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Abstract

Conflict is an inevitable process in relationships. Effective strategies must be used to manage conflict accordingly. If one is to understand how to incorporate effective strategies when dealing with conflict, the emotional experience related to conflict must be understood. The expression of anger is the emotion most associated with conflict; therefore, anger is an important emotion in the assessment of conflict. Anger is associated with arousal that may be traced to have its roots in the evolution of humankind. The emotion of anger is in part biological which links it to dispositional properties and to another extent largely communicative as it has expressive properties. From a communication perspective, fight and flight responses can be modified to contribute to more productive forms of conflict management. This paper argues that avoidance and silence are strategies that are viewed negatively in Western Cultures; however, these strategies can in fact be effective strategies in promoting peace in relationships when conflict arises. *Peace and Conflict Studies* - 85

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THE ROLE OF SILENCE AND AVOIDANCE IN INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

Alexia Georgakopoulos

Abstract

Conflict is an inevitable process in relationships. Effective strategies must be used to manage conflict accordingly. If one is to understand how to incorporate effective strategies when dealing with conflict, the emotional experience related to conflict must be understood. The expression of anger is the emotion most associated with conflict; therefore, anger is an important emotion in the assessment of conflict. Anger is associated with arousal that may be traced to have its roots in the evolution of humankind. The emotion of anger is in part biological which links it to dispositional properties and to another extent largely communicative as it has expressive properties. From a communication perspective, fight and flight responses can be modified to contribute to more productive forms of conflict management. This paper argues that avoidance and silence are strategies that are viewed negatively in Western Cultures; however, these strategies can in fact be effective strategies in promoting peace in relationships when conflict arises.

Conflict is a natural phenomenon that cannot be exempt from relationships. Conflict is ever present, especially between intimates. As much as intimates may hope to be free from conflict and discord, they are more prone to conflict due to the frequency of their interactions and the types of interactions they are immersed in on a daily basis. What is meant by conflict between people in relationships? Essentially “conflict occurs in situations in which (1) the people are interdependent; (2) the people perceive that they seek different outcomes or they favor different means to the same ends; and/or (3) the people perceive that the other is interfering with their pursuit of scarce rewards or resources (such as money, time, affection, status, power, etc.)” (Lulofs, 1994, p. 12). The experience of conflict often is accompanied with negative emotions that lead to an escalation of negative conflict communication behaviors, which in turn may contribute to harming the intimacy in relationships. Because conflict is a ubiquitous and inevitable phenomenon, it is important to analyze how people can employ appropriate and effective strategies to make communication during conflict more productive in nature. It has been demonstrated that the presence of conflict between intimates does not determine the quality of those relationships; rather, how the couple manages conflict situations determines the relational quality (Comstock and Strzyzewski, 1990). Therefore, appropriate and effective strategies and styles of conflict are important to investigate.

The following paper will examine the role of silence and avoidance as competent communicative strategies to employ when conflict is involved with the emotional experience

of anger. Past research (Coombs & Avrunin, 1988) focused more on how conflict is characterized, but neglected to see conflict as an emotional experience most often linked to anger and aggression. Although, many conflict scholars (Cahn, 1992) characterized silencing tactics and avoidance tactics as dysfunctional and negative approaches, the present literature goes counter-intuitive to this approach by suggesting that silence and avoidance may be the most competent tactics to incorporate to prevent the escalation of conflict. Travis (1984) reviewed research on anger and found that "many studies indicate a host of negative aspects of expressing anger, including miscommunication with the target of one's anger; emotional distance as a person angry with you; rehearsal of grievances; acquiring a hostile disposition; angry habits; making a bad situation worse, losing self-esteem, respect of others, 'anti-catharsis'; raising blood pressure, signs of tension; feeling angrier" (p. 171-172). Likewise, Makepeace (1986) observed that intense feelings of anger correlate strongly with the use of violence for both men and women. For men, violence is expressed most commonly as a result of experiencing intense anger. In fact, intense anger represents the number one motive regarding the use of violence for men. For women, intense anger represents a strong motive for the use of violence second only after self-defense (Makepeace, 1986).

