Relationship Conflict: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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Introduction

One night, my husband and I had a fight, the first since we had been married. I was so frustrated and agitated that I fled the apartment in tears. I had so many things running through my mind blocking my sense of rationality, when it occurred to me that too many of us encounter horrible fights with our significant others ending with tears, slammed doors, broken objects, hurt feelings, and even broken hearts. I realized that it is time to study interpersonal conflict in depth, I said to myself, “this is what I am writing my thesis about.” At that moment, I brainstormed the idea of studying conflict. I asked: How often does conflict occur within most relationships? Is this feeling normal? How do people manage conflict and what are things I can do to elevate conflict in the future? Remembering this topic from a previous course, I decided to further research the topic and then create a survey to see if the researched proved valid.

Interpersonal conflict manages to stay out of common discussion even though it is completely prevalent among relationships. Jeanne Segal, Ph.D and Jaelline Jaffe, Ph.D (2007) say disagreements will occur in any intimate relationship. Two people’ can’t possibly always have the same needs, opinions and expectations. Successfully resolving differences is essential for the preservation and growth of any relationship.

Conflict is often times thought of as being negative, unfavorable, and unnecessary; however, conflict can be productive and is entirely inevitable in any relationship. It is important to consider the issue of conflict and conflict management in relationships because everybody belongs to and needs relationships. If people can better understand conflict they could potentially decrease the amount of conflict and increase relationship satisfaction.

I have taken many courses that have explained relationships using different theories. For instance, in Theories of Human Communication I learned that Deborah
Tannen’s Genderlect theory explains how and why men and women communicate within relationships. Additionally, the Relational Communication course has taught me how to manage relationships depending on relationship type and using diverse maintenance strategies. In order to illustrate the importance of understanding conflict I will be using information from Theories of Human Communication, Gender Communication, and Relational Communication. Additionally, I have conducted library research and reviewed relevant literature to discover what studies have already found and what people in real life relationships know about relationship conflict regarding why conflict occurs in various relationship types, how often conflict happens, the duration of conflict, and the effects this has on relationship satisfaction and quality. I gathered data from a survey I created through the means of KSU online survey system.

Literature Review

Guerrero, Andersen, and Afifi (2001) define conflict as a disagreement between two interdependent people who perceive that they have incompatible goals. Conflict plays an important part in relationships, not only possibly affecting the relationship duration but also relationship satisfaction and quality. Julia T. Wood (2007) stated that conflict affects’ power dynamic between couples by forcing them to negotiate and renegotiate the extent to which they share power. Furthermore, Guerrero et al. (2001) argue that close relationships that do not have conflict are rare and highly exceptional. Essentially, no relationship can exist without conflict. In fact, satisfied couples are more likely to discuss issues of disagreement, whereas dissatisfied couples are more likely to minimize or avoid conflict (Guerrero et al., 2001). Despite the fact that conflict seems to be unavoidable, few scholars have researched the darker side of close relationships (Walker, 2000). The darker side can be unfortunate events such as fighting, disagreement, or conflict. The fact that scholars have yet to fully research the
phenomenon known as interpersonal conflict makes it difficult for people to better understand conflict and to learn how to manage conflict. Guerrero et al. state, “the need to examine the dark side of close relationships is more important than focusing on the positive aspects of interpersonal relationships” (Walker, 2000). Walker continues to point out that studies usually have a “Pollyanna-like perspective which only highlights that individuals need to be open, honest, polite, and attractive in relationships, while ignoring other negative relational dynamics” (341). As Walker (2000) states, however conflict is as integral (and common) a part of relationships as is the positive side thus creating legitimacy and necessity for better understanding.

Sources of Conflict

Emotions are highly communicative. A growing body of research indicates that the transition from casual dating to serious commitment is marked by intensified emotions, increased emotional jealousy, greater reactivity to conflict and uncertainty, and more negative appraisals of irritations (Theiss & Soloman, 2006). A couple’s first fight may occur at this point of relationship development. Couples who broke up after their first big fight reported feeling confused or uncertain about their relationship (Guerrero et al., 2001). Consequently, partners who stayed together gained a greater understanding of their feelings for each other and felt that they could solve problems together and were confident that they would both be willing to make sacrifices for each other. Personally, I had experienced conflict within my relationship due to outside factors within 2 months. As a result, we stayed together and both learned from the experience. After the experience was over, I felt an ease of burden and felt the relationship is justifiable.

