RUNNING HEAD: Communication during Conflict

What Type of Communication during Conflict is Beneficial for Intimate Relationships?

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Abstract

What constitutes effective communication during conflict? Answering this question requires (a) clarifying whether communication expresses opposition versus cooperation and is direct versus indirect, (b) assessing the mechanisms through which communication effects relationships, and (c) identifying the contextual factors that determine the impact of communication. Recent research incorporating these components illustrates that direct opposition is beneficial when serious problems need to be addressed and partners are able to change, but can be harmful when partners are not confident or secure enough to be responsive. In contrast, cooperative communication involving affection and validation can be harmful when serious problems need to be changed, but may be beneficial when problems are minor, cannot be changed, or involve partners whose defensiveness curtails problem solving.

Keywords: relationship conflict, communication, conflict behavior, problem resolution, context

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Stress can arise in relationships when partners experience conflicting goals, motives and preferences. Common sources of conflict involve unmet expectations, intimacy, time spent together, financial difficulties, discrepancies in equity and power, domestic and family responsibilities, parenting, jealousy, bad habits and more [1,2,3]. Unresolved conflicts and the stress associated with conflict put even the most satisfying relationship at risk [4,5,6,7]. Moreover, managing and resolving conflict is difficult, and can itself be a significant source of stress. Indeed, one of the most pressing problems couples identify is how to communicate while resolving their disagreements [1,2,8], and relationship therapists agree that dysfunctional communication is the most damaging and difficult to treat relationship problem [3,9]. Identifying what constitutes effective communication during conflict is thus critical to help couples resolve problems and sustain their relationships.

Unfortunately, despite decades of investigations, research investigating how couples communicate during conflict has failed to provide a definitive picture regarding the best way to resolve sources of conflict. In this article, we describe recent advances in research on communication during conflict that help to provide a more complete understanding. We focus on three significant developments. First, we move beyond conceptualizations of communication that focus on what appears to be destructive versus constructive in the moment to identify important dimensions of communication that are key to uncovering what types of communication enhance versus undermine problem resolution. Second, we show that understanding effective communication requires assessing the mechanisms through which different types of communication shape relationship satisfaction, such as whether problems improve or grow across time. Third, we illustrate that all types of communication can have beneficial and harmful effects on relationships, but whether they ultimately help or harm relationships depends on a range of contextual factors.

Conflict, Communication and Resolving Relationship Problems

Clinical researchers pioneered the investigation of communication during conflict with the aim of distinguishing distressed couples embroiled in intractable disagreements from more satisfied couples. Not surprisingly, hundreds of cross-sectional studies in this tradition revealed that dissatisfied couples exhibit greater disagreement, hostility, and criticism compared to satisfied couples who express greater agreement, affection and humor [10-14]. Some longitudinal studies have also provided evidence that the presence of hostile disagreement predicts declines in satisfaction, whereas expressing agreement and affection sustains relationship satisfaction [5]. These patterns suggest that communication intuitively understood as ‘negative’ is harmful for relationships, whereas more pleasant and assumed ‘positive’ communication is beneficial.

Yet, amongst this mass of studies, notable exceptions have provided contrary evidence by showing that disagreement, criticism and anger during couples’ conflict discussions predicts relative improvements in satisfaction across time [15-18], whereas expressing agreement and humor undermines satisfaction and stability [15,16]. The common thread in the explanations offered for this reverse pattern is that directly confronting problems by engaging in conflict motivates partners to produce desired changes and, thus, leads to more successful problem resolution [11,16-20]. In contrast, high levels of affection, validation and humor may soften the immediate unpleasantness of conflict but in doing so fail to motivate partners to change [15,16,20]. However, testing this explanation requires two important additions to the way researchers have typically assessed communication and its effects. Research needs to (1) more clearly identify the ingredients of communication that motivate partner change and promote problem resolution, and then (2) test whether these types of communication actually do facilitate problem resolution across time [5,21].

