Fall 12-1-2008

Conflict Analysis on Everybody Loves Raymond

Alyssa Fernandez

Nova Southeastern University

Recommended Citation

Running head: CONFLICT ON TELEVISION

Conflict Analysis on *Everybody Loves Raymond*

Alyssa Fernandez

Faculty Advisor: Michael D. Reiter, Ph.D.

Nova Southeastern University

Conflict Analysis on *Everybody Loves Raymond*

Interpersonal conflicts are part of everyday life and can be seen from minor disagreements with friends, families, spouses, and others to major disputes, which may be deciding factors for the future of certain relationships. An interpersonal conflict is a struggle between two people because they have conflicting goals or needs or because of some misunderstanding (Beebe, Beebe, and Redmond, 2005). People experience conflicts or disagreements because their needs, such as the need for power, belonging, and freedom, are not the same; there are not enough resources to meet each individual's goals; or they become too competitive and the goals are no longer the primary issue (Cupach & Canary, 1997). Interpersonal conflict is very complex; it is not simply a minor disagreement that can be resolved quickly. Different people understand and respond to conflict differently, and if problems persist without resolution, conflict will intensify over time. Many scholars have analyzed and categorized conflict into a variety of forms, types, and levels (Beebe, Beebe, and Redmond, 2005). This paper focuses on explaining the breakdown of conflict into different forms, types, and levels involved in an interpersonal conflict. Conflict can be divided into two forms, constructive or destructive, based on what is accomplished at the end of the conflict. Conflict can also be categorized as being a pseduoconflict, simple conflict, and/or ego conflict. Conflict can also be resolved into different levels ranging from one to three, depending on the nature of the conflict. Conflicts have also been found to occur in a common pattern, which includes a source, beginning, middle, end, and aftermath, which is further discussed in this research. This paper later uses this research to analyze an interpersonal conflict observed in an episode of the television show *Everybody Loves Raymond*.

One way conflict is described is by analyzing what is learned and accomplished at the end of the conflict. In doing this, conflict can be broken down into two forms: constructive conflict and destructive conflict (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2005). Constructive conflicts are beneficial to relationships; they help individuals learn more about each other's thoughts and feelings. Constructive conflicts involve people discussing their differences openly, while still allowing a person to feel their values and needs are respected. This form of conflict allows a person to be more flexible in attaining their goals, which shows the other individual that they care for the relationship. A destructive conflict, on the other hand, is a form of conflict where nothing is resolved and no one benefits from the conflict. In this negative form of conflict, an individual tries to save their goals and threatens or attacks another person's goals or beliefs. When a person is vengeful or gets too emotionally involved, they are engaging in a destructive conflict. Individuals may blame the conflict on the other person's personality and inflexibility, rather than concentrating on the issue at hand (Donohue & Kolt, 1992). Overall, constructive conflicts can be viewed as being helpful to a relationship, while destructive provides no benefit whatsoever.

In addition to these two forms of conflict, different types of conflict exist that can more thoroughly analyze the concept. According to Miller and Mark (2005), three types of conflict can be noted: pseudoconflict, simple conflict, and ego conflict. Pseudoconflicts are not major conflicts but rather misunderstandings. People engage in a pseudoconflict when the meaning of a message is misinterpreted. The best way to avoid this type of conflict is to clarify statements that are confusing, observe facial expressions of others to make sure they understand what is being said, and attempt to support the other person when this type of conflict arises.

The next type of conflict is a simple conflict, which is a conflict that initiates from differences between individuals' goals or ideas. People engaged in this type of conflict understand the conflict and the views of the other person; however, they have a different stand on the issue and will not alter their view. Since this type of conflict cannot be avoided due to the inevitable contrasting views between different people, people should focus more on ways to quickly resolve the issue. There are many ways to help resolve this issue such as recognizing the important issues and working to accomplish only those issues at hand, rather than bringing up irrelevant disagreements or ideas. Also, a person should try to find agreement whenever it is available. Also, if necessary, take a break to cool off if the conflict becomes too intense.

