CONFLICT IN MARRIAGE:
Implications for Working with Couples

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ABSTRACT

The investigation of marital conflict has reached a crossroads. Over 25 years of research on marital conflict behavior yields a relatively clear picture of its topography, but its relevance for changing the marital relationship remains controversial. We can continue to amass observations in a relatively atheoretical manner and hope that patterns capable of guiding clinical activity will emerge, or we can begin creating a unified theoretical framework to indicate new directions for clinical activity and empirical investigation. Before exploring the latter option, this chapter reviews briefly the impact of marital conflict on mental, physical, and family health and what is known about the nature of conflict in marriage. After highlighting some recent theoretically grounded advances, we illustrate how conceptualizing marital conflict behavior as goal directed provides an integrative theoretical framework for treatment, prevention, and marital conflict research.

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STARTING POINT

Systematic research on marriage in psychology emerged largely in response to the desire to better assist couples experiencing marital distress. The investigation of conflictual interaction has a privileged status in this research, as it has been widely accepted that "distress results from couples' aversive and ineffectual response to conflict" (Koerner & Jacobson 1994, p. 208) that is potentially amenable to change. This chapter therefore begins by discussing the importance of conflict for the mental and physical health of spouses and their children. We then briefly examine the nature of conflict in marriage and the impact of negative conflict behavior on change in the marital relationship. This examination emphasizes the need for conceptual development. After highlighting some recent theoretically grounded advances, we re-examine the nature of conflict and identify the study of goal-directed behavior as an important vehicle for advancing an understanding of marriage. We then illustrate how a goal perspective provides a unifying framework for treatment and prevention of, and research on, marital conflict.

WHY IS MARITAL CONFLICT IMPORTANT?

Evidence documenting the importance of marital conflict for understanding mental, physical, and family health continues to accumulate.

Mental Health

Previous *Annual Review* chapters argued that marital conflict has profound implications for individual well-being (Coyne & Downey 1991, O'Leary &

Smith 1991). The link with depression is increasingly well established (see Beach et al 1998), and a link with eating disorders has been documented (see Van den Broucke et al 1997). Similarly, associations have been noted for physical and psychological abuse of partners (e.g. O'Leary et al 1994), male alcoholism (e.g. O'Farrell et al 1991), and early onset drinking, episodic drinking, binge drinking, and out-of-home drinking (see Murphy & O'Farrell 1994). Marital conflict appears less consequential for anxiety disorders (Emmelkamp & Gerlsma 1994), which may reflect a complex association varying according to spouse gender and type of anxiety disorder (McLeod 1994). Increased research on psychopathology and marital functioning has given rise to recent reviews of this area (e.g. Davila & Bradbury 1998, Halford & Bouma 1997).

Physical Health

Although married individuals are healthier on average than the unmarried (House et al 1988), marital conflict is associated with poorer health (Burman & Margolin 1992, Kiecolt-Glaser et al 1988) and with specific illnesses such as cancer, cardiac disease, and chronic pain (see Schmaling & Sher 1997). Marital interaction studies suggest possible mechanisms that may account for these links by showing that hostile behaviors during conflict relate to alterations in immunological (Kiecolt-Glaser et al 1993, 1997), endocrine (Kiecolt-Glaser et al 1997, Malarkey et al 1994), and cardiovascular (Ewarts et al 1991) functioning. Although consequential for both husbands and wives, marital conflict has more pronounced health consequences for wives (Gottman & Levenson 1992; Kiecolt-Glaser et al 1993, 1996, 1997; Malarkey et al 1994). Thus, marital conflict has been linked to several facets of health and remains a vital area of research.

Family Health

Marital conflict is also associated with important family outcomes, including poorer parenting (see Erel & Burman 1995), poorer child adjustment (see Grych & Fincham 1990), problematic attachment to parents (e.g. Owen & Cox 1997), increased likelihood of parent-child conflict (e.g. Margolin et al 1996), and conflict between siblings (e.g. Brody et al 1994). When manipulated experimentally, it increases subsequent parent-son conflict (Jouriles & Farris 1992). Aspects of marital conflict that have a particularly negative influence on children include more frequent, intense, physical, unresolved, child-related conflicts and conflicts attributed to the child's behavior (see Cummings & Davies 1994, Fincham & Osborne 1993). Increasing attention is being given to mechanisms linking marital conflict and child outcomes, the impact of children on the marriage, and viewing the impact of marital conflict within a broader systemic perspective (see Cox & Paley 1997, Fincham 1998).

THE TOPOGRAPHY OF MARITAL CONFLICT: A SYNOPSIS

The presumed role of conflict in generating marital distress led to research on the topography of marital conflict. Identification of conflict responses was assumed to provide guidance for marital intervention. A selective overview of findings highlights the current state of the field.

Are There Observable Patterns in Marital Conflict?

In the first *Annual Review of Psychology* chapter on marital interaction, O'Leary & Smith (1991) noted that distressed couples emit more negative-statements and fewer positive statements and show greater reciprocation of negative behaviors during problem-solving interactions. Indeed, level of negative affect reciprocity is more consistent across different types of situations than is amount of negative or positive affect (Gottman 1979). With regard to behavioral sequences, escalating, negative sequences during conflict are associated with marital distress, and both frequency and sequences of negative behavior are more pronounced in couples where physical aggression is found (e.g. Burman et al 1992, Gottman 1994). In fact, one of the greatest challenges for couples locked into negative exchanges is to find an adaptive way of exiting from such cycles (Weiss & Heyman 1997). This is usually attempted through responses designed to repair the interaction (e.g. metacommunication, "You're not listening to me") that are typically delivered with negative affect (e.g. irritation, sadness). Distressed couples tend to respond to the negative affect, thereby continuing the cycle. This makes their interactions more structured and predictable. In contrast, nondistressed couples appear to be more responsive to the repair attempt and are thereby able to exit from negative exchanges early on. Their interaction sequences appear more random and less predictable (Weiss & Heyman 1997).

An interaction pattern in which the wife raises issues and the husband withdraws has often been noted by clinicians and has received empirical confirmation. For example, Roberts & Krokoff (1990) found dissatisfied couples displayed more husband withdraw–wife hostility sequences, whereas satisfied couples displayed more husband withdraw–wife withdraw sequences. However, it appears that demand-withdraw patterns and the use of other influence tactics vary as a function of whose issue is being discussed during conflict (Heavey et al 1993, Sagrestano et al 1998).

How frequent and stable is marital conflict? McGonagle et al (1992) collected data from a community sample about the frequency of overt disagreements and found a modal response of once or twice a month. A subsample that kept diaries reported similar rates, and when contacted three years later, reported the same rate of disagreement. These findings are consistent with a

broader literature indicating that patterns of coping tend to be stable across occasions (Stone & Neale 1984). Noller et al (1994) found that conflict patterns were stable over the first two years of marriage but that couples lower in satisfaction showed somewhat less stability, briefly becoming more positive in their reported response to conflict after the first year of marriage.

