Positive Psychology of Love

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Handling Conflicts Positively

LORNE CAMPBELL AND SARAH C. E. STANTON

When asked what factors make life most meaningful, the majority of people first mention satisfying close relationships, particularly their romantic relationships (Berscheid, 1985). This is not surprising, given that the fundamental motivation for humans to enter into and maintain close relationships is a universal and intense need to belong—to feel connected to others in enduring, close relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Kirkpatrick & Ellis, 2001). Attesting to the inherent desire for individuals to form close romantic bonds is an analysis of 166 societies by Jankowiak and Fischer (1992) concluding that romantic love is found worldwide. This desire is perhaps a major reason for why over 90% of *everyone in the world* will marry at least once during their lives (Buss, 1985). There are also many positive outcomes associated with being involved in long-term romantic bonds. For example, individuals in positive romantic relationships experience better psychological and physical well-being, as well as greater life satisfaction, than single or divorced individuals (e.g., Clark & Lemay, 2010; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Suls & Wallston, 2003). It appears, therefore, that individuals are motivated to form close romantic bonds and generally experience positive mental and physical well-being because of them.

Maintaining satisfactory relationships, however, can be a daunting task. Intimates are forced to deal with many challenges as relationships develop over time, including, for example, amount and quality of time spent together, disputes over money and division of domestic responsibilities, jealousy, as well as issues regarding sex, drugs, and alcohol (Storaasli & Markman, 1990). How individuals manage these problems can be influenced by a number of factors, the source of which can be both internal (e.g., heightened attachment anxiety; Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005) and external (e.g., daily stress; Neff & Karney, 2009) to the relationship. Indeed, romantic relationships provide a rich context for the experience of a diverse array of both positive *and* negative emotions (Aune, Aune, & Buller, 1994; Bowlby,

1979; Planalp, 1999); these emotions are often tied to feelings of love or dissatisfaction both for and from intimates, and serve to partly communicate to partners the state of their relationships (Berscheid, Lopes, Ammazzalorso, & Langenfeld, 2001). Relationships can therefore feel similar at times to a roller-coaster ride in which partners experience breathtaking emotional highs and heartbreaking lows.

A common source of negative affect in relationships is the presence of conflict, when partners pursue incompatible goals at the expense of the other (Holmes & Murray, 1996). Interestingly, individuals tend to treat their romantic partners more harshly than they do others (Miller, 1997) and argue more often with romantic partners than they do with other social partners (Birditt, Fingerman, & Almeida, 2005). These realities may not be surprising, given that as a relationship progresses partners begin to interact across broader domains, and the potential for important disagreements to emerge between partners increases (e.g., Braiker & Kelley, 1979; Levinger, 1983). A large amount of research has focused on the causes and consequences of conflicts in relationships, and one general conclusion emerging from this body of work is that the presence of conflict may have pernicious effects on partners and relationships. For example, couples with frequent conflicts report lower relationship satisfaction and are more likely to end their relationships over time (Gill, Christensen, & Fincham, 1999; Gottman, Coan, Carrère, & Swanson, 1998; Gottman & Notarius, 2000, 2002; Kluwer & Johnson, 2007), and spouses in highly conflictual relationships experience increased rates of depression (Beach, Fincham, & Katz, 1998). Romantic conflicts are also associated with potentially detrimental physiological consequences as well, such as heightened cardiovascular reactivity (Newton & Samford, 2003), acute neuroendocrine reactivity (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1996), and suppressed immune functioning (Kiecolt-Glaser, Malarkey, Chee, & Newton, 1993; Miller, Dopp, Myers, Stevens, & Fahey, 1999).

Our brief review of the literature to this point suggests three somewhat conflicting conclusions. First, people desire to be involved in long-term romantic relationships and experience positive outcomes when they achieve this goal. Second, the diversity of issues intimates need to negotiate in their relationships over time results in the greater potential for conflict, and indeed people experience more conflicts with their intimate partners compared to others in their lives. Third, relationship-based conflict tends to result in negative outcomes. Regarding the first and third conclusions, how can involvement in long-term committed relationships be associated with both positive and negative outcomes? Missing from our review so far, of course, is a discussion of theory and research showing that the presence of relationship-based conflict itself is not disastrous for the relationship; rather, it is how partners manage conflict in their relationships that is of utmost importance. In many instances, conflict is indeed bad for the relationship. In many others, however, the resolution of relationship-based conflict has the potential to result in stronger, more satisfying relationships. From a positive psychology perspective, then, the

benefits experienced by partners in long-term pair bonds likely result from being able to effectively deal with conflict in their relationships, not the absence of conflict (e.g., McNulty & Russell, 2010).

