

Future Directions

Future Directions in the Study of Close Relationships: Conflict Is Bad (Except When It's Not)

Brett Laursen and Christopher A. Hafen, *Florida Atlantic University*

Abstract

Beneficial and detrimental correlates of interpersonal disagreement have been postulated and documented. The conclusion: conflict is both bad and good. The evidence for these paradoxical effects is summarized. In this article, we argue that the consequences of conflict for individuals depend on its frequency, the way in which it is managed, and the quality of the relationship in which it arises. Non-linear patterns of association are hypothesized such that constructive conflicts, particularly those arising in supportive relationships, should (up to a limit) predict more beneficial and fewer detrimental outcomes. In contrast, coercive conflicts, particularly those arising in unsupportive relationships, should predict more adverse and fewer favorable outcomes.

Keywords: conflict; adjustment; peers/peer relations; parent-child relations

Introduction

Interpersonal conflict can be unpleasant. For most people, these are sufficient grounds for avoiding it, but there are other reasons to consider. Interpersonal conflict is generally assumed to have deleterious consequences. The appropriate analogy is elusive. Is conflict like elevator music, a generally benign aggravation that must be endured to attain a goal? Is conflict like spinach, a distasteful component of healthy living? Is conflict like influenza, a malady that delivers discomfort to most and devastation to a few? There are no good answers to these questions. In this article, we will discuss the correlates of interpersonal conflict and the circumstances in which they vary. We argue that conflict is neither inherently good nor inherently bad for individuals. Instead, the consequences of conflict depend on its frequency, the way in which it is managed, and the quality of the relationship in which it arises.

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Correspondence should be addressed to Brett Laursen, Department of Psychology, Florida Atlantic University, 2912 College Avenue, Fort Lauderdale FL 33314 USA. Email: laursen@fau.edu

Defining Conflict

Characteristics of conflict have been described in detail elsewhere (see Laursen & Pursell, 2009). For purposes of this essay, we note that conflict entails disagreement, which is manifest in incompatible or opposing behaviors or views. Conflict is distinct from related constructs such as aggression, dominance, competition, and anger; any of these may arise during a conflict, but they are neither necessary nor defining features (Shantz, 1987). A conflict has been likened to a play or novel (Laursen & Collins, 1994). There is a protagonist and an antagonist (conflict participants), a theme (conflict topic), a complication (initial opposition), rising action (conflict behaviors), climax or crisis (conflict resolution), and denouement (conflict outcome). These discrete components combine to form a coherent whole. Plots unfold according to a prescribed sequence and so do conflicts. Three prevalent patterns have been identified (Adams & Laursen, 2001): (1) coercive conflicts, which include negative affect, coercive tactics, power assertive resolutions, and unequal or unfavorable outcomes; (2) constructive conflicts, which include neutral or positive affect, co-operative tactics, negotiated resolutions, and equal or favorable outcomes; and (3) unresolved conflicts, which vary in terms of affect and tactics but are similar in that they involve disengagement without a clear resolution or outcome.

The Consequences of Conflict

It is important to distinguish the consequences of conflict for individuals from its consequences for relationships. The primary focus of this essay is the impact of conflict on individual adjustment. But we note in passing that conflict has important repercussions for relationships, and these relationship correlates have implications for understanding the impact of conflict on individuals. Conflict undermines the quality of voluntary affiliations (such as those with friends and romantic partners) and threatens their stability. Conflict may not be a direct threat to the stability of obligatory relationships (such as family relationships), but it is an important component of perceived relationship quality.

Most theories hold that conflict has adverse consequences for individual adjustment, but others have argued that important benefits also accrue from disagreement. There is evidence to support each view.

Conflict Costs

Theories describing detrimental aspects of conflict abound. Conflict, particularly coercive conflict, is stressful. Negative affect is the primary source of stress arising from conflict; anger activates a flight or fight response which, among other things, may result in an extended period of elevated blood pressure (Buerki & Adler, 2005). Chronic conflict may also provoke apprehension and anxiety, which can trigger a host of potentially debilitating physiological reactions (Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996).

