

Family communication to resolve conflicts

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Family Communication to Resolve Conflicts Introduction All these reasons that justify an interest in family communication in general also justify an interest in family conflict communication in particular. How persons communicate during interpersonal conflict is of paramount relevance in determining the quality and stability of their close interpersonal relationships, including family relationships. In the marital context, Gottman (1991, 1994) reported that couples that manage interpersonal conflict well in their relationships report greater relationship satisfaction, more love and respect for their partners, and greater commitment to their partners. Similar findings are reported for family conflict. Families that manage their conflicts well have more satisfied parents and children, and children perform better in school and in peer relationships (Sillars, Canary, & Tafoya, 2004). Thus, family conflict is an important determinant of relationship quality and quality of life of family members. In addition, the conflict communication behaviors socialized in families are among the most important behaviors learned in families that affect children's subsequent interpersonal relationships, further strengthening the case for studying family conflict. Finally, harmful communication and child abuse, which constitute the third reason to study family communication mentioned above, are more likely to occur during family conflict than during any other time of family communication (Anderson, Umberson, & Elliott, 2004), which makes a thorough investigation of family conflict all the more pertinent. Despite these good reasons to study family communication in general and family conflict communication in particular, in reviewing the relevant literature, it became apparent to us that is not easy to integrate the literature on family conflict. The main reasons

are inconsistent conceptualizations of both conflict and communication, as well as of the relationship between them. These problems notwithstanding, in the following pages we discuss, first, how conflict and communication have been conceptualized in various studies of family conflict. We then propose definitions of both conflict and family communication that allow us to integrate at least some of the findings on family conflict and to discuss the relevant literature utilizing these definitions. In particular, we focus on the role that conflict plays in family communication at different stages of family development and in different family types. This discussion is followed by a review of the consequences of family conflict and how family conflict affects family relationships and family members' psychological well-being and social functioning. Finally, we address issues surrounding violence in families related to conflict, including factors affecting violence and its consequences. In our conclusion, we argue that family conflict is best understood in the context of more general family communication processes, such as family communication patterns, and point to some of the lacunas in the research that warrant future investigation, including a more careful investigation of the roles of culture and ethnicity.

Defining Family Communication

In the broadest sense, family communication can be defined as all interactive behaviors of family members that establish family roles, maintain family rules, accomplish family functions, and sustain behavioral patterns in families (Vangelisti, 2004). In other words, all verbal and nonverbal behaviors by which family members affect one another and enact their interpersonal relationships with each other. The breadth of this conceptualization of family communication has the advantage that it opens

for investigation by communication scholars all interpersonal behaviors. In addition, this conceptualization makes explicit the fact that interpersonal relationships are complex and that virtually any type of behavior can be interpersonally meaningful. Finally, this conceptualization highlights some of the underlying assumptions about family communication that researchers are making. The first and probably most important of these assumptions is that family communication is a function of both psychological and interpersonal processes (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a, 2004). This means that family communication has an unequivocally empirical component in family members' behaviors that is observable by family members as well as by outsiders, such as researchers or counselors. In addition, however, family communication also has a psychological component residing within each family member's cognition that is neither observable nor controllable by anybody, except maybe the family member him or herself. As a consequence, each family member aware of an interpersonal behavior partially determines the meaning of that interpersonal behavior individually and idiosyncratically, regardless of any intentions by the actor or any interpretations of the behaviors by others. That means that every interpersonal behavior can, and frequently does, have multiple meanings in the family context, without there being a final arbiter determining meaning for all family members. Because family members respond to behavior of others at least partially based on the meaning that they assign to it, coordinated behavior is difficult for family members unless families develop strategies to address the inherent ambiguity of meaning. One approach families use to deal with the inherent ambiguousness of the meaning of their

behaviors is to establish intersubjectivity, or a shared social reality (McLeod & Chaffee, 1972, 1973). This intersubjectivity allows them to interpret the behaviors of family members consistently and to predict how other family members interpret their own behavior. In short, intersubjectivity allows family members to assign similar meanings to their behaviors, to understand one another, and ultimately to coordinate their behaviors. Intersubjectivity, however, is never perfect—in the sense that all family members share an identical social reality. In the final analysis, each family member's social reality also is always influenced by experiences and beliefs that are uniquely the member's own and that are not shared by other family members. Thus, even in families that achieve high intersubjectivity, there is always an element of idiosyncrasy and uncertainty about meaning that may lead to misunderstandings and difficulties in enacting relationships. In other words, family communication is inherently problematic. To say that family communication is problematic is to acknowledge at least three consequences that stem from the inherent ambiguity of meaning and that can be summarized as follows. First, any behavior enacted within the context of a family relationship may or may not be meaningful to anyone within the family who is aware of the behavior. Thus, any given behavior may or may not have meaning for the actor, may or may not have meaning for the receiver of the behavior, and may or may not have meaning for other family members aware of the behavior. Second, there can be no absolute certainty about the meaning that any given behavior has for anyone within the family. It is possible that family members agree about the meaning of a behavior, but it is also possible that different family members assign very different or