The last type of conflict is an ego conflict, which stems from a simple conflict and later drifts into more personal battles. Ego conflicts involve irrelevant and personal attacks, such as name-calling and criticism, toward another individual. Since ego conflict stems from individual differences, it is difficult to avoid. However, by trying to stay on topic, refraining from making personal attacks, and controlling emotions, the intensity of the conflict can be more controllable (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2005). If people could better analyze their conflicts and determine which type of conflict they are engaging in, the conflict would be more understandable and easier to manage.

Lastly, conflict is commonly interpreted by dividing it into different levels. For example, Braiker and Kelley (1997) argued that conflict exists at three distinct levels. Level one involves predicaments pertaining to specific behaviors. A conflict concerning which television show to watch would be a level one conflict. A level two conflict, on the other hand, deals with issues about relational norms and roles. These conflicts usually involve disagreements between partners about specific roles or what is expected in the relationship. An example of this conflict would be

a disagreement between a married couple about their roles regarding who should cook and who should clean. Finally, a level three conflict pertains to individual characteristics and attitudes. These conflicts deal more with problems a person has with their partner's personality or values. An example of a third level conflict would be having severe jealousy of a partner or having religious differences (Cupach & Canary, 1997). Although most conflicts exhibit either level one, two, or three, there are times during the course of a conflict in which multiple levels may occur. By defining and studying conflict, people can learn more about themselves and others and learn how to avoid, manage, and resolve the conflicts they are frequently faced with in life.

It is important to notice how most relational disagreements follow a certain pattern of development. Most conflicts have a source, beginning, middle, end, and aftermath (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2005). The source, or prior conditions, is the first stage of conflict development, which begins when a person becomes attentive to differences between him or herself and another person. In many interpersonal relationships, potential sources of conflict stay below the surface until they cannot be kept in any longer or multiple issues arise that are relevant to the source (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2005). Many scholars have determined a commonality between the sources of conflict and categorized them into general categories. Many sources of conflict are common amongst people. Kurdek, as described in Cupach and Canary (1997), explained that there are six general areas of conflict. Kurdek surveyed more than 200 random couples to determine how regularly they argue about twenty issues. The results found that most of the couples had similar arguments concerning power, social issues, personal flaws, distrust, intimacy, and personal distance. He also found that most partners' relational satisfaction was severely negatively impacted due to these types of conflicts. The sources of conflict concerning power and intimacy were found to have caused the most distress and lead to the destruction of

many relationships many relationships to end in divorce (Cupach & Canary, 1997). Overall, these themes are all common sources in interpersonal relationships and are the trigger to the formation of a complex conflict.

After some time, the beginning, or frustration awareness stage, of the conflict begins to take shape. In this stage, the person becomes conscious of what really happened and that it is problematic. The person is not content with what occurred or is occurring because the other person may be hindering their goal. At this point, the person begins to get frustrated and bothered by the other person (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2005). The person has the choice to forget about the problem and relapse into a no-conflict state or progress with the conflict and confront the person. However, should a person really confront another individual? Is confrontation better than avoidance? The answer to both these questions is "yes." Although the decision to confront someone about an issue is personal and very complex, it seems safer to confront someone than to avoid the situation entirely. Marital communication researchers such as Gottman, Noller, Sillars, and Wilmot have performed various studies on the effectiveness of confrontation and found that happily married couples confront their problems, while couples with severe marital problems avoid confrontation (Donohue & Kolt, 1992). It is apparent that conversing and listening to each other about concerns or disagreements that the other has allows one to negotiate and better understand the other person's perspectives. Confrontation will, in most cases, help relationships, in which the members involved value their connection and are eager to work for it.

