

## EMOTION AND COMMUNICATION IN CONFLICT INTERACTION

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**K**ate comes home after a long tiring day at work to find the house messy, her daughter crying, and her son covered in mud while her husband, Kevin, is watching television. Her hopes of spending a relaxing evening at home suddenly vanish and she feels frustrated and angry. She immediately lashes out at Kevin, "What kind of father are you? Don't you hear and see your own children?" Kevin becomes defensive, "What kind of mother are you, coming home from work late every night this week?" Hurt by Kevin's comment, Kate strikes back, "Well, at least I don't sit around watching TV and ignoring my kids." When Kevin doesn't answer and continues to look at the screen, Kate becomes exasperated and turns the TV off to get his attention. Now Kevin is even angrier. "Hey," he exclaims, "I was only watching until the weather came on. I need to know if it's going to rain since I'm coaching tomorrow. You have to control everything, don't you?" The conversation carries on this way for a few more minutes until they realize that their daughter has stopped crying but is watching them with an anxious face, while their son has retreated to sit alone in a corner, mud and all.

As the above scenario illustrates, "To be in conflict is to be emotionally charged" (Bodtker & Jameson, 2001, p. 260). Indeed, scholars have argued that people define conflict episodes based on the emotions they experience (Jones, 2000). Serious conflicts are characterized by high levels of emotional activation, whereas destructive conflicts are marked by both negative affect and aggressive behavior. Conflict entails an expressed struggle between two or more interdependent people who perceive that they have incompatible goals (Cahn, 1992). This struggle is most likely when resources are scarce, when each person attaches importance to her or his goals, and when those goals are hard to obtain (Wilmot & Hocker, 2007). Conflict episodes are often filled with emotion, both in terms of the negative affect connected to the interruption of goals and in terms of reactions to the partner's communication. Although conflict episodes can end with satisfying results, negative emotion and destructive communication often sabotage people's chances for a successful outcome.

This chapter highlights the important role that emotion plays in interpersonal conflict. First, emotion is conceptualized, with similarities between emotion and conflict emphasized. Second, six categories of conflict-related emotion—(1) hostile, (2) vulnerable, (3) flat, (4) positive, (5) self-conscious, and (6) fearful—and the ways each of these types of emotion are communicated during conflict are discussed. Third, John Gottman's (1994) cascade model and Judee Burgoon's (Burgoon & Hale, 1988) expectancy violations theory (EVT) are described as exemplar theories for further understanding emotion within conflict interaction. Finally, the chapter ends with a description of critical issues that need exploration in future research.

### CONCEPTUAL SIMILARITIES BETWEEN EMOTION AND CONFLICT

~~Conflict and emotion share several conceptual similarities. Although the term emotion has been defined~~ in various ways, the following ideas are central in most conceptualizations: (a) emotions occur in reaction to stimuli that threaten to interrupt, impede, or enhance one's goals; (b) affect is the most fundamental component of emotional experience; (c) emotional reactions are usually accompanied by physiological changes; (d) cognition frames and helps people interpret emotional reactions; and (e)

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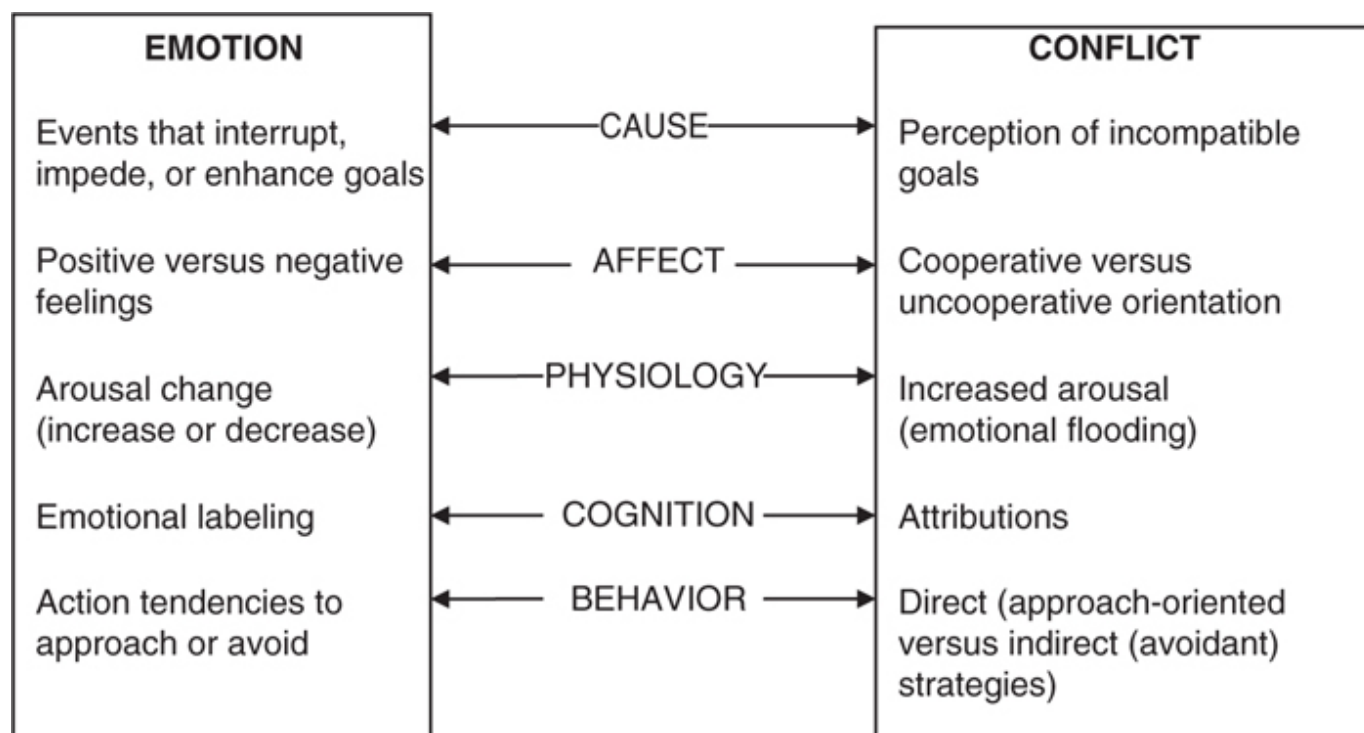
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specific action tendencies are associated with various emotions (Planalp, 1999; Scherer, 1994). Conflict has been described in similar terms, as is shown in Figure 4.1. As the information in this figure shows, conflict and emotion share several features, which suggests that they involve similar cognitions and communication patterns. This is not surprising given that conflict is often emotion laden.

## Emotion and Conflict Are Goal Related

Emotions occur in reaction to a specific stimulus or precipitating event that interrupts, prevents, or facilitates an individual's ability to reach desired goals (Berscheid, 1983; Frijda, 1987). Positive emotions, such as joy and love, occur in response to goal-enhancing events (e.g., Kevin wants a baby and finds out that Kate is pregnant). Negative emotions, such as anger or sadness, typically occur in response to goal-impeding events. For example, Kate might become angry if Kevin calls her "forgetful" and "disorganized" because she wants to be seen as capable.

The fact that conflict involves incompatible goals necessitates that emotions are part of the conflict process. Indeed, incompatible goals lead to conflict because two people are at cross-purposes, but they also lead to emotion because they impede or interrupt one's progress toward getting what one wants (see Figure 4.1). Jones (2000) took this argument further by suggesting that the event that triggers conflict also triggers emotion and that people do not realize they are in conflict until they react emotionally. So Kate may do more than the majority of housework for several weeks without complaining. However, when she notices Kevin watching television all day, she may feel frustrated because she never has any free time for herself. A conflict over the seemingly unfair division of labor may then ensue as a result of Kate's frustration.



**Figure 4.1** Similarities Between Components Related to Emotion and Conflict

Goals are also a defining feature in many conceptualizations of conflict styles. For example, Rahim (1986) identified concern for self versus others as a primary dimension distinguishing between conflict styles. Concern for self involves trying to reach one's own goals, whereas concern for others entails considering the partner's goals. When people are concerned about the needs and feelings of other

disputants, they are more cooperative. In contrast, when people are focused exclusively on their own goals, they are more competitive.