In short, there is greater net negativity, reciprocity of negative behavior, more sustained negative interaction, and escalation of negative interactions among distressed couples. Moreover, conflict behavior seems to be relatively stable over time (see Gottman 1994, Weiss & Heyman 1997).

Is Marital Conflict More Likely in Certain Content Areas?

Dating, newlywed, and established married couples complain about sources of conflict ranging from verbal and physical abusiveness to personal characteristics and behaviors (e.g. Buss 1989). Perceived inequity in division of labor is associated with both marital conflict (Kluwer et al 1996) and more male withdrawal in response to conflict (Kluwer et al 1997). Likewise, conflict over power is strongly related to marital dissatisfaction (Kurdek 1994, Vangelisti & Huston 1994). Reporting problems with spousal extramarital sex, problematic drinking, or drug use is predictive of divorce (Amato & Rogers 1997), as are wives' reports of husbands' jealousy and foolish spending of money. Similarly, reporting greater problem severity (Lindahl et al 1998) increases prediction of divorce. Even though it is often not reported to be a problem (Ehrensaft & Vivian 1996), relationship violence among newlyweds predicts divorce, as does the presence of psychological aggression (Rogge & Bradbury, unpublished observations).

Such findings highlight the need to be vigilant with regard to the effects of conflict area (Baucom et al 1996) and perceived problem difficulty. Some types of problems may be associated with both poorer marital outcomes as well as poorer problem-solving behavior, leading to spurious conclusions if problem-solving behavior is examined in isolation. Also, if some problem areas are associated with an elevated divorce rate, samples of intact couples selected later in marriage will underestimate the extent to which such problems occur and create difficulty for married couples (Glenn 1990). Finally, perceived efficacy or utility of problem discussion may vary with problem area, leading to changes in the relationship between problem-solving behavior and satisfaction as a function of problem area. Accordingly, investigations of how marriages succeed and fail may benefit from including assessments of problem content and personal resources (see Leonard & Roberts 1998).

Do Cognitions Influence Conflict Behavior?

Regardless of their potential to inform predictive models of marital outcome, problem content and personal resources may have limited potential for change.

More useful in a clinical context are accounts that describe the processes that link problems and personal resources to conflict behavior. Within the context of the social learning framework that has guided interaction research, cognitive processes have been used to account for patterns in observed behavior. For example, the finding that satisfied spouses are less likely to respond negatively after displaying negative affect as a listener (thereby avoiding negative escalation, Gottman et al 1977, Notarius et al 1989) is attributed to their ability to "edit" their thoughts during conflict. Attempts to investigate directly the relation between cognition and behavior have yielded encouraging results.

There is increasing evidence that explanations or attributions for negative marital events (e.g. partner comes home late from work) can increase the probability of conflict behavior (e.g. "he only thinks about himself and his needs"). Such conflict-promoting attributions are related to (*a*) less effective problem-solving behaviors (Bradbury & Fincham 1992), (*b*) more negative behaviors during problem-solving and support-giving tasks (Bradbury et al 1996, Miller & Bradbury 1995), and (*c*) specific affects (whining and anger) displayed during problem-solving (Fincham & Bradbury 1992). In addition, wives' unrealistic relationship beliefs are related to higher rates of negative behavior and lower rates of avoidant behavior (Bradbury & Fincham 1993). As regards behavioral sequences, wives' conflict-promoting attributions and husbands' unrealistic relationship beliefs correlate with the tendency to reciprocate negative partner behavior (e.g. Bradbury & Fincham 1993, Miller & Bradbury 1995). The removal of marital satisfaction from these relations shows that they do not simply reflect the spouse's sentiment toward the marriage (Bradbury et al 1996). Finally, manipulating spouses' attributions for a negative partner behavior influenced distressed spouses' subsequent behavior toward their partners (Fincham & Bradbury 1988). Thus, both correlational and experimental findings are consistent with the view that spousal cognitions, particularly attributions, influence marital behavior.

What is the Longer-Term Impact of Marital Conflict?

There has been considerable interest in the impact of negative conflict behavior over time, especially in view of "reversal effects" whereby such behavior predicts improved marital satisfaction. Gottman & Krokoff (1989) found that husbands' "global negative behavior" and "conflict engagement" predicted positive change in husbands' and wives' satisfaction. Wives' "conflict engagement," on the other hand, predicted positive changes in satisfaction for wives only. By highlighting the potential value of some "distressed" communication behaviors, reversal effects led to a crisis of confidence in the behavioral model of marital discord.

Partial replication studies have found that (*a*) "husband-negative" and "husband-demand" behaviors were positively associated with increases in wives' but not husbands' satisfaction over a 12-month period, (*b*) wives' "negative" behaviors again did not predict change in satisfaction (Heavey et al 1993), (*c*) husband-demand behavior for an issue raised by wives was predictive of increased satisfaction for wives but decreased satisfaction for husbands, and (*d*) wife-demand behavior did not predict changes in satisfaction (Heavey et al 1995). In an apparent replication failure, Karney & Bradbury (1997) found, over eight waves of data collected across four years, that negativity of husbands' behavior was significantly or marginally predictive of decreases in wives' satisfaction but was not significantly associated with change in husbands' own satisfaction. Also, in contrast to results reported by Heavey et al (1993, 1995), negative wife behavior was associated with positive change (or less deterioration) in marital satisfaction for both spouses.

In addition to inconsistency in reported reversal effects, other studies have found negative behaviors predict decreased marital satisfaction (e.g. Julien et al 1989, Noller et al 1994), and similar inconsistencies emerge for the effects of withdrawal/disengagement or positive behavior (cf for withdrawal, Smith et al 1990 vs Heavey et al 1993; for positive behavior, Julien et al 1989 vs Gottman & Krokoff 1989). Finally, overt conflict behavior can predict divorce (Gottman 1994, pp. 379, 384; Lindahl et al 1998; but see Gottman 1994, p. 289, for an apparent nonreplication). Karney & Bradbury (1997) suggest that conflict behavior is related to slope of deterioration in marital satisfaction, which is in turn related to divorce and separation.

ARE REVERSAL EFFECTS AN ARTIFACT?   Are reversal effects an artifact arising from the use of difference scores (Woody & Costanzo 1990)? This does not appear to be the case, as they have now emerged with both partial correlations and hierarchical linear models (HLM). Indeed, results with partial correlations and difference scores appear more similar than different (Heavey et al 1995). Difference scores and slopes obtained using HLM may produce more markedly divergent results (Karney & Bradbury 1997), but this is due to both intact and divorcing/separating couples being included in HLM analyses. The differences are likely to be much smaller when samples are limited to intact marriages. However, reversal effects are not sample specific but have emerged across a number of different types of samples.

