

CONFLICT THEORY

Deborah and Jackie live together with their mother and children in Chicago. Deborah, the older sister, works as a licensed practical nurse on the evening shift at a downtown hospital. Her two boys stay with their grandmother when they get home from school. They do not see their father. Jackie, the younger sister, works the day shift at the local bakery and occasionally picks up an extra shift on the weekends. Her daughter goes to the day care center down the street from her house and spends the weekends with her father.

Deborah and Jackie are out shopping. They want to buy some new clothes for their children for Christmas but do not have the money to shop at the fanciest clothing shops in the mall. In fact, they drive forty miles out of town to an outlet mall to find some bargain shops. As Jackie drives, she laments their financial state.

Jackie: I wish that, for once, I could just go to the mall and tell all those snooty salespeople to wrap up anything I want for the kids and us. I know that the kids feel badly because they don't have the "coolest" clothes. And I'd love to buy Mom a cashmere sweater. Just think—I could tell them to wrap it up and deliver it! Wouldn't that be great?

Deborah: Yeah, Sis, it would be, but you know it isn't ever going to happen. We were born poor and we're always going to be poor. All we can hope for is that our children will go to college somehow and maybe get good jobs and not have to always worry about money.

Deborah and Jackie have a fun afternoon shopping together, but having stayed too late, they drive home too fast. A police officer pulls them over for speeding, and despite their pleas, they receive a ticket for \$150. On the drive home, Jackie and Deborah begin to argue with each other.

Jackie: We went all that way to save money and look what happened! We don't have the money to pay this ticket. Why does this stuff always happen to us? Now we're going to have to work overtime just to pay for this speeding ticket.

Deborah: What do you mean we? You were the one who was driving! How can you be so irresponsible? You should have been watching your speed more carefully!

Jackie: I wasn't driving that fast. Did you see that Mercedes pass us? He was doing 85 miles per hour and he didn't get pulled over. I bet if we'd been driving a BMW, we wouldn't have been stopped either! You know I can't afford to pay this ticket. How am I supposed to get overtime when they are laying off people? I thought I could count on you to help cover this—after all, you were in the car with me!

Deborah: This is just the kind of thing you always do. You get yourself in over your head and you always expect me to bail you out. I'm tired of it. This was clearly your fault, and this time you are on your own!

Jackie: You are the worst sister in the world!

By this time, both sisters are emotionally overwrought and drive the rest of the way home in silence.

HISTORY

Conflict theory acknowledges the presence of opposing forces within society that can be analyzed at both macro and micro levels. At the macro level, conflict theory is used to explain differences between classes within society and the competition for scarce resources, including economic wealth, political power, and social status. For instance, countries and their governments compete with each other for resources such as oil, minerals, and skilled labor. They try to negotiate the most favorable international trade deals and attempt to control intercountry aggression by establishing a variety of laws, treaties, and other broadly endorsed agreements. Social classes within societies can also be examined from the macro level. In some earlier (as well as some current) societies, people were born into their roles in society as defined by their social class (such as slave, serf, working class, or aristocracy) and remained there for life. Some social theorists believed that, if conditions were right, eventually those who were in the lower classes could move into the higher classes, but this would happen only as the result of conflict.

At the micro level, conflict theory helps us to examine the struggles that exist within families and other social relationships. For instance, how do couples resolve differences about assignment of household and child-care tasks? What role does conflict play as adolescents seek to individuate from the family while still maintaining some connection to it? The theory assists us in understanding the tensions in families that lead to instability, as well as the strategies necessary to manage differences and maintain stability.

Early thinkers recognized that human nature tends toward greed and self-interest and that these tendencies produce conflict among individuals, groups, and societies. According to Niccolo Machiavelli (1948) and Thomas Hobbes (1947), humans will be in a perpetual state of conflict as they compete for material goods, power, and esteem unless they can be controlled by the state through laws. They deemed that social contracts (i.e., laws, rules) were necessary to balance everyone's needs amid finite resources and to secure social order and a stable society.

The famous social philosopher Karl Marx, who lived during the middle 1800s, is sometimes referred to as the father of conflict theory. His thinking was profoundly influenced by an earlier German philosopher, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Hegel's theory

about the evolution of ideas, known as the Hegelian dialectic, postulated that an accepted idea (the thesis) would eventually be challenged by its opposite (the antithesis) until a stable middle ground was reached that combined aspects of both extremes (the synthesis). The synthesis would then become the new thesis, and the whole pendulum process would begin again (Russell 1945/1972).

Whereas Hegel's philosophy focused on the conflict of ideas, Marx focused on much more pragmatic issues—the economic well-being of individuals in society. Marx took Hegel's approach and applied it to a theory of social and economic change. He studied social change throughout history and proposed that such change followed a dialectical form. He maintained that ruling classes in a society (the ones controlling the economic wealth and the political power) were always overthrown by the oppressed classes through conflict, after which they in turn became the ruling classes and were likewise eventually overthrown by those classes that they had oppressed (Russell 1945/1972; Turner 1998). Marx envisioned a time when the laborers (the oppressed and exploited proletariat) would unite their forces and overthrow the capitalist landowners and industrialists (the oppressive and exploitative bourgeoisie) and create a world where everyone had equal access to resources. This was the basic idea in his now famous *Communist Manifesto* (1848). But before a communistic society could prevail, there had to be many years of class conflict in which the focus was on how the distribution of scarce resources played out and who ultimately maintained the power in those communities. Marx believed that communism was necessary to resolve class opposition because he believed it provided people equal access to limited resources and political power.

