

History of conflict within marriage psychology essay



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Marriage is often portrayed as a period of “lifelong commitment, companionship, support, sexual fulfillment and commitment” (Kelly & Fincham, 1998). A marriage perceived to be conflict free is all but an idealized perception of the marital institution. Conflict is dynamically inevitable, and actually serves a functional purpose for the marriage to progress.

According to Jacobson and Christensen (1996) within marriage couples are “often caught up in a circle of mutual vilification, polarization, and feelings of being trapped”, and hence Fincham and Bradbury (1993) purport that this leads to couples viewing “these differences as indications of stable, global, and blameworthy deficits or failings in the partner”. In marriages partners usually find that they have limited problem solving skills, and a low threshold to work together emotionally if there is a conflict (Beach, Kamen, & Fincham, 2006). Also, in conflictual marriages it is seen that there is a focus more on the negative than the positive in behavioural and emotional aspects, and usually this blame is shifted onto the partner than looking within oneself. Couples hence constantly point out the ways in which each is different from the other leading to the conflict, rather than having the perception of commonalities between them which could have led to a better marriage in the long run instead. What happens instead is that such couples tend to be alert to the perpetual decline in their marriages. This leads to an observation by both partners that their marriage is actually at its end by being a pervading unhappy one. The perceptual evaluation of the ending by both partners is what may lead to marriages being terminated (Kelly & Fincham, 1998) leading to bitter conflicts, separations or even divorce. However it is

seen that many couples opt to remain together despite the heightened conflict and unhappiness.

In couples where conflict resolution and management is low, it is observed that the expression of negative emotions like anger and withdrawal is high. Also, repair attempts like admittance to feeling hurt, apologizing or expressing disappointment in their spouses' behavior is low or absent. According to Kobak, Ruckdeschel and Hazan (1994), the failure of such conflict resolution attempts leads couples to resort to emotional pathways that "short circuit the couple's ability to identify and respond effectively to the source of the distress". As a result the solution to the conflict becomes a source of difficulty in its own leading to a vicious cycle of increasingly unresolvable difficulties (Kelly & Fincham, 1998). What is meant that the attempt to resolve a disagreement in itself could result in further conflict leading to a downward spiral of such marital distress.

It is important to look into the domain of marital conflict because it causes serious psychological and underlying physiological distress in both partners (Gottman & Levenson, 1992). Also important to understand the concept of marital conflict is to look at what persists differently in a healthy marital coalition between partners. A healthy marriage does not necessarily mean the absence of conflict, but rather how conflict was contained. Hence containment of conflict is the key. It is true that happily married couples are not necessarily low on conflict issues, but that their conflict resolution skills and repair attempts are somewhat higher than those in conflictual relationships (Driver & Gottman, 2004).

While reviewing the dimension of marital conflict within marital quality, Kelly and Fincham (1998) observed that marital quality has in the past been seen through as a single one-dimensional construct. This has led to a somewhat loss in perspective, a lacking in the in depth a richness of the content that actually gives us the reasoning behind these results. What the goal is to redefine and reconceptualize marital quality as a multidimensional facet. Frank D. Fincham, in his research concerning marital health (1998) sought to reformulate marital quality in terms of positive and negative dimensions, hence providing a bidirectional view of marital quality. It is the demarcation of this view that brought research closer to viewing conflict within marriage from both eyes, for if one is closed depth of seeing from another perspective is lost. From one positive spectrum to another negative one, in essence both negative and positive components exist because of each other and not in isolation. Hence along with factual quantitative knowledge, a qualitative approach to view marital conflict was needed. Thus the from overall construct cause effect relationships within marital conflict to exploring variables that lie beneath and actually form the process of marital conflict was initiated upon.

Negative Affect Reciprocity within marriage

Affect within marriage refers to “ the individual’s subjective experience with relation to his/her spousal behaviour” (Kelly & Fincham, 2006). The identification and appraisal of negativity in the marital relationship is a healthy process in the development of conflict resolution skills within the marriage. Negativity within marriage could be defined as when couples “ emit more negative statements, tend to make fewer positive statements,

and reciprocate negative behaviors at a higher rate during problem solving interactions” (Weis & Heyman, 1997).