Are reversals an artifact of different coding systems or approaches to coding? Reversals have been found using categorical and continuous coding systems, but attempts at replication, even within the same laboratory, have proved disappointing. However, some results may be incommensurate rather than inconsistent. When different observational systems are used or the same system is used, but specific behaviors are combined into different summary codes, the

meaning of the resulting categories can be quite different (e.g. at least 15 different operationalizations of negativity have been used within one coding system, see Heyman et al 1995). Accordingly, it is important to use theoretically grounded coding systems so that functional categories of behavior can be identified and results reliably replicated.

WHAT CAN WE CONCLUDE FROM THE LITERATURE ON REVERSAL EFFECTS? Reversal effects suggest that some negative behavior may be useful and perhaps even necessary for long-term marital health. However, to conclude that negative conflict behavior leads to better marital outcomes appears to be as overly simplistic as the previous conclusion that negative conflict behavior leads to poorer outcomes.

Negative conflict behavior may have a curvilinear relationship to outcomes with both too little and too much being associated with poorer outcomes. If so, characterizing discrete conflict behaviors in terms of level of negativity or likelihood of engendering threat may help reconcile differences across studies. Alternatively, it is possible that willingness to engage with problems is sometimes useful, and also incidently sometimes results in the expression of negative affect, suggesting that reversal effects are more spurious than substantive (Holmes & Murray 1996). It may therefore be useful to examine separately ratings of problem engagement and affective display.

Similarly, the meaning and function of conflict behavior can vary: It may reflect either engagement with the problem or withdrawal from the problem (Christensen & Pasch 1993), and it may be in the service of maintaining the relationship or reflect having given up on the relationship (Holmes & Murray 1996). If so, characterizing conflict in terms of participants' goals may be useful. Likewise, the literature on reversal effects has been silent with regard to the effect of contextual variables and the way they may modify conflict behaviors and outcomes (see Cohan & Bradbury 1997).

It seems clear that we have to identify the circumstances in which conflict behaviors are likely to result in enhancement rather than deterioration of marital relationships. Exploring the processes driving conflict and preventing distressed couples from breaking the grip of repetitive negative cycles is likely to prove far more fruitful. These conclusions point to the importance of theory for understanding conflict behavior, a topic to which we now turn.

Conclusion: Being Practical Means Being Theoretical

Kurt Lewin's (1951, p. 169) observation "that there is nothing as practical as a good theory" should have particular appeal to marital researchers, because marital conflict research emerged in response to practical problems. Yet the literature on marital conflict contains very little explicit theory. This lack may appear all the more surprising as social learning and social exchange theories

are widely viewed as frameworks informing marital research. When explicit, the association between such theories and research tends to be loose and imprecise and, in some cases, constitutes only a metaphorical connection.

The relative absence of theoretical development most likely reflects attempts of early researchers to avoid theory, believing instead that "a solid data base is a prerequisite to theory development [and] can best be accomplished by descriptive studies which focus on observable behavior" (Markman et al 1981, p. 236). With over 25 years of accumulated observational data, one might expect theory development to be well under way. However, it remains rudimentary. For example, in many coding systems we still need to know what the codes actually measure, how they relate to each other and are best combined, how they relate to other relevant variables (their nomological network), and so on. Also fundamental to further progress is the need to make explicit and critically analyze the assumptions that informed the choice of what to observe in the first place.

Increased awareness of the limits of a purely behavioral account has also prompted greater recognition of the need to expand the study of marital conflict and so find new frameworks capable of guiding clinical intervention. Research on marital conflict in psychology tends to be relatively independent of developments in the parent discipline. However, some recent advances link the study of marital conflict to broader developments in the psychological literature.

ENTERING THE MAINSTREAM: EXPANDING THE STUDY OF MARITAL CONFLICT

Three broad areas of development have the potential to advance understanding of marital conflict and facilitate the development of a broader theoretical framework to guide its investigation.

Contextualizing the Study of Marital Conflict

As noted, the isolated manner in which conflict has been studied yields an incomplete picture of its role in marriage. To illustrate this viewpoint, examples from both nonmarital and marital contexts are highlighted.

NEGATIVE LIFE EVENTS   In the absence of external stressors, problem-solving skills may have little impact on a marriage (Bradbury et al 1998, Karney & Bradbury 1995). External stressors may also influence marital processes directly. In particular, nonmarital stressors may lead to more negative patterns of communication (e.g. Repetti 1989), lower relationship satisfaction (e.g. Cohan & Bradbury 1997), and poor parenting behaviors (e.g. Repetti & Wood 1997). In addition, moderate levels of negative life events provide a context in which

positive and negative partner behavior can become more consequential (Tesser & Beach 1998). Level of negative life events may therefore moderate the effect of conflict behavior on subsequent marital satisfaction (see Cohan & Bradbury 1997). Accordingly, incorporation of life-events assessments into examinations of marital conflict will help enhance prediction of outcomes.

SOCIAL SUPPORT   Because marital interaction research has used tasks that maximize the likelihood of conflict and minimize the likelihood of supportive spouse behavior, it may have overestimated the importance of conflict and underestimated the role of spousal support in marriage (Cutrona 1996). Consistent with this possibility, Melby et al (1995) found that a discussion task designed to enable a range of emotions to be displayed elicited both higher levels of observed warmth and more valid assessment of observed warmth than did a standard problem-solving task.

Pasch & Bradbury (1998) showed that behavior exhibited during conflict and support tasks shared little variance (<20%), wives' support behaviors predicted marital deterioration 24 months later independently of either partners' conflict behaviors, and that support behaviors moderated the association between conflict behavior and later marital deterioration, with poor support and conflict skills leading to greater risk of marital deterioration. Supportive spouse behavior is also related to marital satisfaction is more important than negative behavior in determining perceived supportiveness, and among newlyweds, wives' lack of supportive behavior predicts marital stress 12 months later (Cutrona 1996, Cutrona & Suhr 1994, Davila et al 1997). At the same time, social support outside the marriage may also influence the course and outcome of marital conflict. For example, Julien et al (1994) found that when extra-marital confidants were more supportive, wives were less distressed and closer to their husbands after the confiding interaction.

Increasing Importance of Social Psychological Research

Although initially dominated by the concerns of clinical psychologists, social psychologists are increasingly investigating marriage and bring new perspectives to the study of marital processes. Three examples are illustrative.

ATTACHMENT   Social psychological research on adult attachment has provided fertile ground for new hypotheses about couple interactions. In particular, spouses' mental models of attachment may influence their communications and reactions to negative partner behavior. For example, chronically activated mental models can influence both evaluations and interpretations of ambiguous relational events (Pietromonoco & Carnelly 1994) and lead to the display of proceduralized knowledge (i.e. specific action patterns, strategies, or skills, Baldwin 1992, Kihlstrom 1987). Proceduralized knowledge

may be particularly important for understanding marital conflict in that it is often not available to conscious introspection, leading to spouses' failure to understand or be able to adequately explain their own reactions and behavior.