Conflict may foster rumination, which, together with anger and anxiety, elevates risks for depression and affective disorders (Gil-Rivas, Greenberger, Chen, & Lopez-Lena, 2003). Affective arousal also interferes with information processing abilities (Chartrand, van Baaren, & Bargh, 2006). The mental and physiological states that anticipate or follow from conflict may adversely impact decision-making skills, with

consequences that range from unpleasant to disastrous. Coercion tends to beget coercion; disagreements that spiral out of control can trigger hostility and violence. Over time, poorly managed conflict may foster coercive interpersonal processes that interfere with normal socialization; poor social skills give rise to school difficulties, peer rejection, and affiliation with delinquent age-mates (Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992). Finally, conflict may interfere with the supportive functions of relationships, leaving individuals isolated and alienated (Cohen, 2004).

Literature reviews have documented an extensive list of studies that link parent-child conflict to behavior problems, school difficulties, depression, anxiety, and peer rejection (Smetana, 1996). The Isle of Wight study is an oft-cited example (Rutter, Graham, Chadwick, & Yule, 1976): adolescents with psychiatric troubles were twice as likely to report serious 'altercations' with parents as those without psychiatric disorders. Although fewer studies focus on discord in peer relationships, coercive conflicts with siblings and friends have also been linked to emotional, academic, and behavioral difficulties (see Laursen & Pursell, 2009, for review). To cite one example, coercive sibling conflict uniquely predicts concurrent peer difficulties as well as the slope of increase in antisocial behavior across early and middle adolescence (Bank, Burraston, & Snyder, 2004).

Conflict Benefits

Several theories hold that conflict may not be all bad. Piaget (1932/1965) identified several potential benefits from interpersonal conflict, arguing that developmental change has origins in cognitive disequilibria stemming from disagreement. Conflict with peers is thought to be especially critical to cognitive and social cognitive development because differences between relative equals cannot be settled by power assertion but instead require negotiation. Peer interaction is important not because peers are a more credible source of information, but because conversations between peers involve a unique form of discourse that requires each participant to articulate and defend a position. Social encounters between peers encourage children to reconsider their own views in light of the alternatives proposed, increasing the self-reflection required to discover errors and abandon untenable positions (Ames & Murray, 1982). According to this view, it is not conflict *per se* that promotes intellectual growth but rather the challenging, constructive dialogue that is embedded within it.

Scholars have also suggested that conflict promotes well-being. Disagreement can enhance mental health and social adjustment insofar as it provides opportunities for improving self-expression and refining interpersonal collaboration skills (Dunn, 2004). Conflict is posited to be an essential part of the process of adolescent individuation (Hauser et al., 1984; Volling, Youngblade, & Belsky, 1997). Some disagreement is thought to be necessary for the adolescent to develop a unique identity and to establish autonomy from parents. In addition, conflict may be the impetus that forces parents and adolescent children to renegotiate family roles and responsibilities in a manner that is consistent with the child's heightened maturity (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006).

Some evidence supports these views. In an experimental study of preteens, constructive conflicts between friends were associated with improved problem-solving skills, particularly for those confronted with difficult challenges (Azmitia & Montgomery, 1993). Research with young children indicates that disagreements during a problem-solving task elicit mature cognitive responses, especially when the partner is

a friend (Nelson & Aboud, 1985). Greater cognitive development is more apt to occur following peer conflict than parent-child conflict, although these differences are largely a function of the frequency of exchanges that require elaboration, justification, and critical thought (Kruger, 1993). Concurrent findings suggest that conflict with siblings and friends is associated with greater affective perspective taking and emotional sensitivity (Dunn & Brown, 1994; Dunn & Slomkowski, 1992), and higher levels of moral development (Berkowitz & Gibbs, 1983). Indeed, the quality of arguments during the toddler years has been found to forecast social skills during early childhood (Herrera & Dunn, 1997). Some conflicts are remembered for years; adults refer to memories of childhood family conflict as a parenting referent (Bedford, Volling, & Avioli, 2000). Finally, several studies link conflict to adolescent psychosocial development. Constructive disagreements between children and parents are positively associated with greater adolescent identity development, role taking skills, and self-esteem (Cooper & Cooper, 1992; Grotevant & Cooper, 1985). Adolescent ego and moral development have also been tied to constructive family problem solving (Powers, Hauser, Schwartz, Noam, & Jacobson, 1983).