Negative affect reciprocity refers to the ability of the couple to mirror and be influenced by each other’s emotional state and mood. “ Negative affect reciprocity is a closely-related pattern” that Gottman (2011) says is the best predictor of happy or unhappy couples. The extent to which the couple is more likely than usual to be negative when the partner is negative, as opposed to when the partner is neutral or positive, are showing negative affect reciprocity. This could look like responding to anger with own anger, responding to criticism with stonewalling or defensiveness, and responding to sadness with irritation.

Although numerous models of affect are available to provide theory on the experience of and process of affect development, there are two important classifications which explain affect. One is the bipolar model of affect which explains how negative and positive feelings are inversely related such as in the circumplex model of J. A. Russell and J. M. Carroll (1999). This circumplex model holds that negative and positive affect are polar in nature and hence ‘ mutually exclusive’. The other, which this study draws upon, is the bivariate model called the evaluative space model by J. T. Cacioppo and G. G. Berntson (1994) which explores negative and positive feelings as independent and separate from each other and hence capable of existing at the same time within an individual (Reich & Zautra , 2002). Explanation of these models would be beyond the scope of this study. However, a brief understanding of the evaluative space model would show that this model explores the processes behind the experience of the negative and positive

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feelings. It is the amalgamation of these two separate feelings, which are viewed from two separate viewpoints, one from the positive affect underlying safety and security, and another from the negative affect component underlying threat (Larsen, McGraw, & Cacioppo, 2001).

In reference to the research within the frame of the evaluative space model (Larsen, McGraw, & Cacioppo, 2009), findings show that the allocation of attention to negative stimuli is magnitudinally more than that to positive stimuli (Cacioppo & Gardner, 1999; Ito & Cacioppo, 2005; Ito, Larsen, Smith, & Cacioppo, 1998). The basis of it lie in the neurological functioning of the brain which reacts more to attributions of distress and perception of apparently dangerous situations which are assessed in emotional states. In research studies by Dr. John T. Cacioppo, the understanding of negative affect bias comes out strongly as the human brain's ability to identify more with negative stimuli, whether be physical or emotional. This acts as the brain's survival strategy to detect threatening situations at a faster rate than neutral or positive stimuli. Also, this negative bias is so strong that when negative and positive stimuli increase, the attention and following addressal to negativity occurs at a faster rate than to the positive stimuli (Ito & Cacioppo, 2005). However, in research conducted by Cacioppo and his colleagues it is interesting to note that each individual has different levels of low or high negativity bias which can make the behavioral impression of the stimuli vary across the same situation for different people. In the placement of neutral to positive to negative stimuli before the actual impression formation of any situation, it is important to keep in mind that in individuals whose positivity outweighed the negative bias more times than none formed

more positive attributions when given with a neutral stimulus before the actual impression formation. In accordance to this finding, individuals higher on negative bias evaluated negativity proportionately much more when presented with a negative stimuli than a person with a positive cognitive orientation leading to more negative attributions of the following distressful situation.

The following example is sought to gauge clarity in the above statements. If an individual with a perceived higher negative bias evaluates a negative situation, for example a verbal altercation with the spouse, emotional stimuli will be negatively distorted as to being perceived as 'being blown out of proportion' because the said individual already possesses this negative bias. This could lead to more negative impressions within the altercation or conflict than actually existing. Furthermore, these negative impressions would lead to faster rate of identification of negative responses coming from this said person's spouse than the positive repair attempts made by the spouse involved in the altercation. Since emotional negativity is perceived as a threat, to minimize the damage, here the emotional hurt and ensure survival, this spouse might respond by either fleeing which is withdrawing or stonewalling, or fighting back which is engaging in the verbal conflict through expression of negative emotions like criticisms, defensiveness and verbal bashing like sarcasm, contempt and disgust. In both cases the spouse is providing negative affect feedback to his or her partner which engages them further in to the negative reciprocal loop. This results in a downward spiral and entrenchment in the conflict, particularly more so when both partners in the marriage possess this negative bias and inability to identify

repair attempts. Such a process could well define why some couples permanently get stuck in conflict.