Such results make more interesting the findings that persons reporting insecure attachment styles are more likely to be married to others with an insecure attachment style (Feeney 1994, Senchak & Leonard 1992) and to be less satisfied in their relationships. Similarly, those with a preoccupied attachment style may be particularly likely to show an elevated level of marital conflict after an involuntary separation from the partner (Cafferty et al 1994). In addition, persons with secure attachment styles show a greater tendency to compromise and to take into account both their own and their partners' interests during problem-solving interactions, whereas those with anxious-ambivalent styles display a greater tendency to oblige their partners and to focus on relationship maintenance than do those with an avoidant style (Pistole 1989, Scharfe & Bartholomew 1995).

COMMITMENT   A rich, social psychological literature on commitment has also influenced the study of marriage (e.g. Rusbult 1993). Of particular interest here is the finding that greater commitment is associated with more constructive, accommodative responses to negative partner behavior (Rusbult et al 1991, Rusbult et al 1998).

Recent work on commitment highlights additional growth points for marital conflict research. First, even relatively satisfied partners consider nonconstructive responses to a negative partner behavior before engaging in more constructive behavior, and the constructiveness of responses is greater when there is no time pressure (Yovetich & Rusbult 1994). It therefore appears that distressed couples do what comes naturally and that nondistressed couples engage in more effortful processing. Second, spouses who lack evidence of partner commitment (e.g. when structural factors maintaining commitment are greatly diminished) may adopt a shorter-term perspective and preference for a quid pro quo or exchange orientation in which immediate reciprocation of positive behavior is expected and feelings of exploitation are experienced when help is not reciprocated. Conversely, evidence of partner commitment may facilitate a communal orientation that results in more positive attributions for a partner's performance (McCall 1995).

SELF-PROCESSES   Pointing to the potential importance of individual differences and self-processes for marital outcomes, neuroticism was found to predict poorer marital outcomes over an extended time frame (e.g. Kelly & Conley 1987), apparently by influencing the starting point (or level) of marital satisfaction rather than the slope of change over time (Karney & Bradbury 1997). Self-processes are also important for understanding the effects of social sup-

port (e.g. Nadler 1997), affective reactions to comparisons with the partner (e.g. Beach et al 1998), and feelings of love (e.g. Aron & Aron 1996).

The application of self-processes to the investigation of marital conflict is illustrated by recent work on self-evaluation maintenance in marriage. Beach et al (1998) found that spouses and partners in romantic relationships had different affective reactions to being outperformed by their partner depending on both the importance of the area to them and the importance of the area to their partner. Beach & Tesser (1993) showed that decision-making power could be conceptualized as a performance dimension: Relative to happy couples, less-satisfied couples reported less decision-making power in areas important to the self and more decision-making power in areas seen as important to the partner. It therefore appears that self-evaluation maintenance processes can influence both feelings toward the partner and satisfaction with the relationship.

Positive self-image appears to influence positive illusions about the partner (Murray et al 1996a), and illusions may positively influence the course of the relationship over time (Murray et al 1996b). Conversely, partner's verification of one's self-view (positive or negative) also appears to influence relationship satisfaction (Katz et al 1996, Swann et al 1992). Thus, self-processes appear to influence marital interaction and conflict in several ways.

Clarifying the Construct of Marital Quality

A problem with marital research is that the construct of marital satisfaction, adjustment, or some other synonym reflective of the quality of the marriage is poorly understood and assessed using omnibus measures consisting of non-equivalent item types. Because indices of marital satisfaction include reported conflict, it can be argued that linking observed conflict to satisfaction simply shows that spouses behave in the way they say they do. For some applications, the use of omnibus satisfaction measures appears relatively nonproblematic. However, increased conceptual clarity may offer empirical advantages. One proposal is to limit marital quality to evaluative judgments (see Fincham & Bradbury 1987). This approach has opened two new avenues of research, as described below.

ATTITUDES, ACCESSIBILITY, AND SENTIMENT OVERRIDE   Conceptualizing marital quality in terms of evaluative judgments links it to a broader field of attitude research in which an attitude is viewed as an association between the cognitive representation of an object and a summary evaluation of the object. The strength of this association indexes the degree to which the attitude is accessible and therefore influences information processing about the attitude object, behavior toward it, and so on. Using response latency as a measure of the accessibility of marital quality (evaluative judgments of the partner), Fincham et al (1995) showed that accessibility moderates the relation between marital

quality and attributions and expectations of partner behavior; significantly larger correlations occur when accessibility is relatively high vs low. Because spouses whose marital quality is highly accessible are more likely to process information about their partners in terms of their marital quality, accessibility should also moderate the stability of marital quality. This has been demonstrated over 6-, 12-, and 18-month intervals (Fincham et al 1997). An implication of this research is that the correlates of marital quality need to be reexamined.

THE BI-DIMENSIONAL NATURE OF MARITAL SATISFACTION   Marital conflict research typically uses bipolar measures of marital satisfaction. However, such measures assume rather than demonstrate a bipolar structure for evaluative experience. When this assumption was examined directly, Fincham & Linfield (1997) documented across two assessment procedures a moderate, negative correlation between positive and negative evaluations consistent with that reported in the attitude literature (see Thompson et al 1995). The two dimensions accounted for variance in reported spouse behavior and attributions for spouse behavior over and beyond that which could be attributed to a traditional measure of marital quality or to each spouse's general affectivity. Finally, ambivalent (high positive and negative) and indifferent (low positive and negative) spouses were indistinguishable on an omnibus marital quality measure, but ambivalent wives, compared to their indifferent counterparts, reported a higher ratio of negative to positive behavior and made more conflict-promoting attributions.

Such findings have potentially far-reaching implications. For example, longitudinal change in marital satisfaction may need to be reexamined. It would be theoretically important if happily married spouses first increased only negative evaluations (became ambivalent) before then decreasing positive evaluations and becoming distressed, as compared to a progression in which negative evaluations increased and positive evaluations decreased at the same time. Such progressions may, in turn, differ in important ways from one where there is simply a decline in positive evaluations over time. Documenting the conflict behaviors associated with different avenues of change may illuminate previously undetected aspects of relationships and so advance our understanding of how marriages succeed and fail. In addition, disaggregating positive and negative evaluations may highlight new possibilities for marital intervention.

Conclusion: Being Theoretically Grounded Is Not Enough

Each of the developments outlined is theoretically grounded and can be traced to rich theories in the broader psychological literature. However, they are isolated from each other and none has yet given rise to a broad theoretical framework in the marital domain. Does this mean that the expansion of marital

conflict research will lead inevitably to its balkanization? Not necessarily. Attempts to develop integrative frameworks can be found in the marital literature (e.g. Bradbury & Fincham 1991, Karney & Bradbury 1995, Gottman 1994). These researchers have been quite successful in organizing findings and in identifying new lines of inquiry. Nonetheless, there remains a need for broad, integrative models, and we believe that such models are critical to the future vitality of the field.