Paradoxical Effects of Conflict

We are not the first to note that conflict has both positive and negative consequences. Some scholars have suggested that conflict may promote individuation and ego development in the context of supportive parenting and the enabling interactions that accompany it, but that conflict may inhibit healthy development in the context of rejecting parenting and dismissive interactions (Cooper, 1988; Hauser, Powers, & Noam, 1991). Thus, relationship quality should moderate associations between interpersonal conflict and individual well-being. Support for this notion comes from a recent study examining associations between the frequency of parent-child and friend conflict and adolescent school grades, withdrawal, and delinquency (Adams & Laursen, 2007). Non-linear patterns of results emerged in good-quality relationships: outcomes improved (or failed to decline) as conflict increased from zero to the mean; beyond the mean, conflict was associated with a linear decline in outcomes. Linear patterns of results emerged in poor-quality relationships: Each successive increase in conflict was linked to a commensurate decline in outcomes. Thus, unlike poor-quality relationships, better-quality relationships realized benefits from conflict and buffered against some of the adverse consequences of conflict.

The correlates of conflict are likely to vary as a function of the characteristics of conflict. Conflicts that promote intellectual dialogue and justifications of views are more apt to be beneficial than conflicts that are limited to oppositional exchanges; conflicts characterized by hostile assertions and coercive behavior are more apt to be detrimental than non-threatening conflicts (Howe & McWilliam, 2006). Balance theories of conflict argue that the consequences of conflict depend on the proportion of disagreements that are constructive relative to those that are destructive (Gottman, 1994). According to this view, individual outcomes are more a reflection of the ratio of positive to negative interactions than the absolute number of each. Beneficial conflict outcomes should characterize relationships where pleasant interactions outweigh unpleasant ones; detrimental conflict outcomes should characterize relationships where negativity outweighs positivity.

Mediation models hold that conflict has few direct effects on individuals but instead conflict impacts the quality of relationships, which, in turn, has implications for

individual well-being (Sillars, Canary, & Tafoya, 2004). Constructive conflicts foster supportive relationships, which promote optimal development; destructive conflicts breed antagonistic relationships, which can undermine successful adjustment. Support for this model comes from research in which higher levels of conflict were associated with poorer-quality friendships, which, in turn, were linked to higher levels of depression (Demir & Urberg, 2004).

Conceptual Models of Conflict Outcomes

The query is deceptively simple: How does interpersonal conflict influence individual development? Previous models yield contradictory assertions because the question is multifaceted and unlikely to be answered with reference to linear associations and simple main effects. To address this question, we will distinguish between different measures of conflict, different conflict outcomes, different types of conflict, and different sources of conflict.

Distinguishing Conflict Frequencies from Conflict Events

The frequency of conflict describes the number of disagreements experienced or reported by an individual. Three aspects of conflict frequencies shape associations with conflict outcomes. Firstly, frequencies are often measured within a particular relationship and then tied to a measure of individual adjustment. Considerable confusion arises because most individuals report that conflict rates vary across relationships. In the absence of comprehensive measures of conflict that include all relationships, it is difficult to determine the unique effects of discord in a particular relationship. The effects of conflict may accumulate across relationships as opposed to being specific to a relationship. Moderate levels of conflict in one relationship may mask high aggregate levels of conflict across relationships. Secondly, conflict is in the eye of the beholder. Participants often do not agree as to whether an interaction represents a disagreement. It is logical, therefore, to suppose that individual outcomes are more likely to be tied to self-perceptions of conflict than to observer or partner perceptions because we know that actor perceptions of conflict are more strongly linked to perceptions of relationship quality than are partner perceptions of conflict (Burk & Laursen, 2005). Thirdly, conflict frequencies must be considered apart from particular episodes of conflict. It may well be the case that some conflicts are benign and that only select disagreements have consequences for individual development. The trick, of course, is to identify which conflicts account for most of the variance.

Little is known about differences between significant and mundane conflicts. In one study, adolescents reported that important conflicts are more apt to be angry than other disagreements (Laursen & Koplas, 1995), which suggests that coercive conflicts are overrepresented in assessments of salient events and underrepresented in assessments of common events. It follows that conflicts perceived to be important are more apt to contain costs than benefits. But this is only speculation. Variations in the way conflict is defined and in the manner in which it is measured make it impossible to disentangle outcomes that reflect the frequency with which all conflicts are experienced from outcomes that are a product of a few critical disputes in one or two particular relationships.