### **Affect Is Central to Emotion and Conflict**

Many scholars regard affect to be the most basic and irreducible component underlying emotion (Frijda, 1986; Ortony, Clore, & Foss, 1987). Baumeister, Vohs, DeWall, and Zhang (2007) described affect as a conscious or nonconscious automatic response that is “no more than a quick twinge of feeling that something is good or bad, of liking or disliking for something” (p. 169). Thus, as shown in Figure 4.1, affect is rooted in valence or the extent to which a reaction is positive or negative (Winkielman, Knutson, Paulus, & Trujillo, 2007).

During conflict situations, affect may translate into a positive or negative orientation toward the partner and the conflict situation. Various scholars have described conflict behavior in terms of how cooperative (or constructive) versus uncooperative (or destructive) people act (e.g., Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995; Klein & Johnson, 1997). Such behaviors may reflect an overall orientation toward the conflict situation that is influenced by the affect a person is experiencing. When intense negative affect is present, it may be more difficult to approach conflict in an optimistic, cooperative manner. Indeed, considerable research has confirmed that positive affect is associated with cooperative conflict behavior, whereas negative affect is associated with more competitive conflict behavior (see Bell & Song, 2005, for a review).

### **Arousal Is Central to Emotion and Conflict**

Although affect is the most fundamental component defining emotion, changes in arousal levels, which are manifest in physiological reactions such as increased heart rate, blushing, and relaxed muscles, are also important. Russell (2003) used the term *core affect* to describe the feeling that emerges based on both valence and the degree of arousal experienced. Scholars (e.g., Daly, Lancee, & Polivy, 1983; Russell, 1980) have also categorized emotions based on their affective valence (e.g., pleasant vs. unpleasant), their level of arousal change or activity (e.g., low arousal vs. high arousal or passive vs. active), and their intensity level (e.g., strong vs. weak). Emotions such as anger and fear are classified as unpleasant and active, sadness is classified as unpleasant and passive, joy is classified as pleasant and active, and contentment is classified as pleasant and passive. Within each category, emotions vary in terms of intensity. For instance, depression is more intense than sadness, rage is more intense than annoyance, and elation is more intense than happiness.

Conflict provides a context that often intensifies negative emotion, thereby making cooperation more difficult. According to Gottman (1994), when conflict contains especially high levels of negative affect and emotional intensity, people are likely to become so overwhelmed with emotion that they cannot react constructively. Instead, they either lash out at their partner or become defensive and withdraw as a way to cope with the high level of arousal they are experiencing. As shown in Figure 4.1, Gottman labeled this process *emotional flooding*. When partners are frequently flooded with negative emotion during conflict episodes, they are likely to be lonely and distant from each other, in addition to being more likely to divorce (Gottman, 1994).

### **Cognitive Appraisals and Attributions Are Part of Emotion- and Conflict-Related Processes**

Cognition is vital in the interpretation of emotion-eliciting events (Omdahl, 1995), including conflict. People make sense of emotion-inducing events by making primary appraisals that involve assessing affective valence and relevancy (e.g., How does the event influence one's personal goals and one's identity? Does the event make it easier or more difficult to obtain those goals?) and secondary appraisals

that involve labeling emotions, determining their causes, and developing effective coping strategies (Lazarus, 1991). Similarly, people make appraisals about relevance and attributions regarding blame during conflict situations. In terms of relevance, people are unlikely to engage in conflict unless they perceive something is at stake, such as maintaining a desired relationship, protecting one's personal safety, or presenting a positive self-image. In terms of attributions about blame, both emotions and conflicts are fundamentally evaluative (Jones, 2000). When people experience negative emotion during conflict, they are more likely to attribute blame to their partner and to engage in destructive communication such as withdrawing or demanding (Tashiro & Frazier, 2007).

Attributions about the source of conflict and the partner's behavior also influence communication. According to Sillars (1980), people make communicative decisions during conflict based on attributions in three areas: the cause of the conflict, the intentions or personality traits of their partner, and the stability of the conflict. These attributions then influence the behaviors and strategies people enact during a conflict episode. In addition, people tend to make more positive attributions about their own behavior than their partner's behavior during conflict (Sillars, 1980; Sillars, Roberts, Leonard, & Dun, 2000), which contributes to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Not surprisingly, people in dissatisfying relationships generally experience more misperception, misunderstanding, and negative emotion during conflict than do people in satisfying relationships (Sillars et al., 2000; Sillars & Scott, 1983). Specifically, Sillars et al. (2000) found that angry, frustrated, and blaming thoughts were more prevalent during severe conflicts and in unhappy relationships.

### Action Tendencies Are Activated in Response to Emotion and Conflict

Appraisal theorists also believe that emotions are accompanied by certain action tendencies (Frijda, 1987; Lazarus, 1991; Scherer, 1994). Action tendencies are biologically rooted behavioral responses that help individuals cope with emotion and adapt to their environment. According to Lazarus (1991), action tendencies are based on three characteristics that underlie a particular emotional experience: (1) affect, or the positive or negative feeling state, (2) the level and type of physiological arousal change, and (3) the core theme related to the emotion-eliciting stimulus or event (e.g., relational harm stemming from discovery of a partner's betrayal or relational benefit stemming from receiving an unexpectedly nice gift). Different emotions are associated with various action tendencies. For example, anger is associated with attack, fear with moving away from harm, and guilt with making amends (Lazarus, 1991). To the extent that such emotions are experienced during conflict situations, various action tendencies are likely to be operative.

At their foundation, action tendencies are related to whether people approach or avoid an emotion-evoking stimulus. Given that conflict is emotion laden, it is not surprising that approach and avoidance tendencies are also a prevalent dimension defining conflict styles, as shown in Figure 4.1. Typologies developed by organizational scholars (e.g., Rahim, 1986), psychologists (Klein & Johnson, 1997), and communication scholars (Sillars, Canary, & Tafoya, 2004) all include a dimension that encompasses how direct versus indirect conflict styles are, as well as how cooperative versus uncooperative they are. While the cooperativeness dimension reflects affective valence to some extent (as discussed earlier), the directness dimension captures the idea of approach versus avoid tendencies.

### CONFLICT-RELATED EMOTIONS

~~Scholars have proposed at least two typologies of conflict-related emotions. Within each of these typologies, emotions are classified based on key dimensions that underlie both conflict and emotion, including affect, arousal level, goal-related motives, and action tendencies related to approach and avoidance.~~

The first of these typologies distinguishes between hard, soft, and flat emotions. *Hard emotions*,  
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which include anger, frustration, and contempt, are characterized by negative affect, high levels of arousal, and selfish motives (Christensen, Jacobson, & Babcock, 1995; Dimidjian, Martell, & Christensen, 2002). These emotions are associated with using more aggressive and controlling forms of communication, such as criticism and defensiveness, as well as less positive forms of communication, such as active listening and calm discussion (Maldonado, 2009; Sanford, 2007b). *Soft emotions*, such as hurt and sadness, reflect vulnerability and prosocial motives (e.g., Christensen et al., 1995) and stem from feeling loss or psychological injury (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987; Vangelisti & Sprague, 1998). Although soft emotions appear to be associated with small increases in negative communication, they can also elicit empathy, increase positive communication, and foster conflict resolution (Sanford, 2007b). Finally, *flat emotions*, such as apathy and disinterest, are rooted in negative affect and low levels of arousal and are related to withdrawal, decreased positive communication, and relationship dissatisfaction (Maldonado, 2009; Sanford, 2007a).

The second typology includes four sets of emotions that are distinguished by whether they are self- or other-focused and whether the associated action tendency is to approach or avoid (Bell & Song, 2005). Emotions falling under *hostility* are self-focused and approach oriented. These emotions “typically arise in response to threats or failure to achieve one’s goals, desires, or rights” and then draw an individual toward whomever or whatever caused them to feel that way (Bell & Song, 2005, p. 34). *Relational positivity* includes other-focused emotions that are approach oriented. These emotions, which include respect, fondness, and empathy, are associated positively with integrating, compromising, and obliging conflict strategies (Bell & Song, 2005). *Self-conscious emotions*, such as embarrassment, guilt, and humiliation, are self-focused and withdrawal oriented. These emotions are also social in that they occur during or in response to interpersonal interactions. Finally, Bell and Song (2005) conceptualized *fearful emotions* as “apprehension related to troubling or hurting the other party” (p. 36). These emotions are focused on the partner and are related to avoidant tendencies.