This explanation of reciprocity from the viewpoint of negative bias in marital process has been explored in the area of marital conflict (Traupman, Smith, Florsheim, Berg, & Uchino, 2011) it can be of significance to understand that these research findings could lead to the answer of why individuals get entrapped within a negative emotional loop because of more attention to negative cognitive evaluations hardwired into the human brain neurology.

Forgiveness in Marriage

One of the important variables identified for conflict resolution in marriage is the ability to forgive (Beach, Kamen, & Fincham, 2006). The ability to forgive is not just forgetting, excusing or condoning what was wronged (Knutson, Enright, & Garbers, 2008). The act of forgiving requires a lessening of negative emotions, cognitions and motivations in a sense that feelings like revenge, resentment, avoidance, anger and rage give way to goodwill towards the wrongdoer (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000; Allemand, Amberg, Zimprich, & Fincham, 2007). It is seen as a process rather than an end result of coming to terms with an issue, leading to effective problem resolution and a reversal of conflict escalation to de-escalation and resolution. This however is only one dimension of explaining the concept of forgiveness.

Theorists have deigned to explain forgiveness by differentiating it from other concepts like reconciliation (Human Development study group, 1991), legal pardon (Enright, 1991) and empathy (McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal,

1997) and hence the true essence of forgiveness is yet not captured. It is important to note that it must be noted that “ forgiveness is not the absence of unforgiveness” (American Psychological Association, 2006). What this means is that forgiveness cannot be defined in totum solely in negative terms like the decrease of vengefulness or avoidance (McCullough, Fincham, and Tsang, 2003).

Forgiveness is present in an individual in degrees, and is like a continuum varying in levels. Increase in forgiveness levels is not simply the process of decreasing such negativity, but also looking at benevolent motivational states (American Psychological Association, 2006). These benevolent emotional states could be termed as a positive outlook which needs to be incorporated towards the wrongdoer. There is a consensus within forgiveness research upon this two dimensional approach to forgiveness. This is what could lead to a proper understanding of how forgiveness develops in process from negative to positive cognitions, feelings and behaviours (McCullough & Witvliet , 2002; Allemand, Amberg, Zimprich, & Fincham (2007). To define forgiveness now would be , according to Enright, Freedman, and Rique (1998) “ a willingness to abandon one’s right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly injured us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her” .

With a view of forgiveness research within the marital domain, according to Friesen, Fletcher and Overall (2005) couples in happier marriages show higher levels of forgiveness towards their partner. Also, in a longitudinal analysis on couples exploring marital quality, empathy, forgiveness and <https://assignbuster.com/history-of-conflict-within-marriage-psychology-essay/>

rumination; McCullough, Rachal, & Fincham (1998) found results that showed forgiveness as an aspect to show very bidirectional, indirect relations on marital quality. Other studies by Paleari, Regalia, and Fincham (2005) resulted in the finding that forgiveness has a direct culminative effect on the level of marital satisfaction and that there is a reciprocal effect between forgiveness and marital quality over time. Fincham (2000) also found “ that forgiveness and marital satisfaction were related and went on to show that forgiveness predicted overall behaviour toward the partner independently of marital satisfaction”.

In the face of these research findings, one could argue that couples where spouses are dissatisfied due to the vicious cycle of increased negativity in the relationship, also including the expression and identification of negative affect, could possibly be or perhaps not be contained by the level of forgiveness present within the marriage? But the absence of unforgiveness or presence of forgiveness could be indirectly related to the respective presence or absence of negative affect reciprocity in the couples' conflict sequence, relegating a confusion as to which is the cause of which? Will a person high on negative reciprocal behaviour lead to a propensity to be unforgiving? Or is the opposite true, where because a person is low on forgiveness and benevolent emotional states, that the negative affect expression is increased? These are some of the questions the study purports to find out.