Although Marx was a major proponent of conflict theory, his focus was primarily on the economic impact of the theory. Later sociologists focused on its interpersonal uses, most notably Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and Lewis Coser. Weber was particularly attentive to power, its distribution, and its function in maintaining social order. He noted that legitimate and institutionalized power contributed to stability and order. Simmel (1998) most explicitly delineated the potentially positive effects of social conflict. For Simmel, social relationships inevitably involve both harmony/attraction and conflict/repulsion. Thus, conflict is necessary for unifying social groups. He added interpersonal dimensions of love, ownership, valuing, and jealousy to the perspective of conflict in families noting that, although we seem to move from one extreme to the other in interpersonal relationships, we find a synthesis in our need for loving. Coser (1956), an American sociologist, outlined the functions of social conflict in his book by the same name. Coser noted that conflict establishes the distinction between one's own group and that of the "outsider." Thus, conflict can solidify and unify a group, promoting cohesion and adaptability. Conflict can also lead to the creation of coalitions or alliances between previously unassociated people or groups. The expression of conflict within relationships also has the capacity to foster communication and interaction and function as a safety valve, releasing hostility so that the relationship can be maintained. Dealing with conflict brings flexibility to a system's structure and increases its capacity to change (Turner 1998).

Although these sociologists were important in helping us understand the uses of conflict in society at large, one theorist has been most important in helping define the need for understanding conflict in families—Jetse Sprey. Sprey (1969, 1979, 1999) contends that human interaction has, within its structure, components of inequality and that conflict is a part of every relationship, including those in families. He outlined how conflict may be understood in families by specifying the components of the theory, by

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helping researchers to generate ways in which to classify conflict in families, and by distinguishing conflict in families as unique from other types of conflict. Viewing the family "as a system in conflict," Sprey (1969) urged that our goal be managing rather than eliminating differences.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

Conflict theory focuses on the explanation of orderly as well as disorderly societal processes. In the context of marriage and family studies, it explains "how and why stability and instability occur, and under what conditions harmonious interpersonal bonds are possible" (Sprey 1979, 130). All humans engage in conflict situations, and understanding the management of conflict will lead to an understanding of stability and instability in marriage and family.

The nature of humans is that they are self-oriented. Conflict theorists make certain assumptions about human nature. They assume that the individual is self-oriented, or focused on self-interests. They believe that individuals are symbol producing, which means that they are able to ascribe value to things (such as a corner office, shares of a piece of cake, or praise from parents). This ability sets up the system of scarce resources for which individuals are in competition. In light of limited resources, family members employ a number of strategies to achieve their personal goals and interests and might even resort to interpersonal aggression, if necessary (Olson, Fine, and Lloyd 2005). Conflict theorists also believe that humans have unlimited potential to hope, which means they have unlimited potential to desire power, prestige, and privilege, thereby setting up relationships with other humans as real or potential competitors (Farrington and Chertok 1993; Sprey 1979).

Societies operate under a perpetual scarcity of resources. Conflict theorists also make certain assumptions about the nature of society. Societies represent organized systems for species survival. They operate under a perpetual scarcity of resources, and this leads to perpetual confrontations. According to conflict theorists, such confrontations keep societies in a state of flux and lead to upheaval, social change, and growth. Like structural functional theorists, conflict theorists recognize that inequality is an inevitable aspect of most relationships; unlike other theorists, conflict theorists try to manage the inequality rather than resolve it. In our opening scenario, Deborah and Jackie recognize the differential distribution of scarce resources. They lament that "we were born poor and we're always going to be poor," although they wish for more. They believe that their children may be able to access a greater share of these limited resources if they are able to obtain a higher education and get good-paying jobs.

Group dynamics are different in families than in other groups. When applying conflict theory, one must recognize the differences between groups and families. The demand for resources varies between groups and families because some crises can drain family resources. For example, an illness in a family can cause a family to stress its resources to the maximum, whereas an illness in a group generally will not. Membership in a group is voluntary, whereas membership in a family is generally involuntary. If membership in a voluntary group becomes too intense or too competitive, a member may choose to leave. However, it is more difficult to leave a family than it is to leave a group. For instance, despite their current level of outrage with each other, Deborah and Jackie

(from the vignette at the chapter's beginning) are not likely to dissolve their relationship because they are sisters and their lives are intertwined. Relationships in a family are by definition more intense, because they are closer in proximity and generally have a longer history. Also, dissolution of a family is more threatening than the dissolution of a group. It takes two to form a group, but only one to break it up. Thus, the person with the least interest has the most power. The ability to dissolve a family group is a great power indeed, so families generally tolerate a higher degree of conflict than groups (Sprey 1979).

The power differentials are also different in voluntary groups. Groups often consist of just one sex, so there is more equality of status. Also, group power remains rather static for the life of the group, but power changes over the life cycle of the family. As children age, they gain more power; as adults age, they lose power. These changes keep the family dynamics of power continuously fluid (Farrington and Chertok 1993).