Hard emotions and hostility are the only two categories that are similar across these typologies. Thus, when these two typologies are combined, there are six categories of conflict-related emotion that can be labeled as (1) hostile, (2) vulnerable, (3) flat, (4) positive, (5) self-conscious, and (6) fearful. Placing the emotions that people experience during conflict into categories such as these may be essential for advancing theory on emotional communication. As Nabi (2010) argued, understanding the specific patterns of thoughts and behaviors that are associated with particular types of emotion can provide insight into what types of communication are most effective in a given situation. She gives the example of using different words to calm someone down depending on whether that person is “in an angry, sad or fearful state” (Nabi, 2010, p. 155). For instance, if someone shows anger and hostility during a conflict episode, expressing remorse and acknowledging wrongdoing may be good strategies since anger is often about blame. On the other hand, fearful emotions may signal that there are issues related to power and control that need to be resolved, so having a conversation around these issues “might help calm [the] one who is frightened” (Nabi, 2010) p. 155). In line with this reasoning, the communication patterns related to each of the six conflict-related emotions identified above are discussed next.

## Hostile Emotions

Hostile emotions such as anger, frustration, jealousy, envy, contempt, and disgust are commonly associated with conflict. Of these, anger, jealousy, and to a lesser extent, contempt and disgust have been studied most extensively. The action tendency associated with anger is to attack (Lazarus, 1991) through behaviors such as hitting or yelling (Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994). As Shaver et al. (1987) put it, “Angry persons report becoming stronger ... and more energized in order to fight or rail against the cause of anger” (p. 1078). When Shaver et al. (1987) asked people to describe behaviors that are associated with anger, most were aggressive. For example, people described *verbal attacks* (e.g., yelling, complaining, and using obscenities), *physical attacks* (e.g., clenching one’s fist, making threatening

gestures, and throwing things), and displays of *nonverbal disapproval* (e.g., stomping, slamming doors, and gritting one's teeth) as prototypical responses to anger. These types of expressions are inversely associated with relational satisfaction. Gottman, Markman, and Notarius (1977) found distressed couples to engage in more behaviors indicative of negative affect, including frowning, sneering, and angry looks, than nondistressed couples. Expressing anger aggressively is also associated with perceptions of incompetence and feelings of heightened distress (Kubany & Richard, 1992; Sereno, Welch, & Braaten, 1987; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992).

Jealousy is also often associated with relationship dissatisfaction (Andersen, Eloy, Guerrero, & Spitzberg, 1995). Jealousy is a unique emotion that is based on the perception that one's primary relationship is being threatened by a third party (e.g., White & Mullen, 1989). As such, jealousy is sometimes a cause or consequence of conflict. Jealousy can be communicated in various ways, with some responses to jealousy more likely to cause or exacerbate conflict than others. Guerrero, Hannawa, and Babin (2011) identified three destructive communicative responses to jealousy that are negatively associated with relational satisfaction: *negative communication* (e.g., yelling, arguing, insulting, and ignoring); *counterjealousy induction* (e.g., attempts to make the offending partner feel jealous too); and *violent communication* (e.g., actions such as hitting, shoving, or pushing the partner). Indeed, research has shown jealousy to correlate with violence and aggression (e.g., Dutton, van Ginkel, & Landolt, 1996; Simonelli & Ingram, 1998), and victims of abuse often cite jealousy as a cause of violence in their relationships. In one study, 15% of participants reported that they had suffered physical aggression because their partners were jealous (Mullen & Martin, 1994). In another study, the use of jealousy-inducing behaviors was moderately and positively correlated with aggression (Brainerd, Hunter, Moore, & Thompson, 1996). Several other studies suggest that jealousy is one of the top predictors of physical aggression among couples who report using violent behavior (Hansen, 1991; Laner, 1990). These findings do not suggest that violence is a common response to jealousy. Rather, they suggest that among those couples who report physical violence, jealousy is a top predictor.

Similarly, expressions of disgust and contempt are two of the top predictors of relationship decline (Gottman, 1994). Disgust is typically communicated by "sounding fed up, sickened, and repulsed" (Gottman, 1994, p. 24). For example, Kevin might tell Kate, "I can't listen to this anymore," or Kate might tell Kevin, "You make me sick." Contempt, which implies superiority, is expressed through "any insult, mockery, or sarcasm or derision, of the other person. It includes disapproval, judgment, derision, disdain, exasperation, mockery, put downs, or communicating that the other person is absurd or incompetent" (Gottman, 1994, p. 24). Saying "you're acting psychotic," "you don't know what you are doing," or "you just don't get it" are examples of verbal expressions of contempt. Nonverbal expressions of disgust and contempt, which may involve becoming silent, looking away from someone, furrowing one's brow, and looking astonished (Scherer & Wallbott, 1994), may also be evident. Indeed, Gottman (1993b, 1994) has argued that even subtle facial expressions of disgust and contempt can be quite powerful and that expressions of contempt are better predictors of marital decline than anger.

Although research suggests that people often feel a natural inclination to act aggressively when they experience hostile emotions such as anger, jealousy, disgust, and contempt, these emotions can be displayed constructively. Canary, Spitzberg, and Semic (1998) noted that "although people might think of a 'model' anger episode in terms of destructive and aggressive behaviors, research indicates that people also respond to anger in constructive and less threatening ways" (p. 205), including using assertive rather than aggressive communication (e.g., Guerrero, 1994; Kubany & Richard, 1992; Sereno et al., 1987). Assertive modes of anger expression involve listening to the partner's explanations and points of view; trying to discuss issues in a calm, direct, and fair manner; and taking ownership of one's feelings rather than blaming the partner (e.g., Kate says, "I feel really mad" rather than telling Kevin, "You make me so mad!").

Similarly, nonaggressive communication appears to be a relatively common response to jealousy.

Across Guerrero, Andersen, Jorgensen, Spitzberg, and Eloy's (1995) qualitative and quantitative data, both destructive and constructive communicative responses to jealousy were reported frequently. Schaap, Buunk, and Kerkstra (1988) examined correlations between jealousy and conflict styles. Jealousy was most strongly associated with a competing or distributive conflict style ( $r = .78$ ), but there were also moderate to small significant correlations between jealousy and the compromising ( $r = .42$ ), soothing/accommodating ( $r = .40$ ), and avoiding ( $r = .27$ ) conflict styles. Only the problem-solving or integrative conflict style was associated negatively with jealousy ( $r = -.21$ ). Thus, jealousy is associated with a variety of conflict styles and communicative responses.

## Vulnerable Emotions

The so-called soft or vulnerable emotions include hurt and sadness, which reflect a focus on oneself in relation to another (e.g., Christensen et al., 1995). Hurt is experienced as an unpleasant and often intense emotion that stems from feeling psychologically injured by another person (Folkes, 1982; Vangelisti & Sprague, 1998). When people's feelings are deeply hurt, they often experience other emotions related to vulnerability, such as anguish and sadness (Shaver et al., 1987). If partners decode these vulnerable or "soft" emotions, they are more likely to appraise a conflict as serious and important to resolve (Sanford & Grace, 2011). Research suggests that having one's personal or relational identity attacked is the primary source of emotional hurt, as is evidenced by work on hurtful messages (Vangelisti, 1994). Vangelisti (1994) identified nine specific types of hurtful messages, the most common of which are *evaluations* (e.g., describing someone's value or worth in a negative way, such as saying, "Going out with you was a huge mistake"); *accusations* (e.g., making statements that show a person's faults, such as saying, "You're such a snob"); and *informative statements* (e.g., disclosing facts that reflect badly on someone, such as saying, "I'm just not attracted to you anymore"). Obviously, these types of statements can cause conflict. They can also be used to try to attack one's partner or defend oneself during the course of a conflict episode.