Also, adding to the line of inquiry the previous given questions posed, it is important to understand the mechanisms behind forgiveness as a process which strengthens the marital bond. There is evidence to show that marital
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satisfaction and stability are effected by a couple's perceptions of their ability to resolve arguments and disagreements (Fincham, Harold &Gano-Phillips, 2000; Kurdek, 1994). Adding to this is fact that if individuals perceive the presence of forgiveness in their relationships, then the perception of effectively handling arguments is predictably presents (Fincham, Beach, and Davila, 2004).

Looking at instances where negative affect and forgiveness are interrelated, research looks at forgiveness as the process which helps couples who are in constant disagreement and conflict shift from “ from a trajectory dominated by vicious cycles to one protected by self-regulating, constructive feedback loops” (Beach, Kamen and Fincham 2006). There are many strategies(Veroff , Young, and Coon, 1997) much more like repair attempts, which couples identify when a conflict is happening like expression of a direct communication, or being frank which is neutral to positive in nature (where acknowledgement of distress of each couple and thus later on forgiving the partner could occur) ; expression of hostility, dominance and criticism which is negative in nature (where there is a decrease in benevolent emotional states of each partner leading to a subsequent decrease in the ability to forgive); and lastly, ignoring the conflict or withdrawing from the conflict (which seems to be in neutrality akin to forgiving , but in effect also contributes to the generation of negative expression in the conflict similar to decreased positive states). This could mean that the process involved in conflict resolution could well be similar to what is involved in forgiving another, but this necessarily does not mean they are the same.

Thus the question arises, that if such processes are so similar, then an overlap in conflict resolution should exist in a way that the insight of forgiving, and more importantly the genuine expression of such could effectively reduce negative emotional states and its expression, thus increasing positive emotional states. The exploration of this line of thought is discussed ahead in the present study focus, as well in the literature view ahead.

Present Study Focus

As research within the domain of marital and family therapy has progressed, looking at the works of John M. Gottman and Frank Fincham specifically in this area, it is interesting to highlight that causal variables within marital conflict and marital quality are progressively seen more in qualitative terms. These are drawn from quantitative explorations of the processes that contribute to the inverse or direct influences of these causal variables of conflict within marriage.

The current study focuses only on the individual experiences of couples married between one to five years, i. e., in a relatively young marriage. The interpretative phenomenological approach hence would be favoured since phenomenology aims at describing the event or experience “ as it is lived by the people” (Crotty, 1996). The current study seeks to explore the processes, if any, linking the interpersonal variables of marital conflict in such a young marriage. First being increased negative affect and its reciprocity, and second how is it decreased and reversed when the ability to inculcate forgiveness is present. Focus of the same shall be on the subjective

perception of couples in a young marriage. Also, if it arises, any process that
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is seen to emerge as being parallel across marriages at different points between one year and five years shall be explored.

On a large discussion on marital dysfunction (Beach, Kamen, & Fincham , 2005, p. 3-6) the increased rate of negative affect, inability to repair, decreased forgiveness and accommodation, increased withdrawal and increased demand, elevated level of violence, lower level of supportive behaviour and an overall level of low positive behaviour are the key dimensions of interpersonal attributes that contribute to a low level of marital satisfaction, a measurable degree of lowered marital quality in the long run and increase in marital dysfunction and increase in the inability to resolve marital conflicts effectively. What is mainly quantified, observed and measured within research is how the presence and absence, and the degree of intensity of these variables have a predictive effect on the efficacy of conflict resolution. The two variables, negative affect reciprocity and forgiveness, are particularly taken into consideration in relation with each other and to contribute valuable significance and understanding of the relationship between the two.

In relation to the expression of negative affect and cognitions, research on observable and quantifiable behaviour like communication patterns which relate to withdrawal and demand, aggression both physical and verbal violence ; and cognitive variables such as intra-individual factors like attributions, expectations , beliefs and standards, command and exchange orientations, and conflicting goals, have been successfully mapped out and grounded the ongoing entrenchment of marital conflictual processes (Beach, Kamen, & Fincham , 2005) . This area of research which gained increased <https://assignbuster.com/history-of-conflict-within-marriage-psychology-essay/>

attention was on the domain of marital cognitions. Fincham, Bradbury, and Scott (1990) suggest that it is “ important to understand the role cognitions play in driving emotional expression, behavioral interactions, and satisfaction in marriage”. Baucom, Epstein, Sayers, and Sher (1989) provided an overview and structure for the study of cognition in marriage. They suggested that, “ in addition to attributions, cognitive phenomena taking place in intimate relationships include expectancies (predicting future outcomes from current interactions), assumptions (how people think the world operates), standards (how the world should operate), and the perceptual process of selective attention (the aspects of an event to which an individual pays attention on the basis of a cognitive schema)”.