Conflict is a confrontation over control of scarce resources. Conflict is categorized as either internal or external. Internal conflict is conflict originating from inside the social system (be it between individuals, families, or societies). In closely knit groups, members may suppress conflict. Negative emotions may accumulate and deepen, a phenomenon that social psychologists refer to as "gunny-sacking." When the conflict finally boils over, it is intensified. Not only is the conflict a problem, but it is also compounded and magnified by the expression of conflict. Thus, one outcome of conflict theory is the study of conflict management.

External conflict is conflict originating from outside the social system. One cannot deal with internal conflict while also using energy to fight external conflict. An example might be the conflict between political parties over tax policies (an internal conflict with respect to the country). But if war is declared on a foreign aggressor, the parties put aside their differences to concentrate on dealing with the war against another country (an external conflict). Likewise, a couple may be going through a difficult time and feeling as though their marriage is "on the rocks." Then they learn that their young child has a life-threatening illness, and they bond together for the sake of the child to fight the aggressor—in this case, the disease. The scenario between Deborah and Jackie represented both types of conflict. The sisters were united in their fight against external conflict as they longed for greater access to money and the things that it can buy, similar to what is available to those in higher social classes. However, internal conflict emerged as it became apparent that the sisters did not agree that they should share equal culpability for the speeding ticket. Deborah's comment suggests deeper internal conflict than the present hardship of how to pay for the ticket; historically, she has felt that her sister expects her to bail her out of situations in which she should have displayed greater personal responsibility.

One of the advantages of conflict is that, in the context of discussions, arguments, negotiations, and management, people come to new understandings of one another. This is often the case in families when couples or parents and their children learn about each other in the course of an argument. Thus, conflict can produce new or different values and revitalize existing norms. For example, in a disagreement with her fourteen-year-old daughter, a mother might learn that the curfew of 9:00 p.m. every night was too early to allow her to see even the early movie with her boyfriend. The mother, while still maintaining strict control over her adolescent daughter's dating habits, might be willing to negotiate a 10:00 p.m. curfew for weekends while maintaining the 9:00 p.m. deadline for all other nights. The negotiation maintains social structure in that the mother retains the power, although neither mother nor daughter is truly satisfied with the outcome (the

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mother probably does not want her daughter to date at all; the daughter probably does not want any curfew), but the social order is maintained. Furthermore, the conflict allows for growth to occur in the relationship between the daughter and mother as they both learn something about power, negotiation, family relationships, growing up, letting go, and communication skills.

Conflict can be classified. There are two major ways of classifying conflict in families—from a macrosocial perspective and from a microsocial perspective. Depending on one's educational orientation (more sociological or more developmental), the questions and focus (and related research) differ. Conflict theory is one of the few theories that can be used in both ways, although it does make the theory a bit more complex to fully understand.

As noted above, the conflict perspective allows us to see society as a place that generates and perpetuates inequality, which leads to conflict and change. Unlike structure functionalists, who see society as basically finding its own equilibrium, conflict theorists see that, as a society, we ascribe meaning and value, and stratify people into unequal roles, with varying levels of power and access to resources (Farrington and Chertok 1993). When we apply the theory to families, we analyze how families are classified based on their access to scarce resources and determine who has the power to maintain those value structures. For example, conflict theorists analyze the unequal distribution of power and social status based on social class, gender, race, ethnicity, and education.

From the macrosocial perspective, conflict theorists look at issues of conflict between classes of people who have privilege or dominance and those who are disadvantaged—the “haves” versus the “have nots”—(e.g., men versus women, rich versus poor, whites versus blacks, employed versus unemployed, adults versus children, married versus single). This is not to imply that any one individual has more or less than another, but rather that a group as a whole has more privilege than another group, and those privileges impact families and their opportunities and choices. Conflict theorists are concerned with how people manage the discrimination and stigma they face, how they negotiate their inequality in the face of unyielding privilege, and how society creates a shared value about what people “deserve” (Seccombe 1999, 2000).

A conflict theorist who studies families from this perspective might, for example, study how adoption placements are made. Consider the various levels of privilege and disadvantage of the following five potential parents for an adoption placement: a white, married, upper-income heterosexual couple; a white, middle-class lesbian couple; a Hispanic, single, upper-class gay man; a single, upper-class black woman; and a white, previously divorced, lower-class married couple. If you were the adoption caseworker, how would you rank the order of placement, if all other factors were equal? What aspects of stratification enter into that decision? Generally, it is not the case that families fit neatly into stereotypical distinctions and, at times, values about certain families are based on myths rooted in class consciousness.

From a macrosocial perspective, conflict theorists help to deconstruct and analyze the ways in which our society ascribes values and how this leads to inequality in the family. They focus on broad social issues, such as economic inequities between men's and women's salaries, differing societal expectations of men's and women's responsibilities for child-rearing, and the acceptance of violence toward women and children. Family conflict theorists make the link between these broad social issues and family dynamics. In this way, feminist family theory and conflict theory share common goals.