The primary goal of this chapter is to discuss how relationship-based conflict can have positive effects on partners and the relationship. We first briefly discuss conflict from an interdependence perspective. We then focus on different ways partners can respond to interpersonal conflict, in particular exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect strategies (Rusbult & Zembrodt, 1983), and the process of accommodation (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991), largely derived from interdependence theory. Lastly, we detail recent research demonstrating that a more direct approach to resolving interpersonal conflicts has beneficial long-term, if not short-term, outcomes for the relationship.

An Interdependence Theory Perspective on Conflict

> *The sky of Italy is not less serene nor less splendid after long days of clouds and thunder-storms. Thus it is with love: if it is true love, it cures the gravest and most bloody wounds; it can rise from the slumbering ashes; it can die a hundred times and be born again as often. If it cannot accomplish these miracles, it will be friendship, lechery, but not love.* (Mantegazza, 1894, pp. 316–317)

In this quote, Mantegazza captures the magnificence and the anguish of love. Although romantic partners may often experience the storm clouds of conflict, their love can ultimately bring them back together as they rise above their disagreements. Conflict can be painful, but Mantegazza suggests love can survive, and in fact can even thrive, in the face of conflict. This may occur when individuals not only focus on their thoughts, feelings, and desires regarding a relationship problem, but take their romantic partner's needs into account as well. In other words, awareness of how their own behavior might affect themselves, their partner, and their relationship might lead to stronger love even after encountering conflict. Interdependence theory (for a review see Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996) provides a versatile and convincing framework for Mantegazza's conjectures; we now provide a brief overview of this theory.

Interdependence theory focuses on dyadic processes, and as such explains behavior as the result of properties that reside between, and not exclusively within, partners (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Interaction between partners is the fundamental feature of interdependence, seeing as individuals engage in behaviors that have the potential to influence both their own and their partners' outcomes (Rusbult, Arriaga, & Agnew, 2001). For example, Randy's decision to purchase a new car has implications for his partner Peggy; similarly, Peggy's decision to adhere to a strict diet has implications for Randy. In the event that Randy

and Peggy possess incompatible goals (e.g., Peggy does not want a new car; Randy does not want to cut sugar out of his diet), there is potential for conflicts to arise. However, conflicts will actually occur only when one partner (Randy or Peggy) acts in a way to further his or her own goals in a given situation at the expense of the partner's goals (Holmes & Murray, 1996).

Interdependence theory utilizes what is termed the *outcome matrix* to demonstrate the different types of outcomes that partners' behaviors have on each other. We will not provide a thorough overview of the different forms of interdependence that can exist across various situations (for a review see Kelley et al., 2003), but we want to reinforce the notion that each partner can influence his or her own and the partner's outcomes with his or her behavioral choices. For example, when partners are confronted with a situation (e.g., a messy kitchen), their initial self-centered preferences (e.g., to have the *other* partner clean the kitchen) is referred to as the *given matrix*. Partners' immediate self-centered preferences, of course, are at odds with each other and lay the foundation for conflict over who should clean the kitchen. At this point, according to interdependence theory, partners may undergo a *transformation of motivation* whereby they consider each other's interests as well as the long-term effects of the joint behavior on the relationship. The transformation process is influenced by many factors (e.g., situational, dispositional, and dyadic) and can occur via conscious deliberation or automatically. The result is the *effective matrix*, or the course of action that partners decide to take. On the one hand partners can decide to compromise and alter their initial desires to be more cooperative (e.g., both can assist in cleaning the kitchen, or agree to alternate cleaning duties). It is also possible for partners to maintain their initial preferences and behave in an antagonistic manner toward each other. Conflict can occur in both instances, but the result is positive in the former (i.e., compromise) and harmful in the latter.