Guerrero et al. (2001) estimated that most romantic couples have somewhere between 1-3 disagreements per week of which 1 or 2 disagreements per month is
particularly unpleasant. Additionally, couples who are dissatisfied often experience 5.4 incidences of conflict over a 5-day period. Guerrero et al. (2001) state that most disagreements are related to the fair division of household labor, jealousy and possessiveness, sex, money and possessions, the social network (including in-laws), and children. Specifically, more research has shown the effect work has on the family domain, including stressors such as low levels of spousal support, the number of weekly hours devoted to family activities, and even the number and ages of children (Cinamon, 2006). In addition, individuals may complain that you are not spending enough time together therefore engaging in emotional or sexual infidelity such as sexual or emotional deception (Guerrero et al., 2001). Disagreements about household chores, jealousy and possessiveness, sex, money and possessions, social network, and children are not the only sources of conflict couples experience but tend to be the most common types of conflict within intimate relationships. However, as the survey will illustrate later, these are noted disagreements. After recognizing what types of conflict can occur it is particularly important to also understand the different levels of conflict as defined by Guerrero et al.

Levels of Conflict

Guerrero, Andersen, and Afifi (2001) claim there are four levels of conflict. The first level of conflict as defined by Guerrero et al. (2001) is when couples argue about specific, concrete behaviors such as how to specifically clean the kitchen. The second level of conflict is when couples argue about relational rules and norms such as working late without informing your partner or forgetting your significant other’s birthday or anniversary (Guerrero et al., 2001). Thirdly, Guerrero et al. (2001) define the third level of conflict when couples argue about varying personality traits. An illustration may be if one partner is too old fashioned for the other. Finally, the fourth level of conflict
and probably the most entertaining is when couples argue about the process of conflict itself otherwise known as metaconflict (Guerrero et al., 2001). This may also include accusing your partner of pouting, nagging, throwing a temper tantrum, not listening, or fighting unfairly (Guerrero et al., 2001).

Conflict Style

In addition to there being various levels of conflict there are also different conflict styles: competing, collaborating, accommodating, avoiding, and compromising. These conflict styles describe how people tend to deal with conflict. Conerly and Tripathi (2004) stated no one manages all conflicts the same way and that different styles fit different situations. It is important to know about the varying styles in order to further minimize disagreements. Conerly and Tripathi (2004) have also found that there are basically two things that affect the way you manage conflict in a given situation. One is how much you care about achieving your own goals-how assertive you are. The other is how much you care about relationships-how cooperative you are. Guerrero et al. state that there are five various conflict styles: competing, collaborating, accommodating, avoiding, and compromising.