Hurt also occurs in response to *relational transgressions*, which have been defined as violations of implicit or explicit relational rules (Metts, 1994). Relational transgressions are perceived as betrayals and typically lead to emotional hurt and conflict (Metts, 1994; Vangelisti & Sprague, 1998). The most commonly identified relational transgressions among college students in romantic relationships are having sex with someone outside the primary relationship, wanting to or actually dating others, deceiving the partner, flirting with or kissing another, or being emotionally involved with someone outside the relationship (Metts, 1994). Being dumped and being cheated on were also frequently mentioned as hurtful events in a study by Bachman and Guerrero (2006a).

Vangelisti and Crumley (1998) described three main responses to hurtful messages. First, hurt individuals can use *active verbal* responses such as verbally attacking the offending partner, defending the self, making sarcastic statements, and asking for an explanation. Second, hurt individuals can engage in *acquiescent* responses, which include crying, conceding (e.g., "Fine, I'll just leave then"), and apologizing. Finally, hurt individuals can use *invulnerable* responses, such as ignoring the problem, laughing it off, and becoming quiet. Acquiescent responses were likely when people were deeply hurt by something a close relational partner said, perhaps because their "hurt was intense enough that they were willing (or perhaps forced) to display their vulnerability and acknowledge their conversational partners' ability to hurt them" (Vangelisti & Crumley, 1998) p. 181). Individuals who experience intense hurt may also have a limited array of response tactics at their disposal since they are flooded with emotion. Active verbal responses, on the other hand, were most likely to be used when people were in satisfying relationships, presumably because people in satisfying relationships believe the overall tone of their relationship will remain positive despite an occasional hurtful comment or quarrel. In other studies, individuals who reported responding to hurtful events with integrative communication (e.g., problem solving with their partner), relational repair (e.g., strategies such as being affectionate and spending



more time with one's partner), and loyalty (e.g., waiting patiently for things to improve) were more likely to be satisfied with their relationships and to have forgiven their partners following a relational transgression (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006a, 2006b).

Expressions of sadness can also provide clues about the well-being of a relationship. Greenberg and Goldman (2008) noted that sadness is often associated with feeling isolated or neglected and as such may indicate that there are low levels of desired qualities in a relationship. Gottman, Levenson, and Woodin (2001) conducted a longitudinal study investigating how facial expressions of emotion predict a host of marital outcomes 4 years later, including the degree of fondness individuals feel for their spouse, the degree of negativity in the marriage, and the extent to which participants identified themselves as part of a couple rather than as an individual, which Gottman and colleagues termed *wenness*. Individuals who displayed sad facial expressions were more likely to report negativity in their marriages. In addition, when husbands displayed sadness, both they and their wives reported experiencing less "wenness" later in the marriage. Overall, Gottman et al. (2001) concluded that sadness was one of several expressions that is important in predicting relational outcomes.

## Flat Emotions

Until recently, flat emotions such as apathy, boredom, and indifference had not been studied frequently in relation to conflict. This is somewhat surprising given that flat emotions are associated with withdrawal (Sanford, 2007a), and withdrawal has been studied fairly extensively as a response to conflict (e.g., Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Gottman, 1994). Sanford's program of research suggests that flat emotions are common in conflict interaction (Sanford, 2007a, 2007b) and that people feel neglected when their partner shows an increase in flat emotion during conflict (Sanford, 2010; Sanford & Grace, 2011). When partners feel neglected, they are more likely to experience, and perhaps communicate, hard (hostile) or soft (vulnerable) emotions. Thus, flat emotions can help explain patterns of withdrawal and demand (Christensen & Heavey, 1990); when one partner experiences flat emotion and withdraws, the other partner may experience hostile emotion and become demanding and aggressive. In other cases, flat emotion could provide a pathway to empathy and understanding. Specifically, if one partner's expression of flat emotions prompts the other partner to feel neglected and hurt, the first partner might see those hurt feelings and feel empathy. Of course, for this to occur, the first partner's flat emotion needs to subside or be replaced by more empathic emotion. More research needs to be conducted on patterns such as these to determine the specific role that flat emotion plays in shaping communication during conflict. For now, scholars know that flat emotion is expressed during conflict, that it relates to withdrawal, and that expressions of flat emotions are often interpreted as communicating neglect, which can lead to the experience and expression of either hostile or vulnerable emotions.

Scholars also know that withdrawal is communicated primarily through nonimmediacy cues that reflect a lack of involvement (Guerrero & Floyd, 2006). Specific behaviors related to withdrawal during conflict include less gaze, more head turns and head down positions, fewer open gestures (Feeney, Noller, Sheehan, & Peterson, 1999), more adaptors (Sillars, Coletti, Parry, & Rogers, 1982), and physically pulling away and not talking (Weiss & Summers 1983). The extent that one experiences flat emotions during conflict may be related to how much of each of these types of behaviors an individual enacts.

## Positive Emotions

Several positive emotions, including respect, fondness, empathy, and interpersonal warmth, can be experienced and expressed during conflict episodes. In contrast to negative conflict emotions, which are generally elicited by an interruption of one's goals, positive conflict emotions may arise when the



prospect of cooperation suggests that one's goals will be obtained. Positive emotions may also emanate from the closeness and interdependence that partners share. Guerrero and Floyd (2006) identified two classes of conflict behavior that are related to positive emotion (see also Margolin, Burman, & John, 1989): those reflecting warmth and those reflecting problem solving and cooperation. Interpersonal warmth is communicated through behaviors such as smiling, facial pleasantness, vocal warmth, reinforcing head nods that signal agreement, and vocal interjections (e.g., saying "uh-huh"). Cooperative behaviors that facilitate problem solving include increased talk time, longer speaking turns, a slower speaking pace, fewer interruptions (Sillars et al., 1982), a relaxed posture and voice (Newton & Burgoon, 1990), increased gaze, facial expressiveness, gesturing, and head nods (Feeney et al., 1999).

These behaviors play a critical role in determining whether conflict can be managed effectively. Individuals who are satisfied with their relationships express more agreement and affection during conflict episodes (Revenstorf, Hahlweg, Schindler, & Vogel, 1984; Schaap, 1984). Levenson and his colleagues demonstrated that individuals who report more positive affect and less negative affect are more satisfied with their marriages during and immediately following the conflict (Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1994; Levenson & Gottman, 1983) as well as 3 years later (Levenson & Gottman, 1985). Gottman (1993a) also showed that husbands displayed more affection, and wives displayed more interest and joy if they were in stable rather than unstable relationships. In a longitudinal study of newly married couples (Gottman, Coan, Swanson, & Carrere, 1998), the expression of positive emotion during conflict was the sole predictor of happiness and stability 6 years later. Even feigned positive emotion appears to have positive effects on relationships. In a study by Gottman et al. (2001), wives who expressed unfelt positivity (e.g., they acted happy even when they were not) reported more fondness for their husbands 4 years later.

Research on accommodation and forgiveness also supports the idea that expressions of positive emotion are critical for maintaining satisfying relationships. According to *the accommodation principle*, people have a natural tendency to reciprocate negativity. Accommodation occurs when individuals overcome this initial tendency and engage in cooperative rather than uncooperative behavior. Couples who are in satisfying relationships are more likely to accommodate one another than are those in dissatisfying relationships (Rusbult, Olsen, Davis, & Hannon, 2001). Similarly, McCullough, Worthington, and Rachal (1997) found that empathy helped explain why people forgave their partners following a relational transgression. They theorized that there is a natural tendency for people to engage in avoidance or retaliatory behavior when they are hurt by a partner. However, if the partner apologizes and expresses remorse, the hurt individual may feel empathy and forgive the offending partner. This model of the forgiveness process implicates both positive emotion (in the form of empathy) and self-conscious emotions (e.g., guilt and remorse) in the conflict resolution process.

## Self-Conscious Emotions

Self-conscious emotions are inherently social and involve both self-reflection and self-evaluation (Barrett, 1995; Fischer & Tangney, 1995). Bell and Song (2005) listed embarrassment, guilt, and humiliation as common self-conscious emotions that occur during conflict situations. Of these, guilt has received the most attention. People experience guilt when they perceive that they have injured, unjustly hurt, or failed to help someone. Guilt is a social emotion, because as Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton (1994) noted, a primary function of guilt is to maintain and repair positive relationships. Shimanoff (1984) found that regret (or guilt) was one of the emotions that married couples talked about most frequently. Betraying one's partner, neglecting one's partner, and failing to live up to an interpersonal obligation are primary elicitors of guilt within relationships (Baumeister et al., 1994).