As another example of this process, consider the following situation involving a fictional couple and their young child. Peggy and Randy have been married for a few years and have a 2-year-old boy, Liam. Liam does not want to play alone and is behaving in a very loud and obnoxious manner to get the attention of his parents. Peggy is preparing for an exam and prefers to continue studying and thus have Randy attend to Liam. Randy, on the other hand, would prefer to continue watching a playoff hockey game featuring his favorite team and hopes that Peggy will attend to their son. At this point Peggy or Randy could decide that each others' desires are more important than their own at that time and attend to Liam, resulting in no conflict. They could both ignore the demands of their son and become privately upset at each other for behaving selfishly. They could also address the issue directly and discuss who should attend to their child at that time, putting forward their own arguments and listening to the arguments of each other. Their conflict will ultimately lead to a resolution of the problem in the short term, but whether the conflict has long-term positive or negative effects on the relationship depends on how the conflict was handled.

It seems obvious, on the face of it, why conflict can create discord between partners with long-lasting negative implications, but why might relationship conflict have the potential to ignite the fires of love and result in an even stronger union? Simply put, relationship conflict can provide an ideal opportunity for partners to achieve greater intimacy and partner responsiveness because intimates are forced to pay attention to the desires and goals of each other, and have the option to work toward a mutually beneficial solution (e.g., Fishtein, Pietromonaco, & Feldman Barrett, 1999). Furthermore, conflict prompts partners to articulate competing interests, to understand the interests of each other, and to negotiate compromises (Fincham, 2003; Fincham & Beach, 1999). Research by Gottman et al. (e.g., Gottman, 1998; Gottman et al., 1998; Gottman & Levenson, 1992) provides support for these claims, showing that conflicts that are characterized by mutual understanding and cooperation, and not associated with escalating negativity, may allow couples to more quickly and successfully reach a resolution. In these instances, the conflict might even lead to better relationship functioning and greater intimacy between partners by providing opportunities for positive affective exchanges (see also Reis, 2007). On the other hand, conflicts characterized by high levels of escalating hostility are corrosive to relationships.

From an interdependence theory framework within positive psychology, interpersonal conflict results from partners pursuing incompatible goals, and therefore conflictual encounters provide partners a venue within which to share personal preferences, listen to and understand their partner's preferences, and potentially reach a mutually desirable solution via a cooperative transformation of motivation. At the moment when conflict erupts in a relationship, how intimates decide to negotiate the conflict is therefore of utmost importance. We now turn to theoretical and empirical work addressing the different ways that partners can respond to conflicts, and which approach(es) tend to yield short- and long-term positive relationship outcomes.

Responses to Relationship Conflict

Typological responses to conflict and dissatisfaction were first developed by Hirschman (1970), who identified three responses to decline in economic or political organizations: *exit*, *voice*, and *loyalty*. To extend on this model and examine these responses in the context of romantic relationships, Rusbult and Zembrodt (1983) conducted a multidimensional scaling analysis in which they confirmed Hirschman's three categories of possible reactions to conflict and added a fourth category, *neglect*. These responses are defined along *constructive–destructive* and *active–passive* dimensions, which differ in their impact on the conflict at hand as well as the relationship in general. Specifically, *exit* refers to behaving in an actively destructive manner (e.g., screaming at the partner, threatening to leave, or ending the relationship).

Voice refers to actively and constructively expressing dissatisfaction with the intent to improve conditions (e.g., discussing problems, trying to change oneself or the partner, or seeking advice from others). *Loyalty* refers to passively but optimistically waiting for the relationship to improve (e.g., praying that things will get better, being supportive in the face of criticism, or "giving the issue some time"). Finally, *neglect* refers to passively allowing the relationship to atrophy (e.g., ignoring the partner, spending less time together, or deciding the partner can no longer be trusted).

In general, the constructive responses (voice and loyalty) have been fairly consistently associated with more favorable immediate and long-term consequences, such as feelings of satisfaction and commitment. Destructive responses (exit and neglect), on the other hand, have been associated with more negative consequences (Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986). It is understandable that exit and neglect yield negative outcomes; these reactions often openly devalue the partner and do not promote acceptance or understanding of the partner's concerns, and thus hinder problem solving and lead to less favorable outcomes. Moreover, the typical "gut reaction" to destructive behavior is to "fight fire with fire" and respond destructively in turn (Yovetich & Rusbult, 1994). Accordingly, to preserve the positive quality of the relationship in the long run, individuals must engage in a transformation of motivation to override their destructive impulses in the face of relationship conflict, a process resulting in what is known as accommodation.