Guerrero et al. (2001) describe competing style (distributive and contentious) as being more concerned with their own interests than their partner’s interests. People using the competing style tend to be assertive and typically uncooperative attempting win-lose situations (Guerrero et al., 2001). Guerrero et al. use synonyms for the collaborating style such as integrating, solution oriented, or problem solver. Guerrero et al. (2001) state people using the collaborating style have dual concern for themselves and for others involved. Furthermore, the collaborating style focuses on cooperative problem solving that leads to a win-win situation.
The third conflict style as described by Guerrero et al. (2001) is the accommodating style which is also known as obliging and yielding. This style is similar to collaborating however not identical. Users of accommodating style tend to be indirect and fairly passive (Guerrero et al., 2001). This includes being the “peacemaker” or giving in and allowing the other person to take. Conerly and Tripathi (2004) said that people who give up goals to preserve relationships are highly cooperative, not very assertive, or goal oriented. Individuals with accommodating style want to be accepted and liked by others, believe that conflict should be avoided in favor of harmony, set aside or compromise goals, keep their ideas to themselves, and worry that people can not deal with conflict without damaging relationships (Conerly & Tripathi, 2004). The accommodating style tends to put more of a strain on the relationship because personal goals are not being met. Goals such as work promotions, saving money, or even deciding when to buy a house. The fourth conflict style is the avoiding style otherwise known as non-confrontational or withdrawn. Theorists maintain that is on having little or no concern for oneself or others (Guerrero et al., 2001). Guerrero et al. found that avoiding occurs when people physically or psychologically remove themselves from the conflict scene, refrain from arguing, and refuse to confront their partners in any meaningful way. Papa and Canary (1995, cited in Guerrero et al, 2001) stated the avoiding style is a minimizing response to conflict because avoidance diminishes the importance of the conflict and the actual interests of both parties (Guerrero et al., 2001). It can also be problematic because some avoiding behaviors tend to be uncooperative and cause additional conflict to the issue at hand. This may be certain actions such as purposefully ignoring the partner, holding a grudge, or even administering the silent treatment (Conerly & Tripathi, 2004).
Finally, the compromising style remains. This style is somewhat focused on the self and somewhat focused on others. Conerly & Tripathi (2004) describe users of compromising as flexible, adaptive, moderately assertive, cooperative, and tend to seek middle ground. Guerrero et al., (2001) propose that this includes appealing to fairness, suggesting a trade-off, maximizing gains while minimizing losses, and offering a quick, short-term resolution to the conflict at hand. After recognizing the levels of conflict and conflict styles it is imperative to be prepared for managing conflict. After all, managing conflict and knowing how to respond is the most important part.

Conflict Management

Therefore, there are small changes that we can make in order to possibly minimize conflict. There are certain principles of constructive conflict management that may help ease the conflict at hand. For instance, stick to the topic and avoid red herrings. In other words, avoid bringing up a past argument or an irrelevant annoyance. Another principle is to avoid bringing other people into the conflict such as parents or friends (Guerrero et al., 2001). Next, don’t say things you don’t mean. Randall and France (2003) concluded that verbally aggressive language entails such acts as name-calling and mudslinging, behaviors that tend to escalate the competitive/distributive dynamics of an interaction and that are deemed damaging to constructive conflict resolution and the relationship of the parties involved. Guerrero et al. (2001) state that final changes we can make in conflict resolution is to practice active listening, avoid the” four horsemen of the apocalypse”, and respond with positive validating messages. The four horsemen of the apocalypse are complaints and criticisms, contempt and disgust, and defensiveness such as mind reading or punctuation corrections. Research states that by applying these methods of resolution tactics, conflict can be resolved more responsibly and more effectively.
Research Questions and Hypothesis

The research suggests interpersonal conflict within relationships occurs frequently. We can assume majority of couples experience 1-3 disagreements per week (Guerrero et al., 2001). Taken together, the studies suggest majority of disagreements are a result of the division of household labor, jealousy and possessiveness, sex, money and possessions, the social network, and children. In addition to the sources of conflict, the evidence illustrates four levels of conflict, which can be managed using conflict management tactics. However, does the type of conflict management affect relationship satisfaction and certainty? Additionally, is relationship satisfaction directly correlated with how often couples experience relationship conflict? Finally, the research suggests conflict occurs frequently however, is conflict healthy and normal?
Method

Sample

After completing the necessary research to further investigate interpersonal conflict I wondered how valid the information was since this tends to be a taboo and lightly researched topic. Ultimately, 46 people completed the anonymous survey via the Internet site where the average time to complete took 26 minutes even though participants were urged to not hesitate when answering questions. According to the survey system, 50% \((N=23)\) are women and 50% \((N=23)\) are men. The range of age is between 20-72 years old \((M=30)\). According to the data, 50\% \((N=23)\) are married, 20\% \((N=9)\) are in a (committed) courtship whereas 26\% \((N=12)\) are in a dating relationship. Furthermore, the data collected via the survey indicated the range of relationship duration between 2 weeks to 53 years.

Survey

I created the survey using K-State’s online survey system. The survey consisted of thirty two questions regarding interpersonal conflict within intimate relationships. The survey was offered between March 1 and April 15 to allow for enough time to complete. With the help of professors, email, and facebook I was able to distribute the survey to people of various ages and gender.