TOWARD A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR INTERVENTION, PREVENTION, AND MARITAL CONFLICT RESEARCH

How might we complement recent attempts at theoretical development? In addressing this question we return to basics and ask, "What is marital conflict?"

Back to Basics: What Is Marital Conflict?

What constitutes marital conflict has often been assumed to be self-evident (but see Fincham & Bradbury 1991, Margolin 1988), a circumstance that can be explained by reliance on observed spouse behavior during problem solving as the primary source of data for understanding marital conflict and by a movement away from the idiographic approach characteristic of early behavioral interventions. Two important problems that have resulted are complacency in identifying mechanisms of change, and a presumption that behavioral differences between the "average" conflictual and nonconflictual couple reflect the destructive characteristics of conflict.

The literature reviewed above, particularly that on reversal effects, has been useful in disabusing the field of these misconceptions. However, the atheoretical bias inherent in the purely behavioral approach to conflict persists. Indeed, the absence of strong links with a broader interdisciplinary literature on conflict is striking (for an introduction, see Hocker & Wilmot 1995), but there are suggestions that this might change. Indeed, several excellent, integrative analyses of conflict have appeared in recent years (e.g. Christensen & Pasch 1993, Weiss & Dehle 1994, discussing marital conflict; Holmes & Murray 1996, discussing conflict in close relationships; Emery 1992, Pruitt & Olczak 1995, offering a systems model of conflict; Rubin & Levinger 1995, comparing interpersonal and international conflict; Pruitt 1997, discussing social conflict more generally). Although they differ in foci and definitions of conflict, these analyses share several points of agreement.

First, not all conflicts are overt. Marital conflict can go undetected by one of the partners and have minimal impact on them. Indeed, early in marriage and premaritally, self-reported conflict is unrelated to satisfaction (Kelly et al 1985), and partners may often make virtues out of faults (Holmes & Murray

1996), rendering potential sources of conflict moot. This observation is critical because it highlights (*a*) the need to define conflict without a requirement of overt hostility, (*b*) the importance of assessing cognitive events to obtain a more complete portrait of the conflict process, and (*c*) the inadequacy of behavior during problem solving as the sole measure of conflict behavior.

Second, perceived conflict of interest, incompatible goals, wishes and expectations, and perceived interference with goal-directed behavior all provide starting points for the analysis of conflict. However, not all conflicts of interest result in conflict but are instead successfully transformed into opportunities for cooperative interaction (see Kelley & Thibaut 1978). This observation is important in that it highlights (*a*) the potential for spouses to inhibit or modify initial reactions, thereby transforming hostile impulses in a variety of ways, and (*b*) the potential for partners to approach conflict with a variety of goals and strategies, potentially influencing the course of a conflict episode.

Third, conflict episodes change over time. Salient properties of the conflict process shift depending on when one looks. For example, effortful attributional activity is likely to be most pronounced after overt negative exchanges have stopped, whereas effortful inhibition of negative reactions may be most obvious among satisfied couples in response to negative partner behavior (Yovetich & Rusbult 1994), and much accommodative behavior may occur prior to any conflictual interaction (Rusbult et al 1998). Likewise, many conflicts do not involve overt disagreement and may be handled in ways that do not depend on verbal exchange (e.g. behaving solicitously, Rusbult 1993). Finally, overt marital conflict involves some level of negatively valenced behavior, whether this is directed toward engaging in the conflict or avoiding it. These considerations suggest the relevance of many different approaches to the study of marital conflict, ranging from interactional studies to diary methods and indirect assessments of cognition.

This brief examination of commonalities across analyses of conflict already identifies overlooked issues that need to be considered in developing a theoretical framework. For example, covert conflict is relatively understudied in marriage, and we know nothing about the relation between what happens during and between conflict episodes. Likewise, little is known about the way in which reactions to negative spouse behavior interact with recently or chronically primed attitudes or constructs. Nor is there information about emergent characteristics of conflict, such as the way spouses' intentions for the interaction and view of the partner change after the conflict has begun. However, the primary lesson of this exercise is simple: Conflict is invariably conceptualized in relation to goals.

It is, therefore, surprising that research on marital conflict has paid little attention to the goal construct (but see Fincham & Bradbury 1991). Moreover, the study of goals is both longstanding and ubiquitous in psychology and may

even serve as a vehicle to transcend traditional, subdisciplinary boundaries (Austin & Vancouver 1996). Recent work on goal-directed behavior provides insights into the nature and organization of goals, the important characteristics of goals, and the impact of goal orientation on behavior (see Austin & Vancouver 1996, Gollwitzer & Bargh 1996). In the remainder of this section, we argue that a goal theoretic perspective has the potential to provide an overarching framework for understanding marriage. We begin by considering whether such a perspective adds anything new to the marital literature.

Stating the Obvious to Make a Difference

It could be argued that our position is hardly new, as a goal perspective is already pervasive in marital theorizing. There is merit to this view. For example, some spouse behavior is labeled as defensive or is described as an attempt at meta-communication. Other spouses are labeled as engaging in "tit-for-tat" or negative reciprocity. In each case, there is an implication that the behavior is serving one or another goal and that it is the goal that makes the description sensible to us.

The problem is that use of the goal construct remains largely unacknowledged in work on marriage and interpersonal relationships (see Berscheid 1994). Thus, despite frequent, indirect references to goals (as illustrated above), there is substantially less in the way of direct guidance on goals and the effect of goals on marital interaction. This is unfortunate, as a number of heuristic and conceptual advantages follow from making explicit our implicit reliance on the goal construct. We turn now to consider some of these advantages for intervention, prevention, and research on marital conflict phenomena.

Marital Intervention from a Goal Perspective

Four key advantages for intervention follow from adopting a goal perspective: (*a*) We gain an intuitively simple approach to talking about conflict, (*b*) we gain the ability to be idiographic in our assessment and interventions while drawing upon a strong experimental research tradition, (*c*) a large literature documenting the advantages of goal setting can be used in helping couples plan for change, and (*d*) a rapidly expanding network of research on goals across several subdisciplines creates the potential for new insights and intervention technologies to emerge. We briefly illustrate these advantages by showing how a conflictual interaction can be conceptualized in terms of goals.