During the course of a conflict interaction, people sometimes try to elicit guilt in their partner. This may be especially likely if one person feels overburdened or mistreated and, therefore, wants to change something in the relationship. Vangelisti, Daly, and Rudnick (1991) examined conversational tactics that

elicit guilt, the most common of which were statements about relational obligations (e.g., “You need to spend more time with me and the kids than with your friends”), the nature of things (e.g., “You’re not going to waste your time watching that stupid show again, are you?”), role obligations (e.g., “As their coach you should be there on time”), sacrifices (e.g., “I guess I’ll have to watch the kids today so you can go shopping with your friends”), and comparisons to others (e.g., “You spend more time doing what you want than I do,” “Mary’s husband buys her little cards and gifts all the time”). It is easy to imagine these types of statements being said during a conflict episode when individuals believe that they are doing more than their partners, or that their partners are not meeting their obligations or responsibilities. Thus, situations of inequity may lead people to either feel guilty (Sprecher, 2001) or induce guilty feelings in their partner.

Whether people experience guilt on their own or because it is induced by their partner, the primary action tendency associated with guilt is to repair the damage (Lazarus, 1991; Tangney et al., 1992). Guerrero, Andersen, and Afifi (2011) summarized research suggesting that individuals who feel guilty have a number of potentially effective remedial strategies at their disposal, including apologizing and conceding guilt, justifying one’s behavior, trying to appease the partner, and engaging in relationship talk. For example, if Kate felt guilty because she went out to lunch with an old boyfriend without telling Kevin, she could confess and tell Kevin that she was wrong and felt badly about her actions (apology); she could tell Kevin that she only met her ex-boyfriend for lunch because he sounded really depressed (justification); she could be especially nice and affectionate toward Kevin (appeasement); or she could tell Kevin that their marriage is strong, so he should not worry about an ex-boyfriend (relationship talk).

## Fearful Emotions

Bell and Song (2005) conceptualized fearful emotions as an avoidant reaction to the partner, which stems from not wanting to hurt or trouble the partner. Such emotions could, indeed, surface in conflicts, especially if one person fears that speaking the truth could hurt the other person’s feelings. However, a broader conceptualization of fearful emotions would also include more deleterious forms of fear, such as avoiding the partner because one is afraid that the partner will leave or inflict hurt in response to a complaint or request for change. This type of fear drives a specific conflict pattern called *the chilling effect* (Rolloff & Cloven, 1990). The chilling effect occurs when individuals avoid voicing their opinions and complaints because they fear that their partner will react negatively—perhaps by becoming aggressive or by ending the relationship. In this case, rather than fear stemming from a desire not to hurt one’s partner (as Bell & Song, 2005, conceptualized fearful emotions during conflict), fear stems from a desire not to be hurt *by* one’s partner. People are particularly susceptible to the chilling effect when they are more dependent on or more interested in maintaining the relationship than their partner is (Rolloff & Cloven, 1990) Solomon, Knobloch, & Fitzpatrick, 2004). High levels of mutual commitment protect against the chilling effect. Therefore, moving past one’s fear and reinforcing commitment can help people break the conflict pattern associated with the chilling effect. Fear is also common during conflict revolving around traumatic events, such as infidelity, with partners worried that they will be hurt again in the future (Greenberg & Goldman, 2008). In more extreme cases, fear may be related to a pattern of violence in relationships. In particular, *intimate terrorism* involves the chronic use of violence as a means of controlling one’s partner (Johnson, 1995). According to Johnson, fear is one of the primary tools that perpetrators of intimate terrorism use. Partners who are caught in a pattern of intimate terrorism should seek professional help. In an interview, Johnson noted that for therapists to “work effectively with an individual couple experiencing violence it would be important to ask them about the power and control issues involved in their relationship, and about the presence of fear in their relationship” (Ooms, 2006, p. 7). Gottman and his colleagues (2001) examined more general expressions of fear in marital dyads. They found that husbands who displayed fearful expressions at the beginning of a 4-year-longitudinal study reported having spent more time separated from their wives

during the 4-year period. Both husbands and wives also reported more physical illness if the husband had previously displayed fearful expressions. These findings suggest that expressions of fear are associated with negative relational and health outcomes. In line with the chilling effect, fearful emotions could signal that a person is feeling powerless in the relationship or lacks the courage to confront the partner about important issues. If this is the case, problems will remain unresolved and conflict (although not usually overtly expressed) could fester and worsen.

## Theoretical Frameworks for Studying Conflict and Emotion

Researchers have examined how some of the specific emotions mentioned above work together during conflict situations to predict outcomes such as relational satisfaction. Two theories, in particular, have also centered on communication patterns relevant to conflict interaction. Of these, Gottman's (1994) cascade model is the premier relational theory linking emotion to conflict outcomes. Although less well developed than the cascade model in relation to the associations between conflict and emotion, Burgoon's EVT (Burgoon & Hale, 1988) has been applied to situations involving emotion (Burgoon, 1993) and relationship transgressions (Bachman & Guerrero, 2006a), and therefore it appears promising for illuminating how emotion functions in conflict interaction.

### Gottman's Cascade Model

Research related to the cascade model (Gottman, 1993a, 1993b, 1994) illustrates the centrality of emotion in conflict as well as the critical role that emotional experience and expression plays in determining whether conflict will be productive or damaging within the context of marital relationships. In particular, Gottman's work highlights the importance of disgust and contempt in the conflict process. Gottman's work also suggests that emotional flooding impedes constructive communication and leads to defensiveness and stonewalling. Thus, the theory emphasizes the connections between conflict, emotion, and physiological changes related to arousal levels, as well as relational outcomes such as satisfaction and stability.

Early work by Gottman et al. (1977) set the stage for the cascade model. In this study, facial cues such as smiling, having an empathic facial expression, and nodding to show agreement were coded as nonverbal expressions of positive affect, whereas facial cues such as frowning, sneering, crying, or looking angry were coded as expressions of negative affect. Gottman et al. (1977) found that nonverbal indicators of affect were a better discriminator of distressed versus nondistressed couples than were verbal behaviors; couples who were satisfied with their relationships expressed less negative affect during conflict interaction than did those who were dissatisfied. Their data also suggested that distressed couples were more likely to reciprocate one another's expressions of negative affect, leading to cycles of negativity during conflict episodes. Later studies further specified how emotion is related to conflict outcomes by demonstrating that defensiveness, stubbornness, and withdrawal from the interaction were more predictive of marital satisfaction and stability than anger (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989).

Gottman's later work expanded on both of the main ideas from this early study, first, by showing that the ratio of expressions of positive to negative affect is important and, second, by specifying the pattern of emotion and behavior that predicts divorce. In terms of the ratio of positive to negative behavior, Gottman (1993a) described five couple types, three of which are associated with stable, satisfying relationships. The first stable type is the *volatile couple*. These couples are especially high in emotional expressivity. They engage in conflict readily, share their views freely, and try to influence one another when they have differing opinions. The second stable type is the *conflict-avoiding couple*. These couples are the opposite of volatile couples; they are low in emotional expressivity and prefer to steer clear of conflict. Rather than discuss differing opinions, they are likely to accommodate one another or avoid conflict altogether. The third stable couple type, the *validating couple*, falls in between the volatile and

conflict-avoiding types. Validating couples are moderately expressive, discuss differing opinions when necessary, and engage in moderate amounts of conflict. Interestingly, even though these three couple types are very different, they are all characterized by about a 5:1 ratio of positive to negative expressions when they are trying to persuade one another, and therefore, according to Gottman, they are all in satisfying relationships. Importantly, then, it is not the amount of conflict that makes a relationship satisfying, but rather the extent to which positive behaviors outweigh negative behaviors by at least a 5:1 ratio. As Gottman (1993b) put it, “each type of marriage is likely to represent a necessary adaptation that ensures a stable marriage, each with its own rewards and costs and each with its own comfort level of emotional expression” (p. 67).