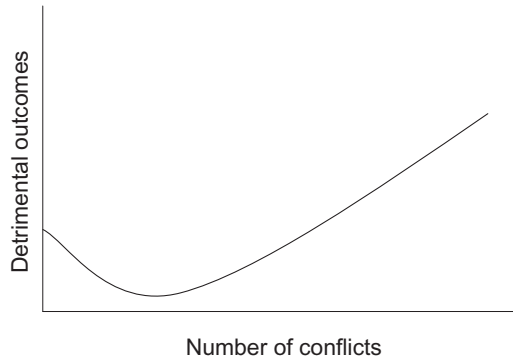


Figure 1. Detrimental Outcomes as a Function of the Frequency of Conflict.

Distinguishing Beneficial Outcomes from Detrimental Outcomes

Our goal is to illustrate how conflict frequencies can have different predictive functions for detrimental and beneficial outcomes. Considerable confusion may be traced to the notion that conflict outcomes exist along a single continuum that runs from the beneficial to the detrimental, with benign outcomes in the middle. Instead, costs and benefits probably represent independent dimensions, each ranging from low to high. We assume that conflicts simultaneously have positive and negative consequences. For example, stress and anxiety may be an unavoidable part of healthy individuation; conflict that promotes the latter may necessarily increase the former. A detailed list of conflict benefits and conflict costs is beyond the scope of this paper. Among the list of benefits, we would include enhanced autonomy and individuation, and improved social skills and social cognitive abilities. Among the list of costs, we would include externalizing problems, internalizing problems, stress, and its health consequences. We do not claim to know how best to classify outcome variables that include both positive and negative endpoints (e.g., self-esteem, school grades), so it is not clear whether these variables should be classified as potential costs, potential benefits, or something altogether different.

Figure 1 depicts a model describing links between the frequency of conflict and detrimental outcomes. We begin with the assumption that there are costs associated with the complete absence of conflict. Individuals who avoid conflict must suppress their needs. This has deleterious effects on relationships and participants, because relationships that are not sensitive to participant needs are perceived as lacking in closeness and support, which are risk factors for adjustment difficulties. As the number of conflicts increases from zero to the mean, the costs associated with conflict should decline. Although conflict is never a risk-free enterprise, moderate amounts of discord are not known to predict adjustment problems. As conflict increases beyond the mean, however, the costs associated with conflict should increase sharply. We hypothesize a positive linear association between conflict frequency and poor outcomes, but the association may be non-linear, with adverse outcomes increasing as an exponential function of increases in conflict.

Figure 2 depicts a model describing associations between the frequency of conflict and beneficial outcomes. We start from the premise that there are few benefits associated with completely avoiding conflict. Initially, we posit a positive association

between conflict and benefits; up to a point, additional conflicts should be linked to better outcomes. We depict this association as non-linear on the assumption that the rate of increase in positive outcomes declines as the number of conflicts approaches the benefits peak. Eventually, a saturation point is reached and outcomes do not improve for those with more conflict; whether this number is higher or lower than the population mean for conflict frequencies is an open question. Also unclear is whether those with very high levels of conflict enjoy fewer benefits than those with moderately high or average levels of conflict. In Figure 2, positive outcomes actually decline when conflict increases beyond an optimal level, but it might be argued instead that positive outcomes simply plateau, without a decline in benefits for those with the highest levels of conflict.

Distinguishing Supportive from Unsupportive Relationship Contexts

As noted earlier, outcomes are hypothesized to vary as a function of the relationship in which conflict arises. Better outcomes are posited for those in better relationships. Figure 3 depicts a model in which relationship quality moderates associations between conflict frequency and negative outcomes. The model includes a main effect for relationship quality. Individuals in poorer-quality relationships are expected to have more adjustment problems than individuals in better-quality relationships. In

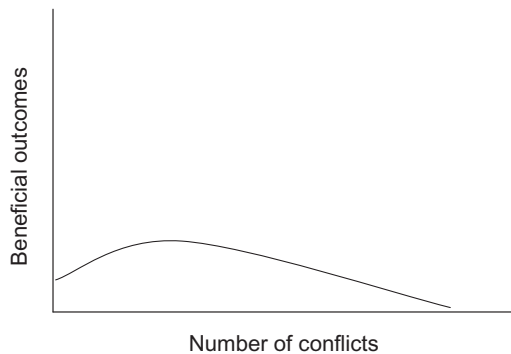


Figure 2. Beneficial Outcomes as a Function of the Frequency of Conflict.