even contradicting meanings to the same behavior. Finally, because family functioning requires a minimum of shared social reality (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004), families spend a considerable amount of time and energy establishing a shared social reality by negotiating the meaning of their behaviors. Because this negotiation is ongoing, one could argue that family communication is inherently conflicted. The inherent ambiguity of meaning in families is not only problematic for families, however, but for scholars researching and theorizing about family communication as well. Simply put, to be adequate, theoretical explanations of family communication must account for both the cognitive and the behavioral aspects of family communication. In other words, theoretical models of family communication must be simultaneously anchored in the abstract and immaterial world of cognition and in the concrete and material world of behavior.

Defining Family Conflict Like family communication, interpersonal conflict, including family conflict, has both psychological and behavioral attributes and can be defined in both terms. One example of a psychologically based definition of conflict is perceived goal incompatibility (Fincham, Bradbury, & Grych, 1990). In this definition, conflict is the perception by at least one person that another person is blocking the first person from achieving a personal, relational, or instrumental goal. That is, for there to be interpersonal conflict in this definition, the other person or persons in the relationship do not even have to be aware that the original person is perceiving an incompatibility of goals or goal blockage. Because in this definition conflict is not necessarily expressed in interpersonal behavior, most scholars interested in interpersonal communication employ more behavioral-oriented definitions.

Examples include Cahn (1992), who identified three types of conflict communication as specific disagreements, problem-solving discussions, and unhappy/dissolving relationships, respectively; Donohue and Kolt (1992), who defined conflict " as a situation in which interdependent people express (manifest or latent) differences in satisfying their individual needs and interests, and they experience interference from each other in accomplishing these goals" (p. 4; emphasis added); and Straus (1990), whose Conflict Tactics Scales measures behavioral manifestations of conflict such as problem solving, yelling, and pushing. The range of behaviors covered by even such behavioral definitions, however, is still very large. In Donohue and Kolt's (1992) definition, for example, conflict behaviors range from " latent conflict" and " problem to solve" to " dispute, " " help, " " fight/flight, " and finally to " intractable. " Similarly, Straus distinguishes between three types of conflict behaviors: " reasoning, " which refers to rational discussion and problem-solving behaviors; " verbal aggression, " which refers to behaviors intended to hurt the other symbolically; and " violence, " which refers to behaviors enacted to inflict physical pain and/or injury. Given this wide range of behaviors covered by the conceptual definitions and operationalizations of interpersonal conflict, it should be apparent that it is almost impossible to evaluate the research on family conflict in a holistic sense. Rather, it is necessary to distinguish between different types of conflict behaviors to fully assess the antecedents and consequences of family conflict. One frequently used way to distinguish between different types of interpersonal conflict has been to focus on the relational outcomes of conflict behaviors and to label them accordingly as either functional (i. e., constructive) or as dysfunctional

(i. e., destructive) (Deutsch, 1973; Donohue & Kolt, 1992). Such a distinction is meaningful as long as it can be assumed that there are conflict behaviors that fairly consistently lead to positive outcomes and conflict behaviors that fairly consistently lead to negative outcomes. This distinction is often motivated by the desire of the researchers to identify and teach “ideal” communication and relationship skills. Because of the already discussed ambiguity of meaning of behaviors, however, such an assumption can be a weak one at best. Nonetheless, research on constructive and destructive conflict communication has led to the identification of teachable conflict communication skills that often do have positive relational outcomes and that allow families to improve the quality of their problem solving and ultimately their interpersonal relationships (e. g., Christensen & Jacobson, 2000; Donohue & Kolt, 1992; Gottman, 1994). In addition to the inherent ambiguity of conflict behaviors, another important problem in identifying constructive versus destructive conflict behaviors is that the standards by which conflict behavior is determined to be either constructive or destructive also are far from unambiguous. Whereas it is relatively easy to make theoretical distinctions that employ fairly abstract concepts such as “interest versus needs centered” and “bolstering versus compromising interdependence” (Donohue & Kolt, 1992), when labeling conflict as either constructive or destructive, judging concrete behaviors using the same abstract concepts is much more difficult. In addition, it is not entirely possible to separate the relational outcomes of conflict from its material or practical outcomes. Although process does matter, persons' relationship commitment and satisfaction is at least partially dependent on the extent to