In contrast, the two unstable couple types, which Gottman (1993a) labeled *hostile* and *hostile/detached*, are marked by ratios of about 0.8:1. In other words, on average, people in unstable relationships use about as many negative expressions as positive expressions. Given that negative expressions, which may occur in the form of complaints, criticisms, contemptuous remarks, or defensiveness, can lead to emotional flooding, it is no surprise that a 0.8:1 ratio would be unhealthy in a marriage. By ensuring that positive expressions outweigh negative expressions, couples can negotiate and persuade one another without risking emotional flooding and the attendant cascade of contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Although both hostile and hostile/detached couples are characterized by more negative affect and less positive affect than the three stable couple types, hostile/detached couples are characterized by especially high levels of negative affect and low levels of positive affect as well as low levels of listening. In particular, hostile/detached couples displayed especially high levels of verbal contempt, hostility, and disgust, as well as especially low levels of interest and positive agenda building (Gottman, 1993a).

The conflict patterns associated with each of the couple types are theorized to be habitual although they can change over time. For the unstable couples, the pattern is described by the cascade model, which is sometimes referred to as the model of the “four horsemen of the Apocalypse” (Gottman, 1994). There are two interrelated cascades. The first of these, the outcome cascade, involves the following sequence: becoming dissatisfied with the relationship, thinking about separation or divorce, separating, and then divorcing. According to Gottman (1994), “There is a cascade of process variables that are related to the outcome cascade” (p. 110). These process variables include behavior (e.g., complaining or withdrawing) as well as emotion. Specifically, Gottman posited that couples who are heading for divorce tend to exhibit the following four-part sequence (a.k.a. the four horsemen) during conflict episodes: (1) complaining and criticizing, (2) which leads to contempt, (3) which leads to defensiveness, (4) which eventually leads to withdrawal or “stonewalling” (p. 110). Of course, not all sequences that begin with complaints or criticism ultimately lead to stonewalling, but when this pattern becomes habitual, and problem solving is replaced by stonewalling, Gottman predicts that couples will divorce unless the unlikely happens and they somehow break the cycle of the four horsemen.

In addition to the key roles played by disgust and contempt, emotion is also featured in the cascade model through the inclusion of a concept called emotional flooding. *Emotional flooding* occurs when people become “surprised, overwhelmed, and disorganized” by their partner’s negative behavior, leading to a state of diffused physiological arousal that is often marked by increased heart rate, perspiration, warm temperature, and heightened blood pressure (Gottman, 1994, p. 21). As such, emotional flooding makes it difficult for people to listen to their partners and process information accurately. Instead, people who are emotionally flooded tend to focus on alleviating their negative emotions, often through destructive means such as using personal attacks (e.g., personal criticism, sarcasm, or contemptuous looks), becoming defensive (including using behaviors such as whining), or withdrawing from the situation (stonewalling). Fortunately, expressions of positive affect can act as buffers against emotional flooding. So if Kevin tells Kate, “You mean so much to me that I hate it when we fight like this,” this type of expression could prevent or alleviate emotional flooding.

Kevin and Kate could also benefit by understanding some of the other practical implications of Gottman's theory. Five implications, in particular, are related to the experience and expression of emotion during conflict as noted next.

1. Couples need to recognize that conflict is an emotion-laden process. Thus, partners should expect one another to display some negative affect when discussing contentious issues. They should remember that the amount of negative affect expressed is not as important as the ratio of negative to positive affect. If the balance is tipped toward too much negativity, couples can compensate by injecting affection, agreement, or humor into the mix.
2. When emotions become intense, postponing the discussion may be a good option. As Gottman's research demonstrates, emotional flooding leads to less productive communication and more negative spirals of behavior. This does not mean that conflict should be postponed indefinitely but rather that couples may need time to cool down before they can get back to discussing a contentious topic more effectively.
3. Couples should be aware of the four horsemen of the apocalypse—criticism/complaints, disgust/contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Teaching couples how to express complaints without personally attacking one another may help prevent the cascade from developing, especially since contempt and defensiveness are often reactions to insults. Gottman, Gottman, and DeClaire (2006) explained that one difference between "marriage masters" and "marriage disasters" is that marriage masters know how to complain respectfully without criticizing one another. Avoiding particularly destructive behaviors, such as whining and rolling one's eyes, can also be helpful.
4. Gottman et al. (2006) also noted that partners need to accept and respond positively to one another's emotional bids. This may be especially true during conflict when people have a tendency to notice and respond to negative behaviors more than positive behaviors (Gaelick, Brodenshauser, & Wyer, 1985). So if Kevin tells Kate that he has felt a need to relax at home lately because he has been under extra pressure at work, Kate should respond positively to his emotional bid, perhaps by touching Kevin's arm and saying she understands.
5. Finally, being able to decode neutral and positive emotions accurately (rather than mistaking them for negative expressions) appears to be a particularly critical skill. Fruzzetti and Iverson (2006) found that accuracy in decoding one another's emotions during conflict was positively related to high-quality communication and the ability to reach a resolution for married couples. Gottman's (1994) work also suggests that it is imperative that partners be able to put themselves in the other's position by creating mental maps of the partner's thoughts and feelings and then verifying why the partner feels a particular way. Too often, relational partners think that they know one another's thoughts and feelings when in truth they are making misattributions. For example, if Kevin understands that Kate is yelling because she is frustrated rather than because she thinks he is lazy, he might be less defensive and display more supportiveness.

## Expectancy Violations Theory

Similar to Gottman's theory, EVT predicts that people can break negative cycles of conflict communication by engaging in positive, compensatory behavior in response to a partner's hostility. Thus, EVT provides a framework for explaining sequences of communicative behavior, including reciprocity and compensation, which occur in response to unexpected events that can lead to or occur during conflict. According to Burgoon's EVT (Burgoon & Hale, 1988) Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman, 1995), people hold both predictive and prescriptive expectancies for people's behavior. Predictive

expectancies involve knowing how a person tends to act in a particular situation. For instance, based on his past behavior, Kate might expect Kevin to kiss her good-bye as they both depart for work in the morning. Prescriptive expectancies, on the other hand, involve expecting someone to conform to general rules of social appropriateness. So, once at work, Kate might expect to shake hands with a new business associate when meeting her for the first time.

According to Burgoon's (1983, 1993) theory, expectations help regulate both emotion and behavior. When someone's behavior is perceived to exceed expectations, positive emotions and reciprocal behavior likely follow (e.g., Kevin gives Kate an especially nice kiss; she feels positive affect and hugs him longer than usual). In contrast, when someone's behavior is perceived to fall short of expectations, negative emotions likely follow (e.g., Kate's new coworker ignores her extended hand). In some cases, people compensate in response to negative expectancy violations; in other cases, they reciprocate and a cycle of negative behavior ensues.

Whether people compensate or reciprocate depends in part on the reward value of the person who committed the expectancy violation (e.g., how attractive or how high or low in status). If the person is unrewarding, then her or his negative behavior will likely be reciprocated (e.g., Kate's new coworker is an intern, so she frowns and looks away when her extended hand is ignored). If the person is highly rewarding, then her or his negative behavior will likely be compensated, at least initially (e.g., Kate's new coworker is of high status, so she smiles despite feeling snubbed when her attempt to shake hands fails). However, if the rewarding person persists in exhibiting negative behavior, the receiver is likely to experience increased negative affect and eventually reciprocate.

EVT is applicable to conflict situations. Afifi and Metts (1998) had people recall something a friend or romantic partner did that violated their expectations. Positive expectancy violations included relationship escalation (e.g., saying "I love you"), acts of devotion (e.g., helping the partner through a crisis), and gestures of inclusion (e.g., extending an invitation to meet one's family). Negative expectancy violations included criticism or accusations (e.g., insulting someone), relationship de-escalation (e.g., spending less time together), transgressions (e.g., being unfaithful or deceitful), and acts of disregard (e.g., forgetting an important occasion). Obviously, these negative expectancy violations can also lead to conflict as well as emotions such as anger and guilt.