In light of the findings that young couples use more engagement styles when dealing with conflict (Zietlow & Sillars, 1988), and that the divorce rate is increasing rapidly especially within the first four years of marriage, more effective approaches to dealing with conflict are necessary. Generalized learned responses elicited during conflict such as being direct, confrontational and engaging may be ineffective types of programmed behaviors. Traditionally, research on conflict suggests, "the only good conflict is a resolved conflict," (Cahn, 1992, p. 23); however, it follows from these analyses that the best conflict is the one that is avoided, prevented, and/or pacified. This is especially the case when anger and aggression may be experienced as a result of conflict. Accordingly, the experience and expression of anger will be a focus of this paper so that alternative strategies to direct communication can be encouraged.

Insight into the emotion of anger is especially important because anger is one of the most frequently experienced emotions (Averill, 1993) along with being the emotion most directly associated with conflict (Cahn, 1992) and aggression (Canary, Spitzberg, & Semic, 1998). When the emotional experience of anger is analyzed, one may better understand why silence and avoidance may be effective survival strategies that should be employed by intimates.

The Emotion of Anger

What is known about anger is that it is a universal experience that pervaded interactions in ancient times and crosses all cultural boundaries in contemporary times (Zillmann, 1998). Although the experience of anger is universal, the expression is different across people and contexts depending on the display rules that exist. However, a commonality across cultural contexts is that, "anger... appears to have a dispositional

component that (a) favors action over inaction and that (b) is directed at the agents deemed responsible for the anger experience” (Zillmann, 1998, p. 96). Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, anger is conceptualized as “the noxious experience of annoyance for which someone or something is held accountable and that inspires hostile and aggressive dispositions and actions toward the instigating agents or conditions” (Zillmann, 1998, p. 95). Anger, then, appears to operate on both experiential and response levels. Anger is induced when there is a real or imaged threat to one’s physical, social or psychological well-being (Zillmann, 1998). Essentially, conflict occurs for the same reasons given for anger, which makes the two closely intertwined. Conflict and anger both involve physiological arousal and agitation; therefore, physiological processes underlying the emotion of anger are important to study in relation to conflict.

Evolution of Anger

In the study of medicine, the approach of treating the root of the problem is of most importance; however, many remedies only treat symptoms allowing the root of the ailment to persist. Also in the study of conflict, conflict scholars neglect to view the roots of conflict as it relates to the emotional experience of anger. In order to have a holistic understanding of the experience of anger, one must analyze its evolutionary roots. Anger that prompts physiological arousal is thought to have been naturally selected by our ancestors as a survival strategy. Therefore, anger as an emotion is thought to have its roots in human evolution (Zillmann, 1998). For our early ancestors there were great advantages in reacting to arousal by either fight or flight types of responses. The fight-flight responses were biologically built into humans to keep them alive by allowing them to thwart off danger. Today the existence of the fight-flight responses still exists, but they are not functional expressions in their archaic raw form. Today fighting with an intimate constitutes as physical abuse and flight responses constitute as relational separation. Both tactics seem primitive and maladaptive, yet they are still evidenced in a large percentage of intimates. As products of our ancestors, humans must evaluate how to incorporate the fight-flight reaction in more productive ways during conflict situations. Most discussions of conflict, underscore strategies for alleviating anger or conflict without accessing “why” the particular strategy will be effective. In essence, much discussion revolving around how to maintain peace in conflict negotiation involve idealistic problem-solving tactics—that even the most learned person would have a difficult time following during conflict situations where negative emotions are being experienced. To understand conflict and the emotion of anger, a framework for understanding anger was established by Zillmann’s notion of emotion theory (1998, p. 99).

