

PART III

Communication and Conflict Processes in Couples and Families

Conflict Avoidance in Families

Functions, Outcomes, and Applied Implications

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People in families and other close relationships attempt to avoid conflict in a number of distinct ways (Rolloff & Ifert, 2000; Sillars, Canary, & Tafoya, 2004). Sometimes they choose not to discuss issues that might lead to conflict; sometimes they withdraw during conflict or try to change the subject; sometimes they leave the setting of an argument. Regardless of the particular strategy used, the general impression one gets from both scholarly and popular writing is that avoiding conflict is harmful.

The Case Against Conflict Avoidance

Scholars and clinicians commonly believe that avoiding conflicts is inherently counter-productive. With respect to marriage, for instance, Wahlroos (1995) advised against avoidance, suggesting, “You must resolve—if you want a truly intimate and trusting relationship with your partner—to be open and honest about your feelings, to level with your partner, and to bring up all significant problems, concerns, and worries” (p. 107). Notarius, Lashley, and Sullivan (1997) claimed that confronting potential problems rather than avoiding them is crucial: “If your partner is doing something that leaves you feeling hurt and angry, it is obviously not constructive simply to ignore the offensive behavior

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and hope that it goes away” (p. 235). Withdrawing from a conflict once it has begun is also considered a “danger sign” in marital relationships (Clements, Cordova, Markman, & Laurenceau, 1997; chapters 9, 10 in this volume).

One reason why conflict avoidance is viewed as problematic is the fact that engaging in conflict can serve important functions in families (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Conflict can help family members become aware of each other’s needs, making it possible to accommodate each other (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Conflict also appears to serve developmental functions for younger family members: A common view of parent–adolescent conflict holds “that conflict between mothers and daughters is normative in early adolescence, and that some conflict may be necessary for girls to become more autonomous” (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1999 p. 213).

Overall, conflict avoidance typically is associated with poor marital and family outcomes (Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, & Callan, 1994; Meeks, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1998). In a study of stepfamilies, for example, Golish (2003) found that it was uncommon for adolescents in thriving stepfamilies to report avoiding conflict topics, but adolescents in families who struggled commonly avoided topics that could lead to conflict (e.g., issues surrounding their biological parents’ divorce). Also, interventions designed to promote constructive conflict engagement can be effective (e.g., Hahlweg, Markman, Thurnmaier, Engl, & Eckert, 1998).

Reasons to Question Whether Conflict Avoidance is Inherently Problematic

Despite the apparently strong evidence against avoiding conflict, there are reasons to question whether conflict avoidance is inevitably problematic. First, the success of teaching constructive conflict management techniques to distressed couples does not necessarily preclude the possibility that conflict avoidance can be innocuous and even useful. The most consistent communication correlates of marital discord are affectively-negative ones—not avoidant ones (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006). Thus, the studies that show benefits of teaching constructive conflict engagement may depend more on family members learning to replace negative behaviors with positive ones; that is, preventing negative behaviors may be more important than preventing avoidant ones.

Second, avoiding conflict is common, even in seemingly functional relationships. Vuchinich (1987) found that even in nondistressed families, the majority of naturally occurring conflicts were not resolved; most conflicts ended in standoffs, which involved a family member simply initiating a nonconflict activity without any clear winner or compromise. Moreover, there is strong evidence that people simply do not raise most potential conflict issues in their marital and family relationships. Even in good relationships, people “often irritate each other on a daily basis” (Roloff & Wright, 2009, p. 321), but only a small minority of those irritations result in an overt conflict episode (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2006).

Overall then, there does not appear to be convincing evidence that avoiding conflict is inevitably harmful. Unqualified statements about the inadvisability of conflict avoidance

are too simplistic. Indeed, avoiding conflicts can be functional in some circumstances (Roloff & Wright, 2009).

Some Potential Benefits of Conflict Avoidance

One reason some scholars give for engaging in (rather than avoiding) conflict is the notion that “the number and type of conflict areas . . . are less important than how couples handle these conflicts” (Clements et al., 1997, p. 342). This mantra is useful for aiding some troubled couples because it draws attention to conflict-management skills, which can be taught. However, there is strong evidence that the number of overt conflict episodes in families does matter. The frequency of conflicts in marriage, for instance, is a known correlate of poor relational quality (Kelly, Huston, & Cate, 1985; Noller & Feeney, 1998, 2002; chapter 9 in this volume), and the number of conflicts couples have as newlyweds forecasts their level of satisfaction 13 years after their wedding (Caughlin & Huston, 1996). Similarly, frequent conflict between parents and adolescents is associated with poor adolescent adjustment, both concurrently (Caughlin & Malis, 2004; chapter 9 in this volume) and over time (Shek, 1998). Given that frequent conflict episodes seem to be problematic in family relationships, avoiding some conflicts might benefit some relationships.

Avoiding conflict may be particularly beneficial if it is used as a means to prevent the noxious effects of certain behaviors. Roberts (2000), for instance, found that the association between husbands’ hostility and wives’ dissatisfaction was diminished by the husbands’ conflict avoidance. As Roberts concluded, “A wife may react positively to her husband’s conflict-avoiding behaviors if the alternative is hostile responsiveness” (p. 704).

Given the reasons to believe that conflict avoidance does not always harm couples, it is important to consider when conflict avoidance would be more or less harmful. Based on a review of literature and an analysis of the various possible purposes of conflict and conflict avoidance behaviors (see Caughlin & Scott, 2010), there are at least three types of factors that are likely to determine whether conflict avoidance is helpful, harmful, or innocuous: (a) the form of the conflict avoidance; (b) the meanings of behaviors to family members; and (c) the specific context in which those behaviors are enacted. We discuss each of these factors below before turning to practical implications of such research. Because the vast majority of the extant literature focuses on instances in which conflict avoidance is harmful, we attend primarily to conditions when conflict avoidance may be helpful or innocuous.

Factors that Influence the Effects of Conflict Avoidance

Forms of conflict avoidance

Conflict avoidance may be more or less detrimental to relationships, depending upon how individuals avoid (Sillars et al., 2004). Although most studies of conflict avoidance do not

distinguish among various avoidant behaviors, the few studies that do so suggest the importance of examining different forms of conflict avoidance. Roberts (2000), for example, examined partners' perceptions of the frequency of conflict-avoidance behaviors, distinguishing between angry withdrawal and other conflict avoidance. Angry withdrawal, avoidance marked by high levels of hostility, was associated with dissatisfaction and distress, whereas conflict avoidance was only weakly associated with relationship quality (Roberts, 2000). The Roberts' study suggests that conflict avoidance that is marked with negative affect is more detrimental to marital well-being than is avoidance alone.

Another apparently useful distinction was made by Crohan (1996), who differentiated between actively leaving the scene versus passively waiting until the conflict episode has subsided. Individuals who avoid conflict by actively withdrawing, as compared to those who passively avoid by remaining quiet, are more likely to experience decreased satisfaction over time (Crohan, 1996). This finding suggests a conceptual distinction between implicit avoidance (e.g., changing the topic without explicitly refusing to discuss the conflict issue) versus explicit conflict avoidance (e.g., overtly refusing to talk about an issue or physically leaving).

Indeed, Caughlin and Scott (2010) argued that explicit or overt avoidance is more uniformly dissatisfying in marital and family relationships than are more tacit strategies of avoidance. The reason is that if one person wishes to discuss a conflict topic and the other explicitly avoids that topic, such behavior will nearly always be understood as being uncooperative. Avoiding through more implicit means, however, leaves open the possibility that family members can maintain the pretense that they have discussed or would discuss the issues.

We are not suggesting that a person using implicit avoidance strategies will always be successful in maintaining the appearance of open discussion, but there do appear to be occasions when family members avoid talking about topics while successfully maintaining the pretext that they are completely open and engaging with each other. For instance, in a study of Australian parents and adolescents, Kirkman, Rosenthal, and Feldman (2005) found that maintaining a global impression of "openness" was important in families, but that such an impression could be maintained even if explicit discussions of some sexual issues were avoided. Clearly, if such avoidance happens explicitly, it would be harder to maintain the sense of overall openness than if the avoidance is more implicit.

Additionally, Dailey and Palomares (2004) found that the association between relationship satisfaction and strategic topic avoidance varied by the degree to which the avoidance tactic was direct and polite. The use of highly polite and indirect avoidance strategies was positively associated with relationship satisfaction and closeness (for similar findings regarding indirect strategies see chapter 16 in this volume; Roloff & Ifert 1998).

Although the examples discussed thus far concern avoiding communication generally, there are good reasons to believe that this pattern of findings can be extrapolated to conflict avoidance. One instance of conflict avoidance that is inherently explicit is the demand-withdraw pattern of conflict, which occurs when one individual attempts to engage the partner in a discussion, but the partner avoids the issue (Caughlin & Scott, 2010; Christensen & Heavey, 1993; chapters 9, 10 in this volume). Because the demand part of the pattern explicitly introduces the topic to the conversation, the possibility of completely covert conflict avoidance (e.g., when a topic is simply not raised) is precluded (Caughlin &

Scott, 2010). This fact could help explain why demand-withdraw appears to be so consistently related to undesirable outcomes (e.g., Caughlin & Huston, 2002; Denton, Burleson, Hobbs, Von Stein, & Rodriguez, 2001; Malis & Roloff 2006).

Moreover, various off-the-record conflict-avoidance strategies may have benefits. The literature on serial arguing in relationships (Roloff & Johnson, 2002) suggests that it is often more important to foster the impression that a conflict could be resolved than to actually resolve it (Malis & Roloff, 2006). Conventional wisdom, of course, would suggest that not actually engaging in conflicts would only result in the issue causing greater problems later. In contrast, Malis and Roloff (2006) found that coping strategies like selectively ignoring problems are frequently beneficial to relationships. Because ignoring a problem is a cognitive strategy, it is certainly tacit most of the time, and this could be part of the reason why it can be effective in terms of maintaining relational closeness.

Meaning of Avoidance Behaviors

One of the most fundamental tenets of communication scholarship is the fact that communication behaviors do not have inherent meanings (Caughlin, 2010). Individuals' beliefs about other communicators' purposes or goals in conversation, for example, partly determine the meanings that people ascribe to communication behaviors (Wilson, 2002). In marriage, a suggestion to change a spouse's behavior can be considered either "helpful advice" or "nagging," depending on the purposes attributed to the suggestion (Goldsmith, Lindholm, & Bute, 2006).