If the decision is made to confront the other person, then the frustration stage has transformed into the middle of the conflict, or the active conflict stage. The active conflict stage begins when the person has revealed their frustration to others. The person tells the other individual what happened and how they feel about it. Feelings can be revealed both verbally and

nonverbally (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2005). When confronting the other individual, the person may talk to them and express their feelings in words. Verbal remarks can be positive in a conflict by giving supportive and conciliatory statements. On the other hand, verbal remarks can also be very negative such as criticism, demands, and threats. It is important in conflicts to try to avoid making negative remarks and if necessary, take time to cool off before engaging in further confrontation. Engaging in conflict with a negative verbal connotation will make the other individual more defensive, and the conflict will simply continue to escalate. However, because by itself verbal content can be very vague at times, nonverbal cues are also an important factor in expressing how a person feels (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995). Nonverbal cues, usually made unconsciously, tend to complement verbal messages. For example, if a person engaged in a conflict raises their voice, moves in an intimidating way closer to the other individual, or clenches their fists, then these nonverbal cues would make others think the person is angry. Similarly, if a person rolls their eyes and moves one side of their mouth laterally while saying an ambiguous verbal comment such as "I doubt that," then someone observing may assume the person is exhibiting some kind of disapproval or contempt towards the other person (Cupach & Canary, 1997). Both verbal and nonverbal cues are useful tools when expressing feelings to others.

After pursuing and completely discussing the issues at hand, the resolution stage may begin. In this stage, some sort of agreement is achieved between the two parties. Many styles and approaches can be taken to try to resolve the issue. Scholars have distinguished five conflict management styles that may be observed during a conflict (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2005). The first style is avoidance, which is where a person does not want anything to do with the conflict and wishes the conflict would go away by itself. This approach is often called the lose-

lose approach because that person is not cooperating and nothing is being achieved. Another style is accommodation, which is when one person gets their wants fulfilled, but the other does not. People who usually accommodate do so because they do not want to make a scene, are seeking approval, care more about the other person's needs, or fear rejection. Therefore, they are basically meeting the demands of the other person. The next style is a competitive style where a person wants to win at the expense of the other person. This is a very selfish approach, since the individual cares only about their needs getting met. This is referred to as a win-lose approach since one person succeeds over the other. A compromising style is a style where both parties do not get all their wants met, but will at least get some. This style shows more of a sense of equality as the parties care for each other and their needs. Lastly, collaboration is the approach where each person wins. People view the conflict more as a set of problems and instead of competing to get their needs met, they resolve the issue so that everyone is content (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2005). These styles are all different approaches to resolving and dealing with conflict. Although some of these approaches seem better than others, everyone approaches conflicts differently, and they are each resolved differently.

Finally, the last stage in the conflict process is the aftermath or follow-up stage. After a conflict, lingering effects from the conflict may occur. Therefore, at this stage, people examine their feelings and check with each other to confirm that both are satisfied with the resolution and what was accomplished (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2005). According to Kelly, Huston, and Cate (as presented in Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995), an increase in premarital conflict predicted later increased levels of marital conflict. Also, with higher levels of premarital conflict, marital satisfaction, especially for women, was negatively affected (Canary, Cupach, & Messman, 1995). Satisfaction and acceptance of resolutions reached are very important in a

relationship. If lingering problems or dissatisfaction persists, then the conflict has not been completely resolved and still exists. However, the conflict remains in a passive state, rather than the active state it was before. If the problem persists within the person, then they are just regressing back to the beginning stage of conflict, the frustration awareness stage. If some other source or issue triggers this stage, then the frustration awareness stage may transform into an active conflict again, and the conflict will then be repeated.