In the face of relationship conflict, *accommodation* refers to the willingness and ability of individuals to inhibit their destructive impulses and instead respond constructively to their partner's concerns or bad behavior (Rusbult et al., 1991). Accommodation is often operationally defined by the exit-voice-loyalty-neglect typology, such that it reflects the process through which individuals restrain their impulses to engage in exit and neglect strategies to instead respond constructively by engaging in voice or loyalty strategies. Accommodating through constructive conflict strategies has been shown to be a strong predictor of overall happiness, stability, and other positive relationship outcomes. For example, Rusbult et al. (1991) found that the constructive responses of accommodation (i.e., voice and loyalty) were meaningfully associated with greater reports of attempting to view relationship conflict from multiple angles in order to find the ideal solution, as well as trying to take the partner's perspective in problem situations. Importantly, this pattern of results was replicated in a behavioral observation study of couple interactions (Study 6). That is, individuals' self-reported willingness to engage in accommodation was predictive of their actual constructive interpersonal behaviors when they were observed interacting with their partners in a laboratory setting.

It therefore appears that the constructive strategies of voice and loyalty ultimately provide more positive relationship benefits when exercised in the face of relationship conflict. Recent research by Overall, Sibley, and Travaglia (2010), however, suggests that the outcomes of the constructive responses (specifically loyalty) may be more nuanced. In one study, participants recalled instances of relationship

problems in the recent past and how they and their partners responded at the time in terms of exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect behavioral strategies. Whereas voice was consistently associated with positive partner responses and restored intimacy, loyalty responses were not associated with these positive outcomes. Consistent with research by Drigotas et al. (1995), loyal responses by one partner were simply not noticed by the other partner, thereby producing less conflict resolution.

In a second study by Overall et al. (2010), individuals in romantic relationships completed a 10-day diary study in which they recorded all social interactions with their romantic partner, how they behaved and felt during each interaction, and the consequences of their behavior (e.g., whether it was noticed by their partner and how their partner responded in turn). When participants reported engaging in voice behaviors during interactions with their partners, they also reported that their partners were more likely to actively listen to their concerns, and they subsequently felt more valued by their partners. Consistent with Study 1 of this research, results also revealed that engaging in loyalty behaviors can be just as detrimental to the future of the relationship as exit and neglect behaviors. That is, individuals who engaged in loyalty strategies felt neglected by their partner and subsequently reported feeling less connected to their partner and the relationship. The authors rationalized that because loyalty is passive, it is less noticeable to the partner, and consequently the partner is unresponsive and conditions in the relationship remain the same or worsen. In contrast, voice responses consistently led to positive relationship outcomes and increased feelings of intimacy.

It is generally agreed, therefore, that voice responses in conflict situations consistently result in positive relationship outcomes and enhanced feelings of satisfaction and closeness between partners. However, these positive outcomes may not be immediately realized, as highlighted by research by Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, and Sibley (2009). In this research, Overall et al. focused on situations where individuals seek to improve their relationships by trying to change something they do not like about their partner. These conversations can be very tricky, as intimates may become defensive when learning of their partner's desire for them to change, and they may also feel that their partners are rejecting them. Indeed, prior research has demonstrated that relationship satisfaction suffered when partners reported more strenuous efforts to change things about each other that they did not like (Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2006), implying that more active (e.g., voice) attempts by intimates to change each other may in fact be bad for the long-term stability of the relationship.

Nevertheless, what may hurt in the short term may result in long-term gains as partners become acutely aware of each others' needs, wants, and desires. To test this possibility, Overall et al. (2009) videotaped couples while they discussed aspects of each other that they would like to see change. The exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect behavioral strategies enacted by each partner were coded by independent raters, and relationship perceptions were obtained from each partner at 3-month intervals for a

period of 1 year. Consistent with past research (e.g., Overall et al., 2006), the enactment of more active strategies during the discussion (both positive and negative) was viewed by both partners as less successful in promoting the desired change. Instead, the use of more positive passive strategies during the discussion (e.g., loyalty) was perceived as more successful at effecting change. Remarkably, the results completely reversed when analyzing reports obtained over the course of the year. Across time, the use of direct strategies (e.g., voice) produced actual change in the targeted features as reported by both partners. Indirect strategies such as loyalty, in contrast, resulted in absolutely no change over time. It seems, then, that when individuals explicitly express dissatisfaction with their relationship, or ask their partner to change, it may create friction or negative feelings between partners in the short term; however, if the problem is worked through, often via additional voice strategies, the couple may end up being better off and more satisfied over time.