From the microsocial perspective, conflict theorists look within the family system at the elements that can bring about conflict. Two major structural distinctions in families are gender and age. These structural differences bring about a distinct asymmetry in member resources and authority (Farrington and Chertok 1993). Regardless of the intent of the family members, society gives them access to resources in different ways. Adults have access to resources that children do not have (e.g., money, freedom, and power); males frequently have access to resources that females do not have (e.g., physical power, higher salaries, and opportunities). In addition, children have an involuntary membership in families. In most other societal groups, membership is voluntary or is the result of one's behavior. But children join families without any consultation. Thus, despite their perspective on membership, they must stay within the group and be governed by those in authority within the group.

The family life cycle also affects the long-term balance of resources within the family. Resource utilization and contribution may differ at various stages of the life cycle. In the earlier stages of the life cycle, parents have the power, whereas children have little power. But in the later stages of the life cycle, the children typically gain power, whereas the parents often lose power. This power shift may create conflict.

The interplay between the various macrosocial influences on intrafamily dynamics can be seen in the example of how power shifts over the life course. In our culture, power tends to decrease as one approaches old age. People are valued by their ability to contribute financially, and older adults are often thought of as being "past their prime" in this regard. In some other cultures, power tends to increase as one approaches old age. The wisdom and experience acquired over the years is regarded as a valuable resource, and so older adults are held in high esteem, even if their physical abilities are not what they once were.

Marital conflict is the most dramatic form of conflict in families in many ways. First, although it takes two to make a relationship, it takes only one to end it. So, as in exchange theory, the person with the least interest in maintaining the relationship has the most power in the relationship. Second, marital conflict can be intense simply because it is dyadic; in a twosome, there are no other allies. Third, marital conflict can also be intense because the marital relationship can come to an end. In contrast, other family relationships are for life. Whenever the stakes are high, the level of conflict can easily escalate.

The outcomes of marital conflict can be assessed in two ways. The first method is to determine the patterns of "winning" and "losing"—that is, "keeping score." The idea of keeping score includes calculating the *importance* of battles won and lost, as well as the *number* of battles won and lost. The second method is to answer the question "What are the consequences for the relationship after conflict?" Conflict in a relationship ends either constructively or destructively. Marital dissolution affects the family as a whole but does not end it. At any given point, families are seen in the midst of their life course, at different points of conflict, growth, and change along the way (Sprey 1999).

Conflict has positive aspects. Conflict theorists believe that, ultimately, conflict is good, which is to say that the aftermath (the result) of conflict is beneficial. They argue that conflict is actually at the root of progress and change. (This is the legacy of Marx.) Conflict brings about the process of assimilation and compromise. It brings solidity and unity within groups and challenges the values and power we ascribe to those in other groups.

We learn as we change and grow in families. The process of learning to negotiate, communicate, and manage conflict is a positive aspect of development in families. Indeed,

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in close relationships, it is less important that there *are* conflicts than *how* the conflicts are handled (Mace and Mace 1980). Facing conflict can bring relationships to new levels of intimacy, relieve tension and resentment, help to identify problems, increase understanding, and bring about a renewed appreciation for the relationship (Farrington and Chertok 1993; Stinnett, Walters, and Stinnett 1991). We would hope, for instance, that Deborah and Jackie (from the vignette) can work out a mutually satisfying resolution in handling the speeding ticket that will allow Jackie to take personal responsibility, while at the same time permitting them to be supportive of one another. Macrosocial conflict theorists believe that conflict theory promotes change by identifying the inequities in society and families and by promoting a reflection and critique of the structures and values that perpetuate oppression.

PRIMARY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Competition

Sprey (1979) defined conflict as the "state of negative interdependence between the elements of a social system" (134). When one member of the family or group gains, others lose. Groups that exist over time, such as families, have highly honed abilities to function within a system of competitiveness and to recognize their interdependence. They realize that they can take turns winning and losing and make decisions whereby members jointly win or lose, depending on their willingness to negotiate, cooperate, and seek compromise.

Conflict

Conflict is the direct confrontation between individuals or groups over scarce resources. It occurs when people use controversial means to obtain their goals, or when they have incompatible goals, or some combination of these. Conflict implies a direct confrontation between opponents, whereas competition is more indirect and less personal. Conflict behavior can include physical force and litigation or the use of other external powers to achieve one's goals. Conflict can end only when both parties reach a mutually recognized agreement (e.g., one party gives up, a settlement is negotiated, or a peace treaty is signed). This does not, however, eliminate the underlying competitive basis.

Conflict Management

Conflict management involves dealing with the conflict while acknowledging the continued existence of the underlying competitive structure. It requires recognizing that (1) there are at least two competing perspectives, (2) there are scarce resources, and (3) each side should have an opportunity for access to those resources. Through negotiation and bargaining, conflict management can help competitors decide whether they wish to participate in a reciprocal sequence of access to resources (win-lose now, but lose-win later), a compromise in which both lose some resources, or a win-win option in which both sides jointly win. Conflict management does not negate the conflict, but it seeks ways to keep it from escalating.

Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution refers to both the end state of conflict and the process of a given conflict's ending. Conflict resolution is different from conflict management, in which the conflict is maintained but negotiated into a stable state. In conflict resolution, the parties no longer see the issue as competition for scarce resources; there is no more conflict (on a particular matter), and resolution is the outcome. This may require redefining the situation, so that conflict is no longer perceived as being present.