EVT has also been applied to the study of relational transgressions and hurtful events. Drawing from EVT, Bachman and Guerrero (2006a) predicted that reward value and negative valence (i.e., the degree to which the event negatively violated expectancies) would associate with communicative responses to hurtful events. They found that people were most likely to use integrative communication (i.e., problem solving) when the relationship was rewarding and the event constituted a relatively mild transgression. Conversely, when people rated their relationships as unrewarding prior to the hurtful event, they tended to report using de-escalation, distributive communication (e.g., yelling, making accusatory statements), and vengeful behavior. When people perceived the hurtful event as a severe relational transgression, they were more likely to report using de-escalation, distributive communication, and active distancing (e.g., ignoring or stonewalling their partner). Perhaps surprisingly, Bachman and Guerrero (2006a) also found that people reported a tendency toward using constructive rather than destructive responses when they were deeply hurt by the partner's actions. Similarly, Lukasik (2001) found that adolescents who were deeply hurt by something a friend said or did during conflict were more likely to forgive the friend. These findings may indicate that people tend to be the most hurt when someone they care about makes cruel remarks or engages in relational transgressions toward them; because they care about the errant partner, they may attempt to use constructive rather than destructive communication. Such an explanation is consistent with principles from EVT, which suggest that people are more likely to respond to negative expectancy violations positively when the violator is rewarding.

Despite this tendency, the predominant pattern is to reciprocate negative behavior (Burgoon et al., 1995). This may be because negative emotions surface when someone fails to meet expectations. So if

Kevin expects Kate to help entertain his friends when they come over to watch football, he will likely become angry if she goes upstairs and ignores them. In such a case, the same behavior that produces an expectancy violation also produces an aversive emotional response, which in turn can lead to conflict and negative behavior, such as defensiveness or accusations. Rusbult, Drigotas, and Verette (1994) claimed that it is very difficult for people to accommodate their partners and break negative cycles of behavior when they are experiencing negative emotion.

Of course, within the context of conflict interaction, the threshold for what counts as an expectancy violation may shift. Angry words and harsh vocal tones may be expected during conflict, even though they are unexpected in other contexts. For couples in distressed relationships, it may become increasingly difficult to violate one another's expectations during the course of a conflict because negative spirals of behavior are expected. During conflict, behaviors such as speaking in a neutral tone, giving the partner a compliment, or failing to respond to a personal insult may sometime violate expectations more than negative behaviors. Thus, a starting point for research on conflict from an EVT framework may be to determine what behaviors typically constitute positive and negative violations during conflict. Behaviors that are perceived to violate expectations positively may help stop destructive cycles of communication.

The extent to which a behavior is perceived to be an expectancy violation also helps predict whether or not forgiveness is forthcoming. Guerrero and Bachman (2010) used principles from EVT and Rusbult's (1983) investment model (IM) to predict forgiveness and forgiving communication following relational transgressions in dating relationships. Individuals were surveyed before and after a relational transgression occurred. Victims were likely to report granting forgiveness if they had previously rated their relationship as rewarding (among other characteristics) and currently perceived the transgression to be relatively mild. Variables from EVT and the IM also predicted the types of forgiving communication that participants reported using (if any). For example, conditional forgiveness (e.g., forgiveness that is contingent on meeting demands) was likely when participants reported having a rewarding relationship, having few good alternatives outside their current relationship, and evaluating the transgression as relatively severe. These individuals likely feel torn regarding whether or not to forgive their partner—on the one hand the transgression was severe, but on the other hand the relationship was previously rewarding and might therefore be worth saving. Having a rewarding, high-quality relationship was also associated positively with discussing the transgression and granting forgiveness explicitly. The more negative the expectancy violation was, the less likely victims were to report showing forgiveness through nonverbal displays (e.g., hugging), discussion, or minimization (e.g., saying that it's "no big deal"). Thus, this study demonstrates that EVT variables are not only associated with emotions and conflict behavior but also with forgiveness, which can be an important part of reconciliation during or after a conflict episode.

Thus far, research suggests that EVT is a helpful framework for understanding communication related to relational transgressions and forgiveness. This work has several implications for couples who are coping with conflict as discussed next.

1. Couples should negotiate rules and expectations for behavior in their relationships. Conflict often arises when partners have different expectations for behavior, so reaching a consensus regarding standards for behavior can help couples avoid conflict and provide a starting point for negotiation when conflict does occur. For example, Kate and Kevin may need to establish rules regarding household chores and calling when one is going to be late.
2. Offenders should realize that the more a transgression violates expectations, the more work they will need to do to try to make amends. Offenders should also understand that if a transgression constitutes a particularly severe violation of expectancies, forgiveness may never be forthcoming.



3. Individuals with low reward value (i.e., those who are considered less socially or physically attractive) should be especially careful not to violate expectations during conflict (or by engaging in a relational transgression) since they will be judged more harshly than individuals with high reward value.
4. Finally, hurt feelings are likely to be expressed during conflict when relational transgressions have occurred. Hurt feelings may reflect not only the severity of the transgression but also the closeness of a relationship, since individuals tend to be more hurt when the transgressor is someone they care about. Thus, hurt individuals may sometimes feel competing impulses—on the one hand they want to disconnect from the person who hurt them, but on the other hand they want to stay close. The hurt individual may need time to sort through these conflicting feelings, and the offending individual may need to give the hurt person time to do so.

### CRITICAL ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

~~Thus far, scholars have spent considerable energy studying both conflict and emotion, but with the~~ exception of Gottman's cascade model, and to a lesser extent, EVT, little work has directly investigated the links between communication and emotion within situations involving relational conflict. Retzinger (1991) argued that specifying the presence or absence of emotions such as contempt and anger may help "untangle the knot of protracted conflict" and that "the communicative aspects of emotional states need to be assessed as they occur in interaction" (pp. 60–61), yet few investigations have examined moment-by-moment patterns of emotion in conflict. Jones and Bodtker (2001) also noted that the lack of attention given to emotion in research on conflict mediation is surprising. However, work related to the communication of hostile, vulnerable, flat, positive, self-conscious, and fearful emotions, along with the two theories discussed herein, provide a foundation for examining the role emotion plays in conflict. Several issues stand out as candidates for future research on each of the six conflict-related emotions discussed in this chapter, as described next. More research is also needed on culture as a possible moderator of the associations between emotion and conflict behavior.

#### Issue 1: Identifying Conditions That Affect How Hostile Emotions Are Expressed

Considerable research suggests that people follow the action tendency to attack when experiencing hostile emotions. Although contempt and disgust may be difficult to express constructively, other hostile emotions, such as anger and jealousy, can be expressed in a positive manner that focuses on sharing feelings and solving problems. Gottman's (1994) research shows that emotional flooding is one condition that prevents people from responding to hostile emotions productively. EVT suggests that people are also unlikely to express hostile emotions in a constructive manner if they consider the behavior that prompted that emotion to be a negative violation of expectancies. However, EVT, along with the IM (Rusbult et al., 1994), specifies that people may resist the urge to retaliate when experiencing hostile emotions if the relationship is rewarding enough. The IM also suggests that people will be less quick to respond aggressively if they have invested a lot into a relationship or if they have poor quality alternatives. The extent to which these relationship factors can prevent emotional flooding and curb relational responses is unknown. Thus, scholars could benefit from better understanding the associations between relationship characteristics and the experience and expression of hostile emotions during conflict.

#### Issue 2: Examining How Hurtful Messages and Responses to Hurtful Messages Function Within Conflict Interactions

Hurt and other vulnerable or “soft” emotions can be associated with either negative or positive communication (Sanford, 2007b). Sometimes, hurt individuals are able to elicit empathy; other times, they become emotionally flooded and defensive, which can usher in Gottman’s (1994) four horsemen of the apocalypse. Vangelisti’s (1994; Vangelisti & Sprague, 1998) work on hurtful messages may add specificity to the cascade model by identifying specific types of verbal messages that are perceived as especially critical or contemptuous, and are therefore likely to prompt emotional flooding, defensiveness, and eventually even stonewalling. For example, certain types of accusations (e.g., “You’re crazy”), expressed desires (e.g., “Sometimes I wish I’d never met you”), and informative statements (e.g., “You sure weighed a lot less when we got married”) may be particularly hurtful because they are perceived as highly critical or contemptuous. Identifying messages that are especially hurtful would help practitioners, who could train clients to avoid using such messages. By the same token, it would be valuable to learn how hurt can be communicated in nondefensive ways that elicit empathy.