Results

Upon being asked if participants were satisfied in their relationship 87\% \((N=37)\) answered yes although 11\% \((N=5)\) answered that they are not satisfied in their relationship. The next question asked participants to define conflict. Some of the answers were as follows:

“Conflict is a communication break down between the partners and the quarrels that ensue afterwards because of this break down of communication.”

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“In a relationship, when one person has a way of thinking of doing something specific that does not complement the way of the other person.”

“Conflict is fighting in a non-constructive manner (e.g. bitching, yelling, just trying to hurt the other person, etc.).”

“Any major disagreement. (Not ones about the specks of toothpaste on the mirror, or who left the toilet seat up. You know it can be left up just as easy!!) Conflicts are more major.”

“When I don’t get to go to sleep when I want.”

Although some of the answers were amusing to read and spawn some laughter, it is important to know how people define conflict because that can determine what they may disagree on.

When participants were asked how many disagreements they and their significant others have had with each other 57% \((N=26)\) stated only 1-2 disagreements per month. A solid 24% \((N=11)\) stated only 1-3 disagreements per week whereas 13% \((N=6)\) admitted to no conflict at all, and finally 2% \((N=1)\) acknowledging 5+ conflict per week. Likewise, when asked if participants experience more or less conflict than in the beginning of their relationship 28% \((N=13)\) answered less, 15% \((N=7)\) answered more, and 56% \((N=26)\) were not applicable.

The survey revealed that the most disagreements between partners was about household chores, jealously and possessiveness, and money (each at 15%) \((N=7)\). A mere 4% \((N=2)\) disagree about sex followed by another 2% \((N=1)\) disagreeing about children. However, 30% \((N=14)\) of the participants listed disagreeing about other factors. Some of the responses were:

“We get into fights about the most random shit that doesn’t even matter.”

“... feeling that personal space has been invaded.”

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“Mostly time management with family schedule and household duties. There are some arguments about how the flow of money and how each other would prefer the other to spend their free time, and with whom they do so with. We do argue on the proper way to discipline our child sometimes. Arguments about sex tend to cycle. Sometimes it is an issue for a couple of months and then we are fine for quite some time. Jealousy is rarely an issue. I would rank it last on the scale.”

“Her expenditures surpass my income.”

Even though participants felt that their answers fell under the “other” category, most answers could actually fit within one of the six common areas.

Next, participants were asked to rank the six conflicts (including other) in order. Results proved that 14 people agreed that money is the most significant disagreement. Furthermore, people listed “other” then social network, sex, household chores, jealousy and possessiveness, and finally children. This is illustrated in the following diagram:

Upon listing “other” as the most disagreement participants then responded with the following disagreements; politics, points of views, when one gets up “on the wrong side of the bed” and old disagreements that keep re-surfacing.
In addition, 70% \((N=32)\) of participants said they do not argue about specific behaviors such as cleaning the kitchen, 59% \((N=27)\) said they do not argue about relationship norms such as working too much, 50% \((N=23)\) do not argue about differing personality traits such as one being too old fashioned, and finally, 59% \((N=27)\) stated they do not argue about conflict itself. Consequently, 57% \((N=26)\) agreed that conflict is not associated with relationship satisfaction.

When asked who causes the most conflict within their relationship, 66% \((N=30)\) answered their partner, 28% \((N=13)\) said they do, and 6% \((N=3)\) answered both. Additional comments read:

“My girlfriend starts 95% of our fights."

“She takes everything too personally and holds them in till she is really mad.”

“She is always to blame. She, when I’m taken, always seems to be too dramatic and makes life worse.”

“He is not as flexible or willing to compromise as I am.”

“I think I start most of the conflict because I am not good at asking for what I need or want. I usually don’t say anything until I am totally overwhelmed or angry and then I start a fight when we could have talked it out earlier.”

