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Conflict Resolution

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Interpersonal conflict arises in families and close relationships when two people hold differing attitudes or opinions, when those disagreements create interference in individuals' personal goals or routines, and when disagreements are accompanied by negative emotion. Conditions that encourage conflict include incompatible goals, scarce resources, and relationships marked by a high degree of mutual influence and interpersonal dependence. Conflict resolution involves a variety of tactics and strategies that are intended to ameliorate disagreement, coordinate behavior, and restore positive feelings toward a partner.

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Resolving conflict requires attention to the goals or outcomes a person hopes to achieve through conflict. Four types of goals are prominent during interpersonal conflict: instrumental, relational, identity, and process. *Instrumental goals* refer to the specific or tangible resources individuals are hoping to obtain or retain at the end of the conflict. *Relational goals* reflect concern over the impact that conflict will have on the quality or state of the relationship between partners. *Identity goals* refer to the way people want to be perceived during and after the conflict, which can involve concern for one's own image or for the image of a partner. *Process goals* refer to one's preferred strategies for managing conflict or beliefs about how conflicts should be resolved. Although instrumental goals tend to be the most salient during conflict, individuals typically have multiple goals and often need to balance competing goals at different times (Keck and Samp 2007). For example, the most efficient way to achieve one's instrumental goal is to demand the desired resources; however, this strategy may compromise one's identity goal of being perceived as kind and reasonable, as well as one's process goals of promoting co-operation and compromise. Thus, individuals may struggle to find conflict resolution strategies that simultaneously promote competing conflict goals.

Another factor that can influence conflict resolution is the degree of power that each person has in the relationship. Individuals gain power in relationships in one of two ways. First, the relative love and need theory suggests that individuals each bring unique resources and needs to their relationship that can be shared with a partner, but resources are not always exchanged equally and some partners stand to gain more than others (Safilios-Rothschild 1970). Accordingly, individuals have *punitive power* when they are able to withhold resources from their partner. Second, the principle of least interest suggests that individuals who are least committed or invested in a relationship enjoy the most power over their partner (Waller and Hill 1951). Thus, individuals have *dependence power* when their partner is more reliant on the relationship than they are. Those who possess a great deal of power in their relationships are free to raise disagreements and can control how conflicts are discussed and resolved. Less powerful individuals experience a *chilling effect* which prevents them from raising complaints out of fear of provoking or losing their more

powerful relationship partner (Roloff and Cloven 1990). In addition, less powerful individuals tend to downplay the severity of a partner's transgressions to avoid the need for confrontation (Solomon and Samp 1998).

The attributions that individuals make about the reasons for a conflict are the final factor that can influence conflict resolution. *Attributions* are the judgments individuals make about who is responsible for a disagreement or transgression. Individuals tend to believe that a partner's behavior is caused by internal traits and motivations, but blame their own transgressions on external causes that are out of their control. Thus, individuals often have divergent explanations for why a conflict occurred. A study of conflict in marriage revealed that spouses tend to attribute the source of conflict to the other partner and to attribute their own behavior to good intentions, unfortunate circumstances, or stress (Schütz 1999). When individuals make maladaptive attributions for conflict, they tend to adopt less effective problem-solving behaviors, display more aggressive and self-centered conflict strategies, and reciprocate their partner's negative behaviors (Bradbury and Fincham 1992). Attributions of blame are also associated with increased marital discord and decreased marital satisfaction. In contrast, individuals who are capable of perspective-taking and expressing empathy tend to engage in more constructive problem-solving and more agreeable communication (Corcoran and Mallinckrodt 2000).