which they are able to obtain desired material or practical outcomes from their interpersonal conflicts. Thus, whether conflict is ultimately constructive also depends on whether conflict is judged using a long or short-term perspective; whether these outcomes are psychological, behavioral, or relational; and finally, from whose perspective the outcomes are judged. As we suggested earlier, at the root of many family conflicts are incompatible goals or interests of family members, making it almost inevitable that any outcome has to be evaluated differently depending on whose perspective is used when making the evaluation. An alternative way to distinguish between different types of conflict is based on observable qualities of behaviors rather than more abstract qualities such as psychological, behavioral, and relational outcomes. For example, Straus (1990), in his work on interpersonal conflict, distinguished between reasoning, verbal aggression, and violence as types of conflict behaviors. Although in much of his work Straus is dedicated to demonstrating different outcomes associated with these conflict behaviors, the distinction is made based on an evaluation of the behaviors themselves, not necessarily their outcomes. That is, even though Straus uses the probable outcomes of conflict behaviors to make arguments for the use of reasoning and against the use of verbal aggression and violence, his rejection of verbal aggression and physical violence is based as much on negative moral evaluations of the behaviors themselves as on the negative outcomes of the behaviors. In this view, for example, the verbal abuse or beating of children is rejected based on the immorality of the behavior itself, independently of whether those behaviors actually harm the child's self-esteem or social functioning. Of course, how moral a behavior is always also

depends on its consequences, but not exclusively so. Thus, verbal aggression against a child is immoral partially because it has negative consequences for the child, but not for that reason alone. Verbal aggression is immoral simply because it attempts to hurt a weaker person, which violates fundamental assumptions about justice and fairness. Differentiating between reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical violence, which essentially groups behaviors into categories along an intensity dimension, is not the only way to distinguish between overt conflict communication behaviors. Sillars et al. (2004), in a recent review of family and marital conflict, classified different types of conflict behaviors identified by other researchers as falling into four types based on two underlying dimensions. In their model, the first dimension distinguishes direct from indirect communication, and the second dimension distinguishes cooperative from competitive communication. The four resulting types are negotiation (direct and cooperative), which includes behaviors such as agreement, analytic remarks, communication talk, description, expressing, problem solving, summarizing, and validating; direct fighting (direct and competitive), which includes behaviors such as blaming, coercive acts, confrontation, disagreement, invalidation, and rejecting acts; nonconfrontation (indirect and cooperative), which includes behaviors such as facilitation, irreverent remarks, resolving acts, and topic management; and indirect fighting (indirect and competitive), which includes behaviors such as denial, equivocation, dysphoric affect, and withdrawal. As in Straus's (1990) typology, conflict types are determined based on observed communication behavior and not on the perceived desirableness of the outcomes, although

direct and cooperative communication is generally viewed to lead to more positive outcomes than indirect and/or competitive communication. As this short review demonstrates, it is possible to define conflict variously in both psychological and behavioral terms. Each approach has its own distinct strengths and weaknesses, and no one definition of conflict and conflict behaviors is unequivocally superior. In the context of family communication, however, there seems to be a preference for definitions of conflict based on behavior over definitions based on psychological or otherwise unobservable outcomes. The main reason, in our estimation, is that behavioral definitions avoid having to deal with the inherent ambiguousness of meaning of communicative behaviors because their empirical nature allows them to be assessed fairly objectively from the perspective of a third-party observer rather than having to rely on the perceptions and biases of individual family members. In addition to their greater ecological validity, the clarity that results from the empirical nature of behavioral definitions makes it possible to compare research stemming from various academic disciplines, which facilitates theory building and testing and increases researchers' abilities to advance their knowledge of family conflict. Our own inclination is to conceptualize and define conflict generally, in its broadest terms, which means including both its cognitive and behavioral aspects, because it is consistent with our similarly broad definition of family communication. Of course, at times it will be necessary to use more narrow definitions of conflict to investigate specific phenomena or test particular hypotheses. But this should not be a problem as long as such more narrow definitions and their limitations are acknowledged from the outset and taken into consideration

when interpreting results from studies employing such definitions. Having defined family communication and conflict, it is now possible to assess the frequency of conflict in families and how conflict behaviors are enacted and learned in families. Frequency and Intensity of Conflict Of all interpersonal relationships, family relationships are arguably the most conflicted (Shantz & Hartup, 1992; Shantz & Hobart, 1989). Not only is conflict inevitable in close, interdependent relationships such as family relationships (Deutsch, 1973), conflict behavior is also more frequent in family relationships (including marital, parent-child, and sibling relationships) than in peer or work relationships (Sillars et al., 2004). In addition to being conflicted, family relationships are also among the most physically violent social relationships persons have. Despite significant changes in social norms that have made acts of severe violence (including kicking, punching, and attacks with objects) unacceptable or illegal in spousal, parent-child, and sibling relationships, severe violence occurs in at least 8% of all marital relationships, 11% of parent-child relationships, and 36% of sibling relationships (Straus & Gelles, 1990). Frequencies of less severe violence (e.g., shoving, pushing, and slapping), which is more likely to be both legal and socially acceptable, are much higher and can be observed in around 16% of marriages, in almost 100% of parent-child relationships with young children (age