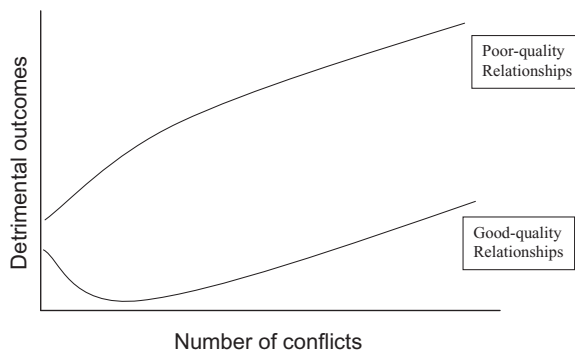


Figure 3. Detrimental Outcomes as a Function of the Frequency of Conflict in Poor-quality Relationships and Good-quality Relationships.

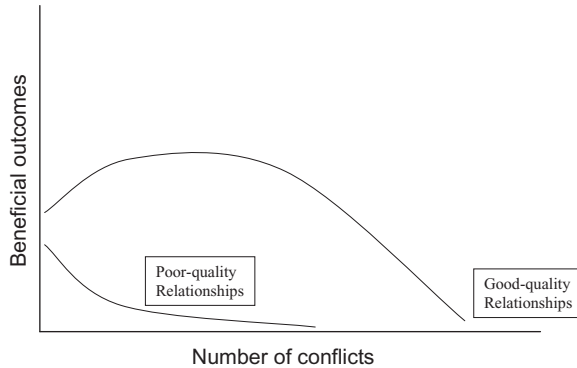


Figure 4. Beneficial Outcomes as a Function of the Frequency of Conflict in Poor-quality Relationships and Good-quality Relationships.

poor-quality relationships, avoiding conflict is presumed to have few costs above that of participating in an unsupportive relationship, because it is unlikely that participants are missing out on conflict experiences that might buffer against adjustment problems. It follows that adjustment problems should increase as a direct linear function of the number of conflicts.

In contrast, there may be costs in avoiding conflict in high-quality relationships because supportive relationships attuned to the needs of participants may well respond to disagreements in a manner that protects against maladjustment. For this reason, individuals with moderate amounts of conflict in high-quality relationships are expected to demonstrate fewer adverse outcomes than individuals with no conflict. Even in the best relationships, however, excessive conflict is likely to increase the risk for maladjustment. The model assumes a linear association at higher levels of conflict, but the function may be non-linear, with a rapid increase in problems for those experiencing severe discord.

Figure 4 describes a model in which relationship quality moderates associations between conflict frequencies and conflict benefits. Once again, there is a main effect for relationship quality: Better outcomes are expected in better relationships. But slopes are hypothesized to differ as a function of relationship quality. In poor-quality relationships, there may be some benefit to avoiding conflict. More precisely, those who avoid conflict in poor-quality relationships may be better adjusted than those who do not, because disputes in unsupportive relationships tend not to have positive consequences. Each successive increase in conflict in poor-quality relationships is likely to bring fewer positive outcomes to the point where conflict offers virtually no benefits for participants. We envision a substantial difference in the well-being of those who report no conflict in poor-quality relationships and those who report infrequent conflict, but successive increases in conflict may bring ever smaller declines in well-being. Eventually, positive conflict outcomes in poor-quality relationships will bottom out, and we suspect that this point will not involve particularly high levels of conflict.

In good-quality relationships, positive outcomes are expected to increase such that individuals reporting moderate conflict should be better adjusted than individuals reporting no conflict, because the latter are missing out on the benefits that typically arise from disagreements in supportive affiliations. It is probably the case that most

benefits can be realized from only a few disagreements, but it is probably also the case that a few more disagreements are unlikely to interfere with the realization of benefits. At some point, however, conflict will become counterproductive and positive outcomes will decline in response to additional conflict. Excessive conflict is expected to correspond with few or no beneficial outcomes, regardless of the quality of the relationship, but it probably takes more conflicts to reach this point in high-quality relationships than in poor-quality relationships.