STRATEGIES AND STYLES OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Individuals may adopt a variety of different strategies as they attempt to resolve conflict. Conflict strategies involve a plan for how one intends to communicate about conflict, and they generally fall into one of three categories. First, *distributive conflict strategies* involve active confrontation of the other person with the goal of diminishing his or her position. The distributive conflict strategy is known as a win–lose approach, because one party typically receives all of his or her desired outcomes while the other retains none of his or her resources. People who employ a distributive conflict strategy are typically quite aggressive in pursuing their goals, often resorting to criticism, belittling their partner, expressing anger, and being defensive to achieve their desired outcome. Second, *integrative conflict strategies* reflect a more co-operative and collaborative orientation toward conflict. Integrative strategies are often known as a win–win approach, because they involve working together to find a mutually satisfying solution. People who use an integrative conflict strategy ask a lot of questions and provide honest answers in an effort to understand and respect the other's point of view. Third, *avoidant conflict strategies* are used to limit or entirely prevent communication about the conflict. Avoidant strategies are often seen as a lose–lose approach to conflict because, when the conflict remains unaddressed, neither party achieves the outcomes he/she desires. Individuals can avoid conflicts by suppressing disagreements, pretending to agree, minimizing the problem, withholding complaints, or declaring particular topics off-limits. Although avoidance is typically an unsuccessful strategy for addressing and resolving conflicts, it can be useful in situations where disagreements are insurmountable and no resolution is possible (Roloff and Ifert 2000).

Individuals tend to take the same approach to conflict resolution every time they are confronted with a dispute. Conflict styles are trait-like tendencies to perceive interpersonal problems in particular ways and to address issues using particular strategies. Conflict styles tend to vary along two dimensions: confrontation orientation and self–other orientation (Rahim 1983). *Confrontation*

orientation describes the extent to which individuals tend to approach or avoid confrontation when faced with an interpersonal problem. The *self – other orientation* addresses the tendency to either pursue desirable outcomes for one's self or to promote positive outcomes for one's partner during conflict. In combination, these two dimensions contribute to five distinct conflict styles: dominating/competing, integrating/collaborating, obliging/accommodating, avoiding, and compromising.

Individuals with a *dominating/competing* conflict style have a high confrontation orientation and a strong self-focus during conflict. Dominators/competitors tend to seek to gain as much as possible for themselves at their partner's expense, thereby taking a win–lose approach to conflict. They employ distributive conflict strategies to bolster their own position and attack their partner's arguments. Individuals with an *integrating/collaborating* conflict style have a high confrontation orientation, but they are focused on ensuring that their partner is satisfied with the outcome of the conflict. Integrators/collaborators believe that it is important to talk about conflicts and tend to confront problems as soon as they are realized. They use integrative conflict strategies, encouraging open disclosures from all parties to ensure that the conflict solution is satisfying to everyone involved. Individuals with an *obliging/accommodating* conflict style have a low confrontation orientation and are motivated to promote positive outcomes for others. Obligers/accommodators tend to see conflict as indicative of a lack of closeness in a relationship and fear that disagreements will hurt or offend their partner. Thus, they will sacrifice their own desires to ensure that their partner is satisfied. The *avoiding* conflict style is marked by a low confrontation orientation and a strong self-focus. The process of engaging in conflict makes avoiders uncomfortable, so they tend to withhold their

complaints or withdraw from conversations that are confrontational. Although avoiders are unlikely to be forthright with their displeasure, when they are confronted they tend to become defensive. Finally, the *compromising* conflict style is moderate in terms of both confrontation orientation and self–other orientation. People who are compromisers are comfortable talking about conflict but prefer to resolve issues quickly. They also tend to believe that neither party should get everything that he/she wants; rather, each party should have to make sacrifices to achieve a mutually beneficial conflict resolution.

Investigations of the perceived effectiveness and appropriateness of each conflict style have revealed that some approaches to conflict are perceived more positively than others (Gross and Guerrero 2000). A conflict style is effective to the extent that it helps individuals to achieve their goals in conflict. Conflict styles are appropriate when they are polite, prosocial, situationally appropriate, and adaptive. The dominating/competing conflict style is rated as inappropriate when used by others but effective when used by oneself. The avoiding conflict style is typically perceived as both ineffective and inappropriate. These strategies can also contribute to marital strife and dissatisfaction because they discourage mutually equitable conflict resolution and can leave issues of conflict unaddressed. Both the obliging/accommodating style and the compromising style are rated as neutral by others, but people who are obligers/accommodators tend to perceive their conflict tactics as ineffective and relationally inappropriate. The obliging/accommodating conflict style can be detrimental to the relationship because it promotes inequity when the obliger/accommodator consistently yields to the other person's wishes. People tend to rate the integrative/collaborative conflict style as the most appropriate and effective

strategy for managing conflict. Collaborating to resolve conflicts also promotes increased satisfaction and equality in close relationships.

SEE ALSO: Communication, Family; Conflict Tactics Scale; Conflict Theory; Marital Conflict

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