In emotion theory, the experience of anger is thought to be controlled by three basic interdependent response components. First, there is a dispositional component that directs overt behavior. This component integrates reflexive, acquired, and planned motor reactions. At the elementary level are reactions such as raising the arms to cover the face in order to protect it against rapidly approaching objects... Second, an excitatory component exists that serves the

energization of the dispositionally guided behavior. Third, and experiential component functions as a monitor of overt action. Higher brain processes are enlisted to plan the expression of affect and the performance of actions, to assess their appropriateness and effectiveness during execution, and to redirect or terminate the actions if necessary. This component is thus burdened with the correction of behavior that is initially controlled by more elementary or basal processes.

Essentially no conflict situation that involves the emotion of anger can be understood without viewing the aforementioned biological components involved with the emotion of anger. During conflict situations where anger is evidenced, the first two reactions toward conflict relate to biological functions that largely elude volitional control. Schwarz (2002) suggested these responses while automatic are imprecise since the brain is acting on "limited information and without any confirmation" (p. 248). However, Schwarz (2002) supported the role of emotions in decision making by suggesting that emotions joined with cognitions allow people to "respond more effectively in a range of situations" (p. 258). It is at the experiential level, that people can be cognizant of what communication strategies may be most appropriate and effective given the situation. The experiential level allows for more deliberation because brain functions from the neocortex which allows more motor control. However, the dispositional and excitatory components are driven by the limbic system, which are included in ancient structures of the brain. The adrenocortical system is activated during anger, which prompts the sympathetic nervous system into a state of increased action readiness. These processes are relatively automatic. The time that the excitatory reactions continue to be stimulated has a strong bearing on the escalation of anger. Zillmann (1998, p. 100) explains it best when he characterizes how the escalation of conflict occurs as the following:

Escalating conflict can be conceptualized as a sequence of provocations, each triggering an excitatory reaction that materializes quickly and that dissipates slowly. If a second sympathetic reaction occurs before the first has dissipated, the second reaction combines with the tail end of the first. Moreover, if a third reaction occurs before the second and first reactions have dissipated, this third reaction combines with the tail ends of both earlier reactions. From this follows the principle that any excitatory reaction to provocation late in the escalation process rides the tails of all earlier excitatory reactions. It also follows that the combination of residual sympathetic excitation from earlier provocations with excitation in response to a subsequent provocation will produce anger and angry aggression of an intensity that appears to be incommensurate with the subsequent provocation.

From the aforementioned discussion, de-escalating strategies of conflict become very important to alleviate the cycle of anger from going out of control. Because the

human is a biological animal, s/he can't prevent from experiencing biological reactions that are innately programmed, but s/he can modify the expressions directed toward the target of anger. Silence and avoidance tactics function effectively when incorporated during a conflict period where more than one provocation may occur to overstimulate the sympathetic nervous system cycle. After one excitatory reaction materializes, it becomes crucial to stabilize the person homeostasis to their earlier parasympathetic state, which is characterized by the termination of glucocorticoids that generate explosions of energy during stressful situations.

Although conflict styles such as compromising, collaborating, and accommodating may be healthy approaches in conflict management, they are not helpful during the time of excitatory escalation in anger. The only conflict approach prescribed during this period is silence and avoidance.

Silence and Avoidance During Conflict

In a society that prizes verbal communication as the U.S. (Hall, 1976), it is no wonder why conflict situations are commonly flooded with words immediately during a conflict. Silence in the West is considered a passive response, but is it a myth to consider it a passive strategy? In Eastern thought, silence is tied to action and is considered a powerful experience.

To demonstrate this Hall (1976) characterizes how intimates differ in their use of silence and avoidance across cultures by differentiating cultures in terms of the way their members communicate. Hall articulated the difference between low and high-context cultures in the following passage:

People raised in high-context systems expect more of others than do the participants in low-context systems. When talking about something that they have on their minds, a high-context individual will expect his [her] interlocutor to know what's bothering him [or her], so that he [or she] doesn't have to be specific. The result is that he [or she] will talk around and around the point, in effect putting all the pieces in place except the crucial one. Placing it properly—this keystone—is the role of his [or her] interlocutor. (Hall, 1976, p. 98)