Distinguishing Constructive Conflicts from Coercive Conflicts

Assessments of conflict frequency obscure differences between constructive and coercive conflicts. Research linking conflict to beneficial outcomes invariably describes constructive conflict, which is characterized by supportive dialogue and constructive exchanges. There is no evidence linking positive outcomes to coercive disagreements. Conversely, there are strong links between coercive conflicts and adverse outcomes. Constructive conflicts are not thought to promote detrimental outcomes. Thus, different patterns of beneficial and detrimental outcomes are assumed for constructive and coercive conflicts.

Figure 5 describes a model in which the type of conflict moderates associations between the frequency of conflict and detrimental outcomes. The costs of avoiding coercive conflict are assumed to be minimal, so the intercept is set near zero. A direct linear association is posited between the number of coercive conflicts and individual adjustment problems. Individuals who experience no coercive conflicts should have fewer difficulties than individuals who experience some coercive conflicts who, in turn, should have fewer difficulties than individuals who experience many coercive conflicts. In contrast, constructive conflicts should be inversely and non-linearly related to maladjustment. Those who report no constructive conflicts should have more difficulties than those who report some or many constructive conflicts. We posit a non-linear decline in detrimental outcomes because we suspect that although there are appreciable decreases in costs associated with the first few constructive conflicts, there is a limit in the extent to which disagreement can buffer against adverse outcomes. Too many constructive conflicts may be associated with a modest uptick in adjustment problems, but we know of no evidence that addresses this point.

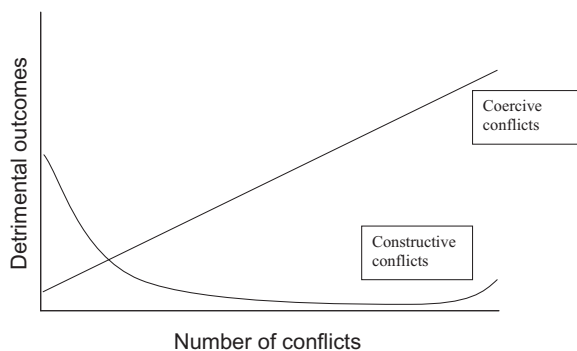


Figure 5. Detrimental Outcomes as a Function of the Frequency of Coercive Conflicts and Constructive Conflicts.

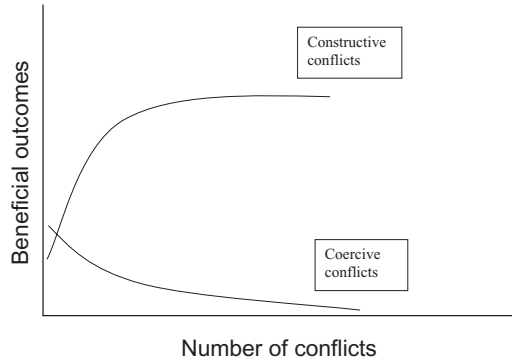


Figure 6. Beneficial Outcomes as a Function of the Frequency of Coercive Conflicts and Constructive Conflicts.

Figure 6 describes a model in which the type of conflict moderates associations between conflict frequency and beneficial outcomes. In terms of coercive conflicts, the best outcomes should be found among those who avoid all such disagreements. Few benefits are postulated to accrue from coercive conflicts, so positive outcomes should fall sharply as the number of disputes increases from zero. We hypothesize a long tail for this distribution, with benefits gradually trailing off, but it may well be the case that benefits dissipate earlier and the positive outcomes of individuals with moderate levels of coercive conflict are indistinguishable from those with high levels of coercive conflict. In contrast, few benefits are hypothesized from avoiding constructive conflicts. Positive outcomes are expected to rise sharply for each increase in constructive conflict, but it is probably the case that most benefits can be realized from a relatively small number of conflicts. Gradually, the increase in benefits is expected to plateau. Some might argue that benefits should decline for those experiencing the highest levels of constructive conflict, on the premise that too much of a good thing can be counterproductive.