We have incorporated these two necessary components into our research programs. First, we have measured different types of communication that vary according to the two dimensions depicted in Figure 1. The vertical dimension captures what has been traditionally understood as ‘negative’ versus ‘positive’ communication and specifies whether communication expresses opposing or contrasting goals and motivations (opposition) versus cooperative or aligned goals and motivations (cooperation). The horizontal dimension captures the directness of communication and specifies whether communication is explicit and overt (direct) versus passive and covert (indirect) with regard to the problem and how that problem can be improved. The two dimensions produce four types of communication: direct opposition (e.g., derogating/blaming the partner), indirect opposition (e.g., inducing guilt/sympathy), direct cooperation (e.g., reasoning) and indirect cooperation (e.g., softening conflict via affection).

Second, we have assessed the degree to which these four types of communication motivate change in problems across time, which has revealed not only that opposition can sometimes have benefits but that directness is pivotal in determining problem resolution. Overall et al. [22] assessed which of the four types of communication shown in Figure 1 predicted the degree to which partners changed targeted problems across the following year. In contrast to the assumption that greater levels of opposition (top half of Figure 1) are inherently detrimental, greater levels of *direct* opposition were associated with *greater* change in targeted problems across time, and perceived improvements predicted increased relationship satisfaction. In independent research, McNulty and Russell [6] also found that greater levels of direct opposition when discussing relatively serious relationship problems increased problem resolution and, in turn, sustained relationship satisfaction. Moreover, both Overall and colleagues [22] and McNulty and Russell [6] found that *indirect* opposition was ineffective in motivating change and resolving problems.

Directness also determines whether cooperative communication is beneficial. Overall and colleagues [22] found that direct cooperation predicted greater improvement in problems across time, whereas indirect cooperation did not. Other research also supports that the types of communication classified as indirect cooperation in Figure 1 (sometimes referred to as loyalty) has limited impact on problem resolution because partners do not recognize the severity of the issue and the subsequent lack of change can leave loyal intimates feeling undervalued and disconnected [29,30]. In sum, an indirect, tactful approach may convey that changes are unnecessary and therefore fail to improve relationship problems. In contrast, direct communication that explicitly conveys problems need to be addressed may be more successful at improving sources of conflict.

Conflict and Communication in Context

Of course, direct opposition will not always be beneficial and indirect cooperation will not always be harmful. Instead, all four types of communication have a mix of benefits and costs, and whether the benefits or costs win out depend on a range of contextual factors [20,31-34]. Examples of these contextual effects are shown in Figure 2 and discussed below.

With regard to direct opposition, our research has shown that whether the potential benefits (e.g., motivating partners to change) outweigh the costs (e.g., producing distress and defensiveness in partners) is determined by the degree to which (a) motivating a partner to change is necessary and (b) resolving the problem is possible [32]. Demonstrating the role of necessity, McNulty and Russell [6] found that direct opposition led to improved relationship quality when couples were facing relatively serious problems but decreased relationship quality when problems were relatively minor. When problems are serious, direct opposition matches the need for improvement and the benefits of motivating change may outweigh any costs. When problems are minor, however, direct opposition is likely to be perceived as unnecessarily harsh and leave partners feeling derogated and less motivated to be responsive.

The perceived necessity of direct opposition is also likely to be why Jayamaha and Overall [35] found that direct opposition enacted by people low in self-esteem was less successful in motivating change and, in turn, reduced relationship satisfaction. Low self-esteem people chronically express negativity in their relationships [36], which may render direct opposition less diagnostic of problem severity and instead appear exaggerated or unjustified.

Whether the problem can be resolved also determines the impact of direct opposition. Direct opposition may benefit relationships if partners are or feel capable of solving the issue, but may overwhelm partners and forestall improvement attempts when they lack such efficacy. For example, people high in depression tend to make self-blaming, stable attributions [37] that lead to low efficacy and the belief that dissatisfying situations cannot be changed [38]. Accordingly, Baker and McNulty [39] illustrated that, although direct opposition tended to motivate change by partners who were low in depression, direct opposition undermined resolution efforts when partners were high in depression because those partners felt less able to address the problem. Partners' actual ability to resolve a problem should have similar effects as perceived efficacy: direct opposition can only lead to improvements if targeted partners can actually change, but will likely only cause distress and acrimony when targeted partners are unable to change [32,40].