Upon conflict occurring, 48% \((N=22)\) of individuals stated that it is resolved within 1 hour or less. Additionally, 30% \((N=14)\) stated 2-5 hours, whereas 11% \((N=5)\) stated 1 day. There was a mere 4% \((N=2)\) that said 1-5 days and only 2% \((N=1)\) that said never. However, when asked if participants were concerned with their partners level of relationship satisfaction 52% \((N=24)\) answered no. Not surprisingly, when asked if participants thought if their partner was concerned with their own relationship satisfaction 52% \((N=24)\) also said no. One participant reported feeling their partner has a lot going on in their life and is not available to put 100% into the relationship.
More information from the survey illustrated that 83% (N=38) of participants do not attempt win-lose situations while 35% (N=16) ranked their communication during conflict as average. Majority of persons (33%) (N=15) admit that they remain passive (silent and withdrawn) when conflict occurs. Next, 26% (N=12) stated they react defensively although 17% (N=8) of participants leave the situation. Foretelling that 66% (N=30) of people do in fact feel uncomfortable when conflict occurs. 100% of participants agreed that in order to solve conflict both parties must collaborate.

In terms of relationship satisfaction 76% (N=35) feel that their own personal goals have been met within their relationship. 82% (N=38) responded that they believe their partner’s expectations are realistic whereas 18% (N=8) said they were not. Comments stated:

“He now wants me to be different than I have ever been.”

“Sometimes he has very unrealistic expectations-it’s his way or the wrong way.”

“He wants to have a single life and have a relationship, which does not work for someone who wants a serious relationship.”

Finally, 98% (N=45) agreed that some conflict is healthy. Some of the comments regarding this question read:

“No two people agree about everything. Conflict is inevitable. It is good to not try to hide it when it happens, but over come it.”

“Individuals are not going to agree on everything-We are not sheep. I would not like to be married to a stepford wife, except some days it sounds good.”

“I think that if my husband and I agreed on everything, we would get bored with each other. We have very different views on certain issues, especially in politics. I am very liberal and he is very conservative. I also think that we help each other grow by our differences. We enjoy debating with each other on issues and have a
good time just talking to each other. If we agreed on everything, we would have nothing to talk about. “

“Without conflict, there would be no true exchange of ideals and decisions. If no conflict arose then one side would be dominating and the other giving up. That is not true understanding or friendship.”

In conclusion, the information from the survey provided was intriguing and very helpful in divulging information regarding interpersonal conflict.

Discussion

My goal in my thesis was to examine the dark side of close relationships and investigate the effects conflict has on relationship satisfaction, quality, and duration. My results from the survey confirm the information found within my research regarding interpersonal conflict. The survey confirmed that conflict is indeed frequent among most various relationship types occurring anywhere between 1-2 disagreements per month to 1-3 disagreements per week. However, even though the survey proved that conflict is frequent it is preferably avoidable by most. The survey confirmed that majority of persons admit that they use avoiding style when conflict occurs remaining silent, withdrawn, and passive. 66% of those surveyed feel uncomfortable when conflict occurs however, think it is necessary for a healthy relationship. This is interesting to me, because majority of individuals expressed that conflict is in fact healthy and necessary for relationship satisfaction and growth, however would rather avoid conflict and not deal with it. I was extremely surprised to find that 52% of participants are not concerned with their partner’s level of satisfaction. Also, 52% responded saying their partner was not concerned with their relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, I was surprised to find 87% completely satisfied in their relationship. I was surprised that most people stay passive and avoidant during conflict that occurs frequently within their
relationship, claiming that conflict is necessary and healthy towards relationship satisfaction, but would rather avoid conflict, claiming they are satisfied, but yet have no care for their partner’s level of satisfaction. In regards to the literature review, this survey information is a little blurry. Otherwise, the research from the literature review has proved correct. The research states there are distinctive conflict types and management types that people adhere to. Specifically, the information proved that conflict effects personal satisfaction within relationships.

Finally, the information from the survey was extremely helpful in regards to evaluating the literature. However, there were limitations to the survey. I was disappointed to only have 46 participants which limited my information. In addition to the size, the fact that 50% of participants are married made some of these questions not applicable towards others. For instance, ranking the types of disagreement such as household chores, money, or children may have been difficult for the 46% not married provided they are not cohabitating. Also, the information was only obtained from participants from Kansas or the mid-west. By doing so, the information only came from one region or culture. Had the information been from a different national region or culture, I think it may have not been as consistent.