Thus, the unstated message is in fact a powerful message for members in high context cultures. Gudykunst and Kim (1984) suggested that members of high-context cultures are less reliant on explicit or oral communication; rather, high-context cultures have a communication repertoire that consists of implicit or non-oral means of communication. Furthermore, research by Singelis (1994) also makes reference to distinctions in high-context and low-context cultures to the extent that various construals of self are associated with a predominant style of encoding and decoding. Singelis (1994) posited that there are two types of self, an interdependent self that is observed in collective societies such as Asian and an independent self -construal that is observed in Western societies. Although Singelis (1994) contended that both types of self can be observed in a culture, predominant patterns are evidenced. The interdependent self communicates in an indirect manner while directing

attention to others' internal state of affairs such as unspoken cognitions and affective states. The unique style of decoding underlying emotions and attitudes is compared to "reading other's minds" (Singelis, 1994, p. 581).

The distinction between high and low context cultures, establishes that the use of silence and avoidance are learned strategies that derive from socialization and cultural values. Anyone who is vigilant of Eastern values will note that there is a tremendous value placed on harmony, balance, and peace. The Eastern perspective emphasizes the use of silence in order to maintain peace and harmony. Considering that Eastern philosophy dates back to 500 BC and that people from this perspective still follow its tenets—that teach how to foster an environment that engenders peace—the tenets of this philosophy should be important for individuals in contemporary relationships who desire more harmonious interactions.

To a lesser extent, studies in the West have shown that silence can be an effective tactic to incorporate especially during conflicts where anger is experienced. Research by Sillars, Pike, Jones, and Redmon (1985) provided support for avoidance strategies in relationships by suggesting that avoidance behaviors may enhance relationships and contribute to marital satisfaction. Other research has suggested avoidance tactics are crucial during conflict situations when the relationship is not stable or the issue can't be resolved productively (Cahn, 1992). According to Saville-Troike (1985) "the significance of silence can usually be interpreted only in relation to sound" (p. 3). This is especially true when one weighs the cost of being verbal during anger and the repercussions it has in contrast to being silent. Phillips (2001) noted that "intensive listening is a profound communication of respect. And respect is the cornerstone of peacemaking" (p. 38). Listening, like silence may not include verbal communication, but can be far more effective in enriching and maintaining relationships with others.

Learning effective strategies even unpopular ones such as avoidance may contribute to bypassing some types of conflict situations all together and preventing other conflicts from escalating. The notion of silence as a passive strategy that is self-oriented should be considered a myth. Rather, silence should be viewed as a conflict strategy that shows concern for the other as the Eastern perspective suggests. The types of strategies involved avoidance that may promote peace include person interrupting, topic shifting, topic avoiding, external attributing, and person avoiding. Social exchange theory may be helpful in determining when the aforementioned strategies may be used in a positive manner. This theory is based on an economic model of human behavior (Adams, 1965; Messick & Cook, 1983; Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). This theory assumes that just as a person's behavior in the marketplace is motivated by the desire to maximize profits and minimize losses, these same motives determine behavior in social relationships (Blau, 1964; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

Conflict Management

The proceeding examples will illustrate basic types of messages that may communicate effective peace building strategies. Clearly, people in conflict should be mindful of the costs and benefits involved in engaging in particular conflicts while also weighing the costs and benefits that may derive from utilizing the strategies listed below. In brief, the following strategies should be employed when the benefits to the relationship outweigh costs to the relationship.

Interrupting behavior:

Sonia: I want to discuss how you flirted with that waitress...

George: (interrupting): Sweetheart, I am so hungry right now, I want to enjoy my food without talking about irrelevant people. Please let's just enjoy each other's company and enjoy our food.

When using this strategy, a person should terminate a potential conflict before it escalates. Perhaps in this example, discussions of jealousy evoke past negative emotional responses. The couple may have had countless discussions about the issue without success in the past. In this case, it may be better for the couple to avoid revisiting this conflict since past experiences with this topic trigger negative emotional responses. Interrupting behavior can be effective when residual conflicts arise. In brief, a cost-benefit analysis in this case may suggest that communication about the issue will be more costly than beneficial; therefore, the couple may determine that communication about the issue is unwise as it will most likely add fuel to the fire and worsen the conflict. Interrupting behavior serves to disarm a potentially explosive conflict from occurring.