Our research has also identified other contextual factors that determine the relative benefits and costs of *indirect* opposition: (a) agents' motivations for enacting indirect opposition and (b) partners' relative vulnerability to the costs of opposition. With regard to agents' motivations, inducing guilt does not focus directly on changing the specific problem but instead focuses on pulling reassurance of the partner's commitment [20,22]. Accordingly, people high in attachment anxiety who are chronically insecure in their relationships use greater guilt induction during conflict, and successfully inducing guilt has the benefit of assuaging their insecurities [41,42]. However, these security-enhancing benefits are

accompanied by important costs, including problems remaining unaddressed and partners becoming increasingly dissatisfied [22,41,42]. Moreover, these costs are particularly apparent when partners are high in attachment avoidance and driven to avoid the dependence and obligations to which guilt induction appeals. In particular, highly avoidant partners react with greater resistance to guilt induction, which results in lower problem resolution [42].

These same factors that determine the costs and benefits of opposition also determine the benefits and costs of cooperation: necessity of change, possibility of change, agents' motivations, and partners' vulnerabilities. Sustaining optimistic views of relationships can undermine satisfaction when couples face serious problems that need to be changed, but may maintain satisfaction when problems are less severe or cannot be changed (7,33,43). Other types of indirect cooperation, such as high levels of forgiveness, undermine satisfaction when partners are not responsive and problems grow, but help to sustain satisfaction when partners do alter problematic behavior [44,45]. Indirect cooperation may also be detrimental when used to avoid guilt, tension or rejection, but be more favorable when agents are motivated to enhance and grow relationships [46]. Finally, indirect cooperation is more beneficial when vulnerable partners would otherwise be resistant to change [20,32,39,47,48]. For example, indirect cooperation reduces avoidant partners' anger and withdrawal during conflict and, in turn, enhances problem resolution [48]. In such contexts, the need to soften defensive reactions may balance or overshadow the costs that can occur when indirect cooperation fails to generate change [20,47,48].

Conclusions

Understanding what constitutes effective communication during conflict requires (a) clarifying whether communication expresses opposition versus cooperation and represents direct versus indirect attempts to resolve problems (Figure 1), (b) assessing the mechanisms through which communication affects relationships, such as motivating partners to improve

problems, and (c) identifying the contextual factors that determine the relative benefits versus costs of different types of communication (Figure 2). Our brief review did not cover all of the important dimensions (e.g., disengagement [17,49]), mechanisms (e.g., perceived investment [17,20]), and contextual factors (e.g., extra-dyadic stress [15,31,50]) that will determine the ultimate impact of communication. However, the research we examined demonstrated that incorporating these three components into future investigations is crucial to truly grasp the best way for couples to manage conflict. Indeed, by incorporating these three elements, recent research has challenged assumptions that disagreement and opposition is bad for relationships, and softening conflict with affection, forgiveness and validation is good. Instead, this research reveals that direct opposition can be necessary when serious problems need to be addressed and partners are able to change, but can inflict harm when partners are not confident or secure enough to be responsive. In contrast, a softer more cooperative approach involving affection and validation can be harmful when serious problems need to be changed, but may be sustaining in the face of problems that are minor, cannot be changed, or involve partners whose defensiveness curtails problem solving. In short, couples need to adjust their communication to the contextual demands they are facing in order to turn conflict into a catalyst for building healthier and happier relationships.

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Figure 1. Examples of communication classified according to whether the communication expresses opposition versus cooperation and is direct versus indirect

Note. This figure provides examples of types of communication that have been commonly assessed within the conflict and influence literatures that can be classified according to two dimensions. The vertical dimension specifies the degree to which communication expresses opposing/contrasting goals and motivations (opposition) versus expresses cooperative/similar goals and motivations (cooperation). The horizontal dimension specifies whether communication is explicit and overt (direct) versus passive and covert (indirect) in regard to the problem, the change desired, and how that change can be achieved. See [20,22] for more detail regarding these types of communication and [23-28] for similar distinctions.

Figure 2. Examples of contextual effects of different types of communication

Note. This figure summarizes some examples of recent research showing that different types of communication during conflict can have beneficial effects on relationship in some contexts and harmful effects on relationships in other contexts. See [32] for a more detailed consideration of different types of contextual factors that determine the impact of communication.