Let's consider the difference between conflict management and conflict resolution by examining a common conflict in new relationships: money. A young couple begins their relationship with two separate bank accounts. Each pays half of the bills for housing, food, and other shared expenses; they spend the rest of their incomes on whatever they choose. But conflicts arise as their relationship begins to change and they want to buy a house, invest in expensive furniture, and save for their future. Who should be responsible for giving up their "fun" money for clothes, the latest technology, or going out? A conflict-managed solution might be for the couple to continue to pay one-half of the bills and for each to put some percentage of their extra funds into a shared account for future expenses (e.g., a down payment for a house, furniture, and other items) and continue to maintain control of the rest of their money. A conflict resolution would have occurred if this couple decided to combine their incomes into a joint checking account and then set up saving funds for their long-term goals. All the bills are paid, but now they are jointly focusing on their goals together, rather than seeing themselves as competitors. Because of a shift in their perspectives, money is no longer seen as an individual resource to be hoarded, but as a resource that has shared value for them as a couple.

Consensus

Consensus refers to a stable state in which society, groups, or families exist, sharing common awareness or knowledge of given issues, values, and norms. Consensus is reached when all parties "see things the same way." Unanimity, reached during decision making and negotiation, is a special case of consensus that occurs when all parties agree to a given course of action or perception of a situation. Conflict management seeks the consensus of the involved parties.

Negotiation and Bargaining

According to Sprey (1979), much conflict behavior is actually focused on negotiation and bargaining rather than fighting per se. These terms refer to the exchange process designed to reach a collective agreement on a disputed issue. Although the exchange may be heated or passionate as individuals and groups explain their positions, the underlying position is that they are trying to maintain access to their share of scarce resources and must, at least for the purposes of this exchange, perceive those "on the other side" as adversaries who seek to take scarce resources away from them. At times, negotiation and bargaining can be associated with hostility, but that is not always the case.

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Power refers to the ability to control the direction or course of action of others. It may apply to individuals or groups. It is a particularly salient concept in the analysis of families, because structures in families give authority to parents over children and society has historically and culturally given power to men over women and boys over girls. Power can also be a function of personality and temperament, because some people tend to be more persuasive (or overpowering) interpersonally, regardless of age, gender, or status). Conflict theory looks at the degree to which interpersonal uses of power enter into reciprocal interactions, identifying ways in which power can be used either positively, as a resource (e.g., authority or privilege), or negatively (e.g., to unduly control others).

Assertion and Aggression

Assertion is acting in a way that affirms one's rights and positions but does not necessarily do so at the expense of others. This is in contrast to aggression, which is a behavioral use of power to get others to behave to one's own advantage, even at the expense of others. Whereas assertion is most typically used in verbal statements, aggression can escalate to the psychological and physical overpowering of others.

Threats and Promises

Threats are messages, not behaviors, that communicate the delivery of punishment if demands are not met at some point in the future; promises are messages, not behaviors, that communicate the delivery of something positive or rewarding if demands are met at some point in the future. These messages, verbal or otherwise, require shared understandings of symbols and meanings, making them sometimes more meaningful to groups and families who have had similar shared experiences and less meaningful to outsiders who do not see their inherent power. For example, a wife may threaten to ruin her husband's reputation if he leaves her, or a husband may threaten to leave his wife poor and destitute if she leaves him. Both of these constitute threats, are coercive, and have a negative impact on the relationship by maintaining power, although no physical aggression is used.

COMMON AREAS OF RESEARCH AND APPLICATION

Conflict Management

For people studying conflict theory, it is often difficult to separate the difference between having a conflict with someone and seeing a relationship in the context of conflict. We all know that being in conflict with someone is draining, frustrating, and often disheartening. In intimate relationships, it is difficult to figure out whether there are winners or losers, although both partners lose when conflict is destructive. Although it seems intuitive that conflicts must be resolved for relationships to be stable, conflict theorists believe that growth and change are necessary to achieve true stability. Thus, conflict theorists reject the notion that conflict between partners should focus on resolution and instead

believe that the focus should be on conflict management (Alberts 1990; Cahn 1990; Sprey 1979). The focus then turns to how couples and families communicate their needs and manage their individual desires as a group.

Power in the marital dyad has been studied extensively, and some classic works are included here because they remain important. Blood and Wolfe (1960) used the concept of power to understand decision making between husbands and wives. Goode (1964) defined a negative authority as someone who could prevent someone else from doing something and indicated that this hidden power was often found in the husband's role. Cromwell and Olson (1975) defined three types of power in intimate relationships: power bases, power processes, and power outcomes. *Power bases* are what we bring into the relationship, or our personal assets such as knowledge or skills that might serve as a reward for the other partner. *Power processes* refer to the techniques we use to gain control in relationships. These might include our abilities to be assertive, persuade, solve problems, or coerce. *Power outcomes* refer to the final decisions that are made. These elements of power have been used to evaluate many components of family dynamics and decision making.