This takes us back to the first of the two variables under scrutiny. Negative affect reciprocity was mainly elaborated by Gottman (1998) which elaborates the entrenchment of a couple within marital conflict because it signifies a ‘ failure of repair attempts’. With respect to the second variable, what is interesting to note is that when other dimensions are present as well like increased level of demand, violence, faulty communication patterns, or low forgiveness is present, it is predictive of high marital dysfunction. The question is whether a non existence or existence of any of these factors would seek to contain the other. In this study the focus being the perception and understanding of forgiveness as a factor of de-escalation of conflict , in the approach to contain the negative affect reciprocity process.

Need and Relevance of the Study

Although negative affect, like negative verbal and nonverbal emotional expression seems non conducive in conflict resolution, it actually has a meta-
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communicative aspect attempting to repair the interaction, hence leading to resolution. This meta-communicative aspect includes components like the content of communication, like informing and telling the partner where things are going wrong and a need to resolve the issue from becoming worse. Since couples fail to interpret the meta-communicative content of the interaction, partners then focus in on emotional negativity rather than content of communication. However, within this study the author endeavors to view the dimension of forgiveness within which this perspective changes or is reversed , i. e., would the presence of forgiveness enable couples to see interaction in terms of repairing the conflict rather than just emotionally being negativity all the time? The factors responsible for the metamorphosis of this perspective within the capacity of being forgiven or the ability to forgive are also explored. Also, attempt to explore whether if this attribution of forgiveness within the marriage would actually lead to or not the containment of the negative affect, thus breaking the vicious cycle of the reciprocity of negative emotions is sought to be identified.

Along the lines of this conflict resolution approach, it is seen that because forgiveness reduces the liability to indulge in verbal aggression and abusive behavior toward the spouse, and is one of the most important factors contributing to marital longevity and satisfaction (Fenell, 1993). It may also be a useful indicator of marital discord, and hence could indicate an important resource for conflict resolution and de-escalation within a marital relationship.

Within the Indian context, and also, the gap in understanding the link between these two variables would be explored. The identification of <https://assignbuster.com/history-of-conflict-within-marriage-psychology-essay/>

forgiveness as a skill could lead to better conflict resolution management. Couples in therapy can be taught to identify negativity and reverse the process to better marriage by inculcating the ability to forgive. The study would also provide an understanding into the causal relationship between forgiveness and negative affect reciprocity reduction, and thus reversal if any. If it arises, the cultural and religious uniqueness of participants in the study would be taken into consideration, in understanding how the two variables of negative affect and forgiveness interact.

To conclude, the study would explore the dimension of negative affect reciprocity, and the factors responsible for its reversal when the dimension of forgiveness is stable and present within the marital relationship over time. The study would also explore whether the dimension of forgiveness is primarily a temperamental variable, implicitly present in the couple, or if it is a skill based component of conflict resolution, leading to effective negative affect reciprocity repair and marital quality. Lastly, the study, should this aspect arise, explore the gender differences, if any, are present within the perception of forgiveness with respect to negative affect reciprocity. This is important to bring out any gender specific differences that could aid in understanding why and how such perceptions of forgiveness exist, and how it influences the emergence of negative affectivity.

Line of Inquiry

To explore the reversal of negative affect reciprocity through forgiveness in marriage.

Objectives

To understand the marital interaction encompassing negative affect and its reciprocity in marital conflict.

To gauge the perception of the ability to inculcate forgiveness within the marriage in relation to conflict de-escalation.

To understand if there is an insightful identification of the change process within the participants. This change is indicative of a decrease in the expression of negative affect in the conflict leading to de-escalation of conflict, and also if it alludes to the presence of the ability to forgive the spouse.