When examining these stages more closely it is important to notice the activity at each phase and how the conflict grows and develops, which helps better understand and more efficiently manage the conflict. These stages of conflict and the different levels and types of conflict can be seen clearly in the episode "The Car" from the television show *Everybody Loves Raymond*. This show concerns a family consisting of a husband, Ray, and wife, Debra, who live together with their three children. Ray's parents, Frank and Marie, and his brother, Robert, live across the street from them. They are a typical American family who demonstrate similar conflicts people have in everyday life. In this episode, Frank tells Ray and Debra that he is selling his 1972 Plymouth Valiant, and Ray said he wants it because he has so many childhood memories of that car. However, Debra wants to save up for a minivan rather than buying the Valiant. This difference in views is the source of the conflict. Debra realizes that there are differing views on the issue and begins to get frustrated, which initiates the next stage of the conflict known as frustration awareness. Next, the active conflict stage begins when Debra starts to make nonverbal cues of frustration, such as putting her arms on her hips, sighing, and looking at Ray. When Ray tells his father that they may be interested in buying the car, Debra quickly responds to him saying "Oh Ray, C'mon, we were thinking of saving up to get a minivan, not a 1972 Valient" (Storm, 2004). Ray ignores Debra and continues to say that he will give Frank

money for the car. Debra abruptly interrupts and says that they do not want the car, which causes Ray to sigh and shake his head at her in disagreement. When Ray turns and urges that while they're saving up for the minivan, she can use the car to run errands, the resolution stage begins. He is trying to propose a solution, which is buying the car, and convincing her that it will be more beneficial to have it. Ray's resolution style is to compromise. He tries to resolve the conflict in a way that he can keep the car, since he really wants it, by trying to convince Debra that it will be very useful. He shows that it will benefit them equally and, eventually, they will also be able to buy the minivan Debra wants. Debra does not really respond to what he says and, rather, begins to support Ray's decision in buying the car. Ray observes this: "So, you do want the car," he states. She replies, "No, I don't want the car, but if we have to get it I want a good deal on it" (Storm, 2004). In the end, they agree on the issue and decide to buy the car. Debra's actions are accommodating to what Ray wanted. She probably does not want to experience a confrontation in front of his parents so she concurs with Ray's resolution, to buy the car. The conflict between Ray and Debra experiences the aftermath or follow up stage when Debra and Ray show each other affection and satisfaction. By hugging and kissing each other, they show that they do not have any lingering feelings. When analyzing the type of conflict that occurs between Debra and Ray, it was concluded that a simple conflict occurs between the couple. The disagreement is not due to miscommunication or a misinterpretation of a message. Furthermore, the conflict is not an ego conflict because the disagreement does not drift into a more personal battle involving personal attacks (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2005). Overall, the conflict occurring between Ray and Debra is a simple conflict because they have differing views about the issue at hand and neither of them will initially alter from their views (Storm, 2004).

Later in the episode, Debra is driving the Valiant and the car breaks down. This is the source for the next conflict; Debra realizes that she wants to get rid of the car, and she knows Ray does not. This triggers her frustration awareness stage, and she begins to get more frustrated about the issue and with Ray. When she gets home later on that day, she confronts Ray about the car, thus moving the conflict into the active conflict stage. She says sarcastically, "Thank you very much Ray for that wonderful car. It broke down" (Storm, 2004). He asks her what she did to it, and she sarcastically replies that she just tried to drive it. At this point her nonverbal cues begin to show as she makes sarcastic faces, raises her voice, and waves her hands up and down, while describing how frustrating her day was with the car. Her nonverbal cues show that she is getting angry. Ray tells her that she probably flooded the engine, and this causes her to get angry and defensive. She begins to criticize the car and call it names. She later argues with Ray that since he is the commuter, he gets to drive the good car, and since she is the house wife, she gets to drive the "the bucket of bolts." She insinuates that he always gets the better things, since he works. Later, she also expresses a similar personal statement when Ray says to her that he can fix the car. She comes back with a sarcastic remark, insinuating that he cannot fix simple things. The responses made by Debra escalate the conflict into an ego conflict because she is personally attacking Ray. She is not focusing on the issue at hand, but is rather bringing up irrelevant material by criticizing him, which causes him to become defensive and intensify the argument. Next, the conflict progresses to the resolution stage when she tells him that she wants to get rid of the car, and he argues that they should keep it. Ray proposes to simply fix the car; however, Debra does not agree with him. She tells him to talk to his parents about returning the car to them. He responds by answering he will not ask his parents to take it back because it would be wrong and ungrateful. Debra then asks if he is going to do anything, and he replies that he will

