

# Research Findings on the Major Sources of Marital Conflict

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Chronic marital conflict--persistent unresolved discord between spouses--is one of the most common reasons people seek psychological help (Bradbury & Finchman, 1990). Research findings in the social sciences show that chronic marital conflict is the result of a complex set of interlocking factors that spiral a relationship into a cycle of increasing negativity (Krokoff, Gottman, & Roy, 1988; Levenson & Gottman, 1985; O'Leary & Smith, 1991; Margolin, John, O'Brien, 1989). Some of the major relational factors contributing to this downward spiral include the couple's incompatible needs, distorted beliefs, negative attributions, breakdowns in communication, high emotional reactivity, and patterns of negative reinforcement.

## Incompatible Needs

Incompatible needs, particularly at the emotional level, can be a vexing source of marital conflict (Freed & Foster, 1981; Welch & Price-Bonham, 1983). For example, the demand-withdrawal cycle between spouses has been described as a "symptom" of their differences around the need for intimacy (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988). Spouses who desire more intimacy may nag and criticize their partners to elicit more involvement. In turn, partners desiring more independence respond to such behaviors as a threat to their personal autonomy and distance themselves to maintain their independence (Christensen, 1988; Jacobson, 1989). However, since virtually all couples differ in some aspect of their psychological needs and makeup (Lloyd, 1990; Margolin, 1979), spousal differences in themselves tend to be only modest predictors of chronic marital conflict (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Gottman, 1979).

## Distorted Beliefs

Another source of chronic marital conflict is the set of distorted beliefs spouses bring to their relationship. These beliefs typically involve unrealistic, mistaken, and/or rigid convictions about what constitutes "normal" spousal relations and roles. When these beliefs are challenged, distress and negativity can often predominate in the relationship (Bradbury & Fincham, 1989; Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Markman, Floyd, Stanley, & Jamieson, 1984).

A common distorted belief is the expectation by one spouse that the other should be able to read his or her mind without engaging in any explicit communication (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982). When this happens, for example, a husband may interpret his wife's lack of responsiveness as selfishness when, in fact, he has not adequately articulated his needs. Persistent negative perceptions about the wife may follow, along with each spouse feeling misunderstood in the marriage (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Bradbury & Fincham, 1988).

Another typical distorted belief is the conviction that marital disagreements, no matter how trivial, signify a serious lack of caring and/or pose a major threat to the relationship. Spouses holding this belief can experience a great deal of distress in their disagreements, which in

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\* Much of the research cited here is taken from Mark Cummings' and Patrick Davies' *Children and Marital Conflict*, 1994, Guilford Press. While these findings would appear to be applicable to a wide range of couples, including nonmarried and same sex couples, it is important to keep in mind that these findings are taken from research primarily concerned with heterosexual married couples.

turn can compromise their capacity to resolve problems in their relationship (Eidelson & Epstein, 1982; Epstein & Eidelson, 1981). As the capacity for problem solving in their relationship decreases, concomitant beliefs about each spouse's intractability can emerge. Hostility and withdrawal can then follow accompanied by growing pessimism about the viability of the relationship (Epstein & Edelson, 1981; Epstein, Pretzer, & Fleming, 1987).

Still another pervasive distorted belief is that the personalities of men and women are so different that it is very difficult for either sex to really understand the other. Spouses who believe that the sexes are very different in this way are more likely to be pessimistic about the chances of resolving their conflicts and are less likely to work on repairing their relationships when conflicts occur (Canary & Emmers-Sommer, 1997). In addition, thinking of the other sex as the equivalent of aliens from another planet tends to forestall efforts on the part of spouses to understand one another and to collaborate with one another in joint problem solving (Metts & Cupach, 1990).

A complicating aspect of these beliefs is that they can be just as much an outcome as a cause of marital distress. In other words, marital distress can generate distorted beliefs just as distorted beliefs can foster marital distress (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). In addition, distorted beliefs may shape marital conflict more indirectly than directly; that is, distorted convictions may engender negative perceptions, which then may lead to conflictual marital relations (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987).

### **Negative Attributions**

Still another source of chronic marital conflict is the predominance of negative attributions in the relationship. Spouses in distressed marriages interpret their partner's behavior in more hostile ways than do nondistressed couples (Markman et al., 1984; Markman & Kraft, 1989). Moreover, distressed spouses perceive their partners as more selfish and blameworthy (Baucom et al., 1989; Fincham, Beach, Baucom, 1987; Madden & Janoff-Bulman, 1981; Margolin & Weiss, 1987). They also tend to focus on the possible negative causes of their spouses' behavior (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990).

Hostile interpretations may result from a long history of problems with a spouse; that is, a spouse's negative thoughts may accurately represent the partner's actions (Baucom, 1987; Bradbury & Fincham, 1989). However, hostile cognitive sets may also generate or maintain negative behavior in the relationship (Bradbury & Fincham, 1988; Newman & Langer, 1988). For instance, negative attributions such as assigning blame and negative intent have been strongly linked to fostering negative behaviors such as engaging in criticism and defensiveness (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Doherty, 1982; Fincham, Beach, & Nelson, 1987; Holtzworth-Monroe & Jacobson, 1985)--behaviors considered pivotal in promoting marital conflict (Gottman, 1994).