Distinguishing Conflict Frequencies from Conflict Ratios

The ratio of positive interactions to negative interactions may be a better predictor of outcomes than the absolute frequency of either. It follows that conflict may predict adverse outcomes only when it crosses a threshold in proportion to the total number of interactions or when the number of destructive conflicts exceeds the number of constructive conflicts. For heuristic purposes, our figures depict the tipping point at parity, but we suspect that the change takes place well before coercive conflicts rise to the same level as constructive conflicts.

Figure 7 describes detrimental outcomes as a function of the ratio of constructive to coercive conflicts, separately for poor-quality and good-quality relationships. The figure includes a main effect for relationship quality; outcomes in poor-quality relationships are always worse than outcomes in good-quality relationships. In both types of relationships, there is a gradual increase in detrimental outcomes as constructive conflicts decline in relation to coercive conflicts until the tipping point is reached, whereupon detrimental outcomes increase rapidly as the proportion of coercive conflicts to constructive conflicts increases. A steeper rate of ascent is hypothesized for low-quality

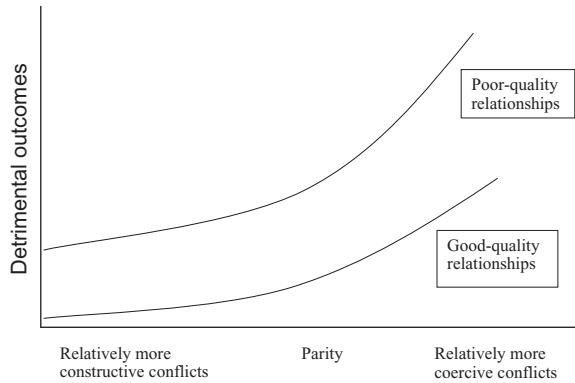


Figure 7. Detrimental Outcomes as a Function of the Ratio of Constructive Conflicts to Coercive Conflicts in Poor-quality Relationships and Good-quality Relationships.

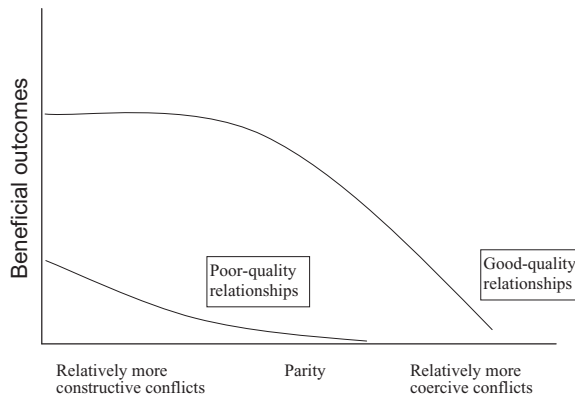


Figure 8. Beneficial Outcomes as a Function of the Ratio of Constructive Conflicts to Coercive Conflicts in Poor-quality Relationships and Good-quality Relationships.

relationships than for high-quality relationships because the latter are thought to have characteristics that might buffer against adverse consequences of coercion.

Figure 8 describes beneficial outcomes in poor-quality relationships and in good-quality relationships in terms of the ratio of constructive conflicts to coercive conflicts. In each case, the higher the proportion of constructive conflicts, the better the outcome. As the ratio of constructive conflicts to coercive conflicts declines, benefits initially fall off at a more rapid rate in poor-quality relationships than in good-quality relationships. In poor-quality relationships, few benefits are hypothesized for those who have as many coercive conflicts as constructive conflicts. In good-quality relationships, parity marks the point where benefits begin a rapid descent as coercive conflicts outstrip constructive conflicts, in much the same way that communication deteriorates as the signal to noise ratio decreases.