This fundamental tenet implies that conflict avoidance may not be dysfunctional or functional in its own right. Rather, the meaning ascribed to avoidant behaviors is important for understanding the significance of avoidance. At the most basic level, perceptions help define what constitutes conflict avoidance. If family members having a conversation do not perceive a topic to be an area of disagreement, for example, they would not interpret behaviors like silence or changing the topic to be conflict avoidance (Sillars, 1986). That is, people's perceptions help define the difference between what is seen as an avoided topic of conflict versus the myriad topics not being discussed at the time. Moreover, even if family members recognize some disagreement about a topic, perceptions are still important to defining the importance of the disagreement. The perception that the issue is trivial may allow them to avoid initiating conflicts about the issue without substantive harm to their relationship (Roloff & Ifert, 2000).

Additionally, individuals' beliefs about the specific reasons for the conflict avoidance probably shape the meaning and impact of that avoidance. Buysse and her colleagues (1999, 2000) found that one common reason for avoiding conflicts is the perception that an issue is relationship threatening. Although most research examining conflict avoidance has not examined the specific motivations for the avoidance, the larger literature on avoiding topics suggests that protecting a relationship is one of the most frequently cited reasons for avoiding certain topics (Dailey & Palomares, 2004). For example, adolescents in stepfamilies commonly report that they protect their relationships with their mothers,

fathers, and stepparents by avoiding certain topics (Golish & Caughlin, 2002). More important, attributing avoidance to relationship protection can mitigate the connection between avoidance and relational dissatisfaction (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004).

Additionally, broader causal attribution processes may influence the connection between conflict avoidance and relational outcomes. During conflict, individuals form attributions about the other person's behavior (Sillars, Roberts, Leonard, & Dun, 2000; Sillars et al., 2004), and the specific attributions that people make about conflict behaviors are associated with relationship satisfaction (Vangelisti, 1994). For instance, individuals who make external, unstable attributions about another family member's avoidance may be less dissatisfied with their relationship than if they were to determine that the avoidance was due to stable, internal causes. Also, cognitive working models may predispose individuals to perceive features of conflict in particular ways. Individuals with an insecure attachment style tend to view conflict as inherently distressing and problematic (Creasey, 2002; Feeney, 2008); thus, having an insecure attachment may exacerbate any detrimental effects of conflict avoidance.

Similar to internal working models, marital and family schemata also structure the way individuals think about their family relationships, which may influence perceptions of conflict avoidance. Marital schemata are cognitive frameworks that influence the way that individuals interpret behavior in marriage (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a). Individuals also have schemata pertaining to entire family systems (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002a). According to Fitzpatrick (1988), a defining dimension of such schemata is conflict orientation, or individuals' beliefs about the utility of avoiding conflict. Individuals who are high in avoidance orientation tend to view conflict avoidance in families as normative (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002b), which means they probably would view conflict avoidance as less dissatisfying than would people low on avoidance orientation. Indeed, in an observational study of married couples, Sillars, Pike, Jones, and Redmon (1983) found that avoidant conflict strategies generally were associated with marital dissatisfaction, but there was no evidence that conflict avoidance was dissatisfying among the group of couples who view conflict avoidance as normative.

The Context of Conflict Avoidance

Scholars who seek to evaluate the sophistication of communication strategies (e.g., Goldsmith, 2004) note that the effectiveness of communication behaviors is inherently linked to particular situations. One cannot make claims about whether a communication behavior or strategy is effective without understanding the interactional circumstances. For instance, episodes in which one person gives advice to another person typically involve certain risks to identity, such as the potential for appearing nosey (Goldsmith, 2004). The salience of that risk, however, depends on contextual factors such as: (a) whether the advice was solicited by the advisee or not; (b) the nature of the relationship between the advisor and advisee; and (c) the nature of the advice given. Thus, one cannot make unqualified statements about the best way to give advice because the risk of appearing intrusive is dependent on the circumstances (see also chapter 16 in this volume).

Because effectiveness depends on context, the impact of any communication behavior also depends on context. There are a number of different aspects of interactional situations that are important. First, like any communicative strategy, conflict avoidance is embedded in a broader conversational context. That is, conflict avoidance must be understood with respect to what occurs before, during, and after the avoidance. For example, outcomes of conflict avoidance can vary with the emotions expressed while avoiding. In conflicts marked by high hostility and negative affect reciprocity, husbands' avoidance is associated with higher satisfaction among wives (Roberts, 2000). That is, husbands' withdrawal appears to buffer wives' distress during hostile conflict.

Second, even when conflict avoidance generally has negative effects, these effects can be offset by other relational behaviors. Gottman (1994) reported that some people in stable marriages engaged in many avoidant behaviors, but this avoidance did not seem problematic when they also attempted to understand their partner and enacted more positive behaviors, such as focusing on the positive aspects of their relationship rather than on disagreements. Similarly, Caughlin and Huston (2002) found that avoidance occurring as part of demand-withdraw was not associated with marital dissatisfaction among couples who were otherwise very affectionate.

Third, the meaning of avoidance (and therefore potential implications for family relationships) may be a function of when it occurs in a given interaction. Fitzpatrick, Fallis, and Vance (1982) examined conflict between spouses and found that conflict avoidance was not consistently perceived to be antisocial or dysfunctional. Sometimes, conflict avoidance was perceived as cooperative. If the meaning of conflict avoidance is dependent on when it occurs (Fitzpatrick et al., 1982), then the outcomes of that conflict avoidance may be tied to when family members choose to engage in avoidance.

Outcomes of avoidance also may be a function of the physical setting in which a conflict occurs. Extant literature suggests that particular communication patterns, such as demand-withdraw, are reliably associated with poor relationship quality (Caughlin & Huston, 2002; chapter 10 in this volume). Despite the wealth of evidence regarding these communication patterns, the very nature of observational studies may preclude examination of a wide array of avoidant behaviors because the setting may limit the ways in which partners can avoid conflict (Caughlin & Scott, 2010; Roberts, 2000). For example, consider an experiment in which two family members are asked to discuss a conflict issue. The scene will generally begin with one person explicitly raising an issue. If the other person wishes to avoid discussing the topic, what options might she or he have, given the setting? Certainly, given the demands of the research study, it would be difficult for a family member to simply leave the scene, even though that happens in actual family conflict episodes (Christensen & Heavey, 1993). Also, because the instructions of the study prompted discussion of the issue, a family member who otherwise might have avoided through indirect means probably would have a more difficult time doing so in the observational setting. Thus, the context might make family members resort to more explicit forms of verbal avoidance, which may make the conflict avoidance more detrimental than if it occurred in another setting.

The type of relationship (e.g., romantic, parent-child, or sibling) may also influence the ways in which conflict avoidance is associated with functioning. When avoidance is considered normative within a particular relationship, individuals may not perceive it as

dissatisfying. For example, parents often avoid discussing aspects of their own sex life with children. Rather than being viewed as a threat to the parent–child relationship, such avoidance may be viewed as appropriate and even desirable by the child (see Petronio, 2002). Further, norms that are specific to certain family forms, such as blended or stepfamilies, may preclude discussion of sensitive topics. Overall, if avoiding certain issues is perceived as normative within a given type of relationship, it is feasible that avoidance may not be associated with relationship distress or dissatisfaction (Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Petronio, 2002).

Even within a particular type of family relationship, the dynamics of each specific relationship probably shape the meaning and importance of conflict avoidance. People who are very secure and committed to their relationship may be untroubled by conflict avoidance. For example, Roloff and Ifert (1998) found that explicitly declaring that some topics were to be avoided in a relationship was dissatisfying in low-commitment dating relationships but not highly committed ones. The power dynamics of a relationship also matter. In dating and married couples, being comparatively dependent emotionally on one's partner is associated with the tendency to withhold complaints about the relationship (Solomon, Knobloch, & Fitzpatrick, 2004). For example, in a study of retired couples, Szinovacz and Schaffer (2000) found that spouses who were more dependent on their partner were more likely to avoid conflict by keeping their opinions to themselves. Avoiding due to power deficits can change the meaning of avoidance to partners. People who are low in power often minimize the importance of the topic (Solomon & Sampa, 1998), which may be a coping strategy for dealing with unaddressed concerns. Such cognitive coping strategies may allow individuals to maintain their satisfaction with the relationship, at least in the short term (Roloff & Wright, 2009).

Practical Implications

In this chapter, we have argued that there are circumstances when conflict avoidance can be more or less functional in marital and family relations. This viewpoint runs counter to much scholarship on family communication, which often presumes that engaging in conflict is always more beneficial than avoiding it. Because of the often unquestioned bias toward conflict engagement (and against conflict avoidance), there are instances in which individuals in relationships are advised—and sometimes even compelled—to attempt to work through issues, even when this strategy is not ideal.

To illustrate this point clearly, it is useful to consider a particular type of family relationship in which avoiding conflict can have obvious benefits, married couples who are in the process of divorcing (see chapter 24 in this volume). Marital relationships do not end the moment the partners decide to divorce, particularly when the couple has children. Instead of ending, the family relationships are restructured with new rules and boundaries (Emery, 1994). As part of the divorce process, parents must learn how to relate to one another as parents while no longer being partners (Bohannon, 1971; Emery & Dillon, 1994). Ongoing parental conflict after divorce can have detrimental effects on children (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000; chapter 9 in this volume); thus,

separating parents are encouraged to develop cooperative relationships with minimal conflict. Policies and intervention programs have been developed to help parents with this transition. For example, many governments in Western countries mandate education classes for divorcing parents that are aimed at strengthening cooperative co-parental relationships and decreasing destructive conflict between parents (e.g., Amato, 2000). The primary purpose is to teach parents the skills to work together to resolve conflicts. While conflict engagement is appropriate for some parents, conflict avoidance may be a more effective approach in some situations.