Employing conflict theory, Recchia, Ross, and Vickar (2010) examined power and conflict resolution within three different family subsystems—that between siblings, parents and children, and spouses. In particular, they looked at the extent to which conflict strategies—like planning and opposition—are used, as well as the type of resolutions that occur—standoff, win-loss, or compromise. The authors assumed that the power differentials existing within these various subsystems will make a difference in the types of strategies (processes) employed, as well as the resultant outcomes. Using a sample of sixty-seven families with two children, the researchers observed the dyadic pairs discuss an unresolved conflict. They coded the resolution achieved (e.g., standoff, win-loss, compromise) and the use of oppositional behavior (e.g., challenging, accusing, dismissing, counterarguing) and future-oriented planning strategies (e.g., generating solutions, adopting plans). Among their many findings, parent-child conflict resolutions tended to end in win-loss, with parents winning most outcomes. Conflicts among spousal and sibling dyads were more likely to remain unresolved. Conflict strategies also varied, with parents employing more future-oriented planning and opposition than children. More planning and less opposition were generally associated with resolving differences. These findings are useful for developing interventions to promote more constructive conflict management within families.

Although other factors, such as money, education, and employment, contribute to the balance of power in social conflicts, communication seems to be one of the key factors in interpersonal conflict (Richmond, McCroskey, and Roach 1997). One of the best known researchers in the past thirty years in the field of couples' communication is John Gottman. Research by Gottman and his associates (Gottman 1979; Gottman et al. 1976; Gottman and Notarius 2000) has demonstrated the differences between the ways distressed and nondistressed couples communicate, illustrating that those who have negative communication patterns also have higher degrees of marital dissatisfaction and conflict. The research of Gottman's team was so precise that they could predict the outcome of a disagreement 96 percent of the time by the amount of criticism and negative emotion apparent at the beginning of the conflict (Gottman and Notarius 2000). Furthermore, they found that the single most important predictor of divorce is when negative emotion escalates in a disagreement (e.g., anger is met with contempt).

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The good news is that healthy relationship and conflict management skills can be taught. For instance, Cleary Bradley and colleagues (Cleary Bradley and Gottman 2012; Cleary Bradley et al. 2014) offered the Creating Healthy Relationships Program (CHRP) to low-income and situationally violent couples with the hope of promoting healthy relationships and reducing the susceptibility for intimate partner violence. CHRP is a group-based couple education program that reinforces communication characteristics of healthy relationships (e.g., shared meaning, friendship) and enhances conflict management (e.g., helping couples detect and manage perpetual vs. resolvable problems). The program was built on Gottman's (1994) Sound Relationship House Theory, a model that depicts seven floors, each representing an essential relationship domain for fostering healthy relationships. Evaluative research on the program suggested that the couples benefited from the CHRP; they reported healthier attitudes about their relationship and built skills for stronger relationships, including conflict management (Cleary Bradley and Gottman 2012; Cleary Bradley et al. 2014). Other research also notes that even highly distressed couples who reported high levels of conflict could be taught to manage their conflict in more positive and satisfactory ways, leading to more positive outcomes and higher marital satisfaction. Conflict management, then, is not a static skill, but one that has the capacity to improve over time (Gottman 1979; Mackey and O'Brien 1998).

Additional work by Madhyastha, Hamaker, and Gottman (2011) suggests that the amount of positivity or negativity each partner brings to the conflictual exchange, as well as each individual's ability to "self-influence" his or her own emotional state during the interchange, might play an increasingly important role in helping couples manage conflict. As a result, the authors propose that interventions that focus on self-influence rather than mutual influence might be fruitful in future clinical work with couples. Taking time to soothe oneself and calm down one's body, so as to avoid emotional flooding, improves couples' abilities to hear each other's grievances and receive repair attempts during times of conflict (Gottman and Silver 1999). When coupled with the concept of power, negative communication takes on additional meaning. For example, some people have a higher tolerance for conflict than others and can use that power to escalate a conflict. Those partners would be classified as *demanders*, and their partners are often *avoiders*. Researchers used to see those labels simply, with the demanders having more power in the relationship than the avoiders. But more careful analysis of communication and power clarified several points. First, couples who avoided conflict entirely were less satisfied with their relationships than those who confronted one another (Gottman and Krokoff 1989). Second, avoidance was not always found to be a negative or deficient element in a relationship; it was found to be a beneficial skill used by couples to postpone discussions until they had the time and energy to discuss issues (Alberts 1990).

Divorce

Not all conflicts can be managed, and divorce is often the result when marital conflicts cannot be resolved. Historically, conflict theory was used to examine divorce, and although it would seem to be a theoretical framework of choice for this topic, nothing has been published recently on divorce that employed the theory. Instead, Haddad and colleagues' (Haddad, Phillips, and Bone 2016) review of the literature on high-conflict divorces suggests that object relations, systems theory, and Bowlby's attachment theory have been the theoretical frameworks used over the past few years to understand high-conflict divorces.

Shehan and Kammeyer (1997) have identified various processes that correspond to the divorce experience, including the emotional, economic, and societal divorce. These processes represent resources that affect the couple differentially and will impact the divorce experience for each partner differently. For example, if one partner has more emotional power by having more emotional closeness with the children, then custody arrangements might be of the greatest importance for that person in the divorce proceedings. If the couple has vast economic holdings and no children, the economic settlement may be the most important. If the couple lives in a small community, the social aspect of the divorce may carry the most weight. In the worst-case scenarios, these resource issues collide as one partner spreads rumors of drug use or child molestation to ensure child custody, or another partner declares bankruptcy so as not to have to pay child support to retaliate for the ex-spouse winning child custody. In such conflict-habituated relationships, conflict did not lend itself to the positive growth and change that the theorists envisioned but still demonstrated the use of competition, power, and attempts to access scarce resources. Although practitioners have recognized the need for effective education and interventions for high-conflict divorcing parents, particularly those programs which keep children in mind (van Lawick and Visser 2015), few, if any, utilize conflict theory as a theoretical lens to develop their programs.