Consider a relatively common conflict: a couple arguing over directions while traveling. Like many garden-variety situations in which conflicts occur, there is little obvious basis for conflict. Both partners want to get to the destination, and neither seems to benefit from arguing about directions. Yet, as it becomes clear that they are not on the correct road, here they go again. He becomes angry and asks why she can not read a simple map. She retorts that there

is nothing wrong with her map reading, that he must have missed a turn. They progress through several increasingly hostile reproach-denial cycles until she suggests they stop and ask someone for directions. He drives on in stony silence, even angrier than he was prior to her suggestion. Everything happens quickly. Upon later inquiry, neither partner reports planning what they did, but both report a considerable number of very negative thoughts about the other in the silence that followed the brief eruption.

How does a goal analysis help us understand the conflict and discuss it with the couple? We begin with three premises: (*a*) All behavior is goal directed (discrepancies between current and desired states drive behavior to reduce the difference through such processes as test-operate-test-exit cycles, Miller et al 1960), (*b*) spouses don't always know what the goal is, even for their own behavior (goals can be latent as well as consciously experienced), and (*c*) goals vary widely (from internal set points, e.g. for body temperature, to complex, cognitively represented outcomes, e.g. for marital success) and cannot be understood in isolation from each other or from the dynamics of goal system functioning (establishing, planning, striving toward and revising goals, see Austin & Vancouver 1996).

Upon accepting these premises, we can begin to talk with the couple about their argument in an intuitively clear way. We may explain that we can identify goals and changing goals on the basis of what is holding their attention and consuming their energy. For example, we can ask the husband at what point he thinks he switched from focusing on finding his way to focusing on whose fault it was for being lost. This is an important moment, because it is the point at which his goals began to shift without his necessarily realizing it. Such a shift in attentional focus is a good indication that an emergent goal displaced his prospective goal of working jointly with his wife to find their way (see Hocker & Wilmot 1995).

Attempting to find out more about his goal shift is likely to illuminate aspects of their interaction that characteristically precede a negative shift in his conflict behavior. Likewise, we might ask the wife about the point at which she began to shift from her focus on helping her husband to defending herself or even counter-attacking. In both cases, spouses are likely to find such questions rather easy to contemplate and discuss, and the therapist can then undertake an idiographic assessment of each couple's particular pattern of conflict. What triggers the shift to the emergent goal for *this* husband and *this* wife? Are there similarities in the triggers that elicit this shift across conflict episodes? A goal perspective is likely to be understandable to both the therapist and the client couple, while preserving many useful characteristics of a functional analysis.

Does a goal perspective help in any other ways? Yes, we can discuss with our clients the value of setting goals for themselves, examining the relation of

the new goals to existing ones (e.g. are they consistent?), and being aware of when their prospective goals are displaced by emergent ones during an interaction. In particular, therapists can highlight the possibility that emergent goals are often self-identity goals (frequently activated automatically and outside of awareness) and that responses often reflect attempts to avoid loss of face (usually manifest in overlearned conflict behavior, see Hocker & Wilmot 1995). In such circumstances, conflict is most likely to escalate, become more global, and generate more rigid conflict behavior as the original content issues that provoked conflict are subsumed by issues of face saving. It can be emphasized that captives of this process are usually quite unaware of it and often express puzzlement about why so much conflict can be generated by trivial issues (e.g. navigation/driving).

In addition, a large literature suggests that goal-setting can facilitate accomplishment in a variety of therapies (see Kanfer & Schefft 1988), and that concrete, small goals are especially useful in this regard. Setting concrete goals allows couples to think about opportunities to implement their goals, further facilitating accomplishment (Gollwitzer & Brandstatter 1997). One resultant approach to helping couples find more adaptive ways to manage conflict is to think through overarching goals (e.g. I want to show I care and also get to the party), and then help the couple break the general goals into smaller, more concrete ones. Accordingly, a goal perspective helps preserve an idiographic approach to intervention.

But what about the danger of emergent goals that may throw all other planning into disarray? If both partners tend to find themselves struggling with identity issues and so responding with self-defensive behavior, they need to satisfy their identity goals in some other way (Tesser et al 1996). In particular, to the extent that a more benign behavior that preserves self identity can substitute for the defensive behavior, the couple may be better able to stay on task and solve their problem.

Once positive goals for the interaction are identified, they can be examined in terms of goal dimensions known to influence a goal's ability to control behavior. Specifically, the couple can explore issues related to perceived goal difficulty, ability to implement goal-relevant behaviors, goal specificity, goal commitment, and perceived rewards of goal attainment. A wide range of interventions may be relevant to helping couples form, make a commitment to, carry out, and maintain behavior related to their positive goals (see Kanfer 1996). By becoming aware of these considerations, spouses can more easily persevere in patterns designed to convey, for example, warmth and regard for the partner. As with the initial assessment of the couple's interaction, the content of each of these goal dimensions is entirely idiographic; however, the importance of the dimensions themselves is tied to a broader experimental literature in which goals have been found to vary along a number of dimensions

(e.g. level of consciousness, importance-commitment, difficulty, specificity, temporal range, and connectedness, see Austin & Vancouver 1996).

GOALS AND DEFENSIVE BEHAVIOR   As noted earlier, an important challenge for a goal perspective is its ability to deal with defensive behavior. Why is defensive behavior so challenging for couples and therapists alike? Perhaps it is because the emergent goal structure that guides defensive behavior is particularly stable both within each partner and within the dyadic system, rendering it difficult for couples to exit on their own and difficult for therapists to preempt. To elaborate this hypothesis, we need to distinguish approach, avoidance, and combination goal structures. After doing so, we hypothesize that defensive goals are combination goal structures, that the activation of defensive goals leads spouses to view partner negative behavior as diagnostic, and that each person's defensive behavior has strong potential to activate a symmetrical goal structure in the partner.

Three types of goals   Three types of goals can be distinguished (Carver & Scheier 1998). Approach goals are prototypic positive goals. They are associated with pressure to move toward a given state and with internal feedback designed to encourage discrepancy reduction. Avoidance goals, on the other hand, are also quite familiar in clinical settings. They are associated with pressure to move away from a given state and with internal feedback designed to enlarge discrepancy. A typical example would be a feared state or object. Carver & Scheier (1998) note, however, that avoidance goals are quite commonly connected with an associated approach goal. The resulting combination goal has both an avoidance pole that the individual moves away from in any direction that is possible, and an approach pole that attracts the person as they move further from the avoidance goal. Such combination goals are presumed to be more stable.

Three other general observations are relevant here (Carver & Scheier 1998). First, successful movement away from an avoidance goal most likely produces a different type of affect (relief) than movement toward an approach goal (elation), allowing one to distinguish their effect if one uses a two-dimensional affect system. Second, the approach and avoidance systems are likely to be physiologically distinct, perhaps with approach goals reflecting activity in the behavioral approach system and avoidance reflecting activity in the behavioral inhibition system (Gray 1987). Because underlying activity in these two systems appears to influence tendencies to learn avoidance and approach goals (Corr et al 1997), some individual difference variables may influence spouses' weighting of different goal types. Third, avoidance goals appear to have an inherent primacy, perhaps reflected in the common tendency for negative behavior to be relatively more salient than positive behavior in dyadic interaction.