Avoiding conflict and developing distant relationships may be healthier and safer for divorcing parents with persistently high conflict or a history of marital violence. High conflict divorces are characterized by high rates of litigation, high levels of anger and fear, and lack of trust (Blaisure & Geasler, 2006). These parents (and their children) may benefit more from learning parallel (vs. cooperative) co-parenting skills, in which parents disengage from one another to avoid explicit conflicts. Parallel co-parenting relationships tend to have a businesslike quality (Emery & Dillon, 1994) with more formal and less frequent communication, lower engagement, and more rigid boundaries than cooperative co-parenting relationships. Both types of co-parenting relationships can effectively minimize children's exposure to conflict and contribute to family adjustment after divorce (Kelly & Emery, 2003).

In addition to high conflict, a history of marital violence can make conflict avoidance essential. Women who have left their abusive husbands and are going through divorce have legitimate fears, such as concerns that they or their children remain in danger of violence from their (ex)-husbands (Hardesty & Ganong, 2006; Walker, Logan, Jordan, & Campbell, 2004). Indeed, the period after the initial separation is a time of heightened risk of abuse (Campbell, et al., 2003; Walker et al., 2004). In such circumstances, the need to ensure physical safety ought to take precedence over co-parenting plans and arrangements that rely on cooperation (Hardesty & Chung, 2006).

Unfortunately, there are considerable pressures on women who have left abusive husbands to engage in conflict with their former mates. As noted above, court-mandated parenting programs often assume that open discussion of issues is always warranted, and such programs make it difficult for women to avoid conflict altogether. Even when not directly mandated to participate in a cooperative co-parenting program, women may believe—or even be given legal advice—that their case for custody can be undermined if they are seen as anything other than a friendly and cooperative co-parent (Hardesty & Ganong, 2006). Moreover, many women strongly believe in the value of both parents being involved with children, making it personally difficult for them to cut themselves off from the spouse they are divorcing (Hardesty & Ganong, 2006). Such factors may make it difficult for women with a history of being abused to avoid conflicts with their former partners. Yet, engaging in conflicts around parenting issues could place them at continued risk of physical harm or psychological abuse (Walker et al., 2004).

Despite the barriers to doing so, some abused women have reported using conflict-avoidance strategies to prevent the potential for violence (Hardesty, Khaw, Chung, & Martin, 2008). For example, abused women reported avoiding conflict by setting rigid boundaries that limited the time spent talking with their ex-husbands and the topics about which they communicated (e.g., restricting topics unrelated to the children; Hardesty &

Ganong, 2006; Hardesty et al., 2008). When safety concerns persist after separation, women's efforts to avoid conflict become more explicit (Hardesty & Ganong, 2006). Thus, although it may be constructive to implicitly avoid conflict in general, in situations with violence, indirect strategies for avoidance may be insufficient: explicit conflict avoidance may be necessary to reinforce boundaries that separate parental and former spouse roles. Understanding when conflict avoidance is a protective factor has implications for mental health professionals and the legal system.

First, it must be recognized that legal mandates that are designed to encourage cooperative co-parenting between ex-spouses are not appropriate in all cases. Regardless of how helpful such mandates are in the majority of cases, if the efforts at establishing cooperation put a mother and children at risk for continued violence, the ideal of open discussion of differences should be abandoned in those cases. Thus, courts need to take a history of intimate partner violence very seriously, and they need a way to routinely screen for it in the divorce process (for a more thorough discussion of this issue, see Hardesty & Chung, 2006). Moreover, laws and court rulings must be sensitive to the real harm that can be done in encouraging women with a history of experiencing violence to actively engage with their former partners. There should be, for instance, provisions for identifying abused women, assessing risk, and exempting women from typically mandated programs that may compromise their safety (Hardesty & Chung, 2006).

From a counseling perspective, clinicians and social workers who assist mothers in the divorce process should be aware that many of them will have beliefs about the ideal family that make them reluctant to completely avoid conflict with their co-parent. Mothers may believe that avoiding discussions (and conflict) with the father of their children makes them uncooperative and will harm the relationship of the father with the child. When safety is an issue, however, such concerns serve as obstacles to doing what is best for the mother and the child. In such instances, clinicians would benefit from knowledge about how the meaning of conflict avoidance can be shaped by the inferences people make about avoidance. A mother who is convinced that conflict avoidance is aimed at putting the child's safety and welfare first, for example, will have a different understanding of avoidance than one who believes the avoidance serves a less benevolent purpose. When explicit and extreme conflict avoidance is warranted, counselors should recognize that individuals' willingness and ability to engage in such actions may depend, in part, on their beliefs about what those actions are accomplishing. Helping abused women understand the purposes of avoidance may be as important as suggesting when they should avoid.

The case of abused women provides a clear illustration that proscriptions against conflict avoidance are overly simplistic. There are other family relationships in which conflict avoidance is probably useful in some instances. For example, divorced parents may reasonably be committed to a continuing relationship with one another for the purposes of co-parenting their children. Parents and children may benefit from learning when and how to avoid conflict when it is in the best interests of maintaining healthy and safe relationships. For example, there may be issues that are simply too heated for the parents to discuss constructively, and it may be better to avoid such issues while still maintaining a co-parenting relationship by discussing other issues.

Lest the reader infer that we are suggesting that conflict avoidance is only useful in families negotiating a divorce, similar logic can be used in stable family relationships as

well. The emphasis on openness and resolving conflicts involves risks, perhaps leaving family members unprepared for setting boundaries when necessary. Additionally, children are harmed by exposure to conflict (Cummings & Davies, 2002), so married parents who cannot resolve their issues quickly and constructively need to balance any perceived threat to their relationship against the harm that conflict episodes can have on children.

Although conflict avoidance is certainly not ideal in all situations, researchers and practitioners would benefit from understanding that conflict avoidance can be useful at times. Conflict avoidance may come with costs, as implied by the well-known association between conflict avoidance and poor adjustment in family relationships, but conflict avoidance can also have benefits that in some situations outweigh the costs. Rather than focusing only on teaching family members constructive conflict engagement skills, clinicians would do well to teach family members skills related to productive conflict avoidance, such as recognizing when conflict avoidance might be warranted, as well as how to go about avoiding conflict to minimize the risks of conflict avoidance in a given situation.

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Conflict in Family Relationships

Patricia Noller

One important principle of family systems theory is circular causality; this principle states that change in one member of the family affects other members and the system as a whole (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hinde, 1989; Minuchin, 1988; O'Connor, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1997). In addition, family systems theory focuses on the “mutual influences of individuals within a relationship and the mutual influences among relationships” (O'Connor et al., 1997, p. 493).

In this chapter, I will be exploring the associations among different relationships within the family in the context of conflict. In our studies we have frequently explored these associations among different family relationships: links between the marital relationship and the parent–child relationship, between the parent–child relationship and the sibling relationship, and between the marital relationship and the sibling relationship, as well as the effects of siblings on each other (Noller & Feeney, 2004).

Conflict in relationships is inevitable because romantic relationships tend to bring together two people who have had different experiences in their families of origin, and who then have to find ways to live together at least relatively amicably. They also need to agree to some extent about how to parent their children. In addition, families tend to have limited resources, leading to competition and conflict between family members who want to make sure that they obtain their “fair share” of those resources. Because of the strength of feeling among family members and the inevitability of differences, conflict, when it occurs, can be intense and difficult.

Misunderstandings and Conflict in Marriage

Noller and her colleagues (Noller, 1980, 1981, 1984; Noller & Ruzzene, 1991; Robillard & Noller, in press) carried out several studies to explore the link between accuracy in interpreting one another's nonverbal messages and the level of marital satisfaction of couples. All of these studies used standard content methodology where spouses use words that can be interpreted in at least three ways, depending on the nonverbal behavior accompanying the message. "What are you doing?" is a good example of this kind of message because it can have positive, neutral, and negative connotations.

In the Noller (1980) study, there was clear evidence that those in unhappy relationships, but especially husbands, tended to make more errors in both the way they sent the message (encoding) and the way they interpreted a message from their spouse (decoding). In addition, husbands were more likely to make decoding errors in a negative direction, whereas wives tended to make errors in a positive direction (see Noller, 2001). For example, if a wife asked her husband "What are you doing?" he would be likely to see that question as involving criticism of himself, whereas if a husband asked his wife the same question, she would be more likely to see the question in a positive light. It is easy to see how conflicts can stem from these kinds of misunderstandings.

In another study (Guthrie & Noller, 1988), where spouses were asked to report their own intentions in an interaction while their partners made a separate judgment about those intentions, those who were in low satisfaction marriages were less likely to accurately infer their spouse's intentions. In addition, the intentions of those in low satisfaction marriages were rated more negatively by a group of outside observers than were the intentions of those in high satisfaction marriages, suggesting that these low satisfaction spouses were leaking negativity through their nonverbal behavior. All spouses attributed more positive intentions to themselves when they were angry than they attributed to their angry partners. Again, there was evidence in these data for misunderstandings likely to increase the probability of conflict occurring.

Conflict Styles

Of course, family members differ in the ways that they approach conflict and respond to it (Christensen, 1988; Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Sagrestano, Christensen, & Heavey, 1998). Common patterns include mutual discussion of the issue, a coercive approach to the issue, mutual avoidance of the issue, and demand/withdraw (where one partner tries to get the other partner involved in discussion of an issue while the other partner withdraws; Christensen & Heavey, 1990). Family members, especially couples, can also collude to avoid dealing with the issue at all, in a pattern generally referred to as mutual avoidance.

Demand-withdraw as a conflict style

A large amount of research has focused on the demand-withdraw pattern in married couples (Christensen, 1988; Eldridge & Christensen, 2002; chapter 10 in this volume). Noller and

White (1990) used Christensen's Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ; Christensen, 1988) and showed that greater self-reported demand-withdraw communication was associated with lower marital satisfaction. In a study of young newlywed couples recruited before their weddings, Noller and her colleagues (Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, & Callan, 1994) found that spouses who were high in marital satisfaction after 2 years of marriage were less likely to engage in destructive patterns of communication such as demand-withdraw, behaving coercively towards the partner, and avoiding discussion of the conflict.

Feeney, Noller, and Callan (1994) used the same data set to explore the links among attachment security, relationship satisfaction, and conflict communication. Mutuality in communication reported by males was positively associated with comfort with closeness and negatively associated with attachment anxiety, two important aspects of attachment security/insecurity. Attachment anxiety was positively associated with coercion for both males and females at both the first marital assessment and at follow-up, and was associated with destructive process (demand-withdraw) for females at the first marital assessment and for males at follow-up. These findings suggest that at least some conflict styles in marriage are driven by attachment insecurity, particularly anxiety about the relationship and how much the partner really cares.