Additional empirical evidence regarding the ineffectiveness of conflict-resolution strategies that do not attempt to seek perspective taking and compromise by both partners has recently been reported by McNulty (2010; see also McNulty, 2008). McNulty focused on the tendency for spouses to quickly forgive each others' transgressions, commonly believed to have long-term positive outcomes for relationships. Forgiveness, however, can result in the failure to adequately discourage a partner from continuing to engage in the offending behavior. In this case, forgiveness in the short term may lead to friction in the long term. Testing this possibility, 135 married couples were recruited to participate in a 7-day diary study. Each day, spouses reported if their partners behaved negatively toward them, if they forgave their partner for their behavior, and if their partner transgressed on following days. Indeed, partners were more likely to continue enacting an offending behavior across the diary period if they had been previously forgiven for enacting the same behavior. McNulty (2010) suggests that forgiveness may have positive short-term benefits for the relationship in that it can prevent further conflict, but ultimately it can result in partners (a) not sharing their true feelings with an offending spouse, and thus (b) removing consequences for the offending spouse that could potentially curb his or her reenacting of these negative behaviors.

Recent research by McNulty and Russell (2010) conceptually replicates Overall et al.'s (2009) regarding the use of voice strategies when dealing with marital conflict. They used one sample of 72 newlywed couples who reported their marital satisfaction up to eight times over the course of 5 years, and a second sample of 135 newlywed couples who reported their marital satisfaction up to three times over the course of 1 year. In an initial laboratory session each spouse was asked to identify an area of difficulty in the marriage, and all couples were videotaped while attempting to resolve the issues raised by both partners (one at a time). The behavior of each spouse was coded by independent raters, with a special emphasis placed on active negative behaviors (e.g., blaming a partner for the problem). When spouses were discussing marital problems that were rated as being fairly minor in severity, marital

satisfaction steadily improved when they were observed to engage in fewer active negative behaviors during the discussion. Strikingly, however, marital satisfaction was most effectively maintained when spouses enacted relatively *more* active negative behaviors when discussing more severe marital problems. This pattern of results is consistent with prior research showing that marital satisfaction maintained or improved over time for spouses who made more internal negative attributions for each others' behavior (e.g., blame the partner, not the external context) when faced with fairly severe marital problems (McNulty, O'Mara, & Karney, 2008). Taken together, the results of these studies show that when spouses are faced with severe marital problems, it is better in the long run to be aware of the problems and to actively discuss them. These direct, albeit negative, interpersonal behaviors can motivate change in the partner and make clear the changes that need to be made.

Conclusions and Future Directions

In romantic relationships it is inevitable that the desires and goals of intimates will be incompatible at times, and pursuing these incompatible goals can cause interpersonal friction. Whether conflict degrades or potentially enhances the quality of the relationship over time largely rests with how partners work together to deal with their competing interests. One theoretical perspective particularly relevant for understanding how partners respond to conflict is interdependence theory, since both partners are involved in a conflict and must consider not only their own but their partner's behavior as well. According to this perspective, the process of accommodation, or the willingness and ability of individuals to inhibit their destructive impulses and instead respond constructively to their partner's concerns or bad behavior, is critical for successful conflict management.

The body of research reviewed in this chapter suggests that voice, actively and constructively expressing dissatisfaction with the intent to improve conditions, is the most effective strategy for handling relationship conflict (particularly for more severe relationship problems), and predicts more positive long-term outcomes for the relationship. Since direct and positive strategies such as voice are detected by the romantic partner and act as an unambiguous means of expressing concerns, they have the ability to diminish problem severity and yield desired change in a way that passive strategies do not. Voice strategies can also promote later relationship satisfaction and commitment as they demonstrate to intimates that they can solve problems effectively and constructively.

Indeed, the use of voice is more likely to convey the importance of the relationship to a partner, as well as commitment to the future of the relationship. In the interest of relationship maintenance and long-term satisfaction, therefore, it seems to be most beneficial to override any initial destructive responses (e.g., exit and neglect) and respond actively and constructively with voice strategies so the conflict is clear

to both partners. Future research involving voice as a positive conflict-resolution strategy is a promising avenue for exploration into relationship approach, development of love and intimacy, relationship maintenance, and attainment of ideal standards. Through voice and other positive conflict strategies couples may understand each other and work together to improve the quality of their relationship.

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