Other Factors to Consider

There is more. Conflict outcomes probably differ according to conflict topics. The benefits of disagreements over television preferences may be limited compared to

those over ethics. Adverse outcomes may arise from almost any dispute, but the likelihood that this will happen may be a function of the emotional investment in a topic. Conflict outcomes probably also differ across relationship categories. The benefits of conflict with peers may differ from that of conflict with parents, because individuation and autonomy are often the underlying theme of parent–child interactions, whereas loyalty and intimacy tend to punctuate close peer interactions. We suspect that conflict with parents may carry a greater risk of detrimental individual outcomes than conflict with friends and romantic partners because of the enduring nature of family bonds. In contrast, conflict poses a greater risk to peer relationships than to family relationships. Paradoxically, voluntary relationships may be more apt to profit from conflict than obligatory relationships because the lessons of conflict may be easier to apply to the construction of a new friendship or marriage than to the repair of damaged family bonds. Conflict models may vary somewhat for cognitive and social outcomes. Some domains may be more resistant to change than others, a pattern that probably varies with age. Finally, profound individual differences are anticipated in conflict outcomes. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some people thrive on dissent. Disputatious and disagreeable individuals may get rewards from conflict that others do not. Conversely, reactive and affectively labile individuals may be particularly sensitive to discord, responding to the slightest provocation with anxiety or stressful arousal. These individuals may suffer costs from conflict that others do not.

Future Directions

The measurement of conflict is a particularly vexing issue. Descriptive reports vary in terms of how conflict is defined and how it is measured. More conflict is reported when the term is defined as disagreeing than when it is defined as quarreling, fighting, or arguing. This is not surprising given that high-intensity disputes are less frequent than low-intensity disputes. Questionnaires in which participants review a list of conflict topics and identify the number of disagreements arising during the previous day elicit more conflicts than daily records in which participants describe social interactions and note whether each contained a disagreement (Burk, Dennissen, van Doorn, Branje, & Laursen, 2009). Self-reports of conflict frequencies also vary according to the time interval for recall. Long reference periods suggest that the investigator is looking for unusual, infrequent events, whereas short reference periods suggest that the investigator is looking for common, mundane events (Winkielman, Kanuper, & Schwarz, 1998). It follows that lower rates of conflict are reported when participants are asked to recall conflict during the past week or month than when participants are asked to report conflict during the previous day. Longer reference periods are also more susceptible to reporter biases (Schwarz & Bienias, 1990), whereas shorter reference periods contain error related to the measurement of infrequent events. Thus, one of the most pressing problems facing scholars of interpersonal conflict is the lack of research on basic measurement issues. Predicting outcomes associated with conflict will remain an elusive goal so long as the measurement properties of the predictor variable remain poorly understood.

Participants report that conflicts differ in terms of their perceived valence, but we do not know whether high-salience conflicts better predict individual outcomes than low-salience conflicts. Nor do we know whether the salience of a particular conflict changes with the passage of time. Immediately after a conflict, participants may overestimate the significance of affectively charged disputes and underestimate the

importance of muted disputes. With the benefit of hindsight, the valence of these conflict events may be re-evaluated. If the perceived salience of conflict episodes changes over time, it is important to identify the point at which perceptions best predict outcomes. Ideally, this will involve tying multiple assessments of the same disagreement to outcomes at a fixed time point.

We readily admit that our models are limited by their failure to acknowledge development. One might well expect the adjustment correlates of conflict to differ according to the age and maturity of the participants, but remarkably little is known on this topic. For instance, because younger youth are more focused on short-term goals and immediate conflict outcomes, we might expect that their disputes will have more unintended (but not necessarily more unpredictable) outcomes than those involving older youth. Alternatively, because older youth have more stable relationships and more stable views of relationships, we might expect that most of the disputes of older youth will not have consequences for relationships, but those that have an adverse impact on the relationships would be expected to also have a significant impact on individual adjustment. The reverse should describe younger age groups, where disputes may have a greater tendency to harm the relationship, but the ups and downs of these transitory affiliations may not tend to adversely impact the individual. In truth, there is little we can say about developmental differences with any certainty. This ought to be of no small concern to scholars interested in social development.

Summary Conclusion

We have argued that simple main effects models are inadequate for describing the varied influence that conflict has on individual adjustment. In their stead, we have advanced a set of non-linear models in which associations are moderated by outcomes, relationship quality, and the type of conflict. These models illustrate how the positive and negative consequences of conflict differ for constructive and coercive conflicts in good-quality and poor-quality relationships. This is not the final word on the topic, but rather an illustration of the complex models required to understand the potential impact of interpersonal conflict. It is time to move beyond vague generalizations about whether conflict is good or bad and focus our efforts on specifying when, with whom, and for whom different types of conflicts have beneficial and detrimental consequences.

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