Withdrawal as a conflict style

Withdrawal is generally seen as a negative behavior in couple interactions because of its consequences (Christensen, 1988; Fruzzetti, 1996; Noller, Feeney, Roberts, & Christensen, 2005). The consequences of withdrawal can include the issue not being resolved and becoming an ongoing and even escalating issue in the relationship, with the lack of resolution creating resentment in the person wanting change, and coldness and distance between the couple. It has also been suggested that withdrawal can lead to ongoing power struggles (Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, & Stuart, 1998).

Of course, withdrawal can be subtle as in becoming silent, turning to look at the TV or the newspaper or changing the topic, or blatant such as in storming out of the room. In terms of Blake and Mouton's (1964) model of interpersonal communication (see Figure 9.1), withdrawal is seen as involving low concern for self (not being willing to push for what one wants) and low concern for the other (due to the apparent lack of concern for resolving the issue for the sake of the relationship with one's partner). Of course, withdrawal can also be positive, especially if a mutual decision is made to put off

Care for One's own Interests	Care for the Relationship	
	High	Low
High	Problem-solving	Aggression
Low	Obliging/Soothing	Avoidance

Figure 9.1 Conflict styles based on Blake and Mouton, 1964

Source: Blake, R. R., & Mouton, J. S. (1964). *The managerial grid*. Houston: Gulf

discussing the issue until the partners have calmed down and are more willing to engage in a rational discussion of the issue. It has also been suggested that withdrawal is not necessarily negative, especially if partners are not introspective and share a strong bond of affection (Raush, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974). (See chapter 8 in this volume for a discussion of positive aspects of conflict avoidance.)

Christensen and Heavey (1990) showed that the use of withdrawal by husbands was related to whose issue was being discussed. Husbands were more likely to withdraw when their wives' issues were being discussed than were wives whose husbands' issues were being discussed. Christensen and Heavey interpreted this finding in terms of the social structure view that focuses on power discrepancies between men and women. According to Noller (1993), men maintain their power by resisting their wives' requests for change and withdrawing from such interactions.

Withdrawal also involves a particular pattern of nonverbal behavior (Noller & Christensen, 1991, in Noller et al., 2005). These researchers found that husbands' withdrawal during discussion of their wives' issue (the clearest pattern in these data) was characterized by a lack of open gestures and gaze and by head down and head turn. Wives were rated as withdrawing during discussion of their own issue when they used few neutral gestures and engaged in head down, and husbands also used head down when withdrawing during discussion of their own issues. These behaviors are, of course, the more subtle versions of withdrawal that one might expect to see when couples are being observed in the laboratory.

Withdrawal in violent couples

Noller and Roberts (2002) compared four groups of couples in terms of their use of withdrawal: nonviolent happy; nonviolent unhappy; violent happy; and violent unhappy. Anxiety/arousal was assessed using both self-report and physiological measures, and withdrawal was rated from video-recordings of two conflict interactions: one proposed by the wife and one proposed by the husband. Overall, men tended to withdraw from conflict interactions more than did women, especially in discussions of the wife's issue and if they described their relationship as unhappy. Withdrawal tended to be used more by couples in violent distressed relationships, especially when the wife's issue was being discussed.

Because this study involved participants reporting on their anxiety/arousal and also having their physiological reactions measured continuously, we were able to use time-series analysis and explore the links between anxiety/arousal and withdrawal. There was an association between the withdrawal of males from conflict interaction and the anxiety of their female partners; in other words, when he withdrew from their interaction, her anxiety increased. This finding suggests that the anxiety of women in violent relationships is driven, at least in part, by the partner's withdrawal from the interaction. Perhaps women interpret male withdrawal as a signal that once the talking has stopped, violence may follow.

In addition, the anxiety/arousal of those men who were in violent relationships was linked to their withdrawing from an interaction with their wives within 30 seconds. Such a finding supports Gottman and Levenson's (1988) proposal that anxiety/arousal actually caused men to withdraw from marital interactions in order to decrease their unpleasant level of arousal. It is important to note, however, that the finding in the Noller and

Roberts (2002) study was specific to men in violent relationships, whereas the Gottman and Levenson (1988) proposal concerned men more generally.

Learning Conflict Patterns in the Family

One issue we were interested in was how these conflict styles are learned in the family. In a sample of families with adolescent siblings, we used different versions of the Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ; Christensen, 1988) to assess communication styles between a married couple, the mother and daughter, the father and daughter, the mother and son, the father and son, and between the two siblings (Noller, Feeney, Peterson, & Sheehan, 1995). We found that the association between conflict styles in the marital relationship and in the parent–child relationship was generally strong (see Table 9.1).

Demand/withdraw ratings in the marital and the parent–child relationships were strongly correlated, especially between the marital and mother–son relationship and between the marital and father–son relationship. It seems that boys, in particular, learn this pattern in interaction with both mothers and fathers, a pattern that they are then likely to repeat in their conflict with their siblings and in their romantic relationships later in life (see Table 9.2).

In the same study, we then compared CPQ reports of conflict styles in the parent–adolescent relationship with reports of conflict styles in the sibling relationship and found moderate correlations between conflict styles in the parent–child and sibling relationships (see Table 9.2). Interestingly, there were no correlations between conflict styles in the marital and sibling relationships, suggesting that conflict styles used in sibling relationships are not modeled directly on the marital relationship, but are learned in interactions with parents (Noller et al., 1995).

Conflict and Family Members' Perceptions of One Another

In another study (Noller, Feeney, Sheehan, & Peterson, 2000), we again used the CPQ to explore the association among reports of conflict behavior in families of adolescent twins

Table 9.1 Correlations Between Marital and Parent–Child Conflict

<i>Conflict style</i>	<i>Mother</i>		<i>Father</i>	
	<i>Son</i>	<i>Daughter</i>	<i>Son</i>	<i>Daughter</i>
Mutual	.24	.48**	.49**	.54**
Coercion	.58**	.34*	.36*	.34*
Demand/withdraw	.55**	.47**	.54**	.51**

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Source: Based on Noller, P., Feeney, J., Peterson, C., & Sheehan, G. (1995). Learning conflict patterns in the family: Links between marital, parent–child and sibling relationships. In T. J. Socha & G. H. Stamp (Eds.), *Parents, children and communication: Frontiers of theory and research* (pp. 273–298). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum

Table 9.2 Correlations Between Parent–Child and Sibling Conflict

<i>Conflict style</i>	<i>Mother</i>		<i>Father</i>	
	<i>Son</i>	<i>Daughter</i>	<i>Son</i>	<i>Daughter</i>
Mutual	.29	.35**	.22	.28**
Coercion	.61**	.36**	.40**	.29*
Demand/withdraw	.54**	.30*	.61**	.30*

Note: * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

Source: Based on Noller, P., Feeney, J., Peterson, C., & Sheehan, G. (1995). Learning conflict patterns in the family: Links between marital, parent–child and sibling relationships. In T. J. Socha & G. H. Stamp (Eds.), *Parents, children and communication: Frontiers of theory and research* (pp.273–298). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum

and global ratings made by family members of behavior during a videotaped decision-making interaction that included all four family members. There were no associations found for mothers, but associations were found between marital conflict styles reported by fathers and their ratings of the behavior of their adolescents during the decision-making interaction. Those fathers who reported destructive patterns of conflict in their marital relationship, perceived their adolescent twins more negatively. Thus it seems that fathers' perceptions of their offspring are affected by the quality of their relationship with their wives. It is also possible, of course, that adolescents in families where the parents are highly conflicted are more controlling and rejecting towards their parents than are adolescents whose parents are not so conflicted.

Links were also found between reports of father–child conflict and children's perceptions of one another during the interaction. Where fathers reported destructive patterns of parent–child conflict, adolescents reported more negative perceptions of one another (Noller, Feeney, Sheehan, & Peterson, 2000). It seems that patterns of marital conflict are linked, not only with conflict patterns used in other family relationships but also with family members' perceptions of one another in decision-making situations (e.g., planning a holiday). These findings illustrate the ways in which communication during conflict can impact on family relationships, even for those not directly involved in the conflict.

Conflict Strategies and Relationship Satisfaction

Noller et al. (1994) assessed not only conflict styles or patterns, but also conflict strategies over three time periods in newlywed couples: before the wedding; after approximately 1 year of marriage; and after about 2 years. On each occasion, spouses were asked to work through the videotape of their interaction and to stop the tape when they were aware of a specific strategy they were using and describe what they were trying to do. A six-category system was derived from the literature on compliance-gaining strategies and conflict resolution (e.g., Schaap, Buunk, & Kerkstra, 1988). The six categories included three strategies that would generally be considered positive: reason, assertion, partner support; as

Table 9.3 Definitions and Examples of Six Conflict Strategies

<i>Positive strategies</i>	<i>Definitions</i>
Reason	Rational argument, problem solving (use of reason or logic; presenting alternatives or seeking solutions)
Assertion	Direct expression of opinions or wants (clear statement of one's position; redirecting conversation to topic; emphasis by gesture or eye contact)
Partner support	Acknowledgment of partner's views (active listening or questioning; support or agreeing with partner; compromise or concession)
<i>Negative strategies</i>	
Coercion	Seeking control through use of force (threat; blame; sarcasm; physical or verbal aggression)
Manipulation	Attempts to gain compliance by indirect or false means (providing misleading information; attempts to make partner feel guilty/defensive; feigning of moods)
Avoidance	Physical/emotional retreat from the situation (changing or avoiding the topic; avoiding eye contact)

Source: Noller, P., Feeney, J. A., Bonnell, D., & Callan, V. J. (1994). A longitudinal study of conflict in early marriage. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 11, 233–252.

well as three strategies that would generally be considered negative: coercion, manipulation, and avoidance. See Table 9.3 for definitions of the strategies and examples of the ways they were implemented.

