mental health problems and can be an indicator of his general alienation (Krupenski, Marshall & Yule, 1970). A wife's lack of sexual interest in her husband correlates with her dislike of her husband and personal indifference, lack of communication and her mental health difficulties. Her sexual disinterest appears as an indicator of a nervous, upset and alienated wife who has difficulty coping in a situation of stress. Similarly, this same study showed that economic difficulties were related to all other factors (McMillan, 1969). Every marriage counselor knows that the problems couples complain about in the beginning of counseling may be only symptoms or the focal point of conflict. The real causes of difficulties often run much deeper. Sometimes, couples themselves may not realize the basic reasons for their difficulties. These causes often are found only in the understanding psyche of the individual or in the pattern of their interpersonal relationship with one another.

Situational or environmental sources: Situational, societal or environmental sources of conflict include such things as living conditions in the household, societal pressures on family members or unexpected events that disturb family functioning. For example, the more children in a family, the more strain, stress and conflict is introduced. Sometimes a marital relationship remains in a state of relative equilibrium until some traumatic event occurs to disrupt the

relationship. One study of couples who had lived together in basically neurotic relationships for a number of years showed that specific events could disrupt this neurotic equilibrium by interfering with the neurotic need gratification patterns of the couples. One wife seemed to get along fairly well with her husband as long as he paid a lot of attention to her by berating her for sexual affairs she had prior to marriage. When he stopped because he wanted “to treat her better than before”, she had an affair with a man next door to give him new evidence of her sexual promiscuity. The wife’s real motive was that she missed the attention her husband had shown through his criticism of her sexual affairs. In another case, the husband and wife started having conflict when the wife expressed a desire to stop having children after the birth of the tenth child (the same number her mother had). The husband did not wish to stop having children until after the twelfth child (McGee & Kostrubala, 1964). In each of these instances, a specific event triggered the conflict, although the seeds of tension were already present in the relationship. Unexpected events such as unemployment, change of jobs, war, disaster, illness, an unplanned pregnancy, death or a forced separation or more may be enough to trigger a crisis. Couples who are emotionally insecure or unstable usually have far more difficulty coping than do other couples (McCubbin, Joy, Cauble, Comeau, Patterson & Needle, 1980). One study showed that couples who have high levels of tension between them have even more conflict when they are together because of vacations, retirement, illness or reduced hours of employment (Rosenblatt et al., 1979). Is not the existence of conflict that is important to the family, but the methods of managing and resolving the conflict (Straus, 1979). Some couples have a lot of conflict, but keep it under control and resolve their tensions and problems. Other couples are never able to minimize tension or solve anything and so small problems grow into very big ones.

Destructive conflicts

Destructive arguments are those that attack the ego of the other person rather than the problem. they seek to shame, belittle or punish the other person through name calling or by attacking sensitive issues in a spirit of hatred, revenge or contempt. They are characterized by real lack of communication and by suspicion and they often rely on interpersonal strategies that involve threat or coercion. The argument brings up many side issues and it seeks to relieve the attacker’s individual tensions at the expense of the other person. Destructive arguments increase resentment and hostility toward the other person; undermine confidence, trust, friendship and affectionate feelings; result in loss of companionship and engender greater alienation. The following phrases are examples of destructive ways of quarreling:

- “How would you know? You never want to college. You are just a dumb slob.” (labeling)
- “Other husbands earn enough to pay their bills, but not you. You are too lazy.” (comparison, labeling)
- “You are the worst housekeeper I have ever seen.” (comparison, overgeneralization)
- “Do you always have to be so obnoxious?” (sarcasm)
- “I refuse to give you your dinner until you fix my vacuum cleaner.” (blackmailing)

- “If you don’t sleep with me, then to hell with your allowance.” (threat, coercion, withdrawal)

In these examples of destructive quarreling, efforts were made to shame and hurt the other person through deprecating remarks, coercion and threats to try to force compliance. There was a great deal of distrust, contempt and hostility revealed in the husband-wife relationships.

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