Family Violence

Conflict theory has been used in family science to clarify issues in family violence and abuse. The clear dynamics of conflict and power are a part of abusive relationships, and family scholars have analyzed these relationships to determine how and why violence occurs, what the predetermining factors are, why people stay in abusive relationships, and what motivates people to leave them.

Typically, when we consider couple violence, we often consider physical strength the power in the relationship, but conflict theorists broaden our perspective. When examining domestic violence today, we must take into account dating and courtship violence, cohabiting violence, violence perpetrated on men by women, same-sex relationship violence, and our increasing knowledge of the many forms of abuse (Johnson and Ferraro 2000; Miller and Knudsen 1999). The term *wife abuse* is no longer sufficient to include the types of abuse found in intimate relationships. Even such labels as partner abuse, child abuse, and elder abuse are not sufficient. Within couples, we must now distinguish between common couple violence, intimate terrorism, and violent resistance (Johnson and Ferraro 2000). Conflict theorists have helped us to analyze the complexity of the many forms of violence perpetrated in families.

One of the most important predictors of domestic violence is inequity in power (Sagrestano, Heavey, and Christensen 1999). Couples with more egalitarian distributions of power in their relationships are less likely to report violence than those with unequal power (Coleman and Straus 1986). Furthermore, the severity of the abuse toward a female is dependent on the abuser's perception of her power (Claes and Rosenthal 1990). Power differentials can be seen in communication patterns because verbal coercion can be a form of emotional abuse and a precursor to physical abuse (Babcock et al. 1993). Ironically, despite the hope that women would be empowered by educational and occupational achievements, violence against women is greater in couples when the woman's economic, educational, or occupational status is higher than the man's (Claes and Rosenthal 1990; Sagrestano, Heavey, and Christensen 1999).

Siblings can also resort to the use of violence to resolve conflicts resulting from such things as sibling jealousy or competition for parental attention, distribution of household chores, and the need to share space and possessions. Recognizing that most family violence occurs between siblings, Hoffman, Kiecolt, and Edwards (2005) used conflict, feminist, and social-learning theories to ask 651 first-year college students about their experience of physical violence with siblings. As might be expected from a conflict theory perspective, sibling violence, particularly among males, was more prevalent when parents elevated one child as a standard for other children. Such resentments exacerbated sibling arguments and also made it more difficult for siblings to share property.

Immigration and Ethnic Diversity

One domain in which there seems to be a growing macro-level application of conflict theory is related to the examination of individual and group attitudes and behaviors as ethnically and culturally diverse immigrants flow into immigrant-receiving communities. Group conflict theory suggests that hostile attitudes toward immigrants and immigration are caused by a perceived threat of intergroup competition for scarce resources (Meuleman, Davidov, and Billiet 2009) or challenges to the morals, values, and norms of the cultural order of the majority (Schlueter, Meuleman, and Davidov 2012). In other words, from a conflict theory perspective, we would anticipate greater conflict or hostility between current residents/citizens of a country and incoming immigrants when economic conditions are hard, unemployment is high, and resources are scarce; the new immigrants would be perceived as a threat because they would compete for limited housing, jobs, and other material goods. In fact, Meuleman and colleagues noted (2009) more positive attitudes toward immigration in European countries with decreasing unemployment rates and weak immigration flows. Conversely, in countries with high immigration rates, attitudes toward immigration became more restrictive. Using longitudinal data from a German sample, Lancee and Pardos-Prado (2013) reiterate a greater concern over immigration among those from lower classes than those from higher classes and better educated participants. However, people of all social classes who lost their jobs and became unemployed were more likely to be concerned about immigration. Thus, in support of conflict theory, ethnic competition increases when people of all social classes perceive themselves to be economically vulnerable and immigrants possess similar levels of skills.

Schlueter and colleagues (2012) also tested group conflict theory in their review of immigrant integration policies within twenty-seven Western and Eastern European countries. Results from two studies revealed that more permissive immigrant integration policies were associated with diminished perceptions of group threat from immigrants. Thus, these results failed to support expectations from conflict theory; there was no support for the notion that permissive integration policies "stimulate intergroup competition and thereby are positively associated with perceived group threat" (Schlueter, Meuleman, and Davidov 2012, 680).

More recently, Hooghe and de Vroome (2015) used group conflict theory to explore the effect of both perceived and actual ethnic diversity on anti-immigrant sentiments within the Flemish region of Belgium. Results suggested that Belgians living in ethnically diverse communities do not have greater anti-immigrant attitudes. In fact, having a cross-ethnic friendship was associated with fewer negative sentiments. However, Belgians who perceived that there were more immigrants in their communities than there actually

were possessed more hostile sentiments toward immigrants. These Belgians tended to be older, have less education, watch more television, and score lower on generalized trust. The authors concluded that perception may be more important than social reality when it comes to feelings about immigrants.