In terms of positive strategies, we found that husbands low in relationship satisfaction increased their use of the reasoning from before marriage to a year or so after marriage, and then reduced their use of reason after 2 years of marriage. Wives low in relationship satisfaction, on the other hand, increased their support of their husbands from before marriage to after a year of marriage and then decreased that support after 2 years. For the negative strategies, both husbands and wives low in relationship satisfaction reported less manipulation and less avoidance after a year of marriage than they did before marriage or after 2 years. It seems that couples make an effort over the first year or so and then give up if they don't get the effect they want. Spouses high in satisfaction after 2 years of marriage were less likely to rely on manipulation, avoidance, and destructive patterns such as demand–withdraw and coercion in dealing with conflicts with their partners.

Conflict in Separated/Divorcing Families

Although people tend to have a general expectation that conflict ends with separation and divorce, that notion seems to be far from the truth. We carried out a study to explore conflict in separated/divorcing families with adolescents, and to compare the levels of conflict in those families with the levels of conflict in stable married families that included the biological parents of the adolescents (Noller, Feeney, Sheehan, Darlington, & Rogers, 2008; Sheehan & Noller, 2002).

Sibling relationships

We focused first on the relationships between siblings because we wanted to know what impact an event such as the separation or divorce of their parents would have on the relationships between siblings. We expected that, rather than their relationships becoming more conflicted (that is, *congruent* with the relationships of their parents), siblings might become closer as a way of *compensating* for the loss of a close relationship with their parents. We did find more sibling conflict in the relationships of siblings in divorcing families than was true for the relationships of siblings in stable married families, and we also found that, whereas siblings from divorcing families reported similar levels of conflict over time, those from stable married families reported decreasing levels of conflict. These findings tend to support the congruence hypothesis.

We also found that siblings in the divorcing families reported using more attacking-type communication in interactions with their sibling at the second data collection (approximately 12 months later) than at the first, whereas siblings in the married families reported less attacking-type communication at the second data collection than at the first. In addition, the difference between the siblings in the two types of families was greater at the second data collection than the first. In other words, the communication between the siblings in the stable married families tended to improve over time, whereas the communication between the siblings in the divorcing families seemed to get worse over time.

Although there is considerable research support for the congruence hypothesis (Boer, Goedhart, & Treffers, 1992; Noller et al., 1995), Sheehan and her colleagues (Sheehan, Darlington, Noller, & Feeney, 2002) argued that congruence and compensation could coexist in sibling relationships in separated/divorcing families. Congruence is possible because sibling relationships tend to be intense (Sulloway, 1996), because adolescents in families in the process of separating or divorcing are likely to be exposed to high levels of conflict between parents (Amato & Keith, 1991) that could be highly stressful (Noller, Feeney, Peterson, & Atkin, 2000). In other words, if the congruence hypothesis is correct, sibling relationships in these families are likely to be quite hostile and conflicted.

On the other hand, the conditions may also exist for compensation to occur. Bank (1992) argued that a lack of parental care and high levels of access to their sibling are likely to increase the probability of adolescents compensating for this lack of parental attention by developing a very close bond with their sibling. Although parents in separating and divorcing families are not knowingly or deliberately neglectful of their children, they are likely to be so absorbed in their own problems that adolescent siblings are left to care for one another and their relationships could become closer and warmer.

We based our study on a typology of sibling relationships developed by McGuire and her colleagues (McGuire, McHale, & Updegraff, 1996) in which sibling relationships were assessed on the two critical dimensions of warmth and hostility. Warmth and hostility were measured using the Sibling Relationship Questionnaire (SRQ; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985).

McGuire et al. (1996) identified four possible types of sibling relationships. In our research, we also found the same four types of sibling relationships found by McGuire et al. (1996): harmonious (high in warmth and low in hostility); hostile (high in hostility and low in warmth); uninvolved (low on both warmth and hostility); and affect-intense

Sibling Hostility	Sibling Warmth	
	High	Low
High	Affect-intense	Hostile
Low	Harmonious	Uninvolved

Figure 9.2 McGuire et al.'s 1996 typology of sibling relationships

Source: Created from McGuire, S., McHale, S.M., & Updegraff, K. (1996). Children's perceptions of the sibling relationship in middle childhood: Connections within and between family relationships. *Personal Relationships*, 3(3), 229–239

(high in both warmth and hostility). A really interesting finding was that the sibling relationships of those adolescents in the separated/divorcing families were twice as likely as those from the stable married families to be affect-intense or high in *both* hostility and warmth (Sheehan et al., 2002; see Figure 9.2.). Affect-intense relationships tended to be as nurturant as harmonious relationships and as dominant as hostile relationships. Sibling relationships in the married families were not all harmonious, but more evenly spread across the four types.

Because we also interviewed individual adolescents about the nature of their sibling relationships, we were able to understand how high levels of warmth and high levels of hostility could coexist in these relationships. A commonly reported scenario was where older siblings provided nurturance and support for younger siblings who weren't always appreciative of this support and sometimes even resented it. For example, a younger sibling might seek support from an older sibling when the parents were fighting and want to stay with him or her, but would resist if they thought that their independence was being threatened or the sibling was being too nurturant. Younger siblings were often ambivalent about the protectiveness of an older sibling and saw such behavior as sometimes good and sometimes bad.

An older brother might believe that he should take on a fathering role towards his younger brother and teach him how to shave etc., but the younger brother might not be totally happy with being "fathered" by his brother and want a more equal role in the relationship. It is important to note that there were also families in which the younger child appreciated the love and support of an older sibling and felt protected because of that support. In addition there were families where the support was mutual (Sheehan et al., 2002). For example some siblings believed that because of the fighting between their parents, they had grown closer and needed to depend on each other more.

Couple conflict

In this same study (Noller et al., 2008) we asked both children and parents in the married and divorcing families to rate inter-parental conflict. The ratings were made with regard to

pre- and post-separation for the separated/divorcing couples and at the follow-up for the married families. For both adult and child ratings, it was clear that there was more conflict between parents in the divorcing families than between those in the stable married families, both before and after the separation.

Children in the separated/divorcing families (the only ones interviewed) tended to see their parents' arguments as stupid and trivial and often saw their parents' conflict behavior as childish. Although they may be right at one level, they almost certainly failed to understand the underlying issues. For example arguments that might seem trivial to children may be about power and who has the right to make decisions in that particular area. For example, relatively unimportant arguments about such issues as which restaurant to eat at or which movie to see can be about power and losing face.

Children also saw a lot of arguments as being about financial issues, and they particularly reported on financial issues that affected them. Examples are issues about who would pay school-related expenses such as uniforms and school camps, and who would pay for extracurricular activities such as music lessons and sport.

Children also mentioned conflict around transfers when they were moving between families. These seemed to be times when parents could start arguments with each other around all kinds of issues, particularly child-related issues. And, if all else failed, there was always the telephone. Children reported many arguments between their parents using the telephone. They described parents screaming at each other on the telephone and arguing with each other for hours at a time.

Parent-child conflict

Family members also completed the ICPS Family Functioning Scales (Noller, Seth-Smith, Bouma, & Schweitzer, 1992) as a measure of parent-child conflict and the SRQ as a measure of sibling conflict (note that data from the SRQ have already been reported in the section on sibling relationships.). Both parents and children in the divorcing families reported more parent-child conflict in the divorcing families than in the married families. In addition, the children in the divorcing families reported less family intimacy than those in the stable married families (Noller et al., 2008).

In terms of mother-adolescent conflict, young people described their relationships with their mothers as "up-and-down" before the separation but basically okay. Some, however, reported more conflict with their mothers after the separation than before. They also reported frequent arguments with their mothers about money and admitted that they sometimes provoked conflict by being deliberately annoying towards their mothers who were generally the resident parent.

Fathers were criticized for being too controlling and for not allowing their adolescent sons and daughters enough of the kinds of choices that they would expect at their age. They saw their fathers as being critical of them and not accepting them, and some claimed that their fathers were prone to outbursts of temper during times of conflict. As would be expected, they also complained about problems of organizing time together and being in trouble for planning things or being invited to parties etc. on "his weekend."

Family Conflict and Adolescent Psychological Adjustment

Another important issue related to family conflict concerns the impact of family conflict on the psychological adjustment of younger family members. In the study of divorcing families described above (Noller et al., 2008), we also obtained measures of adjustment: self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. Our analysis was carried out with conflict and family type (married versus divorcing) as the independent variables. We found that across all three measures of adjustment, adolescents in high conflict families were less well adjusted than their counterparts in low conflict families. A similar effect was found for family type, with adolescents in divorcing families being less well adjusted than those in stable married families. In addition, those whose families were both high in conflict and in the process of divorcing were the least well adjusted of all the families.

Differential Parenting and Conflict Between Siblings

We have also carried out studies to explore the links between differential treatment by parents (where one sibling is clearly favored over the other) and conflict in the sibling relationships of stable families. We assessed communication during conflict using self-report questionnaires and by coding videotapes of actual interactions between twin siblings (Sheehan, 2000; Sheehan & Noller, 2002). Links were found between twins' reports of absolute differential treatment (that is, not taking into account who was favored and who was disfavored) and their reports of their conflict interactions. Twins who reported more differential treatment also reported more destructive patterns of conflict in their interactions with one another. They reported more avoidance of conflict, more attacking behavior, more distress following the conflict, and less ability to solve the problems between them. It is important to note here that both twins experienced this negative climate for dealing with conflict, irrespective of whether they were favored or disfavored.

In the interaction task, twins who reported that they were treated differently from their twin by their parents, rated their own and their twin's communication less positively than those who did not report differential treatment. In addition, outsiders' ratings of the communication between the twins were correlated with the twins' reports of differential parenting. For firstborn twins, their reports of differential parenting were associated with outsider ratings of their communication with their twin as unfriendly and rejecting. Thus differential parenting was related to more negative interactions between siblings than was true for families where differential treatment was not reported.

Implications

Conflict that is inevitable in family relationships can be related to misunderstandings, especially in couples, who may misinterpret one another's intentions. Such misunder-

standings may be particularly problematic when intentions are interpreted more negatively than they were meant. It may be important for therapists to highlight the importance of the nonverbal behaviors that accompany their statements and that may lead to misinterpretation and arguments.

