Course: Communication and Conflict

Course Completed: Fall 2012

Assignment Title: Gender Within Conflict Interactions

Assignment Project Description: The objective in this assignment was to find a journal article addressing gender in a conflict situation. After locating an article with this topic we were required to analyze and reflect on the article and relate it to course content.

Reflection: I selected this paper because in an organizational setting conflict situations are bound to arise. In many circumstances there will be many gender aspects that factor into the argument at hand. As I am in the pursuit of a leadership position my ability to analyze the situation and reduce conflict is critical. This paper allowed me to have a background in analyzing gendered conflict.

Gender Within Conflict Interactions

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The study by Heavey, Layne, and Christensen focused on the outcomes produced by gender interactional differences in married couples as they engaged in problem-solving discussion. Specifically, these interaction investigations focused on demand/withdraw behaviors and characterized such patterns of exchange as the most central and destructive of marital interactions. This particular study relied heavily on previously conducted and closely related research but added components: a longitudinal impact study, a study of the process leading to overall marital dissatisfaction based on negative interaction, and an assessment of anxiety level of each spouse.

Researchers expected to replicate previous findings relative to the importance of gender and conflict structure in demand/withdraw behavior in context with overall marital dissatisfaction. Additionally, research intended to measure the impact gender and conflict structure had on negative and positive conflict behaviors, examine the relationship between anxiety and conflict behavior, and assess satisfaction with discussion outcomes both over a long period of time and as a factor in general relationship satisfaction (p. 18).

A total of twenty-nine married couples were recruited as participants through response to fliers sent to preschools in the Los Angeles area. A promise of full psychological assessment for preschool children, regardless of internalizing or externalizing problems, was offered in exchange for couple participation. Of the twenty-nine participating couples, twenty-five were Caucasian, two were Asian, and three couples were mixed Caucasian and Asian. The mean age for husbands was 41.5 years and 38.9 years for wives, with the mean socioeconomic status level of 56.2 for all involved families (p. 18).

The analysis and results of this study were derived through participant self-report and observer rating. Researchers administered a uniquely developed *Desired Changes Questionnaire* to all participants, designed to measure the extent to which a spouse desired change in a partner's behavior. Each participant was then given a *Communications Patterns Questionnaire* to assess perceptions of the attributes of their problem-solving interactions. Following videotaped discussions, each spouse was next given a *Postdiscussion Questionnaire* intended to assess discussion experience and level of satisfaction with the discussion.

The *Conflict Rating System* was utilized to rate the couples' behaviors on fifteen dimensions during problem-solving discussions, using eight undergraduate observers who had been trained to use the *CSR* to rate the participants. Finally, the *Dyadic Adjustment Scale* was used to measure overall relationship satisfaction. This measurement was acquired by taking four observers ratings, then calculating the average of those ratings for purposes of analysis.

Results generally indicated the finding that a conflict situation strategy where women demand and men withdraw is strongly related to social structure, specifically where couples interact under gender-stereotyped roles. Further findings conclude that these types of gender-stereotyped relationships are at risk for long-term relationship satisfaction deterioration and couples in such environments do not respond as well as others to marital therapy. While researchers extended their data and made several speculative remarks and postulations, one must dismiss such commentary, simply because the study did not include adequate testing measures to support such observations and conclusions or account for their accuracy.

Specifically this research relates to our understanding of conflict in a few ways. We have examined gender effect in conflict and have concluded that men often exhibit dominating and competitive behavior while women exhibit avoidance and compromising behavior. Too, one's perception of power can affect behavior both leading up to conflict and in conflict. These very elements were seen in some couples' interactions. Continual withdrawal from conflict situations eventually leads to polarization and rigidity and may eventually lead to divorce, a fact the findings in this study also support. The analogy to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, represented by criticism, defensiveness, stonewalling, and contempt, provides an accurate description to the process couples experience in problem-solving discussions that ultimately leads to overall marital dissatisfaction that may end in divorce.

This particular research study contains several features that may adversely affect the validity of the results. The foundation for data collection centered on videotaped discussions between couples who were aware they were being taped. This type of observation may produce less than authentic results since participants realize they are "on stage". Discussions used for rated behaviors are also limited in nature and setting. One must question whether this is *really* how couples behave in private conflict situations or if their behaviors reflect how they behave in public discussion before an audience.

The sample of participants was quite limited and was extremely narrow in terms of cultural diversity. Out of twenty-nine couples, approximately 86% were Caucasian. Without consideration of cultural differences, sweeping generalizations were made that cannot be justifiable across all couple interactions or defensible in identifying gender

tendencies. It is possible that results are applicable only to couple behaviors in the United States, or within a particular region, given the small sample.

Too, no consideration was given to an individual's personality variation or past experience with conflict situations within the sample; any idiosyncrasies among participants were ignored. There was no reference to one's family of origin conflict system. It is necessary to account for whether an individual displays avoidance systems, collaborative systems, or aggressive systems. Responses to problem-solving discussion with a spouse relies on automatic responses that individuals cannot control based on family history and structure. Lastly, it is an unusual motivation to trade participation in a gender and conflict structure study for a full psychological assessment for preschool children. The motivation behind participation seems suspect.

The method of collecting data included a large self-reporting component. This type of data collection carries with it the uncertainty of influence by either past or present circumstances. For example, did the couple have an argument the night before? Is one of the spouses having a bad day, perhaps on account of too little sleep which influenced interactions during the discussion, or resulted in an over-reporting on spousal behaviors or an over-criticism on post discussion questionnaires? Such variables were not controlled, making it difficult to extend conclusions and generalizations to how videotaped discussion reflects gender differences in conflict situations.

Unreliability lies in the fact that despite an examination of gender differences within conflict situations, all researchers were male. Those who rated discussions were eight undergraduate students whose gender was not revealed. A serious flaw would

exist in this study if *none* of those students were female. Additionally, raters were minimally trained, and questions remain regarding their motivation or benefit for participating in this project. Another concern lies in rater experience in conflict situations. There appeared to be no attempt to gender-neutralize raters, allowing the possibility that their own experience could impact an interpretation and produce miscalculations during discussion observations for participant couples.

In conclusion, while this study appears to support general gender behaviors and has merit in supporting gender behaviors in conflict situations, there may be some elements that could be improved to provide better avenues of research for more conclusive and definitive findings. Overall, gender differences are essential considerations in conflict interactions and are integral to all communication scenarios.

REFERENCES

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