Defensive goal systems   Our hypothesis is that defensive marital behavior typically reflects a combination goal. Such goal combinations may exert a stronger influence on the course of a conflictual interaction and perhaps on the course of a relationship than does either goal taken alone. An example of a (defensive) combination goal might be the goal of avoiding feeling stupid or small joined to the approach goal of evening the score with one's partner. When the partner's behavior is seen as threatening, this activates the goal of reducing the threat. However, through long association, as the avoidance goal is met, the approach goal is activated. Thus, in this example, a powerful motive to attack and belittle the partner could be set in motion by a relatively minor criticism. One could easily, however, substitute stone-walling, negative mind-reading, or physical violence for the approach goal and retain the same basic goal structure.

One may also wonder about the constellation of factors that predispose some individuals to view partner behavior as attacking or requiring a defensive reaction. There are powerful individual differences in the extent to which particular outcomes are viewed as being diagnostic of something about the self, or simply reflecting a need to create some incremental change. Early attachment experiences most likely contribute to the development of such individual differences in reactivity (Mikulincer 1998), and other factors, such as neuroticism, might also play a role. However, if an individual is vulnerable to reacting to partner criticisms as if they were diagnostic of a feared self-view, that should lead to greater avoidance of partner criticism and less persistence in trying to make things work when the partner is critical (see Dweck 1996).

A more complete understanding of defensive goal systems must incorporate the systemic relationship that exists between spouses. Defensive spouse behavior is both a response to prior events and a stimulus for the partner's next behavior. When a husband or wife responds to defensive partner behavior in kind, this sets the stage for re-energizing the partner's original avoidance goal. That is, the feared goal is moved closer to the partner, energizing their avoidance behavior.

To the extent that couples proceed through many iterations of re-energizing each other's defensive behavior, an important change might also be occurring in perceived self-efficacy to attain positive goals such as closeness and intimacy. Goals related to relationship maintenance or showing concern for the partner are likely to seem ever more unattainable. This combination of outcomes becomes a prescription for viewing the relationship as secondary, decreasing the salience of communal relationship norms, decreasing perceived self-efficacy for positive goals, and so further decreasing constructive accommodation to the partner.

In sum, a goal framework suggests that defensive behavior should be discernable early in the sequence of events leading to marital deterioration. Nega-

tive (agitation) affect should increase and then lead to a decrease in positive affect over time. Couples in which both partners are vulnerable to defensiveness should have a poorer prognosis than those in which only one partner is prone to defensive reactions. In addition, it should be possible to assess vulnerability to defensive reactions in a variety of ways, including direct observation and indirect assessment (e.g. via assessment of material activated by the presentation of conflict). Thus, our analysis suggests a theoretically informed cascade beginning with changes in high-level goals and exerting effects throughout the cognitive, behavioral, and affective system. Examining the structure of goals activated during conflict therefore may reveal important differences between couples headed for poorer vs better outcomes.

Prevention of Marital Problems from a Goal Perspective

Some types of marital problems (e.g. violence, infidelity), particularly in the context of reduced personal resources (e.g. poverty, ongoing illness), may be powerful elicitors of defensiveness. It may be useful to acknowledge the possibility that most spouses would respond defensively if placed in the same circumstances. Our analysis suggests, however, that defensiveness may have a special role to play in the subsequent development of marital dysfunction. Once activated, certain types of combination defensive goals may increase negative aspects of the relationship and then, over time, come to erode the positive in the relationship as well. Also, before the activation of these defensive goals, many couples may feel they are doing fine even if they are engaging in considerable overt conflict. Once defensive goals are activated, however, they should heighten the perception of negative partner behavior, intensify its impact, and lead to changes in interpretation of negative partner behavior and to more negative behavioral reactions. This, in turn, should increase the likelihood that the partner will also have defensive goals activated.

The need to provide couples with ways to interrupt this pattern early and return to nondefensive interaction is acute. Recent investigations of premarital prevention programs report modest effects (e.g. Markman et al 1993). It also appears that the couples in greatest need of prevention programs may be the least likely to seek them out, and that premarital prevention programs in the community provide relatively little benefit (Sullivan & Bradbury 1997). Even in the context of research volunteers, more than half declined the opportunity to participate in a prevention program (Markman et al 1993). These findings suggest that widespread prevention programs remain more promise than reality and that there is a need for improvements in both substance (i.e. efficacy) and delivery (i.e. effectiveness).

In the context of such findings, it is perhaps not surprising that we see proposals for "minimal" programs of preventative intervention (Gottman 1994). If brief, effective programs were available, it might be possible to better meet

the needs of couples most at risk. Our goal analysis highlights three potential foci for such programs.

First, if avoidance goals are the source of defensive behavior, it is important to give couples a way to recognize when they are getting defensive and provide them with an alternative to attacking, belittling, becoming belligerent, or stonewalling. Recent work suggests that self-protective mechanisms may be interchangeable (e.g. Tesser et al 1996), and so rather than focus on over-learning basic relationship skills (see Gottman 1994), it may be more efficient to provide new methods of self-protection. For example, we might focus on helping partners substitute workable self-enhancement strategies for partner-attacking reactions and thereby reduce a spouse's felt need to attack, demean, or stonewall. If the "attack" goal can be separated from the defensive pattern in this way, the couple has a better chance to emerge from a self-perpetuating pattern of mutual recrimination.

A second component for a minimal intervention is to address directly sensitivity to threat. A goal perspective suggests that there are particular "feared selves" (e.g. Markus & Nurius 1986) that motivate defensive behavior. If so, the areas represented by feared selves represent areas of vulnerability for destructive marital interaction. To the extent that such feared selves can be reliably assessed, it should be possible to design exposure-based interventions that reduce their power to disrupt interaction. Alternatively, awareness of points of vulnerability might allow couples to successfully deal with such issues when they arise.

The third component of a minimal intervention would help couples learn that relationships are always changing and developing so that they develop an incremental theory of marriage and marital happiness rather than an entity theory where marital satisfaction is viewed in finite terms (see Dweck 1996, Knee 1998). An incremental orientation is linked to learning goals and allows for failure and disappointments, whereas an entity orientation is linked to performance goals leading to an ongoing focus on marital behavior as diagnostic of relationship well-being. Inappropriate negative attributions for partner behavior and very low efficacy expectations might indicate such entity-oriented thinking. Once detected, an entity orientation could be addressed didactically, as it is when couples are encouraged to adopt a problem-solving attitude. Alternatively, it might be addressed indirectly through metaphor or humor designed to activate alternative frameworks for interpreting spouse behavior. However, because it is important that couples be able to self-regulate the tendency to reach entity-oriented conclusions, indirect interventions would need to be sufficiently memorable that they could be called upon in later conflict situations.