To understand any new variables that may arise in exploring pathways connecting negative affect expression and forgiveness in a marital conflict.

To identify gender differences, if any, that may arise while exploring the above.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many a time's couples attribute that theirs as an overall 'good' or a 'bad' marriage, which ultimately influences and determines the course of its survival. But what is the precursor for a marriage to be labeled so? Many couples would believe that a good marriage would mean the absence of conflicts or 'no fighting'. However, as mentioned in the beginning, conflict is necessary to ensure the survival of the marriage not only because it entails developing proper resolution skills necessary to contain it, but it also

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increases the couples' repair attempt repertoires in marital interactions, for instance the usage of humor (Carstensen, Gottman, & Levenson, 1995).

Understanding how Conflict, Affect and the Ability to Forgive are related

In marriage research, the ongoing prevalent theory suggests that conflict resolution can in fact lead to overall positive outcomes in establishing long term marriages. In a review of ' Intervention for couples' entailing therapeutic frameworks successful for resolving couple conflict, Christensen and Heavey (1999) establish that behavioural therapy, cognitive behavioural therapy and emotion focused therapy are considered the best in effects and good results. Each of these therapies addresses how marital interaction can be bettered by focusing on improving the pattern of communication, and especially how to change the way in which couples resolve ongoing disagreements. However, there was a need to understand why these therapeutic frameworks do not have a cent percent success rate.

In response to this, in psychological research concerning marital interactions, research classifies the ' happy' marriages and the ' not so happy' marriages. Gottman (1999) elaborates that the key is to look where happy couples differ from the not so happy couples. Against popular belief, couples who are in conflict most of the time communicate a lot of their distress, almost as much as the happy couples do. The difference comes in the way couples interact during their normal daily interactions, during an ongoing disagreement, as well as what happens after the disagreement is over. With regards to daily interactions, it is necessary to note that a couple's everyday interactions heavily influence the patterns of how conflict is communicated and how it is

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contained. Attempts to repair conflicts not only arise in conflicted situations, but in everyday daily interactions as studied by Gottman and Driver (2004) in their study 'Daily marital interactions and positive affect during marital conflict among newlywed couples'. Their study focused on the emergence of how a couple builds intimacy through everyday attempts at emotional connects with their partner and how it influences couple's behaviour in conflict. Their results elaborated on how each spouses' positive emotional states like enthusiasm, playfulness, and affection influenced each other in a bidirectional way, and also effected the behaviour elicited in each partner during a conflict. Through observation of actual interactions between newly married spouses, it was seen that positive affect emergence in everyday interaction did manoeuvre the disagreement into a healthy trajectory and also effected how each person influenced the other's reaction in the conflict, leading to an upward spiral of containment or a downward spiral of entrenchment in the conflict. The study emphasizes on the fact that it may be easier to teach couples to resolve conflicts by focusing on applying positive affect in everyday affairs than handling them during conflict only.

In relation to the above study Vincent, Friedman, Nugent, and Messerly (1979) in a study on 'Demand characteristics in observations of marital interaction' found that it was near impossible for couples with a high expression of negativity in their marriages to fake a scenario where they had been instructed to be positive and use positive verbal cues in their behaviour to resolve issues. Observers who saw such couples' videotapes could easily distinguish between couples whose marriages were distressed as opposed to those who were genuinely positive. This was because nonverbal cues

implying expression of emotional negativity often leaked through such distressed couples' seemingly 'positive' interactions. This understanding of how positive and negative affect interplay could lead to how such determines the difference between happy and unhappy couples. This could lead to the question that overall negativity in the marriage could as well result in how it is expressed especially when a conflict is going on.

In understanding how such positive and negative affective states exercise control over the functionality of conflict emergence, it is important to know that all relationships exist in a bidirectional state of what is called a positive sentiment override (PSO) and a consecutive negative sentiment override (NSO), a concept established by Gottman in his model of couple's assessment and therapy. These states are present together and not in exclusion of each other, a view supported by the evaluative state model (Cacioppo & Berntson , 1994) as affectiv