Family members use different conflict styles, with the main styles being mutual discussion, coercion, demand–withdraw, and withdrawal. Conflict styles are related to attachment insecurity and the quality of the relationship. Withdrawal is generally seen as less effective than other styles because issues tend not to get resolved and there can be a build-up of resentment leading to coldness and distance between the couple. Therapists may find it useful to work on attachment styles with some couples, especially if they engage in a lot of coercive interactions or tend to favor demand–withdraw as a conflict style. Those engaging in pre-marital education may also need to be aware of the importance of the first 2 years of marriage for the development of communication patterns.

Communication styles are learned in the family, especially in interactions between parents and children and these interactions can affect sibling conflicts. Children, and especially sons, seem to learn the demand–withdraw style in interaction with their parents. Given that demand/withdraw is not an effective way of dealing with conflict, those educating parents in conflict management should help them find more constructive strategies for dealing with conflict so that destructive patterns won't be passed on to the next generation.

In violent couples, both husbands' and wives' anxiety seems to be an important driver of their communication patterns. It may be important for therapists to talk with violent couples about this pattern and the role that the anxiety of both the husband and wife plays in the cycle of violence.

Fathers' perceptions of their conflict communication with their wives had an impact on their perceptions of their offspring. In addition, fathers' perceptions of parent–child conflict seemed to affect siblings' perceptions of one another. Parents in conflicted families may need help to understand these processes and the implications for all family relationships.

Divorced or separated families tend to be involved in more conflict than stable married families across marital, parent–child, and sibling relationships. In addition, in those families that were both high in conflict and separated or divorced, the children were the least well-adjusted children in the study. Those counseling divorcing couples may need to help them to deal with their disagreements more effectively, and in ways that do not impact so heavily on the children. Because of the intense emotions that are aroused by family breakdown, this task will not be an easy one (see chapter 24 in this volume).

In families where there is differential treatment, both siblings tend to be involved in more destructive forms of conflict, thus creating a negative climate for their relationship. This finding was supported by both questionnaire results and observation. No one wins in this type of relationship, and the focus needs to be on helping the parents to be more even-handed in their dealings with their children.

Overall, the findings of the studies reported here have implications for marital and family therapists and those who teach communication skills. Many families could be helped to achieve more functional relationships if they were able to learn more constructive ways to communicate in conflict situations.

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Demand–Withdraw Communication in Couples

Recent Developments and Future Directions

Kathleen A. Eldridge, and Brian Baucom

The demand–withdraw interaction pattern has been a focused interest of close relationship researchers and clinicians for several decades. In this pattern, one partner engages in demanding forms of behavior, such as complaints, criticisms, and pressures for changes, while the other partner engages in withdrawing forms of behavior, such as halfhearted involvement, changing the topic, avoiding discussion, or even walking away (Christensen, 1988). Importantly, the pattern is conceptualized as bidirectional: each partner's behavior influences the behavior of the other. For example, demand behavior does not cause withdrawing, instead demanding is both a cause and consequence of withdrawing. Each behavior exacerbates the other in a systemic, dyadic manner such that behaviors become increasingly polarized and rigid over time (Baucom, McFarland, & Christensen, 2010; Eldridge, Sevier, Jones, Atkins, & Christensen, 2007). Further, research has demonstrated that this pattern is distinct from general negativity (Caughlin & Huston, 2002).

Couple therapists have long recognized demand–withdraw communication as a common problem among therapy-seeking couples. Although consistent replication is often difficult to achieve in the social sciences, systematic research on the demand–withdraw pattern is unique, as it contains multiple replications that increase confidence in findings. After a brief description of replicated findings and proposed theories about the pattern, we review in this chapter recent developments in demand–withdraw research by

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summarizing the proximal and distal contexts for the pattern, immediate and long-term consequences of demand–withdraw, treatment responsiveness, and ideas for substantive and methodological advancements.

Replicated Findings

Arguably the most robust finding about demand–withdraw is the association with relationship dissatisfaction. Among several types of relationships (married, cohabiting, dating, same-sex, cross-sex, treatment-seeking, and nonclinical samples) and across cultures (North American, Australian, European, Brazilian, Taiwanese, and Pakistani), greater relationship distress is associated with more demand–withdraw communication (see Eldridge & Christensen, 2002, for a review). We are aware of only one study that did not produce this finding (Heffner et al., 2006), possibly due to the size and idiosyncratic nature of this sample (older, longer-married, highly satisfied spouses). This link between demand–withdraw and dissatisfaction carries the greatest concern for clinicians.

One of the most interesting aspects of the demand–withdraw pattern is that, in heterosexual relationships, it can be further specified into male-demand/female-withdraw and female-demand/male-withdraw. Most studies find that the female-demand/male-withdraw pattern is more common than the reverse. However, Christensen and Heavey (1990) first used a two-topic methodology (his issue and her issue) to discover that this gender difference holds true for conversation topics of primary importance to the female, but not for conversation topics of primary importance to the male. Studies employing this two-topic methodology have found that during female-generated topics, female-demand/male-withdraw is more common than the reverse, and during male-generated topics either there is no significant gender difference in demanding or withdrawing (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey, Layne, & Christensen, 1993; Vogel & Karney, 2003), or there is greater male-demand/female-withdraw than the reverse (Holtzworth-Munroe, Smutzler, & Stuart, 1998; Klinetob & Smith, 1996; McGinn, McFarland, & Christensen, 2009), or the presence of this effect depends on distress level and marriage length (Eldridge et al., 2007). These findings have made clear the central importance of using a two-topic protocol for studying demand–withdraw, as the topic of the conversation strongly influences each partner's behavior.

Theories

There are four explanations for why demand–withdraw occurs: individual differences; social structure; conflict structure; and multiple goals. Each of these explanations, except the most recent multiple goals perspective, attempts to account for the gender linkage in demand and withdraw roles. A lengthy review of each perspective is beyond the scope of this chapter, so each is described briefly below (see Eldridge & Christensen, 2002; and Sagrestano, Heavey, & Christensen, 2006, for more extended coverage).

The *individual differences* perspective posits that physiological or socialization differences between men and women foster the development of demand–withdraw communication behavior, particularly the female-demand/male-withdraw pattern. The *escape conditioning* explanation (Gottman & Levenson, 1988) suggests that men are more aversely affected by the physiological arousal experienced during conflict, making men more inclined to withdraw from conflict to alleviate the aversive arousal. In contrast, *gender role socialization* explanations (Chodorow, 1978; Gilligan, 1982; Noller, 1993; Rubin, 1983; summarized in Sagrestano et al., 2006) focus on the divergent social worlds of men and women that influence personality, identity and values development, communication goals, speech usage, and interpretations of conversations. Generally, women become more relationship-oriented and men become independence-oriented, thus women pursue closeness and connection (demand) while men seek to maintain separation (withdrawal) (Christensen, 1987, 1988; Jacobson, 1989; Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). A third version of the individual differences perspective suggests that differences between people in basic *personality attributes*, not necessarily gender-linked (such as agreeableness, neuroticism, and extraversion), contribute to demand–withdraw through directly influencing one's own communication behavior (self-influence) and/or one's partner's behavior (relational influence) (Caughlin & Vangelisti, 2000; chapters 9, 16 in this volume).

The *social structure* perspective (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Sagrestano et al., 2006) emphasizes the sociocultural variables associated with gender, such as power and social roles. This explanation suggests that the relational partner with more power and status in society (the male) will want to maintain that position by withdrawing from discussions about changes in the relationship that would reduce his power or status. Similarly, the relational partner with less power (the female) will engage in communication behavior (demand) designed to bring about change in the relationship so that it is defined more according to their interests.

The individual and social structure perspectives focus on enduring and distal characteristics of men and women that influence communication tendencies throughout a relationship. In contrast, the conflict structure and multiple goals approaches allow for more attention to the proximal characteristics of each conversation. The *conflict structure* view suggests that the person seeking change in the issue being discussed will tend to be more demanding whereas the person seeking to maintain the status quo will tend to be more withdrawn. Thus behavior is determined by investment in either change or stability, not by sex or gender (Heavey et al., 1993).

The *multiple goals* approach (Caughlin & Scott, 2010) is similar to the conflict structure viewpoint in that it focuses on the immediate goals at hand in a conversation. However, this approach broadens the potential goals, extending beyond seeking change or consistency, to include primary and secondary goals. Primary goals represent the main objective, while secondary goals influence whether and how primary goals are pursued. Examples of primary goals provided by Caughlin and Scott parallel those in the conflict structure approach, such as wanting to influence the other to change, or wanting to maintain the existing arrangement. However, secondary goals include such examples as wanting to prevent upheaval, wanting to appear reasonable, or not wanting to appear dictatorial. It is assumed that these goals are likely to change over the course of a conversation as well as over longer spans of time. Caughlin and Scott (2010) suggest that this approach is

consistent with existing research findings on demand–withdraw, yet offers the possibility of addressing limitations in prior explanations for the pattern.

Several studies reviewed in this chapter have attempted to test these explanations. The results of a large number of cleverly designed and implemented studies make it clear that biological sex alone does not fully explain the gender differences observed in demand–withdraw, and no one theory has yielded more empirical support than the others. As with most relationship phenomena, it is likely that one theory does not fit all couples, and variations within and between samples foster mixed and inconclusive results. Each perspective contains valuable and essential information in understanding demand–withdraw, and none offer a complete explanation. Combined they suggest that, like most relationship phenomena, demand–withdraw is multifactorial. Therefore, a combined model that encompasses both proximal and distal influences is needed to provide a more complete and contextual understanding of demand–withdraw.

The Proximal and Distal Context of Demand–Withdraw Communication

Research has identified several variables associated with demand–withdraw that can be cogently organized into proximal and distal variables. Proximal variables occur very close in time to the behavior and may be more fluid or dynamic. Distal variables, on the other hand, are more stable and enduring characteristics of partners or relationships that are present for longer periods of time and act as more distant antecedents of demand–withdraw.

Distal context: individual, relational, and cultural variables

Individual. Individual variables associated with demand–withdraw include personality characteristics and personal desire for greater closeness or independence in the relationship. Caughlin and Vangelisti (2000) found that desire for closeness and argumentativeness were each positively related to one's own demanding behavior and inversely related to one's own withdrawing. Neuroticism and external locus of control over conflict were positively associated with demand–withdraw, while agreeableness, flexibility, and internal locus of control were inversely associated with demand–withdraw. Christensen and colleagues (Christensen, 1987, 1988; Christensen & Shenk, 1991) demonstrated that the partner desiring more closeness tends to be more demanding during conflict, while the partner desiring more distance tends to be more withdrawing, and greater differences between partners in their desires for closeness and distance predicts greater demand–withdraw (Christensen, Eldridge, Catta-Preta, Lim, & Santagata, 2006).