Conclusion

The survey provided a lot of helpful information making it easy to fully answer my questions regarding interpersonal conflict within intimate relationships. The research provided useful information regarding what defines conflict, how people cope with conflict and how satisfied they are in their current relationships. I enjoyed inspecting the information found from the survey. It was interesting to find out how much conflict is considered to be acceptable within relationships and I was even more
pleased to find myself in that category. The results of the survey were particularly interesting. The research I found in books and journals was indefinitely insightful, however, it was interesting to read real cases about conflict and how people manage. The information found in the survey validated majority of the research which is what I was hoping for in my conclusion.

The literature review and the survey both provide necessary information. People need to acknowledge how other people view relationships in order to understand their own. How people define conflict may make a difference in how they perceive disagreements. Therefore, instead of people focusing so much on the negative aspects of conflict, people should take the time to learn from it. Until individuals can meet a mutual respect for each other by truly learning what the other person’s expectations are in the relationship then conflict will be more prominent. In addition, if people learn more about conflict and how to better manage it, it will ultimately minimize the amount of conflict, which in turn can increase relationship satisfaction and quality. In conclusion, by educating ourselves about conflict management we can surely minimize those fights ending in tears, broken plates, and a night on the most uncomfortable couch ever. It is time to say farewell to the bad and the ugly and welcome in the good.
References


Appendix

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Interpersonal Conflict within Intimate Relationships Survey

1. What is your gender?

2. How old are you?

3. What type of relationship are you currently involved in?
   a. Marriage
   b. Courtship (committed)
   c. Dating

4. What is the duration of your relationship?

5. Are you satisfied within your relationship?

6. How do you define conflict?

7. How many disagreements do you and your partner have?
   a. 1-3 disagreements per week
   b. 1-2 disagreements per month
   c. 5+ per week
   d. No conflict
   e. Too many to count

8. Do you have more or less conflict than in the beginning of your relationship?
   a. Less
   b. More

9. What are most disagreements between you and your partner about?
   a. Household Chores
   b. Jealousy & Possessiveness
   c. Sex
   d. Money
   e. Social Network
f. Children
g. Other (Please specify)

10. Please rank the following conflicts from least (conflict) to greatest (conflict). If one does not apply, please remove from list.

1. Household Chores
2. Jealousy & Possessiveness
3. Sex
4. Money
5. Social Network
6. Children
7. Other (Please specify)

11. Do you and your partner argue about specific behaviors such as cleaning the kitchen?

12. Do you and your partner argue about relationship rules or norms such as one working too often?

13. Do you and your partner argue about differing personality traits such as one being too old fashioned or set in their ways?

14. Do you and your partner argue about conflict itself?

15. True or false: Conflict is not associated with relationship dissatisfaction.

16. In your opinion, who causes the most conflict within your relationship?
   a. I do
   b. My partner

17. When conflict occurs, how long until it is resolved?
   a. 1 hour (or less)
   b. 2-5 hours
c. 1 day

d. 1-5 days

e. Never

18. Are you concerned with your partner’s level of relationship satisfaction?

19. Do you think your partner is concerned with your level of relationship satisfaction? If not, why do you feel this way?

20. When conflict occurs, do you attempt win-lose situations?

21. Where would you rank you and your partner’s level of communication during conflict?
   a. Poor
   b. Low
   c. Medium
   d. Average
   e. Excellent

22. When dealing with conflict, do you feel that you have to lose or sacrifice something?

23. When conflict occurs, how do you manage?
   a. Remain passive and withdrawn
   b. Leave the situation
   c. Become defensive
   d. Become angry
   e. React violently

24. Do you feel uncomfortable when conflict occurs in your relationship?

25. Do you agree with the statement: It takes collaboration to solve conflict.

26. How do you define a successful relationship?
27. Are you concerned with your partner’s level of satisfaction in your relationship?

28. Do you tend to play down disagreements? If so, why?

29. Where would you rank your level of satisfaction within your relationship?
   a. Low
   b. Medium
   c. Average
   d. Very satisfied

30. Do you feel that your own personal goals have been met within your relationship?

31. Are your partner’s expectations realistic? (If not, please explain)

32. Do you agree with the statement: Some conflict is healthy. Please explain your answer.