The suggestions highlighted by a goal perspective do not focus on skills training or on "calming down." Rather, they may be characterized as focusing

on taking care of one's self first, facing what one is potentially afraid of finding in the relationship, and refusing to rectify problems. This perspective therefore provides belated recognition of the insight provided by an early study by Birchler et al (1975). These investigators showed that distressed spouses are not characterized by skill deficits so much as by failure to use with the partner those skills that are apparent in conversation with strangers. Indeed, skills in the context of marital discord may contribute to more rather than less dissatisfaction (Burleson & Denton 1997). Such considerations provide grounds for suspecting that it is aims and objectives (goals) that most often differentiate distressed and nondistressed partners rather than skills and capabilities.

Of course, these suggestions are quite rudimentary, lack direct empirical validation, and are not yet associated with a viable assessment technology. Still, they provide a glimpse of the integrative alternative offered by a goal perspective, and as goal theory continues to develop and be applied in the marital domain, increasingly novel implications for intervention and prevention may be forthcoming. A goal perspective can also help make research more clinically relevant in that it has the potential to integrate and direct disparate lines of research on marital conflict phenomena.

Marital Conflict Phenomena from a Goal Perspective

A goal perspective generates new insights regarding conflict patterns, reversal effects, conflict context, and cognitive processes in marital conflict and has potential to integrate theoretical developments in attachment, commitment, and self-processes.

CONFLICT PATTERNS   Goal differences may account for the differing conflict patterns found in distressed and nondistressed couples. Self-protective (e.g. re-establishing equity) and avoidance (e.g. of harm) goals most likely give rise to conflict behavior (e.g. defensiveness) in distressed couples. In contrast, problem-resolution and relationship-enhancement goals appear to underlie the conflict behavior of nondistressed couples. This difference in goals most likely manifests itself in the choice of different "transformations of motivation rules" (Kelley & Thibaut 1978). Whereas distressed couples should be biased to defeat (e.g. maximize the relative difference between partners' outcomes) or not be fooled by the partner (e.g. maximize own outcomes), nondistressed partners should find it easier to focus on trying to find the best outcome for both partners (e.g. maximize joint outcomes), the most equitable outcome (e.g. minimize the difference between partners' outcomes), or the best outcome for the partner (e.g. maximize partner's outcomes). By considering the goals associated with different conflict patterns, our analysis creates the potential for integrating observational approaches to both conflict and support with insights from interdependence theory and the assessment of cognitive processes.

REVERSAL EFFECTS   How does a goal perspective facilitate understanding of reversal effects? Reversal effects should be mediated by the association of certain negative conflict behaviors to the presence of pro-relationship goals by the actor (or the elicitation of pro-relationship goals in the partner). Already discussed in the marital literature is the possibility that reversal effects result when negative conflict behavior represents genuine attempts at engagement of the other rather than simple avoidance of problems. Our analysis helps elaborate and broaden the discussion.

A goal perspective also provides a coherent framework for discussing the circumstances under which conflict engagement and avoidance may work to enhance couple satisfaction. Negative conflict behavior should have positive effects to the extent that it prompts the other to better understand one's reaction and activates prorelationship motives in the other (i.e. "I need to quit thinking just of myself"). At the same time, goal theory suggests the hypothesis that reversal effects should be less likely for behaviors that are associated with retaliation goals or defensive goals or for those behaviors that tend to evoke such goals in the other.

CONFLICT CONTEXT   Unlike current research, a goal perspective can easily incorporate context effects. For example, stressful life events as well as certain personal characteristics and family history variables may lower the threshold for defensive and retaliatory goals. Similarly, stressful life events may activate approach and avoidance motives differently for persons with differing attachment styles (Mikulincer et al 1993), and negative partner behavior results in different explanations depending on attachment style (Collins 1996). At the same time, negative life events may stimulate a felt need for partner support, and may do so differently depending on personal characteristics such as attachment style (Simpson et al 1992).

Thus, both current life events and personal characteristics have the potential to shape the goals activated by marital interaction. This points to possible theoretical continuity between observational literatures on support and conflict and suggests that both literatures may benefit from assessment of goals activated during interaction. Similarly, attempts to assess "entity" interpretations of negative conflict partner behavior or "entity" interpretations of failures to provide supportive behavior might prove to be powerful predictors of emotional and defensive reactions.

COGNITION   A goal perspective can also ground marital research on cognition in a useful way. For example, within a goal framework, attributional effects are of interest both as part of the process leading to emergent defensive goals and as a continuation of the defensive pattern that may remain long after the overt conflict episode is over (e.g. Martin & Tesser 1996). Similarly, our analysis

easily incorporates the prediction that high self-efficacy should be associated with more successful implementation of constructive problem-solving efforts (Doherty 1981). Finally, recent work on goals is compatible with both a two-dimensional structure of marital affect (Carver 1996) and the greater impact of more accessible marital evaluations (Kruglanski 1996).

ATTACHMENT, COMMITMENT, AND SELF PROCESSES   Perhaps most importantly, a goal perspective is compatible with, and potentially integrates, areas of current theoretical growth. As regards attachment, secure vs insecure attachment may be thought of as reflecting different patterns of goal organization as well as differences in the goals that are most chronically activated. Likewise, relationship commitment has considerable conceptual overlap with a goal perspective, and the literature on self-processes is often couched in terms of goal systems. Accordingly, our goal analysis is a natural extension of these perspectives and so lends itself to their integration into a single, coherent framework.

Conclusion: Being Goal Oriented Facilitates Being Integrative

Being goal oriented points us toward a broad, integrative framework for development of new intervention and prevention programs as well as future research on marital conflict. This framework is idiographic in its implications for understanding a specific couple, yet provides connections with a nomothetic, experimental research base that has proved to be remarkably generative. In particular, it provides critical insights with regard to both the function of problematic conflict behavior as well as the key process parameters likely to make such behavior more or less difficult to change. Our analysis highlights the utility of verbal prompts to create specific interaction goals, to envision such goals and how they might be implemented, and to clarify the level of commitment to the goals and any lack of perceived ability to realize them. Intervention, prevention, and research efforts might fruitfully and easily incorporate the goal construct at this level.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Research on marital conflict has reached a crossroads. We can continue amassing observations in an atheoretical manner and hope that patterns will emerge after we attain some critical mass, or we can begin now the hard work of creating a unified theoretical framework for the study of marriage. We chose the latter option and offered a goal perspective as one such potential integrative framework. Our analysis offers suggestions for reconciling anomalies in research findings, is compatible with areas of current theoretical growth, offers suggestions for both clinical and preventative intervention, and suggests op-

portunities for ties with a thriving area of experimental research. Our analysis is merely a starting point. Whether the marital literature realizes the potential of a goal theoretic framework will depend on our collective efforts.

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