### **Issue 3: Understanding the Role of Flat Emotion in Withdrawal Patterns**

The conflict literature is replete with references to avoidant behavior, withdrawal, and stonewalling. Yet with only a few notable exceptions (e.g., Gottman, 1994), researchers have not discussed how these responses may be governed, at least partially, by emotion. Yet flat emotions such as apathy and disinterest are associated with avoidant communication as well as low levels of constructive communication (Maldonado, 2009; Sanford, 2007a). This suggests that flat emotions could help predict when demand–withdrawal patterns (Christensen & Heavey, 1990) or stonewalling (Gottman, 1994) ensue. Indeed, the demand–withdrawal conflict pattern is one of the most researched aspects of conflict communication. This sequence involves one person demanding and the other person withdrawing, in either order, with the demanding person becoming increasingly aggressive in response to the partner’s continuing withdrawal, and the withdrawing person becoming increasingly avoidant in response to the partner’s continuing demands. One of the most accepted and empirically supported explanations for this pattern is that the person in the demanding position wants change, whereas the person in the withdrawing position wants to maintain the status quo (Sagrestano, Heavey, & Christensen, 2006). Emotions may provide a complementary, or perhaps mediating, explanation. Individuals who are in the demanding position may indeed want change, but the desire for change may be fueled by hostile emotions such as frustration, anger, or jealousy that are related to approach tendencies. In contrast, individuals in the withdrawing position may feel flat emotions that are related to avoidant tendencies, such as disinterest and apathy, because their goals are not being interrupted, except by their partner who wants change. Flat emotions could also play a role in the cascade model. Chronic stonewalling may only occur when emotional flooding has dissipated and individuals instead feel a sense of apathy and perhaps even hopelessness toward dealing with their partner.

### **Issue 4: Understanding the Role of Positive Affect in Conflict Interaction**

Research on conflict and emotion has primarily focused on negative emotions. Yet people can experience positive emotions such as fondness, admiration, and empathy during conflict. Indeed, the trick to managing conflict constructively may be to alleviate negative affect and, ideally, to experience some positive affect during the conflict episode. Constructive conflict behaviors may be effective not only because they help couples tackle issues and solve problems but also because they detract from negative emotion and can sometimes lead to positive affect. Cooperative behaviors may also facilitate rather than impede goals, and goal facilitation has been linked to happiness and love (Ellis & Malamuth,

2000). Positive affect also promotes openness and creativity in problem solving and conflict negotiation (Isen, 1993). It is critical, then, for researchers and practitioners to understand how couples can inject expressions of positive emotion into conflict interactions.

### **Issue 5: Exploring the Role Self-Conscious Emotions Play in Conflict Interaction**

Little research has examined self-conscious emotions within conflict episodes. Yet emotions such as guilt may be central to many conflict interactions. When conflict is caused by a relational transgression, one person may be cast in the role of the “guilty party,” while the other person may be cast as a victim. These roles may then frame the conflict interaction. Guilty feelings may cause people to make amends or, ironically, to avoid conflict if they perceive that discussing the transgression will only further harm their self-image. Individuals who feel they have been treated unfairly may induce guilt in their partners by using the types of guilt-inducing techniques that Vangelisti et al. (1991) uncovered. The effects of guilt-inducing techniques, however, are unclear. Guilt induction may sometimes be necessary to point out inequities and solve problems. Other times, guilt-inducing techniques may be perceived as contemptuous or critical remarks that imply superiority or unfairly judge the partner. When this is the case, aggressive behavior, defensiveness, or stonewalling may follow, leading to a destructive negative cycle (Gottman, 1994) Tangney et al., 1992). Pride is another self-conscious emotion that needs to be better understood within the context of conflict interaction; pride could lead people to stubbornly cling to positions or to get especially defensive when attacked.

### **Issue 6: Understanding Types of Fear That Prevent or Promote Communication About Conflict Issues**

Different types of fear can be part of the conflict process. In some cases, fear may prompt demands or retaliation. Such may be the case when fear stems from a relational transgression, such as infidelity or deception, which makes the hurt individual fearful that the partner will engage in similar behavior in the future. This type of fear may be related to conditional forgiveness and demands for change. In other cases, fear may prevent conflict from being expressed. Such is the case with the chilling effect (Rolloff & Cloven, 1990). Yet little is known regarding how fear may work with other emotions to prevent or promote people from voicing their opinions. There may be a point where hostile emotions, such as anger or irritation, override the chilling effect, and people express their frustrations regardless of their fear. Fear can also be studied in relation to *the principle of least interest*, which specifies that the person who is less interested in maintaining a relationship has more power (Sprecher, Schmeekle, & Felmlee, 2006). If, indeed, one partner cares more than the other, the partner who cares more may inhibit negative emotional expressions during conflict so as not to put the relationship in jeopardy. Fear may also be used to manipulate. Intimate terrorism is an extreme example of this, with one partner controlling the other through threats and violence (Johnson, 1995). The fear instilled through intimate terrorism can go beyond keeping people from expressing disagreement; it can also trap people in unhealthy relationships and is therefore worthy of future study.

### **Issue 7: Incorporating Culture Into Conflict Models**

In addition to examining each type of conflict-related emotion in more detail, there is a general need to investigate conflict communication using more diverse populations. The vast majority of research reported in this chapter comes from U.S. samples consisting mostly of people with European American backgrounds. Yet scholars recognize that people from different cultures and cocultures express and regulate emotions differently (Planalp, 1999). In general, studies suggest that people from some Asian cultures tend to express less emotion than people from other cultures. For example, Rimé, Corsini, and

Herbette (2002) reported a study where people from France, Japan, Korea, Singapore, and the United States recalled their most recent experience of an unpleasant emotion. Although there were no cultural differences in felt emotional intensity, people from Japan, Korea, and Singapore reported significantly less emotional sharing than did people from France and the United States. For example, people from the United States reported that they shared their emotional experiences with others about 95% of time, whereas people from Korea reported sharing their emotions less than 80% of the time (see Rimé, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech, & Philippot, 1998, for details). Similarly, research has demonstrated that people from some Asian cultures avoid conflict and mask negative emotions such as shame, anger, and disgust more than their Western counterparts (Barnlund, 1989; Matsumoto, 2000). In contrast, people from some Arab countries tend to approach conflict and express negative emotions more than people from the West (Almaney & Alwan, 1982; Feghali, 1997). As these studies suggest, cultural differences in emotional expression could exacerbate conflict in cross-cultural or intercultural interaction.

Indeed, some studies have shown differences in conflict patterns based on culture or coculture. Chua and Gudykunst (1987) noted that individuals from low-context cultures, such as the United States, use more solution-oriented conflict behaviors, while individuals from high-context cultures, such as Japan, prefer nonconfrontational behaviors. Flores, Tschann, Marin, and Pantoja (2004) found that Mexican American couples who were more oriented toward Mexican culture than Anglo culture tended to report avoiding conflict, whereas those who were more oriented toward the Anglo culture tended to report expressing more feelings during conflict. Other research has shown that people in collectivist cultures are more likely to use avoidant conflict strategies than are those in individualistic cultures, who are more likely to use confrontational strategies (Cai & Fink, 2002; Pearson & Stephan, 1998).

In cultures where individuals value interdependence and group identity, people may be unlikely to confront one another or express negative emotions (Kim & Leung, 2000). With regard to interdependent cultures, attention needs to be focused on nonverbal communication as a means of perceiving the indirect, emotional messages conveyed during conflict (see Doi, 1973; Okabe, 1983). In addition, research on how people from various cultures manage emotions differently during conflict may be one of the keys to understanding some of the cross-cultural differences mentioned here.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

~~When people are engaged in conflict, their communication is as much a function of the emotion they are~~ experiencing as the arguments they are hearing or the situation they are facing. Research on hostile, vulnerable, flat, positive, self-conscious, and fearful emotions provides a foundation for understanding the types of emotions that influence the conflict process. Gottman's (1994) cascade model and Burgoon's (1993) EVT also provide invaluable starting points for explaining how emotions function in conflict interactions. Including emotion in theories on conflict communication will give scholars more explanatory power. Indeed, emotion acts as both a cause and consequence of conflict communication and may ultimately guide behavior and determine outcomes. During conflict, relational partners need to do more than manage their conflict behavior; they must also be able to deal effectively with the many emotions they are experiencing.

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