Topic shifting:

Sonia: We have spent enough time and energy on this topic. We know that we disagree so let's talk about something more important like what we are going to do on our vacation next week.

Topic shifting can ameliorate potentially destructive expressions of anger such as physical attack and verbal denunciation by terminating a conflict before it begins. Like interrupting behaviors, topic shifting takes the focus away from a potential conflict. In this example, the emphasis is placed on another topic that is important. This avoidance-relevant response is helpful because it preoccupies intimates with a new topic.

Avoiding the topic:

George: We worked very hard today and we both need some well deserved rest, so let's not talk about my in-laws right now.

When intimates appropriately avoid sensitive topics, they are using preemptive strategies in diplomacy in their relationships. In constructive avoidance, parties express concern for self as well as for the other when they convey their need to avoid a sensitive topic. In contrast during destructive avoidance, a relational partner may avoid a topic for self-

serving purposes. This expression can be negative as it may communicate a passive aggressive response to the relational partner.

Attribution appraisals:

Sonia: I haven't been getting good sleep lately, so its best we don't talk about saving money because I am overly sensitive that you might take my reaction personally.

George: Ok, I realize you do need your rest, but we really should talk about it when you are not so tired from work because this topic is important for us both.

In this example, the intimates accurately recognize external circumstances that may hinder their judgments. It should be noted, however, that the parties can address the topic of interest at a later time when physical, physiological, and/or psychological external barrier are removed. Attribution appraisals are powerful messages in conveying validation and confirmation to a relational partner, as they communicate concern for the other when negative behaviors are attributed to an external locus of control rather than internal locus of control. Constructive attribution appraisals can be empowering because they communicate direct and genuine expressions of concern for the other. External situations are in flux thus people are expected to change as a result of their environment. In contrast, destructive attribution appraisals can destroy healthy self-images and relationships. For example, destructive attribution appraisals place the locus of control internally rather than externally when a negative behavior is observed. In the example above, George could have used a negative attribution appraisal such as "Sonia you are lazy or passive...that is why you don't spend time talking about our financial situation." Sonia may then consistently avoid financial discussions because of George's negative perceptions of her in relation to this topic. As the example indicates, negative internal attributions can be harmful because they are based on trait characteristics that are relatively consistent and impossible to change.

Avoiding:

Sonia: I am so angry right now that I can't think straight. It's best that we don't talk now because I need some fresh air.

George: I know I made you angry. Just relax now; we will talk about it later when you are calmer.

It is constructive to avoid a person and/or discussions when emotions are intense. In this example the couple validates their inability to discuss the issue at hand rationally due to emotional flooding and intense anger. When individuals develop a better understanding of how emotions like anger function during conflict, they will better appreciate alternative strategies for coping during conflict episodes.

Summary

Pursuing some types of conflicts may result in negative outcomes, including escalatory conflict, behavioral altercations, verbal denigrations, and anger expressions. However, strategic orientations that include more adaptive types of action programs may be more beneficial than enlisting automatic responses during conflict. People who employ alternative communicative orientations such as silence and avoidance may be considered more competent by their partners compared to individuals who engage in aggressive responses.

According to the components involved in the experience of anger, people have control to modify behavior at the experiential level, thus people can incorporate silence and avoidance as strategies that promote peace in their relationships. Cultural dictates emphasizing confrontational and engagement approaches to conflict management in the West may not be as healthy as we have come to learn, especially given the research reviewed earlier on the biological experience of anger. But before people can effectively enact strategic communicative orientations such as silence and avoidance they need to understand what their prototypical reactions are when they experience anger, while also re-evaluate how they feel about avoidance strategies if they view these negatively.

Endnote:

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the National Communication Association Meeting in Chicago, IL November 1999.

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