### **Breakdowns in Communication**

Breakdowns in communication are one of the most frequently cited reasons for chronic marital conflict (Haynes, Chavez, & Samuel, 1984; Markman, 1984). Getting a message across is a complex process consisting of a multiple sequence of events (Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Markman, Duncan, & Storaasli, & Howes, 1987). First, one partner must conceive of a message; second, the partner must express the message; third, the other partner must attend to and interpret the message; and fourth, the other partner must respond and initiate this same sequence of activities to complete the transaction (Wile, 1988).

Given this complexity, there are ample opportunities for breakdowns in communication. The original message may be ambiguously conceived, and even if it is clearly formulated, the actual message may not reflect the intended communication. Furthermore, even if the message

matches the intended communication, it may not be accurately perceived. Indeed, studies of unhappy couples consistently show that the spouses do a poor job of (a) saying what they mean and (b) listening to what they say (Gottman, 1994).

In distressed relationships, spouses often communicate their complaints in an imprecise manner that typically involves a variety of topics (Christensen & Nies, 1980). This usually causes the primary concern to get lost in the multiple frustrations that are announced at once. Moreover, during these conflictual conversations, the spouses rarely try to double-check their understanding of their partner's messages (Daigen & Holmes, 2000). Instead, they jump to conclusions and head off on tangents based on what they presume their partners really mean. As a result, their conversations frequently drift, wandering from topic to topic, so that the conversation never focuses on one concern long enough to address it adequately.

Finally, studies show that spouses in distressed relationships tend to pay more attention to negative messages in their communication with one another (Baucom & Sayers, 1989; Fincham & O'Leary, 1983; Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). Even when the messages are largely positive or neutral, the negative features of these messages tend to become the focus of attention (Baucom, Epstein, Sayers, & Sher, 1989; Notarius, Benson, Sloane, Vanzetti, & Hornyak, 1989). This type of selective attention often propels couples into a downward spiral of negativity and fuels the contempt, defensiveness, and belligerence that typically characterizes the communication in these distressed relationships (Gottman & Silver, 1999).

### **Emotional Reactivity**

Another important source of marital conflict is high emotional reactivity on the part of the couple. Spouses who engage in persistent conflict tend to be highly reactive to discordance; that is, they tend to experience high levels of emotional and physiological arousal during and after their disagreements (Levenson & Gottman, 1985; Gottman, 1994). This high level of arousal inhibits the understanding and problem solving needed for spouses to resolve their disputes. As frustration and distress increases with these couples, they tend to become more sensitized and reactive to conflict. Once a fight starts it is more likely to continue in the form of each spouse responding with anger and/or distance to the other's anger and/or distance (Bardbury & Fincham, 1987; Gottman, 1979; O'Leary & Smith, 1991). Marital conflicts thus become more prolonged, and fighting in future interactions becomes more likely.

### **Negative Reinforcement**

Negative reinforcement can also play a role in promoting marital conflict. Negative reinforcement involves any behaviors that reduce the immediate aversiveness of conflictual interactions. However, while these behaviors may reduce hostility in the short run, they can foster greater problems in the long run. For example, one strategy for terminating marital conflict is to escalate the level of ongoing hostility. If, in the face of such negativity, one spouse withdraws or submits, not only is the behavior of the aggressive spouse rewarded, but the withdrawing spouse is negatively rewarded for avoiding the other spouse's anger. Over time this pattern can contribute to a maladaptive style of pursuit by one spouse and withdrawal by the other (Markman & Kraft, 1989).

If both spouses escalate their hostility, a vicious cycle of reciprocity can evolve, which in turn can again set up a pattern of negative reinforcement when one of the spouses finally submits (Gottman & Levenson, 1986; Jacobson & Margolin, 1979; Margolin, John, & Gleberman, 1988; Markman & Floyd, 1980). Furthermore, if both spouses tend to avoid anger and other expressions of negativity, this also can be rewarding in the short run; but in the long run a

maladaptive pattern of withdrawal can develop, which again can lead to further distress in the marriage (Gottman & Krokoff, 1989).

### Other Related Factors

While the previously discussed relational factors constitute the immediate driving forces involved in promoting chronic marital conflict, there are also a host of developmental and social factors that can contribute to generating discord between spouses. Major differences in personality types (Myers, 1980), emotional maturity (Bader & Pearson, 1988), family-of-origin differentiation (Williamson, 1991), and socialization experiences (McGolderick & Petro, 1994; Walters, Carter, Papp, & Silverstien, 1988) have all been established as important sources of marital conflict. In addition, particular clinical problems such as sexual dysfunction (Wincze & Carey, 1991), alcoholism (Brown, 1985), battering (Cascardi, Langhinrichsen, & Vivian, 1992), depression (Beach, Sandeen, & O'Leary, 1990), and personality disorder (Weeks & Treat, 1992) have also been identified as sources of marital discord. Generally speaking, these factors can be viewed as the main contextual forces shaping the relational aspects of chronic marital discord.

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