Relational. As described above, greater relationship distress is consistently associated with more demand–withdraw. Research has begun to extend this finding by examining additional variables that may influence the relationship between distress and demand–withdraw. For example, Caughlin and Huston (2002) demonstrated that this relationship was reduced in the context of an affectionate relationship. Similarly, Weger (2005)

reported that feeling understood by one's spouse mediated the association between marital satisfaction and demand–withdraw for husbands and partially mediated it for wives. In contrast, investigators examining couples in which one partner is also depressed have largely found that depression does not uniquely contribute to demand–withdraw when controlling for distress (Baucom et al., 2007; Byrne, Carr, & Clark, 2004).

Cultural. As with all behavior, demand–withdraw must be understood within a cultural context. Recent studies have examined demand–withdraw using a cultural lens. Christensen et al. (2006) examined demand–withdraw behavior in couples from Brazil, Italy, Taiwan, and the United States. These countries represent disparate cultural attitudes, religions, and gendered expectations that are presumed to influence relationship communication. Despite these cultural disparities, findings were consistent across the four cultures and replicated earlier findings. Demand–withdraw was negatively associated with relationship satisfaction, and female-demand/male-withdraw was more likely than male-demand/female-withdraw.

Rehman and Holtzworth-Munroe (2006) examined the influence of social norms about gender and power on demand–withdraw behavior in a study of three cultures with varying degrees of espoused patriarchy: white Americans, immigrant Pakistani couples in America, and Pakistani couples in Pakistan. In all three groups the relationship between demand–withdraw and distress was replicated. However, one of the primary contributions of this study was the examination of the gender linkage in demand–withdraw roles. These authors hypothesized that the gender-stereotyped pattern of female-demand/male-withdraw might not be present to the same degree in patriarchal countries as in more egalitarian ones, but rather that women in patriarchal countries might refrain from culturally incongruent demanding behavior. Likewise men in patriarchal countries might be less likely to withdraw if they are not threatened by wife demands and instead engage in more explicit demanding behavior.

As expected, American couples demonstrated significantly more wife-demand/husband-withdraw than Pakistani couples, with no statistically significant differences between the two Pakistani groups. Further, both Pakistani groups demonstrated significantly greater husband-demand/wife-withdraw than American couples. Pakistani wives demonstrated significantly more unassertive and fewer aggressive demands than American wives, whereas Pakistani and immigrant husbands demonstrated significantly more aggressive demands than their wives while the converse was found for American couples. Finally, unlike American couples, Pakistani wives withdrew significantly more than their husbands and significantly more than American wives.

These results strongly suggest that the roles of men and women in the demand–withdraw pattern are not determined solely by gender, but are clearly influenced by gender role expectations and cultural norms. Even though one approach to understanding the female-demand/male-withdraw pattern has been to hypothesize that women demand due to their reduced power and thus dissatisfaction in the traditional marital structure of American couples, these authors suggest that women with reduced power in patriarchal cultures may tend to withdraw as a result of resignation. These findings demonstrate the importance of understanding the intent, function, or goals behind demanding and withdrawing behavior, and support the utility of the multiple goals approach described above (Caughlin & Scott, 2010).

Although Rehman and Holtzworth-Munroe (2006) did not utilize direct measures of gender roles, two studies examining the links between demand–withdraw, traditionalism, and egalitarianism found similar results. Kluwer et al. (1997) found that during discussions about the division of household labor, traditional wives, and wives with traditional husbands, were more likely to avoid conflict than were egalitarian wives and wives with an egalitarian husband. Kluwer (1998) suggests that traditional wives, and wives with a traditional husband, may find it more difficult to engage in conflict over the division of labor because of strongly held gender role ideologies (DeVault, 1990). Opposing the traditional marital roles is considered inappropriate in such marriages. Interestingly, traditional ideologies may actually reduce the gender-stereotyped wife-demand/husband-withdraw pattern, and instead increase the extent of conflict avoidance among traditional wives and wives with a traditional husband.

Just as certain conflict structures may exacerbate or facilitate the gender-stereotyped pattern of wife-demand/husband-withdraw (such as when the topic is one in which the wife wants change, see chapter 16 in this volume), there are moderating variables, such as gender roles, that may reduce or even reverse this interaction pattern. For example, Eldridge (2000) found that during conflict discussions generated by wives, traditional couples demonstrated greater husband-demand/wife-withdraw than egalitarian couples, and more traditionalism was associated with more husband-demand/wife-withdraw and less wife-demand/husband-withdraw. These studies suggest that type of marital structure and gender roles influence patterns of demand–withdraw behavior.

Another way researchers have examined the relative influence of inherent differences between men and women versus other variables is by comparing cross-sex and same-sex couples (Baucom, Snyder, & Gordon, 2009; Holley & Levenson, 2010; Kurdek, 2004). One study found that gay (but not lesbian) couples engage in less demand–withdraw than cross-sex married couples with children (but not cross-sex childless married couples, Kurdek, 2004) while another found that same-sex and cross-sex couples engage in similar levels of demand and withdraw, and demand–withdraw polarization (Holley & Levenson, 2010).

Similar to cross-sex couples, same-sex relationship satisfaction is inversely associated with demand–withdraw (Baucom et al., 2009), and differences in amount of change desired by partners predicted expected differences in demanding and withdrawing during conflict (Holley & Levenson, 2010). In the only study to use the two-topic protocol among cross-sex and same-sex couples, Baucom et al. (2009) found that partners' demanding was greater during discussion of their own chosen issue than during discussion of their partners' chosen issue, while withdrawing was greater during discussion of their partners' chosen issue than their own issue. These results suggest that gender differences alone cannot account for the demand–withdraw pattern, while the conflict structure perspective focusing on differences in desired change applies to same-sex couples as it does to cross-sex couples.

Proximal context: immediate antecedents of demand–withdraw

Topic variables. As suggested by the conflict structure view, the amount and type of demand–withdraw are related to the topic of the conflict. One explanation for these

findings is that the person who chooses the topic is the one more invested in changing that area of the relationship, and is therefore primed to be more demanding, while the other partner is less invested in change and is thus primed to be more withdrawn. This model suggests that a complete crossover in roles depending on topic should occur. Some studies have found this crossover (Holtzworth-Munroe et al., 1998; Klinetob & Smith, 1996; McGinn et al., 2009), but others have not (Christensen & Heavey, 1990; Heavey et al., 1993; Vogel & Karney, 2003), and one study demonstrated that the crossover occurs among nondistressed couples but not among distressed couples seeking therapy (Eldridge et al., 2007). These discrepancies suggest that proximal and distal variables interact, an issue which we examine later in the chapter.

Other elements of the topic, in addition to who chose it for discussion, have been studied. McGinn et al. (2009) failed to find associations between issue seriousness and demand-withdraw during conflict. Eldridge et al. (2007) found that more previous discussion of a topic was associated with more demand-withdraw during the discussion of that topic, most strongly among distressed couples discussing wife-generated topics (Eldridge, 2000). Topic novelty did not predict discrepancy in demand-withdraw patterns (Eldridge et al., 2007).

Although virtually all demand-withdraw research has been conducted in the context of discussions in which partners are attempting to resolve a conflict or solve a relationship problem, one study (Eldridge et al., 2007) examined demand-withdraw in the context of supportive relationship discussions about partners' personal problems. The unique aspect of these discussions is that the person desiring change and carrying the burden of change are the same. Using the two-topic paradigm, Eldridge et al. (2007) showed that, as expected, there was more demand-withdraw in conflict discussions than support discussions, and this difference was more pronounced for severely distressed couples. Interestingly, wife-demand/husband-withdraw was greater than husband-demand/wife-withdraw in both types of discussions.

Importantly, in the Eldridge et al. (2007) study, seeking change in the husband predicted gender-stereotyped disparity in roles in all discussions. Whenever the discussion centered on the husband changing, whether the change was being sought by the wife (in a wife-chosen problem-solving topic) or by the husband himself (in a husband-chosen social-support topic), this gender-stereotyped difference was present. However, if the discussion was centered on the wife changing, whether husband-imposed (conflict topic) or wife-imposed (support topic), there was little to no gender polarization in demand-withdraw roles. As the authors report, "It is unclear whether the greater disparity is because husbands are more resistant to change than wives, because wives are more insistent on change than husbands, or both" (p. 225). Hence, essential proximal variables in understanding demand-withdraw may revolve around characteristics of the topic like investment in change, resistance to change, and gender of the person who feels pressured to change.

Mood and satisfaction variables. Recently, mood and distress immediately preceding interaction have been inconsistently linked to demanding and withdrawing behaviors. Tashiro and Frazier (2007) found that couples exhibited greater demanding and withdrawing behaviors after a negative mood induction (having the couple discuss

presenting problems) than after a positive mood induction (talking about positive aspects of the relationship). Likewise, Afifi et al. (2009) found that greater dissatisfaction reported immediately before an interaction predicted more observationally coded avoidance and greater self-reported perceptions of partner avoidance during the interaction. In contrast, McGinn et al. (2009) failed to find significant associations between level of distress prior to discussion and demand–withdraw behavior during conflict. These null findings may be due to low ratings of upset in their mostly satisfied, nondistressed sample; Tashiro and Frazier (2007) found the impact of negative mood induction on demanding behavior to be enhanced in less satisfied couples.

Immediate goals. Caughlin and Scott (2010) have recently proposed that goals are an important proximal variable to consider. Their recent description of the multiple goals approach contained a transcript analysis of marital and parent–adolescent discussions and determined four qualitatively different forms of demand–withdraw: discuss/exit (one partner seeks discussion while the other overtly exits the conversation, physically or verbally); Socratic question/perfunctory response (one partner asks questions while the other provides dutiful minimal responses); complain/deny (one partner complains about the other, while the other denies the legitimacy of the complaint); and criticize/defend (one partner complains about the other, while the other justifies the criticized behavior). Proximal goals such as avoidance of the discussion can be pursued in various ways depending on other goals such as wanting to appear cooperative (an identity goal) or wanting to maintain harmony (a relational goal). For example, outright exit is one way to avoid discussion, but a perfunctory response serves multiple goals of avoiding true conflict discussion while appearing cooperative and maintaining relationship harmony. This qualitative lens reminds us that type of demand–withdraw, not just amount or gender-linked pattern, is important to consider.