not do anything. This is how the conflict is resolved. They agree to not sell or return the car, and Ray compromises that next time they would not buy a car from his parents. However, Debra still seems unhappy about the decision made. She seems to accommodate again to what he wants because she does not want to continue to argue with him. The aftermath or follow up stage between the couple left Debra still unhappy. However, Ray never finds out because he does not confront and confirm with her that everything is resolved. Therefore, this forces Debra back into a frustration awareness stage (Storm, 2004).

Toward the end of the episode, Debra finds out from Ray's brother that the reason Ray does not want to sell the car is because that car is where Ray first got lucky. Debra, still in the frustration stage because she was unhappy about the resolution of the last conflict, returns home and releases all her frustration on Ray. She engages again in active conflict and confronts him about the issues she has with the car. She expresses that it is disgusting that he wants to keep the car because of those inappropriate memories and that he is making her drive it. Ray, however, is not affected by what she expresses and still does not wish to get rid of the car. They again have differing views about the issue, and they take time to think of a resolution. Unlike the other conflicts engaged in earlier in the episode, Debra refuses to avoid the issue and accommodate Ray. She uses a more competitive resolution style, in which she wants to win the argument and get only her needs met. In the end, Ray accommodates to Debra's needs and tells her that he is going to sell the car, which is the final resolution stage. He tells her that he loves her and her happiness is more important to him than anything. She is happy and agrees, and they resolve the complex conflict. The end of the conflict continues through an aftermath stage as they are affectionate with each other and speak openly, demonstrating to each other that they are content

with the outcome. In the end, they confirm with each other that they are satisfied with the resolution (Storm, 2004).

Overall, this episode of *Everybody Loves Raymond* provides a perfect example of an interpersonal conflict. The first conflict observed is a simple conflict because of differing views about whether to buy the valiant or not. However, the second conflict in the episode escalates from a simple conflict to an ego conflict when Debra begins to use personal attacks on Ray. In both conflicts, it appears to be a level one conflict in that it pertains more to a predicament involving a specific behavior of whether to keep the car or not. Although they have differing views on the issue, both conflicts are more constructive than destructive. Ray and Debra learn about each other's thoughts and feelings on the issues and are each flexible in attaining their goals because they care for each other. This conflict resembles many common conflicts. Being able to define and describe conflict is important and necessary when trying to analyze and evaluate an issue. The ability to define and describe conflicts allows an individual to have a thorough understanding of the conflict at hand, thereby, allowing them to approach the conflict in a more productive way. Furthermore, understanding the different levels, forms, types, and common patterns of interpersonal conflict makes it easier to avoid and manage conflict. The breakdown of a conflict into its various components enables an individual to observe the conflict more clearly and to potentially take precautionary measures in order to prevent the conflict from escalating into a destructive conflict that may negatively affect a relationship.

References

Beebe, S., Beebe, S., & Redmond, M. (2005). *Interpersonal communication: Relating to others*.

Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

Canary, D., Cupach, W., & Messman, S. (1995). *Relationship conflict*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE

Publications, Inc.

Cupach, W., & Canary, D. (1997). *Competence in interpersonal conflict*.New York: McGraw-

Hill Companies, Inc.

Donohue, W., & Kolt, R. (1992). *Managing interpersonal confict*.Newbury Park: SAGE

Publications, Inc.

Storm, H. (Director). (1997). *The Car* [Television series episode]. In *Everybody Loves Raymond*.

Hollywood: Home Box Office.