At the micro level, conflict theory has been applied within classroom contexts. Janmaat (2014) used contact and conflict theories to examine the extent to which ethnically mixed classrooms foster more inclusive attitudes toward immigrants among fourteen-year-old native students in fourteen Western countries. Findings failed to support conflict theory; outgroup size did not generate the predicted sense of threat among the native teens, which, in turn, was to contribute to negative attitudes toward the immigrant group. Instead, in countries and classes where there were more second-generation than first-generation migrant children, native adolescents possessed more favorable outgroup attitudes. Using nine months of ethnographic data collected from a prekindergarten classroom, Souto-Manning (2014) employed conflict theory to illustrate how conflict between children in an early childhood classroom affords invaluable learning opportunities for young children. The author argued that rather than suppressing conflict and maintaining the status quo (i.e., mandated curriculum, ethnocentric practices, negative peace), early childhood educators should use conflict between children to transform their learning and initiate positive change. She outlined how this is possible by observing how a conflict two children had about "stink" became a transformative learning experience.

Professional Practice and Policy

In some instances, conflict theory has been helpful for practitioners and clinicians in the work that they do. For example, Vodde (2001) applies a linguistic theory of conflict in working with couples in therapy, particularly in the treatment of marital conflict. Vodde recognizes that power differentials exist within couples and that language is a means to express symbolic power. By making assessments or judgments about the nature of one's partner or one's marital relationship, a more powerful person exerts a certain narrative, legitimizing the structure and governance of the relationship or the distribution of resources. As Vodde states, "simply put, any statement defining the other or one's relationship with the other is considered a statement that attempts to define, unilaterally, one's position of authority with that person" (75), thus normalizing the control. Positioned within this larger field of power (e.g., gender, economics, vocation), couples struggle, not necessarily over resource distribution, but over "legitimizing a particular description of what is happening" (Vodde 2001, 77). He encourages therapists to consider the power disparities that might exist between couples and how roles and power are decided both internally and externally to the relationship. The therapist should pay particular attention to "strategies of condescension" (81), because such tactics silence the other partner, although often appearing as agreement. When working with couples in conflict, therapists should not assume "dialogical equality" because it may not be safe for one of the partners to share his or her version of the truth. If social justice is to become a reality within the family, the therapist must expose the power imbalance that exists within dysfunctional marital conflict.

Conflict theory has been used to consider the competing forces encountered by human service professionals functioning within their employment contexts. Fogler (2009) used conflict theory to outline the dilemma encountered by nursing home social workers when they are confronted by competing interests of the nursing home industry and

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governmental policy in making discharge plans related to long-term care for older adults. Conflict theory is helpful in identifying vying superstructures at the macro level and their related interests. In this case, the for-profit nursing home industry wants nursing home social workers to maintain population so that homes operate as close to capacity as possible. At the same time, government, which is concerned about cost containment, encourages social work discharge planners to maximize the utilization of home- and community-based services, which tend to be less expensive than institutionalization. These disparate interests create the potential for real confusion and conflict for discharge planners, particularly when they ultimately must keep the best interests of older adults in mind. This and other research reveals how conflict theory is helpful in examining competing needs within family relationships, as well as between social structures.

Conflict theory also helps professionals analyze various social problems. For instance, Patterson and Wolf (2010) used conflict theory, social construction theory, and ethnomethodology to evaluate HIV/AIDS and alcohol and drug use. According to the authors, conflict theory recognizes that many chronic drug users are structurally disadvantaged individuals; they are politically less powerful and often from low-income families and disorganized neighborhoods. Conflict theory and its attentiveness to power relations and those with authority within society helps us recognize the impact of decisions made by policy makers and medical professionals relative to who deserves health care and what those health-care options will include. Consequently, the authors conclude that, to combat HIV transmission and the spread of alcohol and drug dependency among those with HIV infection, both individual and macro-level risk factors must be considered. Conflict theory helps to identify those opposing forces.

CRITIQUE

One of the criticisms of conflict theory is that it analyzes families in destructive, negative terms (i.e., conflict, power, and competition). Many family theorists prefer to focus on constructive and positive terms (i.e., cooperation, equity, and compassion). In other words, it simply does not fit our ideal of what relationships "ought" to be and therefore provides a less positive model for study.

Another criticism is that conflict theory, once it has described relationships in terms of its components of competition, power, and access to resources, does not propose how families can improve. Other theories focus on order and being able to make predictions about families. Conflict theory, by definition, does not engender a static view of families, but an always-changing perspective. Thus, conflict theory does not lend itself to research or application outcomes that are immediately transferable to skill building. One exception is the work by Gottman, but his focus has been on conflicts at the interpersonal level and not at the social level.

Some scholars may wish for families that are safe and happy places, but conflict theory does, in fact, describe situations in which families are not. Conflict theory raises our awareness of situations that families face regarding inequities in health care, income, access to education, and equal opportunity (both legally and in other, more subtle ways). It encourages us to see families within their complex social systems. In addition, conflict theory takes into account the ever-changing elements brought into families by development, social events, social pressures, and internal and external forces.