Interaction of proximal and distal variables

Distal variables also influence the association between proximal variables and demand–withdraw. For example, Tashiro and Frazier (2007) demonstrated that the impact of negative mood induction on demanding behavior was stronger for less satisfied couples than for more satisfied couples. Eldridge et al. (2007) demonstrated that the impact of conflict structure (husband or wife topic) on demand–withdraw patterns depended on two distal variables: distress level of the relationship and marriage length. Severely distressed couples remained in gender-stereotyped demand–withdraw roles regardless of conflict structure, whereas moderately distressed and nondistressed couples reversed roles depending on conflict structure. Marriage length interacted with distress level as well, such that couples in shorter marriages reversed roles depending on who chose the topic, whereas among those in longer marriages, only those less distressed couples reversed roles depending on who chose the topic. Longer marriages that were severely distressed remained locked in gender-stereotyped demand–withdraw roles across wife and husband topics, but couples in shorter marriages that were severely distressed demonstrated some role reversal depending on the conflict structure. Together, these two studies suggest that

proximal variables such as mood and topic are strongly influenced by distal ones, most clearly level of distress.

Immediate and Long-term Consequences of Demand-Withdraw Communication

What happens to couples when they engage in demanding and withdrawing behavior? How do they feel, think, and behave in response to conflicts that contain demand-withdraw patterns? Research has identified a number of short- and long-term consequences of demand-withdraw.

Immediate consequences

A number of immediate consequences of demand-withdraw have been identified, each with probable long-term implications. Research on general marital conflict has shown that there are significant individual differences in cognitive response to conflict. Some individuals continue thinking about the conflict a great deal while others attempt to avoid thinking about it (e.g., Johnson & Roloff, 1998). Consistent with these findings, Malis and Roloff (2006) found that self-demand/partner-withdraw was positively associated with reports of post-conflict hyper arousal, attempts to avoid recollections and feelings about the episode, intrusive thoughts, feelings, and images related to the episode, and health-related reductions in life activities (work, school, etc.) after the episode. Partner-demand/self-withdraw was also associated with attempts to avoid thinking about the episode and with post-episode appraisals of stressful life events, but not with hyper arousal or health-related reductions in activities.

Using diary methodology, Papp et al. (2009) found that wife-demand/husband-withdraw and husband-demand/wife-withdraw were each associated with less conflict resolution for husbands and wives. McGinn et al. (2009) found that higher levels of demand-withdraw during a discussion predicted less satisfaction with the outcome of the discussion, independent of the actual outcome. Surprisingly, demand-withdraw did not predict resolution frequency, but for those issues that were considered resolved, partner-demand/self-withdraw was associated with less likelihood of coming to agreed-upon changes. Demand-withdraw is also associated with perceived resolvability of the issue, such that demand-withdraw during conflict, and avoidance after conflict, were each inversely correlated with perceived resolvability (Johnson & Roloff, 1998).

Weger (2005) conceptualizes demand-withdraw as an example of disconfirming communication, causing the demanding partner to feel misunderstood and unaccepted by the withdrawing partner. He found that demand-withdraw resulted in spouses feeling less understood by their mates. Feeling misunderstood mediated associations between demand-withdraw and satisfaction for both spouses. Even perceptions of avoidance can have consequences. Afifi et al. (2009) found that perceptions of partner avoidance during a discussion predicted decreases in relationship satisfaction from before to after the interaction.

Longitudinal research

Although cross-sectional research on demand–withdraw has been plentiful and findings have been fairly consistent, longitudinal research has been sparse and findings have sometimes been counter-intuitive. Although there is relatively limited longitudinal research, much of it attempts to determine whether demand–withdraw predicts later dissatisfaction, whether dissatisfaction predicts later demand–withdraw, and if these relationships are bidirectional over time.

Kurdek (2003) found that higher levels of self-report demand–withdraw behavior were related to longitudinal declines in relationship satisfaction in a sample of gay male and lesbian couples. Several observational studies have found that higher levels of wife-demand/husband-withdraw predict decreases in relationship satisfaction over time, particularly for women (Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Heavey et al., 1995). Similarly, husband-withdraw, independent of wife-demand, has been found to predict declines in husband relationship satisfaction over time (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989; Heavey, Christensen, & Malamuth, 1995). Other studies have generated almost diametrically opposed findings. Caughlin and Huston (2002) found that both husband-demand/wife-withdraw and wife-demand/husband-withdraw predicted increases in relationship satisfaction for women. Heavey et al. (1993) also found that husband-demand/wife-withdraw predicted increases in wives' satisfaction. Finally, some studies (e.g. Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, & Callan, 1994) have failed to find any relationship between demand–withdraw behavior and relationship satisfaction over time at all. These inconsistencies have been attributed to methodological and statistical differences across studies (Bradbury & Karney, 1993; Gottman & Krokoff, 1990; Smith, Vivian, & O'Leary, 1991; Woody & Costanzo, 1990).

Treatment Responsiveness

Does treatment reduce demand–withdraw? Given the robust association between demand–withdraw and relationship distress, it is essential to develop treatments that effectively diminish the presence of this pattern in treatment-seeking couples. One study to date has examined the effect of couple therapy on reducing the demand–withdraw pattern. Eldridge (2000) examined reduction in demand–withdraw from pre- to post-therapy among couples seeking therapy in a randomized clinical trial of Traditional Behavioral Couple Therapy (chapters 21, 22 in this volume; Jacobson & Margolin, 1979) and Integrative Behavioral Couple Therapy (chapter 22 in this volume; Christensen & Jacobson, 2000; Jacobson & Christensen, 1996). Results indicated that reported and observed demand–withdraw declined significantly over time, and that female-demand/male-withdraw decreased more than male-demand/female-withdraw. These are hopeful results. However, since these analyses were conducted on a subsample of the couples who had completed treatment at the time, they are preliminary, and the sample size was not large enough to compare differences between the two forms of treatment in their ability to reduce demand–withdraw.

Future Research Directions

The results of recent studies suggest refinements of the existing models of demand–withdraw behavior and identify avenues of exploration that are in need of additional study. One area of research that has seen considerable recent attention is the escape-conditioning model. Early work examining the escape-conditioning model measured emotional arousal through physiological indices such as blood pressure, heart rate, and cortisol. By and large, these measures failed to show associations with demanding and withdrawing behaviors (Denton, Burleson, Hobbs, Von Stein, & Rodroquez, 2001; Kiecolt-Glaser, Newton, Cacioppo, & MacCallum, 1996; Kiecolt-Glaser, Bane, Glaser, & Malarkey, 2003; Loving, Heffner, Kiecolt-Glaser, Glaser, & Malarkey, 2004).

Two recent studies used widely differing measures of emotional arousal and found convergent evidence linking higher levels of emotional arousal to higher levels of demanding and lower levels of withdrawing. Vogel et al. (2008) reported these findings in a sample of heterosexual community couples using skin conductance to measure arousal, and Baucom et al. (2010) documented these associations in samples of treatment-seeking heterosexual, cohabiting heterosexual, gay male, and lesbian community couples using fundamental frequency (a well-accepted vocal measure of emotional arousal that is very highly correlated with perceived pitch; see Juslin & Scherer, 2005) to measure emotional arousal. Baucom et al. (2010) suggest that specific emotions associated with demanding (anger/frustration) and withdrawing (anxiety) may be important to consider in understanding the associations between emotional arousal and demand–withdraw behavior in future studies.

Other substantive areas are just beginning to receive empirical attention, such as the role of demand–withdraw in physical/mental health (Byrne et al., 2004; Papp, et al., 2009) and demand–withdraw during specific developmental stages of the relationship. For example, Smith et al. (2009) found behaviors similar to demand–withdraw occurring in older adults but also note that the form of demanding and withdrawing behaviors may change over the course of a relationship with some significant sex differences in behaviors not emerging until later life. In examining control behavior (which is conceptually similar to demanding) in middle-aged and older adult couples, older adult women used significantly higher levels of hostile controlling behaviors than men. In contrast, older adult men used significantly higher levels of warm control than women but there were no sex differences in these two behaviors in middle-aged couples (Smith et al., 2009). Additional work is needed to explore this possibility as well as to examine demand–withdraw behavior during other salient relationship stages, such as the transitions to marriage, parenthood (Thorp, Krause, Cukrowicz, & Lynch, 2004), and retirement.

Similarly, recent studies have focused on demand–withdraw behavior between parents and adolescents (Caughlin & Malis, 2004; Caughlin & Ramey, 2005; chapter 8 in this volume), and within the family system (Noller, Feeney, Sheehan, & Peterson, 2000; chapter 9 in this volume). The pioneering work in this area documents the occurrence and ramifications of demand–withdraw behavior for parents and children; however, much remains to be learned about the developmental correlates of demand–withdraw behavior for children such as whether demand–withdraw behavior is a mechanism of intergener-

ational transmission of domestic aggression, risk for divorce, and depression. A final line of research that holds much promise for additional exploration is culture. Rehman and Holtzworth-Munroe's (2006) thought-provoking study of cultural variation in demand-withdraw behavior suggests the need for examination of other cultural norms for behavior, such as the cultural congruence of assertiveness, high/low context communication tendencies, patriarchal tendencies, and the degree of individualism/collectivism.

Conclusion

Recent years have seen exciting expansions in demand-withdraw research. Notably, investigators who examine relationship communication, now often focus specifically on the demand-withdraw pattern, instead of global positive/negative communication. With the amount of knowledge amassed about demand-withdraw in past and recent years, the time is ripe to explore two important avenues in the next decade: (i) careful refinement and combination of demand-withdraw theories into a cohesive proximal-distal model and (ii) extension to clinical practice by examining treatment responsiveness and refining existing therapies to most effectively alleviate this pattern. Couples polarized by this pattern, and therapists working with them, would benefit greatly from focused efforts in these two areas.

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